Is Comparative Philosophy Possible?*

It is the aim of this paper to raise some objections to the enterprise of comparative philosophy, with special emphasis on Western and Indian philosophies, and to question whether the enterprise is possible at all, and if it is, along what lines.

In what follows we shall understand by 'comparative philosophy' any comparative study of the systems or doctrines of philosophy developed in two or more different civilizations** such as Western, Indian, Chinese or Japanese, and not a comparative study of the systems of philosophy within any particular civilization, though the term has sometimes been applied by scholars to this latter study also. The need for the former kind of study arises chiefly out of the interests of interpreting the philosophical traditions of the East** to the West** and vice versa, of re-examining the foundations of Western and Eastern philosophical thought in the light of a comparison of the basic tenets of the systems of these traditions, of determining whether such a study leads to a discovery of a common foundation for the different traditions, and of bringing whatever is of philosophical value in the Eastern traditions into the fold of contemporary local philosophical issues.

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* I am deeply indebted to Professor David S. Shwayder for going through several versions of this paper and suggesting very useful criticisms.

** We shall not here attempt a definition of these terms. In this paper they are used with the commonly understood meanings

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We shall first consider a few important objections to the enterprise of comparative philosophy, some of which have in fact been responsible for the neglect of the study of Eastern philosophies by contemporary Western philosophers, particularly by those belonging to the Empiricist tradition.

A prima facie objection may be expressed as follows; A comparative study of the systems of philosophy of the Eastern and Western civilizations is not possible because there is no agreement between the two traditions even as to what the nature of philosophy is. What the West considers as philosophy the East, at least in its central tradition, considers only as a stepping stone to real knowledge, a ladder, to adopt a phrase of Wittgenstein, to be thrown away after one has climbed up on it. Again, what the East considers as philosophy the West regards as theology. The reason for this is that Eastern philosophy, especially most of Indian philosophy, much as Scholasticism in the West, has been tied to the authority of religious scriptures or to some mystic experience. And the validity of these have been questioned by most Western philosophers.

In reply to this objection one may say that, after all, these different traditions do have a common conception of philosophy, viz., that it is concerned with the knowledge of Reality.

But, in counter reply, the critic who made the above objection may say that this conception does not hold for a whole set of Western philosophers like the Empiricists, Positivists and Analysts of all kinds. Even if it did, the apparent consensus disappears as soon as one begins to inquire into what each of these traditions means by 'knowledge' and by 'reality', very early in the history of Western philosophy 'knowledge' came to imply knowledge of objects in terms of concepts. Whatever be the differences between schools such as nominalism and realism as to the status of the universal and of the concept, and between schools such as realism and idealism as to the status of the object, the demand that Reality must be knowable or graspable by means of the concept remains basic in Western thought. Plotinus, Bergson and a few others are the rule-illustrating exceptions to this generalization. The dominant trend of Eastern thought, on the other hand, has held that the world as it is known by conceptual thought, the world of name and form, is not fully real, and is transcended by a 'higher' mystical knowledge which is identical with being. Such views are found in the Upanishads, in Taoism and in Vedanta as well as in Buddhism. These and other schools of Indian philosophy do, to be sure, recognize the existence of conceptual knowledge. The distinction, for instance, between determinate and indeterminate perception (savikalpaka and nirvikalpaka pratyaksha) vaguely implies such a recognition. The Nyaya-Vaiseshika school has explicitly mentioned the universal (samanya) as one of the categories.

The schools of Indian philosophy also recognize the usefulness

of conceptual knowledge for day-to-day living. But many of them deny ultimate validity to it.

As a result of this basic difference in the conceptions as to the nature of knowledge and of Reality, the basic pattern of systems of philosophy in the West has been to construct conceptual schemes and systems either to describe or to speculate about the Real; whereas in Eastern philosophies the basic aim has been to gain an insight into Reality, which insight has been described in Indian philosophy as intuition, direct knowledge (anubhava, aparoksha jnana) etc. The means for achieving this end consisted in a study of the various doctrines or views which the systems espoused and of the reasonings and discussions in them, as well as of various physical, mental or spiritual and moral exercises. These doctrines and views are to be taken as explications of the fundamental insights contained in the scriptures. Exceptions to this pattern to be mentioned are those systems which did not recognize mystic experience or the authority of the Vedas as revelation, and those which gave equal importance to reason and the authority of the Vedas. Examples of these exceptions are the Charvaka and Nyaya-Vaiseshika schools.

