

Tantric Phenomenology: Nature Of Consciousness Between Edmund Husserl & Kashmir Saivism

Abstract

Towing the line of the shared interaction between Indian and Western phenomenological thought, the paper presents a phenomenological analysis and appreciation of the idealistic esoteric tradition of Pratyabhijna, a sub-school of what is popularly known as Kashmir Saivism. Armed with the lens of the Husserlian phenomenological method, the paper looks at the phenomenological elements of epistemological 'world-making' within Pratyabhijna. With the vantage point supplied by previous research that has investigated parallels in the notions of consciousness between Husserlian phenomenology and the Indian philosophical traditions of Samkara, Ramanuja, and the Yogacara Buddhists, the paper suggests that both transcendental phenomenology and Pratyabhijna postulate a foundational, temporal, and intentional consciousness, in contradistinction to the aforementioned traditions. In underscoring the intentional nature of consciousness in Pratyabhijna, the paper emphasises the epistemological dyad of prakasa-vimarsa. While doing the following, it also points to the differences in the key metaphysical assumptions of the two traditions.

Keywords: Husserl, Kashmir Saivism, Siva, Sakti, Pratyabhijna, phenomenology, transcendental, consciousness, perception, foundational, temporality, intentionality, prakasa-vimarsa

Introduction

The 20th Century was marked by the enthusiastic efforts of philosophers like D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Lester Embree, and J.N. Mohanty, who sought to unite the Indian and the continental philosophical traditions. In their 1992 book, *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy*, they have featured works by various Indian and continental philosophers which look at concepts of rationality, perception, and consciousness present in Buddhist and Vedantic philosophy from a phenomenological lens. The likening of the Husserlian transcendental ego, or “I-consciousness”, and the Vedantic Atman serves as a starting point for these thinkers to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between phenomenology and the Indic Brahminical tradition.

Although Mohanty preferred to distance his work from the realm of ‘comparative philosophy’, S. K. Maharana, in his 2009 paper, has ventured into a comparative analysis of the notions of consciousness in Adi Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Maharana argues that for both Samkara and Husserl, ‘pure consciousness’ is “essentially foundational”, and absolute for any epistemic act. Husserl’s consciousness, in the Kantian spirit, is transcendental, which means that everything in the world, as well as the world itself, derives meaning from consciousness and its intentionality, and his phenomenological project was devised to demonstrate that all objects are constituted in consciousness.

In the Husserlian framework, intentionality refers to the directedness of consciousness towards objects - that consciousness is always “of” or “about” something. Intentionality encompassed the entire scope and structure of consciousness, and was made an active process in which the subject is constantly directed towards objects, ideas, or experiences, and forms mental representations¹. To address the problem of directedness in Brentano’s conception of intentionality, Husserl introduces two components of intentional acts: noesis and noema². During an intentional act, the subjective act of awareness of an object is the noesis, while noema, on the other hand, constitutes the object of which one is aware³. For instance, when a subject thinks about a table, the intentional act of thinking is the noesis, and the table, which is the intentional content, is the noema that is presented to consciousness.

Within the Indian tradition, any school can be classified into one of three broad categories based on its attitude towards consciousness and its intentionality. It could believe

¹ Siewert, “Consciousness and Intentionality.”

² Huemer, “Franz Brentano.”

³ Moran, “Introduction to Phenomenology,” 156.

that consciousness is (a) pure, self-revealing and non-intentional, (b) exclusively intentional, or (c) both revealing and intentional. Samkara's Advaita Vedanta treats consciousness as pure and self-revealing, but seems to deny intentionality. There is a notable distinction between Consciousness and the Object, which are diametrically opposed to each other.

Nyaya-Vaisesika and Yogacara Buddhism treat consciousness as exclusively intentional. The latter goes to the extent of denying the external world and putting forward a distinction between the subject and the object within consciousness, similar to the "noesis-noema" structure of Husserl. For Ramanuja, the preceptor of the Visistadvaita tradition, consciousness is both 'self-shining' and 'object-directed', as it reveals itself to its locus only when it manifests its object. Although in the Visistadvaita, consciousness is self-luminous, it is absolutely intentional, and not pure or foundational like the transcendental ego, or the Brahman of Samkara. In essence, there can be no consciousness without an object⁴.

