A Phenomenology Without Reserve: A ‘Post-modern’ Reading of the Stoic Theory of Knowledge

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Abstract: This article is the product of a critical engagement that I have orchestrated between Husserl’s phenomenology and Stoic epistemology. I argue that the Stoic theory of knowledge, which is based upon the idea that the individual human being is a logos spermatikos, or “rational seed” of God, precludes any authentic doctrine of freedom, insofar as it enslaves the individual to a constant reference back toward God, as the source of “fundament” of all knowledge. However, the similarities between the Stoic theory and the phenomenology of Husserl call us toward a deeper reading, and an asking of the important question: what constitutes freedom? This question can only be answered by thinking beyond both Stoic epistemological schemas and Husserlian intentionality, toward a doctrine of freedom that is best described as demiurgic.

Résumé: Cet article est le produit d’une entreprise critique organisée autour de la phénoménologie husserlienne et de l’épistémologie stoïcienne. Je soutiens que la théorie stoïcienne de la connaissance, fondée sur l’idée qui veut que l’être humain individuel soit un logos spermatikos, un “germe rationnel” de Dieu, exclut toute doctrine authentique de la liberté, dans la mesure où elle contraint l’individu à référer constamment à Dieu en tant que source ou “fondement” de toute connaissance. Toutefois, les similitudes entre la théorie stoïcienne et la phénoménologie husserlienne nous poussent à une interprétation plus profonde et à poser l’importante question: qu’est la liberté? Cette question ne peut être répondue qu’en dépassant et les schémes épistémologiques stoïciens, et l’intentionalité husserlienne, vers une doctrine de la liberté qui pourrait être qualifiée de démiurgique.

The ancient Stoics developed a very elegant theory of knowledge, which rested upon an equally elegant onto-theological fundament, if you will. I say “fundament,” since the notion of a material cosmos, with a purely material God as the life-giving warmth, imparting a measure of reason to all existents – and to humankind most of all – was a purely theoretical or speculative basis upon which the ancient Stoics erected a philosophical edifice. The fundament of Stoic philosophy was, of course, like any other, apodictic; but Stoic onto-theology did not contain or account for its necessity in and of itself – it was only by virtue of the complexity and rigor of the theories and concepts built upon this foundation that the foundation was maintained in its apodicticity. As I have discussed in a previous writing, the relation between Stoic cosmological and ethical theories is, in a grand manner, symbiotic. This is to say that there is no dialectical tension between the apodictic
fundament and the theories or concepts built upon it. However, since the onto-
theological fundament of Stoic philosophy was, as we can see from our historical
vantage point, purely theoretical, it would follow, logically, that the concepts built
upon it would also be dependent upon it. In other words, the question arises: If we
pull the rug out from under certain Stoic concepts, will they be able to regain their
footing on bare ground? This question seems to carry more than a little weight,
considering the post-“Death of God” syndrome and its gradual effacing in the
newly emerging “post-secular” world. The Stoics had the luxury of referring human
reason to an ultimate source in the divine logos – indeed, for the Stoics, the human
logos was a “seed” of God itself. By the time we reach the early twentieth century,
after Nietzsche’s announcement of the “Death of God” had been given ample time
to sink into the philosophical consciousness, we witness an effort, on the part of
certain outstanding thinkers, to account for human reason qua human reason – that
is, without recourse to any source outside of itself. This effort, as should be
obvious, led to a re-thinking of the entire relation of the human mind to the truth
that it seeks to grasp. With the removal of what Jacques Derrida has referred to as
the “transcendental signified,” human consciousness is set adrift on a sea of its own
self-constituted phenomena, and so truth and knowledge are immediately placed
in question. However, the desire of the human intellect for true knowledge is not
so easily quenched. And so the counter-question arises: If the human intellect
continues to find itself yearning and searching for some wholly objective truth, are
we not justified in continuing the search, even in the absence of a “transcendental
signified,” in the absence, even, of God?