Thus, the critic's first objection may be concluded as follows» Since what is called philosophy in the West exists only as a minor part in the Indian tradition and conversely, no significant comparisons can be made between the systems of these two sets of traditions.

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As a reply to the critic one might point out that there is a basic similarity of pattern between the Scholastic philosophies in the West and many of the schools of philosophy in India, and that the problems which arise in calling the Indian systems philosophies also arise in the case of Scholasticism in the West. Just as a contemporary Western philosopher might pick out from Scholasticism only those discussions which interest him and ignore the rest, he may also do the same kind of things with Indian philosophy. Examples of such problems of interest are the problems of knowledge, causality, proofs for the existence of God, of substance, space and time, free will, meanings of words, universals and of inference. All these problems have been discussed in Indian philosophy in greater or less detail, independently of any reference to the authority of the scriptures.

This reply leads us to a second objection by the critic; It is true that one might find some doctrines and discussions concerning these problems in the systems of Indian philosophy, and that the systems are to that extent intelligible to a Western philosopher and even comparable to some of the Western theories. But the question is whether they mean anything to the Western philosopher except as a historical curiosity, and whether he can relate in any significant way such discussions to his own problems without doing complete injustice to the basic interests which prompted such discussions. It is true that one can find in Indian philosophy instances of theories, as in the dialectic of Nagarjuna, which have relevance to the interests of a contemporary Western philosopher in much the same fashion as do the paradoxes

of Zeno, and Bradley's theory of the denial of the reality of space, time, substance and attribute. Both in Bradley and in Nagarjuna the aim of such discussions is to show the self-contradictory nature of the intellect or the discursive mind and to transcend it. The contemporary Western philosopher would only be interested in showing the fallacies in their arguments. But both the above philosophers would contend that the basic insight they have about the self-contradictory nature of our concept-structure is true even if their particular arguments to show that such is the case may turn out to be fallacious,

Thus we are led to a third objection by the critic: The Western philosopher's difficulty in relating discussions in Indian philosophy to his own arises also out of the differences in the categories used and the distinctions made in the different traditions. The differences, the critic may argue, are due to the fact that the philosophies of a particular tradition are controlled and directed by a set of basic interests and concerns; the categories and the distinctions made within the categories which are relevant and necessary.to a particular set of interests and concerns may not be relevant to another. In Western psychology, mental functions are commonly classified in terms of the affective, the cognitive and the conative. In the traditional faculty psychology the several mental faculties that have been recognized are: sensation, memory or imagination, thinking or judgment, desire and will. In Plato, to take a typical example, the primary interest in his division of the soul into three parts is to explain the nature of conflict in the human being. Once this division has

been made, it is easy to derive the conclusion that the will informed by reason cannot but act morally.* Thus Plato justifies the Socratic dictum that virtue is knowledge. One other interest important for Western psychology is the explanation of the mechanism of knowledge. In Indian psychology, on the other hand, the primary interest has almost always been the liberation of the individual from a life of suffering. The suffering is usually explained as arising due to an illusion concerning the nature of ourselves. The different psychological categories are a result of explaining the series of fictitious identifications we make with the different elements in ourselves. According to Advaita Vedanta and Samkhya, for instance, we think, owing to an illusion, that we are the agent and enjoyer etc. of our actions and their consequences, whereas in reality we cannot be identified with any of these elements, since we are essentially pure consciousness. In this psychology, pure consciousness (purusha or sakshin) is sharply distinguished from the other elements of mental life. Almost all of what we call mental functions are attributed to what is called the internal organ (antahkarana). The internal organ has three modifications (vrttis); the attending or doubting function (manas), the ego-sense (ahamkara), and the discriminatory or deciding function (buddhi). Again, in Buddhist psychology, the hierarchy of the five aggregates (pancha skandhas) of mental

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**Plato also shows some interest in the liberation of the soul from the trammels of the body. But this does not seem to form an integral part of his thought, since it can neither explain the division of the soul into three parts, nor the necessity of a moral life in terms of a harmony of the several parts of the soul.

