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Comparative Philosophy: What It Is and What It Ought to Be

ALL COMPARATIVE studies imply simultaneously an identity and a difference, a situation that is replete with intellectual difficulties, which give rise to interminable disputes regarding whether we are talking about the same thing or different things. One may cut the Gordian knot by deciding either way, but the situation would reappear again as it is bound up with the comparative perspective itself and not with any particular example of it. One wonders how long we shall go on "naming," for the process is unending and ultimately "everything is what it is, and not another thing." Or, if we do not like "names" as they hardly give us any knowledge and if we opt for "descriptions," which give us "facts," then they too are as unending as the "names," for, as the Jains taught us long ago, they are a function of the *dṛṣṭi* that we have or the point of view that we adopt.

"How similar is the similar?" is a question that can always be asked and hence is the bane of all comparisons, infecting them with an uncertainty that is irremediable in principle. Yet bare identity is not interesting to anybody. "$A = A$" hardly makes one move forward and "$A = B$," as everybody knows since the work of Frege, raises problems that seem insoluble at least to pure theoretical reason. As for the practical reason, particularly not of the kind that Kant called "pure," it has never had problems with the difficulties that the pure or even impure theoretical reason has raised—a situation that has earned philosophers the dubious privilege of being considered the most impracticable people in the world.

But comparative studies are not just comparisons. They are comparisons between societies, cultures, and civilizations.

Across the boundaries defined by the "we" and the "they," the world of comparative studies is inevitably an attempt to look at what, by definition, is "another reality" from the viewpoint of that which is not itself. The contradiction lying at the very foundation of comparative studies is sought to be glossed over by the appeal to the universalism of all knowledge and the identification of the knowledge with the privileged "us" from whose viewpoint all "other" societies and cultures are judged and evaluated. The roots of this privileged position have generally lain in the political and economic power of the society of which the viewer happened to be a member. The anthropological studies from which most comparative studies have arisen were, by and large, an appendage of the extension of some western European countries' political and economic power over the globe during the past three hundred years or so. As this expansion was accompanied not only by phenomenal growth in some of the traditional fields of knowledge but also by demarcation and consolidation of new areas designating new fields of knowledge, the feeling that the claim that all "knowledge" discovered by the West held universal validity was justified. It was seen, therefore, as a universal standard by which to judge all other societies and cultures anywhere in the world, not only in those domains of knowledge but in all fields, whether they had anything to do with them or not.

Comparative studies, thus, meant in effect the comparison of all other societies and cultures in terms of the standards provided by the western societies and cultures, both in cognitive and in noncognitive domains. The scholars who belonged to these other societies and cultures, instead of looking at western society and culture from their own perspectives, accepted the norms provided by western scholars and tried to show that the achievements in various fields within their cultures paralleled those in the West, so they could not be regarded as inferior in any way. This acceptance of bias hindered the emergence of what may be called "comparative 'comparative studies,' " which might have led to a more balanced perspective in these fields.

Further, the so-called comparative studies were primarily a search for facts or a reporting of data in terms of a conceptual structure already formulated in the West. The questions to which answers were being sought were already predetermined in the light of the relationships that were regarded as significant or the theories that were to be tested. Where cultures were seen as autonomous it was more in terms of values embodied in the institutions of the culture than in terms of conceptual structures defining the cognitive terrain itself. Philosophy is, however, nothing but the conceptual structure itself, and hence any attempt at comparative philosophizing is bound to lead to an awareness of an alternative conceptual structure, a different way of looking at the world, a different way of mapping the cognitive terrain than that to which one is accustomed. Yet, however natural such an expectation might be, it is not what happened. How could one allow for the possibility of an alternative conceptual scheme when what was "possible" was itself determined by the conceptual scheme one was born into?

