



Conditions for Meaningful Comparative Philosophy

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr **Conditions for meaningful comparative philosophy**

The Tower of Babel in which modern man resides makes communication most difficult at a time when outward contact among men seems to have become easier than at any other time in human history. The common language of wisdom having been lost, there exists no common ground to make any meaningful communication possible, especially between the modern Western world and the traditions of the East. Men talk of a single humanity at a time when there has never been as little real communication between them as there is now. In no field is this as true as in "philosophy," or that knowledge which determines the ultimate framework of all of man's other modes of knowledge and the values of his actions.

Because of the lack of discernment, which characterizes the modern world and which is to be seen even more among Westernized Orientals, all kinds of fantastic excesses in East and West have prevented a meaningful, worthy intellectual communication and a comparative study of philosophy and metaphysics from being carried out. The greatest gnostics and saints have been compared to skeptics, and different levels of inspiration have been totally confused. A Tolstoy has been called a *mahātman*; Hume's denial of causality has been related to Ash'arite theology on the one hand and to Buddhism on the other; Śaṅkara has been compared to the German idealists; and Nietzsche to Rūmī, just to cite a few examples. The Western students of Oriental doctrines have usually tried to reduce these doctrines to "profane" philosophy; and modernized Orientals, often burdened by a half-hidden inferiority complex, have tried to give respectability to the same doctrines and to "elevate" them by giving them the honor of being in harmony with the thought of whichever Western philosopher was in vogue. On both sides, usually the relation of the "philosophy" in question to the experience or direct knowledge of the Truth, which is the source of this "philosophy," is forgotten and levels of reality confused.

A step toward a solution is to clear the ground of existing confusions, to determine exactly what is being compared with what. One must first ask what we mean by "philosophy." To this extremely complicated question a clear answer can be provided if there is the light of metaphysical certainty. Because this light is lacking in most discussions, the worst kind of confusion reigns over the attempt at a definition. Moreover, the traditions of the East and the West have given different meanings to this term, although at the highest level of the *philosophia perennis*, the *sanātana dharma* of Hinduism or the *ḥikmah laduniyyah* of Islam, there has always been the profoundest agreement concerning the nature of the *sophia* which all true philosophies seek and in whose bosom alone East and West can meet.¹

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¹ "We recognise that the only possible ground upon which an effective entente of East

It can be said that if we accept the meaning of philosophy current in the West, then it is nearly synonymous with logic and its applications, leaving aside the current antirationalist movements based upon such sentiments as anxiety and fear.² In the West this philosophy has sometimes allied itself with revelation and theology or truly intellectual intuition (intellect being understood in its original sense) as in St. Bonaventure or St. Thomas;³ at other times it has become wed to mathematics or to the physical sciences as in the seventeenth century; and at yet other times it has sought to analyze and dissect the data of the senses alone, as in British empiricism, and to serve solely the function of praxis. Also in the West, metaphysics in its real sense, which is a sapiential knowledge based upon the direct and immediate experience of the Truth, has become reduced (thanks to Aristotle) to a branch of philosophy. As a result, men such as Plotinus, Proclus, Dionysius, Erigena, and Nicolas of Cusa have been treated as ordinary philosophers. But if we accept the meaning of philosophy given earlier, they cannot be classified in the same category with Descartes and Kant, or even with the Aristotelian and Thomist philosophers, who occupy an intermediary position between the two groups. As a result of the forgetting of the fundamental distinction between the intellect, which knows through immediate experience or vision, and reason, which being *ratio* can only know through analysis and division, the basic distinction between metaphysics as a *scientia sacra* or Divine knowledge and philosophy as a purely human form of mental activity has been blurred or forgotten.⁴ Even in the different philosophical schools of the modern world all has been reduced to a least common denominator.

and West can be accomplished is that of the purely intellectual wisdom that is one and the same at all times and for all men, and is independent of all environmental idiosyncrasy." A. K. Coomaraswamy, "On the Pertinence of Philosophy," in *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1952), p. 160.