phenomena is as follows: aggregates of sensations or perceptions (rupa), feelings (vedana), symbolic or conceptual thinking (samjna) , synthesis of the different experiences or mental dispositions (samskara) , and the consciousness of the ego as a person or individual (vijnana) . Western psychology in general hardly recognizes the ego-sense; in it no distinction exists between 'soul', 'self and 'ego'. Incidentally, the problem of the relation between mind and body occurs in Indian philosophy in a totally different way, if it appears at all: The mind as it is conceived in the West is for most Indian philosophy only a different kind of matter. It is by its own nature unconscious. There can be no real relationship between pure consciousness and the different mental phenomena. If there appears to be any, and if the mind appears to be conscious, it is because of an illusion or ignorance as to the nature of these phenomena.

Thus the critic raises a further objection to the enterprise of comparative philosophy, viz., since the different traditions are based on different interests and conceptions as to the nature of philosophy, the philosophies that have been put forth by these traditions are necessarily incommensurable. What a system in one tradition takes for granted, a system in the other might require to be proved; what is axiomatic for the one tradition is at best only a hypothesis or a problem to be solved for the other.

Let us try to bring into a focus the alleged difficulties of the imaginary critic by considering an example for comparison from the field of ethics:

II

The dominant traditions in the West and in India differ significantly not only as to the basic doctrines, but even as to the problems which define ethics. The highest goal for human endeavor for Indian ethics can be described as union with Reality, or, negatively, as freedom from the feeling of separation from Reality, or as freedom from suffering, equated with release from the cycle of births and rebirths (samsara). In the West the main business of ethics has been to set forth standards or criteria of social behavior. According to this conception of ethics, the action of an individual which does not potentially affect other human beings could hardly form the subject-matter of ethics. Even egoistic ethical theories like Epicureanism, or the self-perfectionist theories such as those of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Spinoza and Bradley are not exempt from this generalization; they may define what is good in terms of an ideal state of the individual; but they still consider as ethical, as opposed to non-ethical, only those actions which may affect other human beings.

Secondly, the concept of responsibility is central to Western ethics. A main reason for this is the general character of Western ethics which has been mentioned in the previous paragraph: Western ethics in general is concerned with the improvement of human conduct by means of a set of rewards and punishments, and praise and blame. And one can meaningfully assign rewards and punishments to the individual only for those actions for which he is said to

be somehow responsible. There has been an emphasis, then, on retribution and justice, for which Judaism and Christianity were also at least partly responsible.

The problem of responsibility in its turn gives rise to the problem of reconciling determinism and freedom of the will. The general questions that are asked in connection with responsibility are: whether the individual has freely chosen the particular action for which he is now being held responsible; whether, given the same or similar circumstances, he could have acted otherwise; whether, given the principle of universal causation, it makes sense to say that the individual could have acted otherwise than he in fact did; and, if his actions are the inevitable and unavoidable consequences of previous causes such as desires, habits, motives, passions or emotions, which may not be under his control, how can he be called free. A typical answer given in Western ethics to these questions is that of John Locke: '

> So that the idea of liberty is, the idea of a power in any agent to do or forbear any particular action, according to the determination or thought of the mind, whereby either of them is preferred to the others where either of them is not in the power of the agent to be produced by him according to his volition, there he is not at liberty; that agent is under necessity. (1)

Again, the concept of the self or the ego as a moral agent with a capability to choose between different courses of action, and a radical opposition between the concepts of good and evil and of right and wrong are essential to most Western systems ofethics.

On a first glance one might be tempted to say that Indian ethics is also egoistic, as most Western ethics is, but one would be quite mistaken in this for several reasons. Indian ethics is generally based on some kind of mysticism. It denies the ultimate reality of the ego or self, whereas even in a self-perfectionist ethics such as that of Bradley, the identity of the self or the ego, although the self realizes itself as part of the Universal Self or the Absolute, is never completely lost.

Mysticism in general denies not only the reality of the ego or self, but also the ultimate validity of all distinctions and oppositions such as between self and the other, good and evil, and right and wrong. Mystical ethics, unlike perfectionist or self-realization ethics, is negative in its emphasis: It assumes that all action contrary to one's obligations to society, and conflicting with the interests of society, originates from the illusion of the self or ego. It is this sense of the self, and the resulting selfishness which creates human conflict and suffering in the individual as well as in the society. So, all human endeavor must be directed to a cessation of the sense of the self. Also, mysticism does not envisage action which is generated out of an intense conflict such as that involved in moral choices, since its whole endeavor is to be free from conflict. Mystical ethics. in short, is an ethics of liberation.

