
TRACES OF BUDDHISM IN THE WORKS OF EMIL CIORAN

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Abstract

Emil Cioran spoke repeatedly about the injustice of birth, life and death. I chose these three themes of reflection to highlight any similarities between the Buddhist doctrine and Cioran's philosophy. But is Cioran an authentic Buddhist? Despite the connections made between him and the Buddhist doctrine, fact recognized by Cioran himself at one time, the two visions share only the starting point – suffering – and debate on issues of birth, life and death. Cioran's approach is also a highly stylized one, highly emotional, which shows a revolt and a hidden inner drama.

Keywords: Buddhism, scepticism, birth, life, death

1. Introductory considerations

Emil Cioran was, as he himself confessed, passionate about religion, although his stance as a sceptic did not seem to indicate it: "Inside of me there has always existed a religious calling, *mystical* actually, not religious. It is impossible for me to have faith, but at the same time it is impossible not to think about faith. There has always been a profound temptation inside of me to believe, but the denial was greater than anything. I have a sort of negativistic and perverted pleasure of denial. I have always oscillated between the need to have faith and the impossibility to believe. Because of this I have had such an interest in religious beings, saints, those who, having the temptations, have gone all the way to the end." [1] He needed to be close to religion, without succeeding to be in its midst and to have the specific behaviour. He never succeeded with Buddhism (the only one that 'gives you access to a religion without having faith'), as it also had its rigors in what regards the path one should follow in life; but, nevertheless, he said that, had he been born a Buddhist, he would have remained a Buddhist, but, born a Christian, he could only stop being a Christian, and this as far back as his early youth [2]. He had, nonetheless, a great sensibility to religious issues (it has been discussed that, even more, one of the two major obsessions that marked Cioran's life and work was that of divinity,

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alongside the obsession for his native lands [3]), even though he was incapable of being a believer; he had the temptation, but not the capability.

Cioran has, on several accounts, stated that he feels closer to the Eastern philosophy than the Western one [4], even though he recognized certain connections in his philosophy that stemmed from the former. Cioran has an affinity for the Indian philosophy, which he finds to be 'the most profound philosophy that has ever existed' because unlike the other two major types of philosophical systems, the Greek and the German, the Indian philosophy has the considerable advantage of not being simply an 'intellectual exercise', it is not a construction detached from experience, but rather elaborated in order to be practiced, in order to achieve freedom. Western philosophy has some amazing constructions, but they are torn away from life: 'they did not stem from life and have not been elaborated based on life'.

In what follows, we will find Cioran in his theoretical and emotional relationship with Buddhism, the religious doctrine to which he felt the closest. This research will lay out some possible points of connection between the sceptical Cioranian vision and the Buddhist vision of the world.

2. Buddhist theological coordinates

In Buddhism, as it is well known, the core of the teaching is made out of the four 'Noble Truths' [5].

The first refers to suffering or pain; for Buddha, as for most religious thinkers following *the Upanishads*, 'everything is suffering', from the most important moments of life – birth, old age, disease, death. The second Noble Truth refers to the origin of suffering, it is identified with the desire, lust or the 'thirst' which determines the reincarnations; there is thus talk of the desire to satisfy the senses, of the wish to perpetuate or the desire for extinction (auto-annihilation). The third truth refers to the release from suffering; this means giving up, the abolition of lust and desire, and is equivalent to Nirvana. The fourth truth reveals the ways leading to the cessation of suffering.

Meditation on the first two noble truths will lead to the discovery of the non-permanence of this, of their and one self's insubstantiality. Man is a wanderer among things, even if he shares their way of existence, as the cosmic whole and psycho-mental activity are all one and the same universe.

Regarding the last two noble truths, the cessation of suffering is achieved by the total cessation of desire (thirst), i.e., the removal, abandonment, rejection, release from desire. Nirvana is thus possible, but can only be achieved by special means, such as concentration or meditation, but also by morality and wisdom.

Therefore, as shown, suffering is a central theme of the Buddhist theology; thus it was natural that such a vision would attract the pessimist Emil Cioran.

3. An embellished Buddhism?

Emil Cioran will talk repeatedly about the injustice of birth, life and death or the suffering caused by the birth, life or death. I have chosen these three themes of reflection to highlight any similarities between the Buddhist doctrine and Cioran's philosophy.