² "Philosophy, in the sense in which we understand the term (which is also its current meaning) primarily consists of logic: this definition of Guénon's puts philosophic thought in its right place and clearly distinguishes it from 'intellectual intuition', which is the direct apprehension of a truth." F. Schuon, *Language of the Self* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1959), p. 7.

³ "Logic can either operate as part of an intellection, or else, on the contrary, put itself at the service of an error; moreover, unintelligence can diminish or even nullify logic, so that philosophy can in fact become the vehicle of almost anything; it can be an Aristotelianism carrying ontological insights, just as it can degenerate into an 'existentialism' in which logic has become a mere shadow of itself, a blind and unreal operation; indeed, what can be said of a 'metaphysic' which idiotically posits man at the centre of the Real, like a sack of coal, and which operates with such blatantly subjective and conjectural concepts as 'worry' and 'anguish'?" *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ "A metaphysical doctrine is the incarnation in the mind of a universal truth.

"A philosophical system is a rational attempt to resolve certain questions which we put to ourselves. A concept is a 'problem' only in relation to a particular ignorance." F. Schuon, trans. D. M. Matheson, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1953), p. 11. This distinction has also been thoroughly discussed by R. Guénon in his many works.

To make the problem more difficult, despite the currently accepted definition of philosophy in the West, the echo of philosophy as the doctrinal aspect of an integral spiritual way or as metaphysics and theosophy (in its original sense) still lingers and continues to possess a marginal existence. One can distinguish, at least in popular language, two meanings of the term philosophy⁵: one is the technical sense alluded to earlier, and second is wisdom, against which most professional European philosophy has rebelled so that this mode of thought could hardly be called *philo-sophia* but rather should be called *miso-sophia*.

As far as the Oriental traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Islam are concerned, the situation is just the reverse. Except for certain schools such as the *mashshā'ī* or Peripatetic school of Islam, which corresponds in many ways to Aristotelianism and Thomism in the West,⁶ certain individual Islamic figures such as Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī, and some of the peripheral schools in India and China, there is nothing in the Oriental traditions which could be considered as philosophy in the sense defined earlier, because the major and dominating intellectual traditions of the Orient always have been wedded to a direct experience of the spiritual world and intellectual intuition in the strictest sense. What is usually called Oriental philosophy is for the most part the doctrinal aspect of a total spiritual way tied to a method of realization and is inseparable from the revelation or tradition which has given birth to the way in question. That is why to speak of rationalistic philosophy and Chinese or Hindu philosophy in the same breath is a contradiction, unless the word philosophy is used in two different senses: first as a wisdom that is wed to spiritual experience, and second as a mental construct, completely cut off from it. A lack of awareness of this basic distinction has made a sham of many studies of comparative philosophy and has helped to reduce to nil the real significance of Oriental metaphysics. This metaphysics, far from being the object of mental play, has the function of enabling men to transcend the mental plane.

When one has taken into consideration these differences as well as the essential role of religion and spiritual methods of realization in the creation and sustenance of most of the diverse schools of what is usually called "Oriental" philosophy, in contrast to what is found in modern Western philosophy, the first necessary condition for a meaningful comparative study will be a

⁵ Coomaraswamy also distinguished between two kinds of philosophy whose unity is embraced by wisdom alone: "Philosophy, accordingly, is a wisdom about knowledge, a *correction du savoir-penser*. . . . Beyond this, however, philosophy has been held to mean a wisdom not so much about particular kinds of thought, as a wisdom about thinking, and an analysis of what it means to think, and an enquiry as to what may be the nature of the ultimate reference of thought." Coomaraswamy, "On the Pertinence of Philosophy," pp. 151-152.

⁶ See S. H. Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), chap. 1.

complete awareness of the structure and levels of meaning of the religious and metaphysical traditions of the East and West. One can compare religions themselves; that belongs to the field of comparative religion. One can also compare the mystical and esoteric teachings of the East and the West in the field, which recently has come to be called comparative mysticism and which is in reality an aspect of comparative religion.⁷ These are disciplines apart from what is called comparative philosophy. Now comparative philosophy per se is either shallow comparisons of apparently similar but essentially different teachings, or, if it is serious, it must be a comparative study of ways of thinking and of the matrices for determining different sciences and forms of knowledge in reference to the total vision of the universe and of the nature of things. This vision is inseparable from the religious and theological background that has produced the "philosophy" in question. The outward comparison of an Emerson with a Ḥāfiẓ or a Sa'dī will never have any meaning unless considered in the light of Protestant Christianity and Islam respectively. Comparative philosophy without reference to the religious background, whether the religion has had a positive or negative influence, is as absurd as comparing single notes of music without reference to the melody of which they are a part.

