

Lecture

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY IN INDIA: OVERCOMING THE EUROCENTRIC STEREOTYPES

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During last years, I became very interested in the philosophical problems of xenology. Xenology is a Greek word, it may be translated as a theory (logos) of xenos – foreign, alien, strange or generally unknown things. Very often the modern usage of the term xenology refers to the forms of extraterrestrial life, or sometimes to the races of creatures depicted in the fantasy books. But I prefer to use it in the sense of understanding or studying foreign cultural traditions and civilizations within terrestrial space. In philosophy, sociology and psychology the problem of foreigner, stranger or alien makes up a special case of the problem of the Other. Xenos – may be regarded as an extreme case of the Other. The Other, which is so alienated, so strange that his very existence challenges our values, excites our imagination, attracts and repulses us. “foreigner”, “stranger” or “alien” - we can notice how negative emotions increase along that chain of words. What interests me most is not to study foreign as such, as Ethnology pretends to do, but to understand how our Western civilizational, our cultural and mental experience is reflected in our views on other civilizations, so I am trying to explore the

Western anthropological foundations of its relationship to the Other, represented by foreign civilizations and cultures.

Despite the fact that each culture fills the concept of Xenos with its proper content, this concept is universal in the sense that it is invariably associated with the self-identity of that community - that “we,” “our,” “mine” - in relation to which someone or something is posited as “stranger,” “alien,” “foreign”. In other words, Xenos - is always an element of the dual structure where at the one end we have what we can identify as our “self” our “own”, “kindred”, “allied”, “inside”, - and at the other – “alien”, “foreign”, “outside”, “wrong”, “extraneous” with regard to our “own”.

“To understand who we are, we have to understand who we are not”. These words were a sort of motto for the series of documentary films by Russian famous film director Andrew Konchalovskii. In other words, when we address ourselves to something beyond our cultural and civilizational horizon, this may help us to understand ourselves. How can it help? - Willy-nilly, we compare ourselves with others. But, in what way do we compare? On what foundations? What kind of preferences do we use? Does such a comparison give us an objective picture? Here we are stepping on the ground of xenology as I understand it¹. The paradox, if one formulates it in philosophical terms, consists in the following: we can realize and identify our “Self” only through “non-Self” – the Other or Alien, but this “non-Self” will still be the construction of our “Self”, because we will distinguish in this Other only those features which somehow resonate with our “Self”. These may be some familiar, common features, but most often we react to uncommon, unlike, contrasting aspects of the Other. In a way, our “Self- image” has been already laid at the foundation of our understanding of others. One creates one’s Other after one’s own image. In other words, our image of Aliens is made out from “customer’s material” – these “customers” are ourselves, and these “materials” are our fears, anxieties, expectations, complexes, our pride, arrogance, etc. For example, the Aliens in the famous horror films of the same name are incarnations of our phobia, fears – xenophobia.

I’ll try to prove this general rule, which I call the postulate of xenology, using as examples some Western stereotypes concerning Indian philosophy.

Western philosophers often believe that other civilizations in which such phenomena as democracy, science, freedom of thought and its separation from religion were not developed, couldn’t give rise to their own philosophical tradition. That approach to non-Western cultures and civilizations is usually known as “Europeocentrism” but since the publication of Edward Said’s famous work it is also called “Orientalism”. It has become quite clear that such an approach gives evidence, first of all, of the specific frame of the Western mind. According to Wilhelm Halbfass: “This is not only an expression of doubt concerning the factual occurrence of the phenomenon of philosophy in the Orient, but also a self-demarcation, self-representation, and self-assertion of Europe in the name of a particular concept of philosophy.”² So, I repeat - the image of the Other is firmly based

1 For the definition and the postulates of xenology see: Lysenko, V. G. *Poznanije chuzhovo kak spocob samo-poznanija: Zapad, Indija, Possija (popytka ksenologii)*. Mokskva: Vopr. Filosofii, 2009, s. 61–77.

2 Halbfass, W. *India and Europe: an Essay in Philosophical Understanding*. SUNY Press, 1990, p. 156.

on our own self- image. And let us notice that all the distinctive features given by us to our Other very often contribute to our self-assertion and superiority feeling. What kind of stereotypes do we, Westerners, have towards India?