Edmund Husserl, in his Paris Lectures (1929), put forth the notion that the
world itself, as well as the subject existing in the world, first acquires meaning
solely in and for the consciousness of that individual, thinking subject. Following
this notion, Husserl is led to exclaim that “I and my life remain – in my sense of
reality – untouched by whichever way we decide the issue of whether the world is
or is not.” This radical stance places the thinking subject in a relation to his or her
own innate reason that is, in the most profound sense, a being without reserve:
there is no longer any residue of transcendentality to which the “I” can appeal in
its quest for truth; and so this quest becomes an actualization, on ever more
articulate levels, of the individual’s own innate capacity for reasoning. In the
context of Stoic thought, this is tantamount to a logos spermatikos without the
divine logos – a hegemonikon tauton, a soul that is its own “commanding faculty,”
with no reference to a transcendent ideal or authority. The Sage, then,
hypothetically speaking, will become truly a law unto himself, an isolated
spoudaios. The Stoic theory of knowledge, for all its implicit references to a divine
and rational plenitude, is highly subject-oriented; truth is the sole experience of the
thinking subject, who exercises his or her “commanding faculty” in the pursuit of
an irrefutable knowledge of that which is. For the Stoics, a “conception” (ennoia)
is produced by/through the (unsullied) presentation of an object to the mind. Such
“conceptions” are possible because the “commanding faculty” of the soul (hegemonikon) possesses an innate ability or power to distinguish a rational appearance (fantasia) from an irrational appearance (fantasma), and thereby to place itself in an authentic relationship with the world of perception. The source of this innate ability is, of course, identified by the Stoics as the productive reason of the “craftsmanship fire,” the interpenetrating Wisdom of/that is God. The innate ability itself is further described as the source of “preconceptions” (prolhyeis), which serve as the prime criteria for “right reason,” or that which leads the soul from recognition of universals to the knowledge of what is supremely “self-evident” (enarghs). So, what is supremely self-evident? If the Stoic theory of knowledge is “abstracted” from its onto-theological domain— that is to say, if their theory of knowledge has its fundamental rug pulled out from under it—what is left is the one and the same self-evident enunciation made by Husserl: that I and my life remain— in my sense of reality— untouched by whichever way we decide the issue of whether the world is or is not. And so we reach the basis of phenomenology: when there is nothing left to uncover or explain except the thinking subject’s own relation to the truth which, in the last analysis, turns out to be a tragically creative relationship— for truth is only meaningful when it shows itself forth in a context; and where there is no “natural” context in place, in order for truth to appear meaningfully, one must be set in place by the over-arching will of the perceiving subject. Truth and knowledge is, then, in its highest form, bound to and dependent upon the subject’s inherent will to know, which often manifests itself in what may be called a demiurgic capacity.

A few words must be said, at this point, concerning Husserl’s “enunciation,” and its bearing on the Stoic theory of knowledge. For Husserl, as for the Stoics, existence implies essence. This means, simply, that the meaning derived from experience is not the direct product of that experience. Put another way, if the direct experience of what Merleau-Ponty has called “brute existence” was not always already, in some way, pre-ordained by an intending consciousness, no meaning would ever present itself to the reflective consciousness. The “I” that exists in the world, in direct contact with supposed real existence, is also an “I” capable of entering a domain of being that is strictly constitutive. The constituting act, which for the Stoics involves the “setting into motion” (ormh) of the soul through aisqhsis, or “the breath which extends from the commanding faculty [hegemonikon] to the senses” is, according to Husserl, a product of “intuition,” which implies a double-movement of assent (to the object’s veracity or pure presentational quality) and grasping: the drawing of the “brute object” into the network of meaning that is continually growing, extending, and gathering the stored impressions of the knowing subject into a rational and iterable unity. Existence is the domain of being in which the subject first attains knowledge of his or her constituting power—this is to say: the individual recognizes that the realm of objects, which excites us to acts of intuition, is essentially a realm of
“unprocessed data,” if you will, requiring interpretation and the bestowal of a truly transcedent mode of existence. Such a bestowal, such a gift, is accomplished by the individual who makes of a particular moment of perception a movement of essential intuition, which, for Husserl, is the primordial and therefore unquestioning perception – the supreme and immediate experience of a phenomenon.  