Comparative philosophy between East and West is impossible without considering the hierarchic nature of man's faculties and the modes of knowledge accessible to him. One of the most unfortunate and in fact tragic elements that has prevented most modern Western men from understanding Oriental teachings and much of their own Western tradition is that they wish to study traditional man in the light of the two-dimensional model of modern man deprived of the transcendent dimension. The very concept of man in the modern world is the greatest obstacle to an understanding of traditional man, who has been and continues to be aware of the multiple levels of existence and the grades of knowledge accessible to him.⁸ If a blind man were to develop a philosophy based upon his experience of the world derived from his four senses, surely it would differ from one based upon those four senses as well as upon sight. How much more would a "philosophy" based upon man's rational analysis of sense data differ from one that is the result of the experience of a world which transcends both reason and the sensible world? The functioning of the eye of the heart, the (*'ayn al-qalb* or *chishm-i dil*) of the Ṣūfīs, which corresponds to the third eye of the Hindus, makes

⁷ This field has attracted the attention of several well-known scholars during the past few decades, men like Rudolph Otto, Louis Gardet, D. T. Suzuki, and A. Graham. It has received its profoundest treatment in the writings of F. Schuon, who has followed the path tread before him by R. Guénon and A. K. Coomaraswamy to its sublimest peak.

⁸ See S. H. Nasr, "Who Is Man? The Perennial Answer of Islam," *Studies in Comparative Religion* 2 (1968): 45-56.

accessible a vision or experience of reality which affects man's "philosophy" about the nature of reality as much as perception by the eye colors completely our view of the nature of material existence.

Without a full awareness of the hierarchy of knowledge, which can be reduced to at least the four basic levels of the intellectual, the imaginative (in its positive sense of *imaginatio*, or *khayāl* in Arabic), the rational, and the sensible, no meaningful comparative study is possible.⁹ When people say that Śaṅkara said such and such which was confirmed by Berkeley or some other eighteenth century philosopher, it must be asked whether the same means of gaining knowledge was accessible to both. Or when it is said that this or that existential philosopher has had an "experience of Being" like a Mullā Ṣadrā or some other Muslim sage,¹⁰ it first must be asked whether it is possible for a philosopher who negates Being to have an experience of It. In reality we can only have an experience of Being through the grace provided by Being Itself and by means of the paths provided by It through those objective manifestations of the universal intellect called religion or revelation. Whenever comparisons are to be made, It must be asked what the source of the "philosophy" in question is, whether it comes from ratiocination, empirical analysis of spiritual vision, or in other words, upon which aspect of the being of the knower it depends. One must always remember the dictum of Aristotle that knowledge depends upon the mode of the knower.

In certain limited fields such as logic or the "philosophy of nature," comparisons can be made legitimately for the most part without need to have recourse to the background alluded to earlier, although even here elements cannot be divorced totally from their background. But to a certain degree it is possible to compare Indian or Islamic logic with the different logical schools in the West. But once this limit is transgressed the total background and the question of the "source" of the knowledge in question remain factors of paramount importance.

For example, it is possible to make serious comparative studies between Indian and Persian doctrines and the Greek ones or between Islamic philosophy and Western scholastic philosophy before the modern period. These studies can be meaningful because of both morphological resemblances and historical relations. But when we come to the modern period the situation changes completely.¹¹ From the point of view of Oriental metaphysics the whole movement of thought in the West from the Renaissance to Hegel, not

⁹ See H. Corbin, *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection* (Paris:Correa, 1961).

¹⁰ See H. Corbin, ed., *Le livre des pénétrations métaphysiques (Kitāb al-mashā'ir of Mullā Ṣadrā)* (Tehran and Paris:Institut Franco-Iranien-Andrien-Maisonneuve, 1964), Introduction.