Let us remember that, after Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, the idea of the impossibility of philosophy outside Western civilization still dominates the university programmes on the history of philosophy. According to those famous thinkers, philosophy constitutes an aspect of what is usually called the Greek miracle, - the way of life proper to the polis. It is believed that only within the polis (city) came to life the phenomenon of a free citizen, a person whose thought was not bound to utilitarian or soteriological concerns but existed by itself and for itself - and this phenomenon provided the possibility of emerging the concept of *theoria* or knowledge as its own end. As a consequence of such premises, philosophy seems, first, –as it happened in Greece – to have been born away and against myth, by criticizing myth – from *mythos* to *logos* –, then this philosophical thought should be independent and secular in so much so that it should be based on reason. In the same vein, philosophy should differ from religion, which is based on faith, and should oppose all sorts of mysticism and Revelation.

I shall speak of Indian thought, one of the victims of Europeocentrism which, being an entirely autonomous philosophical tradition, might have inspired Western philosophy but remained neglected by it. When we compare Indian systems of thought to the Western ones, it is imperative to emphasize the fact that we compare different cultures and frames of civilization but not different rationalities nor radically different discourses. How can we assert this?

First, the Indian thought developed on the basis of the Indo-European linguistic matrix. Sanskrit is in no way less apt to express a philosophical thought of the type we are familiar with, than ancient Greek or Latin. It distinguishes being and non-being, being as presence and being as becoming -verbal roots AS and BHU – substrates and attributes, and more concretely substance (*dravya*) and quality (*guṇa*), subsistence (*sthana*) and motion (*karman*), time (*kāla*) and space (*dik*), subject as such (*Ātman*), and object (*artha*), knowing subject (*jñātr*) and agent (*kartr*). In Sanskrit, it is possible to form abstract substantives and, hence, to operate abstractions and general terms. The kinship can be traced not only in the domain of categories but also in related problematizations and conceptualizations as, for instance, the relationship between substance and quality, essence and phenomenon, part and whole, or even that between universals and particulars, between cause and effect, etc.

To be sure, language does not automatically produce philosophical thought but, it, certainly, enables us to formulate this or that philosophical problem, or it doesn't. In Chinese thought, for example, as the French philosopher François Julien brilliantly shows, many problems formulated on the basis of Indo-European languages could not arise for the very reason that they could not be expressed in Chinese hieroglyphs. For instance, China had no ontology, no such concepts as substance, quality, time, subject, object, etc. Instead, there was born and developed an interesting concept of becoming as the unfolding of a self-regulation – Dao- of Nature.

As the Sanskrit language very early became the object of linguistic reflection this played a considerable role in the development of philosophical thought in India. To the extent in which Panini's grammar (circa 5 century D.C.) was a compulsory part of the superior education of Brahmins – the intellectual elite of India, it did shape the thought of Brahmanic philosophers and was later reflected in their theoretical constructions. The well-known specialist of Indian logic, D. Ingalls, compared the part played by Panini's grammar to that of geometry in the philosophy of ancient Greece.

The development of linguistics very early (circa 6 century B.C.) favoured the appearance of semantics. As early as the second century before Christ Patanjali, the great grammarian, formulated a question about the difference between words (*ṣabda*) and the phonemes (*varṇa*) they are made of. He also asked: what does the word mean: the thing itself (*dravya*) or a common propriety (*sāmānya*)? Besides, the fact that language was treated as a reality in its own right, contributed to the arising of the idea of a correspondence between the reality of language and the reality of things. Indian grammarians – with the notable exception of the famous grammarian and philosopher Bhartrhari (5th century A.C.) – follow the principle of parallelism between the words and things: if there are words there must exist things expressed by these words and *vice versa*. Such correspondence exerted an enormous influence on philosophical thought. It contributed to problematizing the ontological status of things. For example, what is the meaning of the word “jug” in the phrase “the jug is being made” provided that the jug does not yet, properly speaking, exist. Such a principle through the ontologization of abstract nouns led to the concepts of universals (in our example the word “jug” had been referred to the universal of “jugness”), then to the development of several conceptions of causality the equivalent of which is unknown in the West – the *sat-kāryavāda* (a teaching on the pre-existence of the effect in the cause), the *asat-kāryavāda* (a teaching on the non-pre-existence of the effect in the cause), and their subvarieties.

