

# THE PRESENT RELATIONS BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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THERE are in the world two great philosophical traditions: a Western tradition, which originated in Ancient Greece and developed to its maturity in Western Europe, and an Eastern tradition, which originated in Ancient India and spread thence throughout Eastern Asia. Though their origins lie so far back in human history, both of them are still full of vitality; and one of the most important tasks of the future will be to bring the two traditions together, for the mutual enrichment of both and for the benefit of all civilized mankind.

There have been occasional contacts between the two in the past, especially in the third and fourth centuries A.D., when Alexandria was a meeting-place of East and West, and when Persia—at that time a great and civilized power—was a link between India and the Græco-Roman world. But on the whole the two traditions have followed separate and divergent lines of development; and in the last two or three centuries, and especially in the last fifty years, the divergence has grown wider. The task of building a bridge between them is not an easy one. If we are to appreciate the difficulties which have to be overcome, we must consider the Western philosophy of our own day, the philosophy taught in contemporary European and American universities and discussed in contemporary learned periodicals. For it is this—not the philosophy of classical Antiquity, nor of the Middle Ages, nor of the nineteenth century—which sets us our problem; and we shall never solve it unless we face its difficulties frankly. The gulf to be bridged is not that between Plotinus and Shankaracharya (which is indeed a relatively small one). What has to be bridged is the vast chasm between Shankaracharya and Bertrand Russell.

Western philosophy at the present is mainly epistemological; that is to say, it is concerned not so much with the nature of reality as with the presuppositions of human knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge. This is the culmination of a tendency which has been

visible ever since the seventeenth century. Modern Europe has indeed produced several great metaphysical systems; one need only mention the names of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Hegel. But if we view the history of modern European philosophy in perspective, these metaphysical systems seem to have been side-lines, offshoots from the main line of development, leading to dead ends. In so far as they left a permanent mark on subsequent philosophy, it was because of their incidental contributions to the Theory of Knowledge or to Logic. Hegel had a profound influence on politics (he was the grandparent both of Marxism and of Fascism). But in philosophy it is Kant who has prevailed—Kant and his empiricist predecessors John Locke and David Hume.

Nor is this surprising. The outstanding achievement of modern Europe is science. In all the other main departments of human civilization other peoples and epochs have surpassed us: in religion, the Hindus and the Semitic peoples; in art, the Chinese and the ancient Greeks; in political organization, the Romans. But in science—the understanding of physical nature and the application of that understanding for the “improvement of man’s estate”—our civilization in the last three centuries has made greater progress than any other; and this is the gift for which posterity will thank us. The world-hegemony of the Western peoples was a by-product of their supremacy in science and scientific technique; and if that world-hegemony is now passing away before our eyes, it is because other peoples have learned to use the science which we taught them.

In these circumstances it is natural and proper that the nature and presuppositions of science should be the main preoccupation of modern Western philosophy: that Logic and the Theory of Knowledge should have become its chief and almost its exclusive interest. Accordingly, we find contemporary Western philosophers maintaining that it is not the business of philosophy to give us information about the world. Philosophy, it is said, “gives us no news about the Universe.” That task must be left to science (including scientific history and scholarship). The task of philosophy is not information but clarification. With this goes a special emphasis upon language. The problem of Knowledge is basically the problem of the relation of thought to reality. Language—including the technical symbolism of mathematics—is the vehicle of thought; indeed, thinking might actually be defined as “cognition by means of symbols.” Thus the problem of Knowledge is from one point of view the problem of meaning, the problem of the relation between language and fact; and the philosopher’s main task is conceived to be the analysis of linguistic forms. The philosopher does not ask whether there *is* a material world, or whether Jones *is* the same person as he was yesterday; but he does ask what we *mean* by saying that there is a material world, or what we *mean* by “personal identity.” The same method

is applied even in Ethics. We are told that it is not the philosopher's business to tell us what is good or what our duties are; his business is only to tell us what we *mean* by the word "good" or the word "duty." To summarize: philosophy on this view does not give us new knowledge. Its task is to make clear to us what we know already; and its chief means of doing so is to analyse the linguistic forms by which that knowledge is expressed, and to remove the confusions and inconsistencies to which they give rise.