Comparative philosophy, thus, has been bogged down from the very beginning with the question of whether there is anything that can be called "philosophy" outside the western tradition. It took a fairly long time for scholars to realize that the so-called histories of philosophy they were writing about were mainly histories of western philosophy and not of philosophy outside the western hemisphere. Bertrand Russell was the first person to acknowledge explicitly, in the very title of his work relating to the history of philosophy, that it was a history of western philosophy and not of philosophy in general. But even today the problem remains the same. Shall we acknowledge what exists outside the western tradition as "philosophy" or not? The question has repeatedly been raised with respect to Indian and Chinese philosophies, the two major traditions outside the West. Recently, the same debate has erupted around the question of whether there was such a thing as "philosophy" in Africa. Surprisingly, the question has never been raised with respect to Islamic philosophy, presumably

because it derived its inspiration directly from the Greeks and self-consciously built upon their work. In fact, most histories of western philosophy have a chapter on Arabic philosophy, but mostly they treat it as important in the context of the West's access to Plato and Aristotle before they came to be directly available in their Greek sources, or else as an interlude with little interest for the development of mainstream philosophy in the West.

The debate regarding the status of philosophy in China or Africa or even in the Arabic world is not the subject of discussion here for the simple reason that I know little about the philosophical tradition in these cultures. A discussion of the Indian case, which I know a little better, may, however, be expected to throw some light on the problems of comparative philosophy as it has developed to the present day.

The first and foremost question that has engaged all those who have been seriously concerned with the so-called philosophical tradition in India relates to the issue of how it can be regarded as "philosophy" proper when it is supposed to be primarily concerned with *mokṣa*, that is, liberation from the very possibility of suffering, which is a quintessentially practical end and has hardly anything theoretical about it. To this question is added the consideration of how any cognitive tradition can be regarded as genuinely philosophical that accepts the authority of revelation or of some superhuman authority which is supposed to have an overriding authority over both reason and experience. In fact, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* officially underwrites the necessary relationship of Indian philosophy with *mokṣa* and maintains that the former cannot be understood without the latter. It is, then, no wonder that Indian philosophy is not taught in the philosophy departments of most western universities, for neither the students nor the teachers in these departments are presumably seeking *mokṣa*. The relegation of Indian philosophy to departments of Indology and its effective segregation from all active philosophical concerns of the day speaks for itself. The other side of the coin is attested by the so-called revival of interest in Indian philos-

ophy on western campuses in the wake of interest in such subjects as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, and the like.

Yet, one has to square this widespread impression about Indian philosophy with the fact that in any work of Indian philosophy *pūrva-pakṣa* (the opponent's position) has necessarily to be presented and refuted before one can establish one's own position. The counterposition, it should be remembered, is not merely stated but is presented with not only all the arguments that have already been proposed in its favor but also those which one can imagine to support it in any way whatsoever. If one simply asserted something and could not provide any reason or *hetu* for it, one opted out of the philosophical arena and ceased to be counted therein. Even the *sūtras* of the various philosophical schools, which are supposed to be the foundational works for them, not only give reasons for the positions they hold but also refute counterpositions. Further, all reasons are not regarded as equally valid; a great deal of thought went into determining what was valid reasoning and how to distinguish it from what was fallacious.

Moreover, the history of the debate on any philosophical issue documents, thinker by thinker, the development of the argument and the flaws pointed out by each in the position of the others. There was, however, in this matter no static repetition of positions but a modification of one's position in the light of opponents' trenchant criticism or even a more sophisticated reformulation of one's position in the light of those criticisms. The great debate between the Buddhists and the Naiyāyikas, which started from Dignāga in the fifth century after Christ and ended sometime around the eleventh century, is evidence of this process. This period of about six hundred years saw on the Buddhist side such well-known figures as Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Dharmottara, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. Ranged against them were Uddyotakara, Kumārila, and Prabhākara of the Mīmāṁsā school, Vācaspatimiśra, Jayanta, Udayana, and Śrīdhara. After the disappearance of the Buddhists from the Indian scene, there was the great debate between the Advaitin and the non-Advaitin, whose last great representatives were