In India, the *logos* had never attempted in order to define once and for all its own territory to break away from myth, from rite or epics and, even less so, from any religious tradition. And, yet, a reverence for tradition as the supreme authority does not necessarily lead to dogmatism, authoritarianism, lack of critique and utter stagnation. Why? For the very reason that there were different traditions and different interpretations of these traditions whose representatives competed to recruit followers and gain the protection of the rulers in power. And, so, the representatives of different schools confronted each other in oratorical duels in which not only the rhetoric skill of the participants were put to trial, but also the very doctrine of their schools. They had to prove their thesis through mere logic and they could never allude to authorities not recognized by their adversaries. Such disputes worked as a catalyst for the formation of philosophical thought in India. Because the disputation became an institution of critical thought – there even was a school, the *Nyāya*, specialised in the elaboration of rules for this “discussion club” (according to the pertinent expression of Russian indologist V. K. Shokhin) – some of them specific only for the Indian modes of philosophical discourse and different from those used in the schools of ancient Greece – Sophists, Peripateticians, Academicians, etc.

Another important feature of the Western self-image of philosophy is the freedom of thought gained by philosophical mind as a result of its separation from religion. This “secular” philosophy is often estimated as the greatest achievement of the Western civilization as compared with the backwardness of Indian philosophical tradition in which philosophy is supposed to be tightly intertwined with religion. The question I am going to deal with in the next part of my lecture is as follows: does the absence of a clear-cut separation from religion prevent Indian philosophy to be a philosophy as a rational enterprise?

First of all, let us define in what sense we will use the word “religion”. In the West, the truths of philosophy and those of religion were respectively linked to the realms of reason and of faith. Faith filled the gap between the two sources: revealed truths on the one hand, and those gained from empirical observation and rational thought, on the other hand. For instance, experience shows that a corpse is bound to decay, whereas religion teaches the resurrection of the flesh.

In India, the truths coming from Revelation, as a matter of fact, do not deal with the facts of daily experience and, in a more general way, do not interfere with our empirical knowledge of the world. As Shankara says: Revelation (Shruti) does not teach that fire is cold and wet. Most Indian schools of philosophy – darśana - are based on the principle that the empirical world is ruled by human action – the law of karma – which leaves traces (bīja, vāsanā, saṃskāra) giving rise to similar activities in the future. Due to the power of these traces, souls are being born again and again in different bodily frames. Those continuous rebirths, named saṃsāra, imply that any form of empirical existence is essentially incomplete. That is why the philosophical schools declare their main aim to be freedom from saṃsāra and attainment of the authentic ultimate Reality beyond dualities and oppositions — mokṣa, nirvāṇa, apavarga, kaivalya. For these schools, to be sure, ultimate Reality could not be attained through conceptual reflection, but does that mean that it constituted a mere object of faith? Not at all! Being beyond the scope of rational understanding ultimate Reality still remained accessible to some forms of experience, that is, to meditation and intuition or to Revelation. Even in the major Indian religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, faith is not regarded as the only way to deal with domains beyond rational elucidation. Faith plays its important role only in the devotional (bhakti) movements of Hinduism, but in the movements which put forward the path of knowledge (jñāna) or the path of action (karma), faith (śraddhā) is, rather a preliminary condition than a true vehicle to emancipation (mokṣa).

One may argue that Indian philosophers were religious thinkers. But in what sense religious? Does this mean that their religious affiliation was obvious in their theoretical constructions? I think that it was no more obvious than in the theoretical constructions of Western philosophers. What do we know about a particular affiliation of many Indian thinkers – Nayāyikas, Vaiśeṣikas, Sāṃkhya, Yogins even Vedāntins? In many cases, we know nothing for certain, in other cases we may guess from their names that some of them were Shaiva, some Vaishnava, but even if we know their affiliation, that does not really help us to understand their respective systems better. As a matter of fact, in Indian tradition, the religious affiliation of a philosopher was, as in the West, his private

affair, not necessarily determinant of his philosophical affiliation. For example, it is well known that Shankara was a Shaivabhākta, devotee of Shiva (he is often considered as the author of a number of devotional hymns to Shiva), but in his system of non-dualist Vedānta (Advaita) he allowed to the personal God (Saguṇa Brahman) only a lower, empirical status, considering ultimate reality to be Absolute Consciousness, devoid of any forms and characteristics (Nirguṇa Brahman). Even if some philosophers introduced their beliefs it may have happened only in a very rational, philosophical way, say, in the form of the proofs of God's existence, like in late Nyāya or Vaiśeṣika. But that does not make them theologians.