This conception of philosophy is in no way illegitimate. There is a genuine need for clarification and analysis; and as the structure of our knowledge grows wider and more complicated, and as its different branches become more specialized, the need is greater rather than less. Yet it is after all a very narrow conception; far narrower than the traditional conception of philosophy, which still lingers in popular speech (witness the traditional phrase "guide, philosopher and friend"). The philosophers of Classical Antiquity, for instance the Stoics and the Neoplatonists, offered to their pupils a *Weltanschauung* and a *Lebensanschauung*—an outlook on the world and a view of life. The metaphysicians of the early modern period, Spinoza for instance, or the Idealist metaphysicians of the Romantic period such as Schopenhauer and Hegel, did the same. But the contemporary Western philosopher makes no such offer. Like Hume and Kant, he is profoundly distrustful of constructive metaphysics. He offers only clarification.

We can now see why it is so difficult at the present day to build a bridge between Eastern and Western philosophy. Between Western philosophy in its contemporary form and the philosophy of Vedanta or Mahayana there are at first sight hardly any points of contact at all. It is not that the contemporary Western philosopher denies what the Vedantist or the Mahayanist asserts, or impugns the validity of their reasoning. If it were so, the task of bridging the gulf between the two philosophical traditions would be easier. Where there is controversy and disagreement, there is the possibility of synthesis and reconciliation. Where there is controversy, there must be some common ground. The two parties are at least talking about the same subject (otherwise they could not disagree); and given good will, each may learn something from the other. But unhappily this is not the situation. The difficulty which confronts us is a much more baffling one. It is that, on the face of it at any rate, the Eastern and the modern Western philosopher are not talking about the same subjects at all. They move as it were in different worlds, so that they cannot even disagree. The modern Western philosopher tells us that mathematical propositions are tautological, that causation is to be defined in terms of regularity, that knowledge is not an act or occurrence, but a disposition. The Vedantist tells us that Atman and Brahman are identical. What differentiates the two systems of

thought is not their doctrines, but the very problems which those doctrines are intended to solve. They do not give different answers to the same question : the questions themselves are different. Broadly speaking, the Western philosopher's questions are concerned with the nature and presuppositions of scientific knowledge; while the questions of the Vedantists—and the same applies to the other great philosophies of the Far East—are concerned with the religious consciousness, and more especially with the mystical form of that consciousness.

How then is the gulf to be bridged? Some may think it is not worth bridging at all. But many of us have an uneasy suspicion that Western mankind, and particularly the most highly educated part of it, has somehow become the prisoner of its own Naturalistic preconceptions. It may be that the success of the physical sciences has blinded us to some truths about the universe and also human personality which it greatly concerns us to know. If that is so, what we need is a radical change of outlook; and we can prepare the way for it by making an effort to assimilate whatever the religious and mystical tradition of the Far East has to teach us.

How is this to be achieved? Not primarily on the plane of philosophical discussion and argument. There is a saying of St Ambrose which we might well ponder: "*Non in dialecticâ complacuit Domino Deo salvum facere populum suum*"—"Not by logic did it please the Lord God to save his people." Indeed, this saying applies with more force to our own time than to his. The reigning philosophy in his time was Neoplatonism, which was itself a religious philosophy. The reigning philosophy in ours is not a religious one. As we have seen already, it is not even anti-religious; it simply does not concern itself with the religious consciousness at all.