3.1. Birth

Cioran noted that “the idea of being born is far more terrible than the idea of dying, for to fear of death is added the futility of birth vision” [6]. In fact, the birth, in a Cioran manner of expression, is only the first step toward death.

As he wrote about the birth, however, he testified that he was seized with a sense of embarrassment, even guilt, a lack of conviction in front of a topic of discussion different than life and death, subjects that are ‘normal’. It is ‘antinatural’ to judge our beginning, our origins, he said; it is easy to deny God, that usually means to deny origin, but not *your* own origin. With this sort of crime feeling a “an unprecedented, risky release, the most important which a mortal is capable of” [6, p. 138-139]. He had recently passed from suicide obsession to birth obsession and the latter seemed more frightening, as his ‘game’ with suicide had a dose of ‘coquetry’, while regarding birth he felt an uttermost inner gravity [6, p. 158].

Birth, the first human tragedy, is, for Cioran, absolutely undesirable: “Not to be born is, without doubt, the best formula available. It is not, unfortunately, at anybody’s hand.” [7]

Non-birth “is preferable to life and death”, as he says elsewhere [6, p. 194], in full consistency with the Schopenhauer formula on this topic: “(...) we have more to enjoy than to suffer for the existence of the world, as non-existence would be preferable to existence” [8]. Every newborn is one more unfortunate, as any dead is one less. (...) Condolences for birth, congratulations for death, this is another of his shocking formulae [9]. He actually tries to imagine the state of pre-birth “as a sleep without beginning, however getting down to an origin where even thought isn’t able to reach, as an ‘infinite’ sleep whose ripping up causes distress. The nostalgia for this anterior infinity is only the regret for interrupting a state in which conscience was fore felt but not wanted ... the non-action was a pleasure/prurience, disturbed unfortunately by the immanence of being” [6, p. 196]. This state of pre-existence of ‘pure virtuality’ would be preferable to existence, and “if it is true that by dying, we come back to what we were before we exist, wouldn’t have been better to confine ourselves to pure virtuality, and not to move from there? Why to take this round travel, when we could remain forever in an unfulfilled plenitude”? [7, p. 155] But the idea of never existing is one of the unacceptable ideas for humans; once aware of his existence, once identified with his own being, man believes himself necessary, indispensable, acts as God and is God [7, p. 189].

Therefore, to procreate, to give birth to another life is merely an act of great irresponsibility, an immoral act that throws another miserable being into this world. Anyone who is responsible, Cioran thinks, will refuse to reproduce. The refusal to procreate, to give something to the species, makes you a monster, but a monster closed to a saint, who, in terms of nature, is a calamity, an absolute end, through renunciation, through defiance of the species [10].

On the other hand, one who is still perpetuating places himself at the level of the nature, he is not far from a dog and he does not understand that he can leave himself to his instincts revolting against them, “that he can enjoy the species benefits, while despising the end of the race – with cravings...” [10] Physical desire, sexuality should not be accepted for any other purpose than pleasure.

He personally applied this philosophy and felt the satisfaction of refusing procreation, but also a strong rebellion against those who have or want children: “The only thing I'm proud to have discovered very early, before turning twenty-one years old, is that we should not procreate. This is the origin of my dread of marriage, family and all social conventions. It's a crime to get your failings to your offspring, thus forcing him to go through the same suffering that you, through, probably, a much more terrible ordeal than yours. To give life to a being who inherit my miseries and diseases - I could never accept this. Parents are all irresponsible or assassins. Only brutes should procreate. Pity stops you to become a ‘genitor’. The most atrocious word of my knowledge.” [9, p. 135] At one point, however, he was put in the position to take care at distance of the three children of his dead sister (the father of the children being invalid), he, who never wanted children. He really felt this as a punishment, being put before an unavoidable situation, aware of the responsibility towards the family left in the country [6, p. 140]. But he, personally, enjoyed “the happiness to die without heirs” [11].

3.2. *Life*

What primarily characterizes life, Cioran says, is first its multiplicity of forms in a production process that gives birth to some of them to destroy others. This continuing productivity of life should not be interpreted as creativity, as forms that are succeeding are not aggregated into an overall structure, they don't amount to a synthetic wholeness [12]. It is a ‘demoniacal process’ of production and destruction, a becoming with no transcendent meaning, taking place in an immanent level, ‘there is no life beyond the multiplicity of its forms’. The irrational of life manifests itself precisely in this demonism of transcendent forms without any transcendent intentionality whose result is the relativity of life contents and forms. In this context, one can say that man, being endowed with a conscience, unlike other parts of life, will ‘digest’ with difficulty the becoming of Demonia. On the trail of Ecclesiastes, it can be stated that everything is emptiness, ‘inanity, insubstantiality, lack of meaning’, when the reasons which give sense to life disappear. Suffering, the pain of the world are due to

irrationality, bestiality and to the demons of life, life is a tragedy because of this demonic immanence [12, p. 178].