Many Western philosophers, Descartes for example, were Catholics and discussed some theological subjects, but is that a reason to call them a theologian? Theology (Īśvaravāda) was one of the subjects of dispute between Indian schools; some of them were atheistic, like the Buddhists, or even the Mīmāṃsākas. The latter, by the way, represented the most ardent apology of the traditionalist Brahmanical and Hindu society based on dharma. But even some of those who defended Īśvaravāda, like late Nayāyikas, Vaiśeṣikas, Sāṃkhyas, could not be called theologians as this subject was quite marginal for their respective systems.

There is one more meaning of the word "religious" which may be applied to Indian systems. One can say that they consider some of their texts as a sort of religious authority or Revelation and a source of the incontestable truths that may be called dogmas. It is the same meaning that we may also attach to the word "traditionalist". Even if the Indian philosophical tradition was not connected with one particular religion, and sometimes openly proclaimed its atheistic approach, it was, certainly traditionalistic, as it always based itself on some authoritative text or texts. But traditionalism is not necessarily a religious phenomenon - the Mīmāṃsākas were traditionalists, but at the same time they were atheists - very pragmatic and rationalist thinkers, intent on justifying brahmanical ritualism.

And yet reverence for tradition as the supreme authority does not necessarily lead to what is very often associated with it - lack of freedom of thought, dogmatism, authoritarianism, and utter stagnation. Why? From the early times India knew a plurality in the domain of religious and theoretical pursuits - many different traditions and within them many different interpretations of the basic texts of these traditions. If, within Indian philosophical systems, we must qualify what is religious, it will be, in my opinion, their soteriological orientation although the latter is being proved by fully rational arguments.

From the Greeks onwards, we are used to consider philosophy to be a pure knowledge, theory, knowledge as an end in itself, forgetting that even in Greece, after Plato and Aristotle, came the time of practical philosophy, that of the Cynics and the Stoics. For them, a philosopher's conceptions could not be separated from his way of life. In India, the link between philosophy and the way of life of men professing philosophy was considered fundamental. For there the truth seekers soon understood that consciousness is the only means at our disposal to change our perspective in life. Besides, through meditation, consciousness can be enlarged, deepened, enhanced and, so doing, be prepared to meet Revelation.

The practice of altered states of consciousness developed through meditation as means of a direct personal experience of ultimate reality also enables us to understand why, in Indian tradition, the relationship between faith and religion was not as close as it was, for instance, in Christianity in which every personal and extra-ecclesial way of entering into contact with superior powers was immediately met with disapproval or at least with suspicion.

Yet, one may object that this has little to do with philosophy. One thing is to follow a religious – soteriological practice and pass it on to a couple of disciples (parampara), another thing is to develop philosophical conceptions. Revelation comes directly through an experience. Yet, when we hear or read the testimonies of those who had it, we are dealing not with the experience itself but with its interpretations which were already somehow “processed” to fit one or other general view of the world. Revelation, in its own way, throws a challenge to reason, inciting it to build a picture of reality within which it would find its proper place. In this way, a reality intuitively discovered through modified states of consciousness becomes the object of different and opposed philosophical interpretations. For instance, the representation of a spiritual foundation, of the whole immutable reality – Brahman or Ātman according to the Advaita-vedānta, Puruṣa in the Sāṃkhya-Yoga – or the “vacuity” in the Buddhist school of Madhyānaka or pure consciousness in the school of Vijñānavāda.

We just cannot get away with an oversimplified answer, for instance, by labelling these doctrines as “mystical”, meaning that they are the product of non-rational methods. Otherwise, why did Śaṅkara, Dharmakīrti, Kumāriḷa, Bhartṛhari, Abhinavagupta and many other great philosophers want to submit their ideas to the critical examination of their opponents? They might have merely told their opponents: “Practice meditation and you may by yourselves become convinced that our positions are the right ones.” But, as I insist, the problem does not bear on the experience itself but on its interpretations. Indian masters of truth required philosophical arguments to win disciples and, as already mentioned, in this competitive milieu offering systematic and logical arguments was a crucial matter. In this context, Indian philosophical texts, in as much as they exclusively follow the laws of thought and logic, widely differ from those of Revelation proper.