Another tradition that occupies the third category is Pratyabhijna, a sub-school of the broader Kashmiri Saiva tradition, an esoteric, idealistic school which, like Advaita Vedanta, gives primacy to consciousness. For the Kashmiri Saivas, unlike Samkara, consciousness is not only foundational but intentional as well. According to Pratyabhijna, or the 'doctrine of self-recognition', the phenomenal world is a manifestation of pure subjectivity or consciousness, typified as Paramasiva, which expresses itself through its dynamic Saktis (consorts or potencies) which channel descent into lower tattvas, or the more objective realms of reality. Unlike the Advaita Vedanta of Samkara, the phenomenal world of Pratyabhijna is a real transformation of consciousness, and not merely a false appearance. For both Samkara and the Kashmiri Saivas, the world lacks absolute givenness, and it derives its existence from a phenomenologically primitive consciousness, which serves to supply meanings to the world.

The paper, therefore, continues in the line of its predecessors by analysing the tradition of Kashmir Saivism from a phenomenological lens, and underscoring a parallel foundational and intentional conceptualisation of consciousness between Kashmir Saivism and Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. In doing so, it utilises the epistemological concept of prakasa-vimarsa, present in Pratyabhijna.

Foundational Consciousness in Husserl & Pratyabhijna

Husserl talks of pure consciousness, or transcendental subjectivity, that is arrived at by the performance of the transcendental epoche. It is this consciousness that is world

⁴ Maharana, "Phenomenology of Consciousness in Adi Samkara and Edmund Husserl," 3.

constituting, in the sense that it is only through consciousness that the world is perceived as meaningful. All world-related meanings, including the term "world" itself, have their origin in the chambers of the structure of consciousness. Husserl's consciousness is active and constituting, and it constitutes itself before it constitutes the world. Unlike Samkara's consciousness, it is temporal - it constitutes itself as a flux. It constitutes its unity as an enduring ego, as unities of immanent acts and temporal entities.

Like Husserl, the nondual idealistic Kashmiri Saivas identify all of the cosmos, with all entities in it, with consciousness, or pure subjectivity, and deify it as Isvara or Siva, the absolute Being and consciousness (cit, or samvit). One's individual, empirical self is believed to be the imperfect consciousness, bound by ignorance and identification with the non-subjective, limiting elements of reality. The result of spiritual practice is the recognition that there is nothing but Siva, or consciousness. Like the phenomenological epoche, where one would arrive at pure, transcendental consciousness, the Kashmiri Saiva scriptures, the likes of Vijnana Bhairava Tantra, prescribe meditative techniques whereby one unravels the layers of one's consciousness and travels back from individuated consciousness to the Absolute one.

Both Husserl and the Saivas seem to converge upon the temporal dimension of consciousness. Husserl's conception of the tri-partite view of consciousness emerged as a response to his preceptor, Brentano's view of consciousness, much like the Kashmiri Saivas who developed their epistemological account of the Self in response to the Buddhist theories of cognition. Much like the Buddhists, Brentano recognised that a mere succession of experiences does not, in and of itself, add up to an experience of succession. For him, there was a two-fold momentary awareness. Firstly, there was direct perception in the moment, and, secondly, a simultaneous awareness of a series of representations (or retentions) of the immediately preceding phases. The latter was referred to as proteraesthesia. However, this approach gave rise to several questions - how can contents which are simultaneous seem to be successive? What is the precise nature of the representations occurring in proteraestheses? - In response to these questions, Husserl developed an account of time-consciousness along retentional lines. He held that we have a seemingly direct awareness of change and persistence amongst the objects and processes we perceive over short intervals, and that we have an awareness of our streams of consciousness flowing on. The latter process necessarily involves past phases of consciousness somehow being "retained in grasp" in later moments of consciousness. This led him to developing a dynamic tri-partite view of the composition of consciousness at any instant. The three components are: primal impressions, retentions (or,