At a strictly human level, bearing all these events is due to the original sin, to leaving Paradise: “Without the idea of original Sin, daze would be the only sense in front of everything that happens and is happening to us. This idea is a guiding principle of universal value, allowing us to understand all the miseries that overwhelm us and especially those that are related to the fact of being human. One who says man says original sin in flesh and blood, present, more alive than ever. An initial scandal governs our destinies, initial and inexhaustible...” [11, p. 194-195]

Therefore for Cioran, life, being the consequence of the man’s fall into history, man’s original Sin, journey of a demonic becoming, is not a gift, but an overlong agony, always ‘a dramatic view’, as Schopenhauer would say, the other great theoretician of life’s sufferance and badness. The feeling of life as agony will lead him in his youth to desperation in front of life, a more intense and tensed feeling than the simple doubt, “a state in which anxiety and inquietude are immanent to the existence” [13], a state in which one can feel the actuality of death in life [12, p. 199-201].

It is obvious that these glum aspects of existence can not be perceived by everybody. This is why the moralist asserts that people can be divided in two categories [13, p. 173-175]: those that look at the world as something exterior and those that contain it in themselves. The first category, common people, sees the objects of the physical world and the nature’s phenomena in themselves, bland and cold, with no significance for man; they live aloof, removing the objective world from any possibility of assimilation. The people belonging to the second category live the significance of things, summing them in subjectivity. Interiorizing the world means not to see just simple fires, tempests, crashes, landscapes, but feeling fires, tempests, crashes, landscapes. Objects, at their turn become able to determine the human beings. “*I* am not the one who suffers in world, but *the world* suffers in me. The individual exists just in the measure in which he concentrates the mute sorrows of things, from the rag to the cathedral. And, in the same way, he is *life* only in the moment when, from worm to God, the living beings are enjoying and moaning in him.” [14]

It is clear that Emil Cioran belongs to the last category and, he confesses that he is one of those who interiorize too intensely, discovering symbolic revelations in the palest aspects of nature. World becomes for him ‘an occasion of endless delights and sadness’, with moments in which the beauty of a flower justifies the existence of a universal finality, but also with moments in which a spot in the purity of an azure ‘excites the pessimistic verve’. The big problem is that interiorization leads eventually to collapse, as the world has entered in you and keeps pressing you.

It is now clear, also, why Emil Cioran puts so much passion when he judges what happens in this world. He is an involved observer, a passionate for life (although with all his thoughts against it, as he declared in an interview), excessively aware, preferring as ‘Job’s epigone’, as he was thought, to bring in

foreground especially the misfortunes experienced by humans in an imperfect world. He even thought for a while that he is the only aware-er in a fallen world, the only man to have enough lucidity to see what life actually is, one of the chosen of this world, but a cursed one.

His relationship with the world and the life pulsing in it is one that involves two irreconcilable positions: "The fact that I exist proves that the world makes no sense. For how can I find a meaning in the discomposure of a man, infinitely dramatic and unfortunate, for whom everything is ultimately reduced to nothingness and for whom the law of this world is suffering? If the world has allowed a human exemplary of my kind, this proves only that the spots on the so-called sun of life are so big that they will hide its light in time." [13, p. 20-21] The bestiality of this world, the irrationality and the demonism of life have irreparably poisoned his soul, and made the suffering present ("Suffering has made me, and the suffering will unmake me. I am the result of it", he noted in a diary [9, p. 293]). Cioran is aware that the relationship between him and the world is unequal, in fact, his struggles, his thoughts, his suffering will disturb just some peaceful existences, but they will not in any way shake the world. However, his tragedy is the most important in the world ("I am convinced that I am absolutely nothing in the Universe, but I feel that the only real existence is mine" [13, p. 54]) and, if he were put to choose between the existence of the world and his existence, he would no doubt choose his own, taking the risk of hovering in the absolute nothingness (in fact, each of us sees the Absolute in his own existence, "everyone is for himself the only fixed point in the Universe" [10, p. 95-96]). Indeed, one's own tragedy, one's own suffering can be best understood, can be grasped in all its complexity, and therefore this seems the only one which is real, the important one, the suffering of others is "ridiculously intelligible" natural, and impossible to be captured in our souls [10, p. 44-45]. We only know that human misery is generalized, both in the relationship with the world and the man's relationship with the others.

