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*Dharmakīrti,  
Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla  
and Husserlian Phenomenology*

*A Question Concerning Compatibility*

**1. Introduction**

Christian Coseru's wonderful book *Perceiving Reality* discusses, among other topics, consciousness, intentionality, perception, and cognition in classical Indian Buddhism. His work falls neatly into the genre of *fusion* philosophy in which one aims to bring together elements of different traditions, perhaps from different cultures, along with other disciplines in order to shed light on a common concern in the human condition. Evan Thompson's works, such as *Mind in Life*, and Thomas Metzinger's *Being No One* also serve as good examples of *fusion* philosophy.

Coseru's ostensible topic is *perception* in the Buddhist tradition. But it is more specifically engaged with the ideas of Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. Along the way Coseru does an amazing job of introducing to the reader a number of issues that fall outside of the realm of perception, such as the nature of conception and language, compassion and dependent arising, and foundationalism in Buddhist epistemology. In my contribution to this symposium I would like to pose a critical question that is directed at Coseru's engagement with Husserlian phenomenology as a pathway for understanding or bringing to light aspects of Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla views on *consciousness* and perception. The question I wish to ask is

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one that aims to offer insight into the fusion of Buddhism and Husserlian phenomenology. My hope here is that Coseru's response will be one satisfactory response to the critical question. And that others, interested in this question, may offer distinct answers depending on which school or philosopher(s) of Buddhism they go in for, and which period or parts of Husserl's work they fuse together with Buddhism. I take it that the importance of the critical question lies in the fact that an answer, or set of answers, to it provides the project of fusing Husserlian phenomenology and Buddhism together with an even more attractive appeal than it already possesses.

## 2. A Question Concerning Compatibility

Because of issues relating to translation — on the one hand from Sanskrit or Pali to English, and on the other hand from German or French to English — I am going to simply state the core critical question in English. This will allow for Coseru and others to respond to the question from their preferred texts with their preferred translations.

*An argument for broad incompatibility*

- (1) Husserlian phenomenology is committed to the idea that there are essences.
  - (2) Buddhism is committed to the idea that there are no essences.
  - (3) An ontological disagreement between two schools renders them incompatible.
- ∴
- (4) Husserlian phenomenology and Buddhism are incompatible.

## 3. A Development of the Incompatibility

One of the key philosophers that Coseru appeals to in the phenomenological tradition is Husserl. Three of the main thinkers that Coseru appeals to in the Buddhist tradition are Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. I think there is at least a *prima facie* tension between some important themes Husserl holds to and the views of these Buddhist thinkers. The tension can be brought out through the following three claims.

- (1) Entities have essences.
- (2) Essences are mind-independent.
- (3) Humans can know essences.

On the account I will offer, Husserl believes (1)–(3), while many Buddhists deny (1) and (2); and for the most part there is little discussion in Buddhism of (3), because of the denial of (1) and (2). This way of putting the problem is flat-footed. For if the problem is to be made clear, as noted above, one needs to define the relevant terms. Thus, in what follows, I will make the case for the claim that there is a reading of Husserl's work under which (1)–(3) are *coarse-grain* incompatible with the thrust of the kind of Buddhism found in Dharmakīrti, Śantarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. This leaves it open for a *fine-grained* reading under which Husserl's views can be made compatible with a variety of Buddhist philosophers.

In sections 86–93 of *Experience and Judgment* Husserl (1973) describes the method of essential seeing (*Wesenerchaung*). At section 87a–f he offers a characterization and example of the method of free variation.

Let us attempt to get a first concept of this operation [free variation]. It is based on the modification of an experienced or imagined objectivity, turning it into an arbitrary example which, at the same time, receives the character of a guiding 'model,' a point of departure for the production of an infinitely open multiplicity of variants. It is based, therefore, on a *variation*. In other words, for its modification in pure imagination, we let ourselves be guided by the fact taken as a model. For this it is necessary that ever new similar images be obtained as copies, as images of the imagination, which are all concretely similar to the original image. Thus, by an act of volition we produce free variants, each of which, just like the total process of variation itself, occurs in the subjective mode of the 'arbitrary.' It then becomes evident that a unity runs through this multiplicity of successive figures, that in such free variations of an original image, e.g., of a thing, an *invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all. While what differentiates the variants remains indifferent to us, this form stands out in the practice of voluntary variation, and as an absolutely identical content, an invariable *what*, according to which all variants coincide: *a general essence*. We can direct our regard toward it as toward the necessarily invariable, which prescribes limits to all variation practiced in the mode of the 'arbitrary,' all variation which is to be variation of the same original image, no matter how this may be carried out. The essence proves to be that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e., without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such. This general essence is the *eidōs*, the *idea* in the Platonic sense, but apprehended in its purity and free from all metaphysical interpretations, therefore taken exactly as it is given to us immediately and intuitively in the vision of

the idea which arises in this way... For example, if we take a sound as our point of departure, whether we actually hear it or whether we have it present as a sound ‘in the imagination,’ then we obtain the *eidos* sound as that which, in the course of ‘arbitrary’ variants, is necessarily common to all these variants. Now if we take as our point of departure another sound phenomenon in order to vary it arbitrarily, in the new ‘example’ we do not apprehend *another eidos* sound; rather, in juxtaposing the old and the new, we see that it is *the same*, that the variants and the variations on both sides join together in a single variation, and that the variants here and there are, in like fashion, *arbitrary particularizations of the one eidos*. (Husserl, 1973, pp. 340–1)