primary memories), and protentions. Primal impressions are the live, actual experiences that occupy the momentary now. No sooner does a primal impression occur than it slips seamlessly into the past, but it does not vanish from consciousness altogether - it survives in the form of a retention, which presents it as past. For Husserl, retentions are a quite distinctive form of consciousness, and differ significantly from ordinary memories. Protentions are future-oriented counterparts of retentions, which are, usually, nothing more than an openness to the future, although sometimes they can be quite detailed when remembering or perceiving a sequence of events that is familiar⁵. A very similar model of the temporality of consciousness appears in the Kasmiri Saiva epistemology, where the Pratyabhijna modalities are divided into three chief Saktis - Cognition, Memory, and Semantic Exclusion.

*evam anyonya-bhinnanam aparaspara-vedinam |
jnananam anusamdhana-janma nasyej jana-sthitih ||
na ced antah-krtananta-visva-rupo mahesvarah |
syad ekas cid-vapur jnana smrty-apohana-saktiman ||*⁶

The unified perception of the diverse and mutually unrelated world-affairs depends on the synthesis of the multifarious cognitions. Such harmony would cease to exist, if not for the Supreme Lord in the form of consciousness, who bears the world and its diverse forms within Himself, and is in possession of the powers of Cognition, Memory, and Semantic Exclusion⁷. (IPK 1.3.6-7)

There seems to be a straightforward correspondence between Utpaladeva and Husserl in their tri-partite conception of a temporal consciousness, particularly, in its dimensions of Cognition and Memory. Like Husserl's primal impressions, the Sakti of Cognition refers to direct perception⁸, the knowledge (jnana) that presents itself to consciousness in the given moment. In articulating the Memory Sakti, the Saivas respond to the Buddhist argument that memory is accomplished through impressions alone, and does not necessitate an underlying substratum of a Self. In doing so, they describe Memory as a device that allows the retrieval

⁵ Dainton, "Temporal Consciousness."

⁶ Utpaladeva and Pandit, "Isvara Pratyabhijna Karika of Utpaladeva: Verses on the Recognition of the Lord," 34

⁷ Translation mine.

⁸ Direct perception (or pratyaksa), in its own right, has been treated as a means of knowledge (pramana) in Indian epistemology, along with other pramanas such as inference (anumana), verbal testimony (sabda), similarity (upamana), etc.

of Cognitions that occurred in the past, and such cognitions are presented *as* past - which would not be possible if cognition were to be purely episodic. This makes it identical to Husserl's retentions. Protentions seem to be entirely absent from the Kasmiri Saiva epistemology, and its place seems to be taken by the Semantic exclusion Sakti.

An important belief that distinguishes Husserl from the Kasmiri Saivas is that Husserl's foundational consciousness supports on top of it a world of meanings and sense, and is not, in Husserl's belief, the origin of the world. Husserl's transcendental idealism was an inquiry merely in the epistemological or methodological domain, and did not require metaphysical idealism. However, for the Kasmiri Saivas, the very existence of the world is contingent on its appearance in the field of consciousness. The phenomenal world is conceived of as an *abhasa*, or appearance, which is why the Kasmiri Saiva doctrine of causation is called '*abhasavada*'. This distinguishes it from Advaita Vedanta, where the world is believed to be an illusory superimposition (*adhyasa*) on consciousness, or Brahman - which, as a theory of causation, is called *vivartavada*. For the Kasmiri Saivas, the supreme consciousness, Shiva, does not merely lay inert but actively transforms itself into the world. Therefore, Siva (consciousness) is both the material and the efficient cause of the world, and fashions everything out of itself. The world, which appears to be constituted of matter, is, in fact, made up of consciousness, wherein the "ideal" substance of consciousness undergoes an illusory transformation and appears, phenomenally, as a physical substance⁹. This is, in stark contrast, to the modified metaphysical realism of Husserl. He himself writes:

. . . I still consider, as I did before, every form of the usual philosophical realism nonsensical in principle, no less so than that idealism which it sets itself up against in its arguments and which it "refutes." (Phenomenological reduction) is a piece of pure self- reflection, exhibiting the most original evident facts; moreover, if it brings into view in them the outlines of idealism ... it is still anything but a party to the usual debates between idealism and realism. . . ¹⁰

Intentional Consciousness in Husserl & Pratyabhijna

⁹ This is supported by the umbrella theory, *satkaryavada*, under which both *vivartavada* of Samkara and *abhasavada* of the Saivas fall. According to this theory, the effect is pre-existent in the cause.