Vyāsatīrtha on the side of the latter and Madhusūdana Saraswati, on the side of the former. Along with this were the radical and revolutionary developments in Nyāya after Gaṅgeśa from the twelfth century, which lasted to the seventeenth century. During this period of almost five centuries there were at least thirty-six thinkers whose names are known and who by their works contributed to the development and refinement of logical thought in India—a development that set new norms for intellectual precision such that no study remained unaffected by it.[1]

From the fifth century to the seventeenth century is a long period indeed, and to find evidence of a fairly high degree of hard-core philosophizing with continuous interchange of argument and counterargument between the participants resulting in a cumulative sophistication of the positions held is an intellectual achievement of the highest order of which any culture might be reasonably proud. Yet, the general picture of Indian philosophy is that it can hardly be regarded as philosophy proper in the western sense of the word, because it is primarily concerned with *mokṣa* and cannot rid itself of its ties to revelation, which it regards as authoritative over and above both reason and experience. Moreover, this privileged sense of the word, to which the West lays a monopolistic claim and which is supposed to provide the standard in terms of which every other "philosophical" enterprise would have to be judged, is supposed to characterize it *uniformly* from the time of Thales down to the present. But as everybody knows this is a false claim, and for long stretches of time what passes for philosophy in the West could not be characterized as such if the definition were to be as strictly enforced there as it usually is in the case of nonwestern cultures. To treat Plato and Aristotle as exclusive parts of the western patrimony and to reread retrospectively the whole of the western tradition in terms of what has

[1] See M. Chakravarti, "History of Navya-Nyaya in Bengal and Mithila," in Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, ed., *Studies in the History of Indian Philosophy*, 3 vols. (Calcutta: K. P. Bagohi, 1979), 2:146–82.

happened there since the seventeenth century are the usual means through which this claim is upheld. However, surprisingly enough, it is not only western scholars who perpetrate this deception; many nonwestern scholars also accept it unquestioningly.

The Indian scholars who have concerned themselves with philosophy, for example, not only have swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker but have tried to gain respectability for Indian philosophy either by discovering parallels to most of the western philosophical positions in the Indian tradition or by taking pride in the fact that philosophy in India was no mere arid intellectual exercise engaged in logic-chopping for its own sake, but concerned with the deepest existential issues of the bondage and liberation of man's innermost being. Indian philosophy, thus, either had everything that western philosophy had to show in terms of the utmost sophistication of epistemological and ontological reflection or had the special, unique characteristic of being spiritual and concerned with *mokṣa*. It was conveniently forgotten that if philosophy is an enterprise of the human reason, it is bound to show similarities across cultures to some extent and, similarly, as a human enterprise it is bound to be concerned with what man, in a particular culture, regards as the summum bonum for mankind.

The inevitable position of the privileged terms in any comparison can only be overcome if the terms functioning as a standard for comparison are deliberately changed to provide a different standard. Normally, this diversity would naturally have been provided by the fact that each culture would have seen the others from its own point of reference and thus been the subject and object of comparison, in turn. But due to political and economic factors, such a situation has not come to pass, as the intellectuals of the observed cultures have themselves internalized the western categories and standards of intelligibility so that they observe, understand, and compare their own cultures in terms given to them by the West. To adopt a well-known expression from Sartre, all nonwestern cultures have been reduced to the status of "objects" by being

observed and studied by western scholars in terms of western concepts and categories, which are treated not as culture-bound but as universal in character. In a deep and radical sense, therefore, it is only the West that has arrogated to itself the status of subjecthood in the cognitive enterprise, reducing all others to the status of objects.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that most of the discussions about Indian philosophy are carried on in the European languages. Perforce, therefore, the Sanskritic terms have to be translated into their western equivalents, giving the latter a magisterial status in deciding what the former mean or ought to mean. The converse situation normally does not take place; but recently when at Poona the experiment was tried of translating some issues in Russell and Wittgenstein into Sanskrit so that responses might be elicited from persons trained in philosophy in the traditional manner, the difficulty became apparent. How were the pandits—philosophers trained on the Sanskrit classics in the traditional manner—to make sense of what Russell and Wittgenstein were saying? As most of them did not know English, the matter had to be translated into Sanskrit, but then those Sanskrit terms carried the usual connotations associated with them and resisted the imposition of new meanings upon them. Earlier, a similar experiment had been tried in the pages of *The Pandit*, a journal published in Banaras in the nineteenth century, with results that have, as far as I know, not been clearly analyzed before.