In stark contrast to Husserl’s commitment to the existence of essences and to the possibility of human knowledge of them, we find in the Buddhist tradition a strong commitment, by many thinkers of the tradition, to:

- (i) Everything is impermanent.

And by some thinkers, such as Dharmakīrti, Śantarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla, to:

- (ii) Existence is momentary.

According to Tillemans (2014), in the second chapter of his *Pramāṇaviniścaya* and in the *Vādanīyāya*, Dharmakīrti offers a powerful set of ideas and arguments for the claim that existence is momentary. The argument is superior to the one offered earlier by Vasubandhu. The key ideas across both texts are as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- (a) If anything exists and is a specific thing rather than another, it is because of its causal efficacy or powers to produce such-and-such effects.
- (b) Things are new moment after moment, because they are always causally efficient in some way.
- (c) Nothing causes new effects while itself remaining the same.
- (d) If something were permanent, it would be causally inert as it would neither produce its effects all at once nor serially.

Of course it is important to keep in mind that Dharmakīrti is *not* arguing against someone that holds to the idea that entities can be *non-*

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of controlling for differences of interpretation and translation of Dharmakīrti’s ideas I am using the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the explicit ideas offered by Tom Tillemans.

*permanent*, that is, exist for some period longer than a moment, yet not permanently. Rather, he is arguing against those that hold to *the doctrine of permanence* — some things exist permanently, that is, for all times. Against those that hold the *doctrine of permanence*, Dharmakīrti is responding to the idea, for example, that a thing can exist permanently and have different effects that it brings about serially over time. That is: *a* exists permanently, but causes *F* at  $t_1$  and *G* at  $t_2$ . Against this view, Dharmakīrti, as well as Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, argue as follows:

[I]f a would-be cause remained unchanged over time and if it was only the concomitant circumstances that changed, then it would have to be the new circumstances that were the actual cause. After all, the permanent thing would be present unchanged both when the putative effects are present and when they are absent, and this failure of co-presence and co-absence conditions for determining cause and effect would show, for Dharmakīrti, that the ever-present thing is not the actual cause, but that something else is. (Tillemans, 2014)

Coseru himself gives us an instructive passage concerning Śāntarakṣita.

Śāntarakṣita's introductory stanzas provide a succinct overview of the entire contents of the *Compendium*. From the outset we learn that its central topic is the principle of dependent arising, and that its presentation is given in the form of a comprehensive list of defining characteristics. Śāntarakṣita lists transitoriness and the basis of ascertaining the true connection between actions and their results as the sole characteristics of the principle of dependent arising. *The main point of this succinct taxonomical exercise is to exclude dependent arising from being associated with such categories as primordial nature, the divine, the self, essence, primordial sound, and universal spirit.* The ultimate aim of these investigations, however, is to demonstrate that supernatural agencies are mere conceptual fabrications that have neither causal efficacy nor explanatory force. Unlike such fixed and immutable principles as 'primordial nature' or 'universal spirit,' *the principle of dependent arising alone captures the nature of phenomena, seen as essentially transitory and as arising due to a multiplicity of causes and conditions, none of which can be taken to stand outside the order of the causal domain.*<sup>2</sup> (Coseru, 2012, pp. 135–6, emphasis added)

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<sup>2</sup> Note the explicit tension between the occurrence of 'essence' in the italicized portion and 'essentially transitory' the closing sentence.

Thus, there is a commitment in Dharmakīrti, Śantarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla to three doctrines: the doctrine of dependent arising, the doctrine of impermanence, and the doctrine of momentariness.

From a logical point of view, it is important to note that (i), *everything is impermanent*, and (ii), *existence is momentary*, are *not* logically equivalent. For example, one cannot argue as follows:

- (1) Everything is impermanent.
- ∴
- (2) If  $x$  exists, then  $x$  exists only for a moment.

The problem is that from (1) there are at least two distinct options:

*The doctrine of non-permanence*

Some things exist only for a thick duration, but not permanently.

Or

*The doctrine of momentariness*

Everything exists only for a moment.

Moving back to the central issue one should ask: what does talk of impermanence have to do with essences, since the problem raised at the outset is about essences and not impermanence?