As for the very experience of altered states of consciousness, often called mystical and supernatural, many Indian schools see in this the development of purely natural powers of consciousness. It seems to me that, thanks to different meditation techniques, Indian thinkers were able to develop philosophically what remained impossible to Westerners: to separate pure consciousness not only from the psyche but also from reasoning, to draw a demarcation line between the transcendent Self and the empirical or psychological “I”, that is a personality, a person, as it is called in the West. These are the concepts of Ātman in the Advaita-Vedānta, or that of Puruṣa as in Sāṃkhya-Yoga, understood as witnessing consciousness in opposition to the psycho-material reality of the Prakṛti, or even the Buddhist idea of vijñāpti - or notification-, not to mention the Kashmir Shivaism which, anxious to outdo its Indian counterparts, came to the point of seeing in consciousness no longer a static absolute but a dynamic process, a play

between awareness and self-awareness, - between light and its reflexion, prakāśa and vimarśa.

Why, in the West, has meditation been separated from philosophy? I dare suggest that Western philosophy, pursuing a scientific ideal of objectivity, mistrusted the subject as the source of an inevitable subjective distortion of reality. By linking philosophy to religion, soteriology and meditation, the Indian tradition offers a solution which could rival the Western project of philosophy as pure knowledge. According to a traditional Indian scheme, Truth should be realized in three stages: 1) Shraṇa – listening to the sacred word or studying the texts by their learning by heart; 2) Manana – thinking on them, problematizing, criticizing and developing a defensive method of argument (apologetics); 3) Nididhyāsana – meditating on the basic principles of the doctrines studied in a rational way to the effect that they become an interior experience, and by this, realizing their capacity of “emancipation”. This traditional brahmanical sequence of learning, intellectual appropriation through criticism and apologetics, and finally, spiritual realization, is to be found in different systems of thought, even in the texts of Buddhist logicians and epistemologists. According to Dharmakīrti (commentary to kārikā 28 of his “Pramāṇaviniśaya”, or “Ascertaining of Instruments of Valid Knowledge”).

“Yogins also, having grasped objects through oral instruction [while studying the Śāstras] and, having established the consistency (yukti) [of this knowledge] through reasoning (cintamaya) proceed with meditation and [when this meditation] attains its culmination (niṣpatti), that what appears clearly, like fear etc. [when an ordinary person is extremely frightened], non-erroneous and free from mental constructions is a perception, an instrument of valid cognition, like the direct experience of the noble truth [by the Buddha] described by us in the *Pramāṇavārttika*”.

According to this description, philosophy fits into the category of understanding from intellectual processing (cinta) through questioning, criticism and apologetics the information received at the stage of hearing (shraṇa) the words of authoritative teacher. Only what is understood in terms of reliable knowledge is further processed through meditative contemplation (bhāvana). If the ultimate reality is attained only through meditative and yogic practices, the question arises as to the place of philosophy (epistemology and logic) in Indian tradition, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism? As far as Buddhism is concerned there are two approaches to this problem. According to the first one, (it is formulated by F.I. Stcherbatsky) Buddhist logic is not directly related to Buddhism as a religion. According to the second approach, Buddhist philosophy has practical, soteriological character. However, neither the first position, which makes the Buddhist philosophy entirely secular nor the second one that identifies it with religion, explain the true position of philosophy in Buddhism. It is equally true with regard to Indian tradition in general.

Philosophy in the West claims the status of the absolute truth, rather than that of the means to achieve it. In Buddhism and other Indian traditions, philosophy is limited to the domain of empirical truth and phenomenal existence. Its primary objective is to refute the views of the opponents and to prove the credibility of one’s own doctrines, and its underlying task is to provide a conceptual framework, which being submitted

to experimental verification in meditation will create a new level of human existence, free from “delusions.” If we mean by religion a soteriology, Indian philosophy is a kind of preparation for the radical soteriological experience, the experience of “awakening” (bodhi) in Buddhism, or mokṣa – emancipation from the cycle of rebirth in Hinduism, etc. At the same time philosophy in India serves a rational justification of this experience which consists in integrating it into a certain philosophical picture of reality. But, we should understand that Indian philosophy itself is in no way reduced to this experience, it still remains a quite rational discipline, and, therefore, within its own sphere of competence, it does not cease to be a philosophy in the Western sense of the term.

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