Stoically speaking, we may refer to Husserl’s “essential intuition” as the all-important criterion of “right reason” (prohýeis) recognized by Posidonius as the sole means of attaining knowledge of that which is. “Preconception [prohýeis] is a natural conception [ennoia] of universals” – that is to say: the ability to know things as they are, or without the “taint of mediation” accompanying conceptual or theoretical knowledge. The movement of the constituting subject is a motion toward the world, a motion of grasping, ordering, conceiving, covering, judging, placing, etc. This movement, if it is carried out in a moment of forgetfulness of the essential intuition (or in a manner devoid of the reflective power that is endemic to the essential as it stands: always, behind directed consciousness) can easily degenerate into mere style. This “mere style” may be understood as the result or consequence of a mind or consciousness caught up in the quagmire of an existence capable only of inscribing disjointed, contextless traces with a “stylus” that has long since lost the character of character.  

These things having been said, let us now consider the Stoic theory of knowledge (asking my reader to keep in mind, of course, that all this is a mere wielding of an interpretative stylus that may or may not bear any resemblance to the character of Stoic theory in itself). The Stoic theory of knowledge, in its broad outlines, is quite simple: there is recognized or “intuited,” beyond the subject who is immediately or “naively” engaged with/in the world, a veridical source or “deterministic point” by/through which the subject orients herself vis-à-vis the life-world (Lebenswelt), by referring the source of truth back beyond any purely phantasmic appearance, to a Divine Logos which has, according to the theory, always already ordered everything so that “right reason” may disclose the irreducible essence of all things in/by their primal facticity. This source, it must be added, is also identical with the subject as she stands in/at her disengaged, reflective, “constitutive” level or mode: the primordial condition in which knowledge is “born.” However, since it is the nature of the subject, as logos spermatikos, to become manifold and to thereby extend the logos of God to its rational conclusion in creation, the subject cannot, in the context of Stoic ontoteology, identify herself with the source of the realm of data, i.e., with the single “ordering-principle” (logos) by virtue of which all phenomena come to presence before the receptive eyes of the subject. The Stoic “subject,” then, in spite of the claims arising from an acceptance of the ontological fundament of Stoicism, bears a somewhat tragic relationship to the “pre-human flux” that is conducive to reflective knowledge – the type of relationship that led Antonin Artaud to lament thus: “I struggled to try to exist, to try to accept the forms (all the forms) with
which the delirious illusion of being in the world has clothed reality.”

For reality inscribes (a sense of) permanence, which, so interpreted, is or becomes the object of desire par excellence of the subject who stands before Being in the “character” of constituting agent, wielding the stylus of the demiurge, if you will. This desire, however, is extinguished in/during the ekpurwswis, the conflagration: the moment when all existents return to their source, and so relinquish, whether willingly or not, their identity. It is truly an amazing and peculiar brand of piety that will lead the thinking subject to posit a source to which she is destined, not to return, in a manner of fulfillment, but to dissolve into ... in the sense of an indifferent Void, no matter what rational predicates are attached to it, “apodictically.” The promise of repetition, which is a fixture of the Stoic fundament is, at the level of the self-reflective individual, a promise of exhaustion ... For a consciousness truly and fully in possession of itself, renewal through repetition is not a viable option. Renewal always implies the possibility of aging, of exhaustion, exhausting possibilities, of knowing and/or becoming everything (which is the main problem or issue that Georges Bataille wrestled with in his magnum opus, Inner Experience) – and as Bataille implies in that text, being everything is indiscernible from being nothing at all.13