At the social level, the essence of life is injustice, so to adhere to any doctrine of social organization would be a useless and stupid act [13, p.143-146]; regarding the reasons causing the disappearance of faith in moral and political theories we have necessarily include misery. But beyond economic conditionals, human misery moves, worth repeated, through the fact that "people who know it and could remedy it, neglect it" [12, p. 52] because it is always about the others, a negligible quantity as long as it is not about your person, on the one hand, and impossible to empathetically measure, on the other hand.

What could joy and happiness mean for such a man? [13, p. 169-170] They have no meaning for someone constantly tormented by the obsession of madness or death; the only thing that remains to him is the path 'of all the sufferings, of a mad and endless exaltation'. Joy is an impossibility for those in despair. And then, are there really happy people in the world? And if so, why they don't come to the middle of the Agora and shout it? Why don't they communicate their state to anyone? It seems that people do not make known their joys, just shout their pains. In fact, all human beings are unhappy, but few

of them know it, the consciousness of unhappiness is a rarity and a disease that is not recorded on any special notch [10, p. 48].

His inadequacy to the world with all the suite of ideas that result might indicate a tormenting depression started in the period of his youth insomnia, but which seems to have its source in the genetic structure of the family, as Cioran himself confesses: "In my family, no one, except my mother, was not able to face life with confidence and courage. They were all more or less desperate and weak fainthearted, starting with me." [11, p. 254, 320]

3.3. Death

In 1933, when he was 22, Cioran proclaimed himself, though not without a feeling of 'strangeness', a specialist in death (a subject that seemed to be exhausted by the philosophical theories of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Heidegger); later, when he was almost 70, he stated that his entire existence 'had been marked by the sign of death'. The moralist declared on all occasions that Death is man's authentic issue, the Issue itself, not just an ordinary issue, 'it is the only absolute and certain thing in this world'.

Death, he said, cannot be understood unless we see life as a long agony. The agony is translated in those dramatic moments of the struggle "between life and death when the presence of death is lived consciously and painfully. The true agony is that of passing into non-being through death, when the feeling of the end consumes you irrevocably and you are defeated by death. As with any genuine agony, there is a triumph of death, even if you continue to live after those moments of end. [13, p. 24]. Thus, death is not something outside life itself, something ontologically different, death is not a reality autonomous from life [13, p. 32].

'Dying' is not as Christianity envisions it, 'the last breath' and possible triumphant passage into an area which is different from life, a transcendental one, but it is more like discovering an immanence of and a way to death while living or to put it in Cioran's terms – One cannot live but by dying. Death begins with life [12, p. 243]. The flesh (body), perishable to indecency, the siege of all diseases, the disease itself and the "incurable naught" [15], is the very symbol of life's precariousness and presence of death within life.

The healthy and average common people do not experience the feeling of agony or the feeling of death; they go through life blindfolded, they perceive life superficially as something permanent, independent of death; to them, the latter is a transcendental reality, beyond understanding, it is not a near and disturbing presence. Regular people do not know the state of progressive dying while they are still living. There is no 'prolonged agony related to the premises of the essential' and dying comes naively for them with the decrease of the vital intensity. Moreover, when judged from the perspective of death, people are divided into two categories: those who have the feeling of death, are aware of and live with it while still living and those who see death as alien, ignore or

consider it for only one moment and who live as if immortal [10, p. 20], enjoying life.

Going against any idealism or humanism filled with ‘optimistic platitudes’, Cioran sees man’s destiny as tragically fulfilled in death: “To paraphrase a German biologist, man is a dilettante of life. What he is trying to say is that man is a being with an uncertain existence, problematic and alienated, left prey to destruction and death. Partially true for everyone, the statement is entirely valid for the gifted ones. That man is a being tossed to death, this is what idealism will never comprehend.” [12, p. 116-117] Hence, death becomes the ‘image of our futility’ and our destiny is nothing but the display of this experience [16].