¹⁰ Siewert, "Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)."

Like the verse from the *Isvara Pratyabhijna Karika* (IPK) quoted in the above section, Husserl also seems to allude to an ordering and enduring unity of phenomena within the field of consciousness in his discussions on its intentionality in *Shorter Logical Investigations*:

The phenomenologically reduced ego is therefore nothing peculiar, floating above many experiences: it is simply identical with their own interconnected unity. In the nature of its contents, and the laws they obey, certain forms of connection are grounded. They run in diverse fashions from content to content, from complex of contents to complex of contents, till in the end a unified sum total of content is constituted, which does not differ from the phenomenologically reduced ego itself¹¹.

Similarly, the Saivas' cosmogonic myth of the world's emanation from consciousness (Siva) and its potencies (Saktis) is also inherently tied to an idea of coherence in the world. In the Pratyabhijna model, every mental activity is to possess the nature of the realisation of "I am Siva", which underpins all epistemic activity, including perception, which is seen as a Sakti of the Absolute and is said to have two fundamental moments: prakasa and vimarsa. The two phases operate together to create the abhasa, or the world-appearance. While one might consider them to be two distinct forces, or epistemological "juices" whose alchemical combination of sorts creates the world, but rather, they are distinguishable functions of a single dyad of conscious activity that constructs the world. The two primordial tattvas - the Siva tattva, which is the static, observing aspect of consciousness, and the Sakti tattva, the dynamic, creative aspect of consciousness, although appearing to be distinct, are not separate but are extensions of the one Absolute consciousness; or as David Peter Lawrence would quote Abhinavagupta's summary of the Pratyabhijna stance (Lawrence 1999, 120-21):

Here, as the multiplicity of things are recognitively apprehended (*vimrsyate*), so they exist (*asti*). This is so because Being (*astitva*) depends upon awareness (*prakasa*). That is, there is the manifestation of Being as depending on the recognitive judgement (*vimarsa*) regarding what is brought about through this awareness (*prakasa*)

¹¹ Husserl and Dummet, "The Shorter Logical Investigations," 205.

Prakasa is conceptualised as the primordial, subjective awareness, validating one's a priori cognition, so that one knows what one knows. This is the first step that the Saiva takes in establishing the thesis that there is nothing outside one's awareness, or that an object is nothing but the awareness of it. Coupled with the identification of oneself with Siva, Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta go a step further to establish that there is no one, in the ultimate perspective, but only a single subject, and the inference of the sentience of others, is only provisional. Thus, solipsism, as understood by the Western mind, is replaced with a conception of universal awareness, beginning from Godhead down to earthworms. Thus, the prakasa arguments establish the unity of the individuated subject with the Absolute consciousness. These arguments are further developed by the vimarsa arguments, which show that awareness is necessarily a process of recognition. The cosmos emanates from Siva-Sakti's self-recognition, embodied as Supreme Speech (paravak) - this fact makes Abhinavagupta believe that cognition is intrinsically linguistic. For him, linguistic interpretation is intrinsic to experience, which ultimately leads to recognition.