In any case, the problem remains of how to translate one conceptual structure in terms of another, particularly when it is not only in another language but also has a history of sophisticated development of its own over millennia. The point is important, for there was a time in which difficult philosophical texts were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, Chinese, and later from Chinese into Korean or Japanese. But in most of these cases, because there was no equally developed native philosophical tradition one could coin new terms without coming into conflict with already well-settled ways of thinking about things. Even in such a situation, as Nakamura has

shown, the translation had to come to terms, if not with the intellectual then at least with the new country's cultural ethos.[2]

However it may be, the only way in which even the first steps can be taken toward any solution of the problem is to look at it from both sides, to see how each looks when seen from the point of the view of the other. No culture or tradition can be assigned a privileged place in this game of observing the other or understanding, judging, and evaluating it in terms of itself.

But there are not just two cultures in the world. It may be difficult to say with any certainty how many there are or even to give some agreed criterion in terms of which one may determine the distinction or demarcation between cultures. Also, it is not necessary that each culture have a distinctive identity in all the domains or even that it might have been creative in all of them. But there can be little doubt that whatever dimension of a culture we may choose to consider, it has been creatively pursued by more than one culture, each of which has made major contributions to it. But if this be so, each would have to be seen from a plurality of standpoints. Such an expectation at the present would almost be utopian. Most countries today are only aware of the West, in terms of which they see, measure, and judge themselves. They are not even aware of its neighbors, even though they might have made the most impressive contributions in the fields in which they may be interested. Of course, there are historical reasons for the situation as it obtains today, and while these reasons continue to operate it is difficult to see how they can be overcome except by the joint effort of scholars in a discipline who belong to diverse cultures and yet are aware of the need for transcending their culture-centric predicament.

The problem of the self-identity of an intellectual tradition within a cultural area, moreover, runs against the claim to universality that all truth professes. But the claim to universality,

[2] Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, rev. ed. Philip P. Wiener (Honolulu: East–West Center Press, 1964).

it should be remembered, is only a claim, and it has hardly been fulfilled by any of the existing claimants to the title. It is only by tacit agreement that the western models are universal, not culturebound as all others are. There is, of course, the other problem of how to compare alternative conceptual structures or decide between them. The Kuhnian approach argues the incommensurability of alternative conceptual structures even within a tradition with a common language, culture, and history. But when these latter differ radically, how can one even think of comparing, contrasting, or judging them? Yet, the judgment of incommensurability involves not only the fact that the two have been compared, but that each has been intelligibly grasped and understood. The consciousness that does so has thus the capacity for intellectual empathy that through conceptual imagination can enter a different world of intelligibility and feel, if not at home, at least not alien in it.

The decision between alternative conceptual structures is made, it has been urged, not on grounds of logic or evidence but in terms of their fecundity for suggesting significant research programs, particularly these days, when the number of persons engaged professionally in research is so large and is increasing day by day. Of course, what is ultimately supposed to decide between alternative theories or conceptual schemes is the Darwinian struggle between them, which results in the survival of the fittest. It is conveniently forgotten that survival is a function of many factors, including those which happen to be primarily political and economic, and that unlike biological forms, cultural forms never die unless their embodiments are destroyed without leaving any traces or copies and beyond the possibility of all retrieval. Further, there is a difference between domination and survival, which those who bring evolutionary considerations into the comparisons of cultures tend to forget. They also tend to assume gratuitously that what is dominant today will remain so forever.