What status, then, are we to assign to the Stoic Sage? Let us first answer the question: How did the Stoics conceive of Mind and Nature? Mind (nous) is to be understood, on the “cosmic” level, as the vivifying presence of the “ordering principle,” in its extensive capacity or manifesting mode; Nature (fusis) shall be understood as the agglomeration of affective attributes revealed at one level, by the subject, and at another level concealed, as ins(ulated)-crypt-ions ... The Stoics were incapable of thinking about Nature apart from Mind and of Mind apart from Nature. The Stoic Sage, who recognized himself, in his essential nature, or capacity, as a constituting “power” (dunamis) of God, while no longer viewing himself as somehow distinct from God (the source) is nevertheless incapable of taking up a reflective stance vis-à-vis the “composite” of Nature (phusis generated by logos spermatikos) and Mind (Logos, God: pur tecknikon). Knowledge, for the Stoics, understood as the ability to receive and interpret that which is presented in/by experience (perception), is neither reflective nor ultimately constitutive. The ability to constitute (an) existence or an existent(ial situation), of course, depends upon the ability or capacity to produce a supplement, which is the same thing as saying: it is the ability to interpret. The mind that is incapable of reflection can never hope to interpret existence, or bring what is into line with the “beautiful possibility” of what may be. The compositional source of existence and experience which, for the Stoics, is God, is also the ultimate reference-point of all knowledge: the Sage refers not only his immediate experiences, but also his entire life-narrative to the verifying presence – always somehow behind and beyond existence itself, as an aloof and yet vivifying notion – of a supremely rational entity that, in its ability to eternally reiterate itself, is understood, theoretically, as the determination
or determining point of the entire chain of perception(s), both actual and possible. We find no “depth of existence” or fecund indeterminacy (a “space of supplementarity”) in Stoic philosophy, which preserves for itself a reserve stock of reason, in the concept of a God that is, at base, nothing but a physical process of generation, “destruction,” and re-generation. This “onto-theo-rhetorical” fundament makes of the hegemonikon nothing more than a leading or commanding impulse of the soul, understood as the presence of the eternal in the finite, but which is, in reality, merely the supposed style (stylus) of the divine, inscribing itself in the life of an individual who refuses, for whatever reason, to question existence. Indeed, the Stoic theory of knowledge is not about questioning existence, but about not falling into error concerning the presentations of our existence. The source of all presentations, according to the Stoics, is God, and so, as it goes, error or falsity is the result of a human mind that has not fully grasped the presentations given to it by God, which are aspects of God! Knowledge, on this view, is not freedom, but simply doing a good job at being a “seed of God,” a logos spermatikos.

The one who accepts such a view – that is, the one who accepts the ontological fundament of Stoicism – is one who was already prepared to forget the “primordial fact” of humankind’s demiurgic nature. Such a personality craves the “active nothingness” of the pre-contextual or “pre-human” source, over against the interpretative, “imperialistic” something of that a life devoted to the creative, constitutive engagement of an ever-unfolding presence.

For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.14

And I would ask you to remember that “Spirit is immortal; with it there is no past, no future, but an essential now.”15

Notes


3. See Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51, and Aetius 4.12.1-5 (SVF 2.54) – “The word “impression” [phantasia] is derived from ‘light’ [phos]; just as light reveals itself and whatever else it includes in its range, so impression reveals itself and its


5. Diogenes Laertius 7.54.

6. Diogenes Laertius 7.52.


8. Diogenes Laertius 7.54.


10. Kharakhter: a Greek term meaning both “stylus” or engraving instrument, and the impression or inscription carved into the head or point of the “stylus,” giving the instrument its unique “character.” Note also that Jesus Christ is referred to, in the Book of Hebrews 1:3, as the kharakhter of God.


13. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. L. Boldt (SUNY 1988); p. 25: “What is strangest: no longer to wish oneself to be everything is for man the highest ambition, it is to want to be man (or, if one likes, to rise above man – to be what he would be, released from the need to cast longing eyes at the perfect ....”