The prakasa-vimarsa arguments together show the object-directedness of consciousness in Pratyabhijna. The way objects present themselves in one's consciousness ultimately ties back to the coherence in the perception of the world. According to Husserl, one's consciousness is object-directed, and the directedness of consciousness towards the object, which creates the 'intentional' experience of it, is referred to as a 'mental act'. Like the prakasa-vimarsa dyad, Husserl's intentionality is an active mental process that constructs objects and experiences of the world, irrespective of the fact that the intentional object may exist or not. The emergence of the world-appearance as a result of the self-projection of the Absolute consciousness in Pratyabhijna is also called pratibimba, or reflection. Just like a person who looks into the mirror, whose face forms the object (bimba) that reflects onto the mirror to form the pratibimba. While it may appear as if the formation of the pratibimba, or abhasa, necessitates the existence of a bimba, the Kashmiri Saivas negate this association by arguing that any reflection or appearance may be caused even without a real, correlative object. The cat that I may see in a dream need not be the same cat that I feed everyday. Like Husserl, the Saivas do not require that the intentional objects of consciousness be existent, as such an argument would presume that the mind or consciousness were to be a passive thing that merely reflects what it comes in contact with, and were in no power to actively create.

Perhaps the prakasa-vimarsa dyad can also be likened to Husserl's noesis-noema structure of intentionality, which he came up with to resolve the problematic psychical-physical distinction that appeared in Brentano's work. Also called the subject-pole,

noesis is best conceived as the mental act which entails the directedness of consciousness towards intentional experiences or objects. On the other hand, the object-pole, noema, is the correlative meaning that is construed by the conscious act. Previous research has likened this to the *asmad-yusmad* (subject-object) structure of Samkara¹². However, there seems to be a strict opposition between *asmad* and *yusmad*. In its place, the *prakasa-vimarsa* structure seems to be a closer match to the noesis-noema of Husserl, as neither of these structures are internally opposed to each other¹³. The noesis, seems to correspond closely to the awareness of *prakasa*, the primordial subjective awareness which provides the epistemic foundation for any mental act, and the noema, which corresponds to *vimarsa*, the recognition and 'sense-making' of the objects of cognition.

Conclusion

Edmund Husserl and the Kasmiri Saivas seem, from one perspective, to be the most unlikely compatriots in sharing a foundational, temporal, and intentional notion of consciousness. In addition to there being little contact between Husserl and the Saiva philosophers, the former held the view that any rational mode of thought was born with the Greeks, and never did exist outside of Europe. For him, philosophy was merely concerned with an interest in the “theoretical attitude”, and not with a practical or a soteriological one. As academic philosophy has, today, approached a more pluralistic approach, many thinkers have drawn connections between the Western and the ‘Oriental’ modes of thought, leading to the development of ‘comparative philosophy’ as a field. This paper contributes to such an endeavour by pointing out the similarities between Husserl and Kasmir Saivism on their conceptions of a foundational, temporal, and intentional consciousness. While there are similarities, there are also differences. For instance, Kasmir Saivism, on one hand, postulates absolute idealism, wherein even the material constitution of the world is reduced to the ideal substance of consciousness. On the other, Husserl believes in a modified form of metaphysical realism where he clarifies the sense in which the objects of our consciousness appear to us, and does away with their givenness. For Husserl, the constitution within consciousness is only a constitution of meanings and he does not seem to suggest that consciousness ‘creates’ the world, in the conventional sense of the term. While both Husserl

¹² Maharana, “Phenomenology of Consciousness in Adi Samkara and Edmund Husserl,” 10.

¹³ Another tradition that comes very close to the noesis-noema structure of Husserl is Vijnanavada, or Yogacara Buddhism, which asserts a stream of consciousness between the subject pole, i.e. individual consciousness, and the object-pole, i.e. the experiences that consciousness is directed towards. While, in contradistinction to Kasmir Saivism, the Yogacara denies any sort of reality of the objects of the outer, objective world, thus posing yet another internal opposition.

and the Pratyabhijna thinkers tend to hold the temporality of consciousness, and the components that denote present and past cognitions, the element of protentions, which denotes future-directed cognition, seems to be entirely absent from the Kasmiri Saiva framework. On the notion of intentionality, Kasmir Saivism seems to use the prakasa-vimarsa structure, which, like Husserl's intentionality, is an active process of consciousness by which objects or experiences are presented to consciousness within a larger stream of orderliness. It is likened to the noesis-noema structure of Husserl, where there is a connection between the subjective and the objective aspects of consciousness.

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