But the idea that a choice has necessarily to be made between alternative conceptual structures, whether they be rooted in

different cultures or not, itself need not be accepted. Conceptual structures may be seen as tools for the organization of experience and for giving it meaning and significance. Each available conceptual structure thus shows the limitations of the others and suggests an alternative possibility unexplored by them. Also, they may be seen as drawing our attention to those facts of our experience which have been neglected in other perspectives and to ways of organizing and patterning experience that were not seen by them.

This view, it may be urged, brings the whole cognitive enterprise perilously close to the artistic one and, if taken to its logical conclusion, would make us give up the truth claim altogether. The parallel with the arts may, however, not be seen as a danger signal warning us that we are not on the right track, but rather a sign, at least for those who value the world of art very highly, that things are not far wrong, even if they are not completely right. Concepts can never be simply images or symbols and can hardly ever be simply a matter of feelings and emotions. The questions of truth and falsity can never be allowed to remain absent for long, even though they may be intractable in nature. Yet, what we should remember is that the cognitive enterprise is as unending as any other enterprise, and that though the truth claim must inevitably be made, it is equally certain that it shall remain unresolved in time. The future will always be there to show us not only the limitations of our knowledge and the falsity of our claims but also to bring to our notice new horizons, undreamed of before.

It is true that the diversity of conceptual structures is rooted in the historical isolation of cultures with little communication, if any, between them. The isolation has been fostered by geographical, political, and linguistic factors, which have simultaneously facilitated interaction within certain peoples and hindered it among others. Trade and religion have generally tried to cross the boundaries for material or spiritual profit, but they have seldom achieved notable success unless backed by political power. Behind the individual stamp conferred on a culture by this development in relative isolation, however,

lies the accident of what struck the great minds as problems requiring solutions or as questions requiring answers at the very beginning of civilization.

Absolute beginnings, it is true, can never be determined with certainty, but there can be little doubt that at the beginnings of all the recorded civilizations there stand outstanding individuals who posed the problems, raised the questions, and laid down at least the direction in which possible solutions or answers might be sought. It is this distinctiveness in what is perceived as a problem or the direction that is chosen for its solution that marks out one tradition from another, and which is what is (or should be) significant for other cultures or traditions.

There is, of course, an objective universality of human reason on the one hand and of the conditions of human living, on the other, which ensures that there would be a fair repetition amongst the problems perceived and the solutions proposed. But this universality can only be of momentary interest except for those who have identified themselves so much with a particular section of humanity that the only paramount concern for them is to prove that all worthwhile things originated with them and were borrowed by others. Basically, their conviction is that what was not originated by them or their ancestors could not possibly be worthwhile, or even if it were, it must surely be inferior to what they themselves have produced or discovered. But just as one travels to find a renewed sense of wonder and novelty, so does one make conceptual journeys to other cultures to look at the world through new conceptual frames.

The interesting approach in comparative philosophy would, then, be to search not for similarities but for differences. But even the differences are philosophically interesting only when they are articulated not in terms of the doctrines held, but in terms of the problems perceived and the solutions attempted. Ultimately, it is the arguments given for a certain position that are of interest to a philosophical mind, and in this respect the Indian philosophical tradition is especially rich because its very

format of presentation consists of giving the arguments of the opponent first and then the establishment of one's position by their rebuttal.

To search for the distinctive philosophical problems seen as problems or for distinctiveness in the solutions offered to similar problems is not only to see the alien tradition in a new way but to enrich oneself with the awareness of an alternative possibility in thought, a possibility that has already been actualized. The awareness of this alternative actualized possibility may, one hopes, free one's conceptual imagination from the unconscious constraints of one's own conceptual tradition. Thus comparative philosophy has the chance to function as a mutual liberator of each philosophical tradition from the limitations imposed upon it by its own past, instead of being what it is at present, the imposition of the standards of one dominant culture upon all the others and the evaluation of their philosophical achievements in terms of those alien standards.