Exceptions to this general trend can be found in Indian ethics. That part of Indian ethics which emphasizes the concept of dharma has been concerned with social obligations. Duties (dharma) are

divided into duties characteristic of one's own station in one's society and to his stage in life (svadharma), and duties common to everyone irrespective of these distinctions (samanya dharma). But the attention to dharma remains mainly a lip service, since in most systems of Indian ethics it has been subordinated to the summum bonum of release or self-realization (moksha).

There are other apparent similarities between Western and Indian ethics which also will not stand up under **close** scrutiny;

The ethics of the Bhagavadgita, like Kantian ethics, recognizes as central to ethics the maxim that one ought to perform one's duty for its own sake without regard to the consequences. This maxim has to be restated to suit the spirit of Indian ethics as saying that one ought to act without seeking any selfish gains, or that one ought to act without the sense of self, without having even the aim of moksha in view. This is so because any aim or motive is a motive for the self, and the action performed out of such an aim necessarily places the individual within the realm of becoming (samsara). An action performed without seeking selfish gain is called nishkama karma. But the emphasis in Kantian ethics, on the other hand, is on the rightness of the action, rather than on the absence of the sense of self.

There is also an apparent similarity between the content of duty in Bradley's ethics, and that in the Gita, viz., that duty consists in performing one's action in accordance with one's station in society. Here again, we must not press the comparison.

This conception of duty in Bradley's ethics is part of his theory of the end of morality as self-realization. In the Gita we do not find much of a justification for such a duty except that it is "God-given". What we find instead is a theory of the constitution of the human being as consisting of the three characters (gunas): the spiritual, the passionate and the lethargic (sattva, rajas and tamas). One of the three characters dominate each individual. But the Git a does not discuss the relationship between the constitution of the human being and his duty in terms of his station in society; nor does it discuss the problem of whether and how action is possible in the absence of the sense of self, except by saying that Nature still prompts us to act.

Indian philosophy has its hedonistic, egoistic and stoic as well as perfectionist theories, e.g., the schools of Charvaka, Bhatta of Purva Mimamsa, Nyaya and Jaina. These are more or less comparable to their counterparts in the West. But they do not form part of the dominant tradition of India.

In Indian ethics rewards and punishments, praise and blame have been less emphasized than self-knowledge as a means to the improvement of human conduct. As a result, the problem of responsibility did not assume as large proportions as it did in the West. So, the problem of the freedom of the will did not arise in India, at least in the form in which it occurred in the west. Also, Indian philosophers failed to connect this problem with the problem of causation, although significant space was devoted to discussions on causation in other contexts. To be sure, in Indian

ethics, the problem of how human effort (purushakara) is possible has been raised as a difficulty of the doctrine of action (karma) and its results. The doctrine of karma holds that one's character and one's state of being and condition in the world and in society are the necessary result of one's past actions. The general answer given to the problem of how human effort is possible if the doctrine of karma is true is as follows; though we have no control over the results of our past actions which are taking effect now, we nevertheless do have control over our actions in the present. Though our previous actions do affect our character, it is possible for us to be free from the influences of our past actions on our character and perform actions which can change the course of our life. But there has been little discussion as to how such action is possible.

Thus the differences between the Western and the Indian traditions are so much grater than their similarities, the critic would conclude, that any significant comparison between them is futile. The situation, he says, is not much different if we wish to compare the ethics of some apparently kindred contemporary thinkers of the two different traditions. Consider, for example, Sartre(2) and J. Krishnamurti(3).

J. Krishnamurti connects the two kinds of freedom -- the freedom and the freedom to. To be completely free in action, he says, is to be free from the influences of our past, and this is the same as being free from the determinations of the self or the ego. The ego is but the product of memory and self-consciousness.

This kind of freedom is made possible by what Krishnamurti calls passive or choiceless awareness of the processes and activities of our mind. This is what he calls self-knowledge and reminds us of the traditional emphasis on self-knowledge as a means to liberation.