The first step, then, and the most important one, must be taken not in philosophy, but in quite a different field. The first thing is to change and to deepen the consciousness of the ordinary Western man: to give him the means of knowing for himself that the world of our ordinary sense-bound consciousness is not the whole of reality. The experience must come first; the philosophical formulation of it will follow afterwards. Men who are blind are not interested in the philosophy of colour or the theory of perspective; and even if they were, it would not cure their blindness. But if they receive their sight, they will be ready enough to theorize about the visible world and eager to read what others have written about it. If direct and first-hand mystical experience were as widely diffused in the Western world as the knowledge of physics is now, our philosophers would very soon sit up and take notice. The problems and paradoxes of the mystical consciousness would absorb their attention, as the problems of scientific knowledge do to-day; and the Vedanta and the Mahayana would be eagerly discussed in all the philosophical

lecture-rooms of Europe and America. But so long as first-hand mystical experience is rare and exceptional among us, so long as it is confined to a handful of specially gifted people (not all of whom are very articulate and those who are, not very intelligible), we cannot expect that it will become a topic of philosophical discussion; at most it will be regarded as a harmless psychological curiosity.

Nevertheless, the argument must not be overstated. We said above that the approach to the desired goal is not *primarily* on the plane of philosophical discussion for the present. But it does not follow that nothing whatever can be done on that plane. Something can be done even now, though it is disappointingly little. Nor is it true that contemporary Western philosophy is *wholly* lacking in points of contact with the philosophy of the East. One or two points of contact do exist, and they are of considerable importance.

In the first place, one may suggest to the contemporary Western philosopher that even on his own showing the field of his professional interests is unduly restricted. His acknowledged aim is to clarify and analyse our experience. But his conception of experience is a narrow one. It covers only perceptual experience on the one hand, from which the raw materials of the physical sciences are derived; and what we may call superficial self-consciousness (introspection), on the other. It is in any case difficult to fit the Moral Consciousness into the picture. Our knowledge of our duties to our neighbour seems to be neither perceptual nor introspective, though it is no doubt conditioned by both these forms of experience. The so-called "supernormal" or "paranormal" cognition investigated by students of Psychical Research—telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition—does not fit into the picture either; yet there is abundant evidence for the reality of telepathy and clairvoyance, and respectable evidence for the reality of precognition. More important still, religious experience—in all its varieties, mystical and other—cannot simply be ignored. Whatever its nature may be, it is a solid fact that such experience does exist, just as perceptual experience does. It claims to yield knowledge, knowledge of truths more fundamental than those with which the physical sciences are concerned. This claim should at least be carefully scrutinized. It cannot just be left on one side without examination.

Now if the modern Western philosopher were to widen the field of his interest, to take in the less familiar forms of experience as well as the more familiar (as on his own principles he ought to do), he would then find himself on the threshold of the topics which are central in the philosophy of the East. The *questions* which occupy the Vedantist and Mahayanist thinkers would then acquire a significance for him, which at present they lack; and if he disagreed with the answers they offer, there would at least be a point of contact between him and them.

But indeed, there is one point of contact already, and it is important.

It concerns self-consciousness. Mystics in all ages have told us, and tell us still, that the superficial self-consciousness which goes by the name of "introspection" is not the only sort. They allege that there is also a deeper sort of self-knowledge, which is present in all men, dimly in most, vividly in some few. They tell us that this knowledge of a Self which lies below and behind the superficial self of ordinary introspection is not easily expressed in language; that what is known in this sort of knowledge can be hinted at, that it can be spoken of in paradoxes and parables, but that it cannot be literally described. And this is of course one of the fundamental contentions of the Eastern philosophers, particularly of Vedanta. Indeed, this mysterious and fundamental sort of self-knowledge is perhaps *the* central topic of Vedantist philosophy. Now modern Western philosophy also is interested in the problem of the Self. Indeed, this interest is a direct consequence of its epistemological preoccupation—its concern with knowledge and the presuppositions of knowledge. For modern Western philosophy, the problem arises as follows. The Self presents itself to us in two very different aspects. On the one hand, the Self is the Knower, the knowing subject, without which knowledge (whether scientific or other) could not possibly exist. On the other hand, the Self is also the *object* of a particular sort of knowledge, namely of introspection, and of the psychology which derives its data from introspection. Hence arises a difficulty, which has been continually discussed by Western philosophers ever since David Hume first drew attention to it two centuries ago. For these two ways of looking at the Self lead to very different conclusions, which seem to be incompatible with each other. When we consider the Self as Knower, the essential features we find in it are its *unity* and *identity*. Knowledge, whether in Science or in daily life, does not come to us ready-made and all in one piece. It comes to us bit by bit, in fragments: it requires synthesis, it must be pieced together by the knower himself. Our knowledge of the physical world depends upon sense-perception. But the data presented to us in sense-perception are multiple, fragmentary and successive. Before he can be aware of the physical world, or even of the most trivial physical object such as a house or a table, the knowing self must "synthesize" these fragmentary and successive data—hold them together and view them as a whole. If he were himself a mere flux or succession of mental events, he could not do this. In order to do it, he must himself possess an unbroken unity and identity. Indeed, when we look at the matter in this way, it is hard to see how the notion of multiplicity and succession (or the notion of cause which is bound up with them) can have any application to the Self at all.