There are two ways to make the connection or disconnection between essence and momentariness. One is logical, and connects momentariness to a theory of essence. The other is related to Husserl's views on essence, and disconnects Husserl's views on essence from momentariness. First, from the logical point of view, there is a problem with the notion of perishability that puts pressure on the idea of momentariness in a way that connects it to essence. The connection arises from considering momentariness in relation to the question: what explains why things exist only for a moment so as to perish? The answer to this question moves away from the Buddhist discussion of causation and onto the importance of a certain kind of explanatory answer deriving from a suitable notion of essence. The core running idea is that rather than thinking only of how causation alters the identity and persistence of an object over time, we can additionally think of a suitable notion of essence or essential property playing a role in helping us understand momentariness.

*The argument from perishability*<sup>3</sup>

- (1) If  $x$  has an essence, we can account for how it is that at  $t_1$   $x$  existed, but at  $t_2$   $x$  did not exist, rather  $y$  existed.
  - (2) If  $x$  does not have an essence, we cannot account for what exists at some time and did not exist at another time.
- ∴
- (3) If things exist only for a moment, they have essences, and if they don't have essences, we cannot account for how they perish.

Let's unpack the motivation for the argument so that the connection between momentariness and essence can be made plausible. Suppose that the essence of Sonia is her soul  $S$  and we are looking at two descriptions of sequential intervals of time, A and B. With  $S$  in place we can account for whether Sonia is present at A or B by simply checking to see whether  $S$  is present at either A or B. *But*, suppose now that we take out  $S$ , how can we tell whether or not Sonia is present at A or B? If there is no  $S$ , there is no way to pick her out. The idea of there being a set of properties present at a time that can be used to pick out Sonia depends on those properties being essential to Sonia, such that in any situation, or time interval, in which the properties are present we can say Sonia is present. Contingent properties don't allow us to individuate entities. So, it might be useful for the defence of momentariness to acknowledge the existence of essences or essential properties of *some kind*. The further question is whether these essences or essential properties can be understood on a Husserlian model of them.

For Husserl essences are (i) mind-independent in a certain sense, (ii) not in the physical world, and (iii) not in the mental world. That is, they are not objects or entities in the physical world, nor are they ideas in the mind of an individual person. As a consequence of these components of what essences are, the following tension can be generated.

- (1) Husserlian phenomenology countenances the existence of essences that have an ontological profile on which they are (i) mind-independent, (ii) non-physical, and (iii) not simply ideas in one's mind.

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Sonia Roca Royes for inspiring the discussion of this argument.

- (2) Buddhism of the kind defended by Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla does not clearly countenance the view that there are mind-independent, non-physical entities of any kind.
- ∴
- (3) Husserlian phenomenology and the Buddhism defended by Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla are *broadly* incompatible.

However, the problem is not just ontological. There is an epistemological way to bring out the problem that is related to Husserl's views on knowledge of essence through variation in imagination. The issue has to do with the relation between everything being momentary and the possible knowledge of essence.

- (1) Everything is momentary.
- (2) For  $x$  to have a specific or general essence that is knowable,  $x$  has to exist for more than a moment.
- ∴
- (3) Momentariness is incompatible with knowledge of essence.

Arguably (2) is true. The core line of reasoning for this, at least on a Husserlian account of our knowledge of essence, is as follows.

Husserl informs us that we can know essences by a method of imaginative variation where, for example, an object in our visual consciousness or auditory consciousness can be taken up into our imagination, whereby it can be subjected to a process of variation, where we can eventually see an invariant of the object through the method of variation. This in turn requires that what we discover to be an essence of an object through variation in imagination is in fact a property of the object. Otherwise what we learn would not be an essence of the object. Moreover, it seems that we learn, for example of an ordinary cup, that it is extended in space and that that aspect of it is an essential component of the cup. However, we do not learn of the cup that it is extended in space *for a moment*. Rather, we learn that it is extended in space for more than a moment. *The reason for this is that we cannot imagine the object being the same object, such that it has the essence of being extended in space, were we to imagine that it exists only for a moment.* Variation of properties in imagination requires that, as we are doing the variation on the object, the object remains the same in time through certain variations and perishes at another time through other variations. So, there is a *prima facie* tension in the idea that the cup exists only for a moment, yet it has an



essence, such as being extended in space, but not being extended for any duration in time. In addition to the example of the cup, we can take the example of sound, also discussed by Husserl. Arguably, Husserl would say that we learn that it is extended in time essentially, but not that the sound's existence is momentary. If there is a commitment in Husserl to the idea that there are real essences and that these essences are knowable, it seems that there is a further commitment in his work to the idea that essences are not momentary, and that minimally they are non-permanent. They only need to be permanent if we take a pure Platonic interpretation of Husserl's views of essence rather than a more nuanced view of them under which they are not mind-independent in the strong sense required by Plato's theory of forms.

Thus, I submit, it is reasonable to wonder whether Husserlian phenomenology and Buddhism are broadly compatible. I am more convinced of the reasonableness of the question than of the view that there are no interesting answers to it. One of those answers I am sure to find in the more informed and careful thinking of Christian Coseru.

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