A deep perspective reveals that “every step in life is a step in death”, that death is omnipresent, destroying a tree or creeping in a dream, withering a flower or a civilization, consuming an individual or a culture... it is everywhere, “an immanent and destructive blow” [13, p. 37]. Life as prolonged agony and road to death is the irrational and insane picture of life in which the latter creates numerous figures only to destroy them (evilness of becoming) without making this a plus or a qualitative leap (the irrationality of becoming).

Most often, becoming aware of the immanence of death happens through disease of the body or depressions. The philosophical mission of disease is to show how illusory is life fulfilling or the feeling of being immortal. Death is always present in life through disease (even if the intensity and form of disease is different from case to case). The disease is an act of obstinate heroism on the ‘lost outposts of life’, an everlasting humiliation of crawling before death. The feeling of death’s immanence adds intensity to the psychological restlessness and creates a continuous state of dissatisfaction and discomfort for the depressed.

4. Instead of conclusions: short comments on a possible parallel between Cioran and Buddhism

As seen in the text above, Cioran meets Buddhism, but only the first Noble Truth. Despite the similarities that are between him and Buddhism, a fact he, himself admits to at one point, the two visions only have in common the starting point – suffering – and the debate on issues of birth, life and death. At least in regards to the Noble Truths third and fourth, Cioran is not one to preach the abandonment issue, with the same tone that he shouted against birth or life, and he is not one to preach in favour of the ways you have to follow in order to reach freedom. Furthermore, Cioran is not one to live the Buddhist life; we should not confuse Cioran’s second part of his life, which was characterized by a kind of resignation or withdrawal (due to physical illness, becoming, by his own words, an ascetic, a good person without his intent) with an authentic Buddhist; he was a man who enjoyed life despite his acid scepticism. So, we can only speak of ‘traces’ left by Buddhism on his life and his work. He repeats certain

themes launched by the Buddhist doctrine long ago, also using a high tone and inserting his inimitable emotional and expressive style mark on them.

And yet how did Cioran approached the Buddhist phenomenon? Here's a possible answer: "elitist without vanity, without popular gregarious directly without being simplistic, Buddhism has everything he needs in order to please a tired rebel. Cioran's genius is to find the resonance point of the doctrine of inspiration of different ages, which all come together to speak ill of this world and situate happiness in the original indistinction, in the void integrity, in the radiant non-being." [17]

We should also take into account the opinion that, in fact, Cioran saw in Buddhism a 'radical scepticism', but we are only dealing here with a distortion of Buddhism, because to consider Buddhism a special scepticism would mean not to take into account the major differences between the two theoretical approaches to existence [18].

Also, the nearness of Cioran to Buddhism can be explained by the fact that Buddhism does not accept any particular deity (as does Cioran), and the fact that, in effect, Buddhism is not a philosophy itself (and Cioran hates Philosophy for the most part) [19], which the moralist himself admitted to several times.

But what does he say? – "Buddhism long interested me: Buddhism gives you access to a religion without having faith. It is a religion that contemplates knowledge" [20], we might say that it is a religion without a deity as a main focus, Buddhism is an 'atheistic religion'.

For a while he even thought he may be a Buddhist and even boasted that he became a Buddhist, based on the common idea of his thought and that of Buddhism on life, or the idea of suffering, but he found that it was inaccessible the way that Buddhism expected - the renunciation of desire, overcoming self etc. [19, p. 71-72, 94] It is useless the fact that Buddha's vision of death, old age or suffering was shared by our philosopher, if the great idea of Buddha, renunciation, is clearly foreign to him and would turn him into an 'impostor', in an 'unworthy Buddha', as he called himself [21]. Attendance to Buddhism can create the illusion of 'pride' that you have distanced yourself from everything and everyone, but eventually you realize that you cannot go all the way and that you are a 'poor man'. The following passage is unequivocal: "It is true that my experience meets the life of Buddha. Buddha's vision on death, on old age, on suffering is an experience that I lived and I am still living. It is my daily reality. But the solutions Buddha proposes are not mine, since I cannot give up desire. I cannot give up *anything*. And then I said I should put an end to the imposture. I am a Buddhist in regards to the suffering, old age and death. But the Buddha says: now we must give up desire to overcome your ego, and I cannot. And I cannot because I lived in the world of literature and what I wrote spins after all, around the ego. Whether it's my ego or the ego in general. However, this is the exact opposite of Buddhism. Then the great idea of Buddhism is still renunciation. And I must say that, looking around me, I see very few people capable of renunciation. And even I, frankly, I found myself to be unable to do it" [19, p. 82-83].

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