Yet when we consider the Self from the other point of view, as the object of introspection and of introspective psychology, a flux of mental events is just what we find. Introspection reveals only a

bewildering stream of sensations, images, thoughts, emotions and wishes. Hence Hume concluded that the Self is nothing but a series—a series of ideas and impressions “which succeed one another with inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” The picture has been further complicated since Hume’s time by the discovery of “unconscious” mental processes—thoughts, feelings and wishes which are not directly accessible to introspection. But though it has been complicated, it has not been fundamentally altered. For in the “unconscious” too we find nothing but flux and succession.

How is it possible that the same being—the being we call Self—should possess characters so different? How can it be at once successive and non-successive, multiple and identical? Kant, the first man in the West to grasp both sides of the difficulty fully, proposed to solve it by distinguishing between two sorts of self: the Pure Ego or “I,” and the empirical Ego or “Me.” Likewise, he distinguished between two radically different types of self-consciousness: Pure Self-consciousness (“I am I”), and Empirical Self-consciousness, the introspective awareness of the flux of mental events within us. This doctrine of Kant’s—like the somewhat similar distinction between Spirit and Soul drawn by some Christian theologians—does bring us fairly close to the Vedantic distinction between *Atman* and *Antahkaran*, or again between *Atman* and *Jiva*. It must not, of course, be supposed that all contemporary Western thinkers would accept Kant’s distinction between the Pure Ego and the empirical “Me.” That is far from being the case. But many of them are keenly aware of the problem which Kant was trying to solve; and they are at any rate familiar with his solution, whether they accept it or not. Here then is one place—and a very important place—where Eastern and Western philosophers do seem to be discussing the same subject (though doubtless they reach it from very different starting-points), and where there is the possibility of a fruitful exchange of views between them.

Perhaps it may be useful to summarize the conclusions which we have reached. The task of bringing Eastern and Western philosophy together is a very difficult one; far more difficult to-day than it would have been in the seventeenth century or in the early nineteenth century, when European thinkers were much more interested in metaphysical speculation than they are at present. Indeed, at first sight, we seem to be confronted with two entirely different worlds of thought, so different that there is not even the possibility of disagreement between them. The one looks outward, and is concerned with Logic and with the presuppositions of scientific knowledge; the other inward, into the “deep yet dazzling darkness” of the mystical consciousness. It follows that, in the main, the eventual cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western thought cannot be brought

about on the plane of philosophical discussion; there must first be a deepening of the consciousness of the ordinary Western man. Nevertheless, a little can be done on the philosophical plane even now. Only we must be careful to begin with the thin end of the wedge, not the thick end. We must begin by trying to get the Western philosopher to widen his notion of experience, instead of limiting it to sense-perception and introspection, as he commonly does now. At the same time we may ask him to consider what Eastern philosophers have to say about the problem raised by Kant and Hume concerning the two aspects of the Self. It is not likely that he will accept the Vedantic solution of this problem. At first, at any rate, he is much more likely to sympathize with the Hinayana view. (There are indeed some passages in the early part of the *Questions of King Milinda* which have a very modern ring, and might almost have been written in Cambridge in the 1920's.) But at the first stage, it does not matter so much whether he accepts or rejects. The important thing at the moment is that he should be induced to take an interest in the philosophies of the East and should come to feel that the *questions* they discuss are important questions, whether he accepts their answers or not.