Krishnamurti's solution to the problem of how freedom is possible resembles Sartre's theory of human consciousness to some extent. Sartre makes freedom the essential nature of man. Man for him is necessarily free, because his consciousness is basically a 'nothing'. So, it cannot, because of its very nature, become a 'something', an object, or be determined by anything, including one's own past, since one's own past is also a something. To become something and to be determined by it seem to be *the* same for Sartre. Thus, no matter how much one may deceive oneself that one is constrained in his action, he is constrained only because he chose to be constrained. According to Sartre, we become aware of our essential freedom in our 'anxiety'. In Krishnamurti, too, the 'passive self-awareness' is at its best in moments of stress, when our whole mental life is in a state of shock.

Both Sartre and Krishnamurti seem to be pointing to the ever self-alienating nature of our consciousness as the basis for the explanation of human freedom, and thus appear as collaborators in contributing something new to the solution of the traditional problem of the freedom of the will. Sartre's solution consists in adding a new kind of entity, viz. the human consciousness, to

the entities accepted in the traditional ontologies. Human consciousness is in a way a 'nothing' and yet somehow a something, since it chooses, acts and creates its own 'essence'.

Consciousness for Sartre is by nature 'intentional', i.e., it is never without an object. It is itself always a subject and can never become an object. However, it constantly strives to become an object, laboring under the self-deception that it can become the object. Sartre seems to explain the origin of the *QS.O* in about the same way as Krishnamurti does, viz., that it is the result of the fictitious identifications of the consciousness. The notion of illusion is made use of directly or indirectly by both the philosophers. For Sartre the self-deception that we are determined and constrained is necessarily a failure.

There are, however, significant differences between the two philosophers. Sartre's primary interest, true to the Western spirit, is theoretical in that he wishes to give a phenomenological description of human consciousness. His theory is ontological and psychological as well as ethical and psychoanalytic. Krishnamurti's analysis is also a description, but is not intended as a theory, because he distrusts all theories as somehow distortions of and escapes from facts. The facts referred to in the descriptions can be experienced by one and all, even if the particular descriptions fail to convey the facts to a particular person. Besides, the realization in one's own experience of the facts so described is supposed to lead one to a 'silencing' of the 'superficial' or 'self-conscious' mind, so that a 'deeper' consciousness or 'intel-

ligence' may function free from the shackles of the ego. Sartre's ontology does not seem to have any such transcendental implications. Sartre's man seems to remain in a state of hopelessness, as creator of his own destiny.

It is true that neither Krishnamurti nor Sartre accept a fixed and eternal set of values. But according to Sartre, we create our values through our choices, and through our choices determine the essence of man. It is not clear in Sartre on what basis we make our choices, nor of what significance is the essence of man for the individual. On the other hand, Krishnamurti seems to suggest that on the realization of our freedom we act choicelessly and on an intuitive basis. And it is not hard to find in his writings suggestions of some guidelines of conduct such as absence of conflict and of selfishness. Love, integration of personality, harmony with society. But he describes all of them only negatively. He refuses to speculate on what happens, or on what basis we act when we realize our freedom.

III

The conclusion that emerges from the above discussion is that the dominant trend in philosophy in the West is basically different from the trend in India in so far as the latter is based on some sort of mysticism or other, notwithstanding the fact that there are some philosophies in the West such as those of Plotinus, Bergson and Bradley, which share a similar basic pattern with many of the philosophies of India. But the basic differences between the

dominant trends in the two traditions are not a bar to comparative studying. The critic's demonstration of these basic differences is in fact such a comparative study which could be expanded by an investigation of the phenomena of mysticism and some traditional and contemporary philosophies based on mysticism.

Some forms of contemporary Indian mysticism such as the one represented by J. Krishnamurti, which claims to present mysticism devoid of any speculative and doctrinal content, offer a challenge to the Western philosopher. Empiricist or otherwise. They present methods and conditions for achieving what is called mystic experience, valid for everyone, and so testable for each person in one's own experience. It is possible that a study and criticism of mysticism may lead one into the discovery of fundamentally different attitudes toward life and the world. One may have to look for some common norms such as mental or psychic health in order to be able to compare and evaluate successfully such basic attitudes with a view to reconciling them. One may be inclined, legitimately, to include such a study of the basic attitudes in the fields of cultural anthropology and philosophy of civilization. This seems to be the only way comparative philosophy can be done successfully and completely.

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