¹¹ In the case of certain seventeenth century philosophers such as Descartes and Spinoza, it is also possible and legitimate to trace influences of Islamic and Greek as well as Scholastic philosophy, as has been done so ably by E. Gilson and H. A. Wolfson.

to speak of twentieth century philosophy, is a movement toward “antimeta-physics” and an even greater alienation from all that constitutes the very basis of all true “philosophy,” namely the traditional twin sources of truth, revelation and intellectual intuition or spiritual vision. Comparative studies made of this period should be concerned either with showing dissimilarities, conflicts, and contradictions or with the schools that have stood away from the mainstream of the history of European thought. A comparative study showing similarities between Oriental doctrines and modern Western “thought” could have meaning only in the case of such Western figures as the Cambridge Platonists, or Jacob Boehme, Claude St. Martin, Franz van Baader, etc., who are not even generally well known in the West to say nothing of the East or on another level with such mystics as Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius. To say that this or that statement of Hegel resembles the Upaniṣads or that Hume presents ideas similar to Nāgārjuna’s is to fall into the worst form of error, one which prevents any type of profound understanding from being achieved, either for Westerners wanting to understand the East or vice versa.

In this order of indiscriminate comparisons without regard to the real nature of the ideas involved and their meaning within the total context of things, Orientals have been even more at fault than the Western scholars who concern themselves with Oriental studies. In both cases the nature of the experience upon which the “philosophy” in question is based and the total world view in which alone it possesses meaning are completely overlooked. Often the sentimental desire for bringing about harmony between completely contradictory and incompatible premises—such as those upon which the traditional societies and the antitraditional modern civilization are based—depicts apparent resemblances where there are the deepest contrasts and reduces the role of comparative philosophy to that of a sentimental charity. However, the function of comparative philosophy should be to serve the truth and to reveal contrasts and differences wherever they exist.

In speaking of differences we must also turn to the question of the comparative study of doctrines between the Eastern traditions themselves. One of the results of Western colonialization of Asia during the last century has been that even today the different civilizations of Asia see each other, even if they are neighbors, in the mirror of the Occident. “Comparative philosophy” is taken for granted to mean the comparison of ideas between what is called East and West. Moreover, Oriental authors who undertake comparative studies usually take their own tradition and the West into consideration and nothing else. A Muslim considers only Islam and the West, and a Hindu, Hinduism and Western thought. For example, as far as relations between Hinduism and Islam are concerned, even now contemporary Hindu and Muslim scholars must strive to their utmost to attain anything like what was achieved three centuries ago by men like Dārā Shukūh and Mīr Abū’l-Qāsim

Findiriskī. Only recently have a handful of Oriental scholars begun to take seriously comparative studies within the Oriental traditions themselves, and there have been a few outstanding works in this domain.¹² Here one finds of course a much firmer ground for comparison than when comparing with the modern West because Oriental civilizations are generally of a traditional character, rooted in the Divine Principle which presides and dominates. But even here it is necessary to proceed with a spirit of discernment, avoiding shallow and sentimental comparisons and equations and situating the many schools and doctrines which exist in each Oriental tradition in their appropriate place within the total matrix of the tradition. Although in a profound and symbolic sense there is an East or Orient which stands vis-à-vis the Occident, a more accurate picture, which would give the appropriate depth to comparative studies, would be to see several Orients juxtaposed against a modern Occident whose historical tradition has possessed elements and periods akin to the Orient. Orient as a term means more than a geographical location, it symbolizes most of all the world of light and illumination.¹³

It might be asked, Of what use is a comparative study of philosophy and metaphysics? To the West its primary function can be to help future intellectual creativity and to provide the criteria necessary to analyze in depth Western philosophy, which is outwardly critical but hardly ever exposed to criticism of its totality and of its basic premises. Moreover, Oriental doctrines can fulfill that most fundamental and urgent task of reminding the West of truths that have existed within its own tradition but which have been completely forgotten that it is as if they had never existed. Today, it is nearly impossible for Western man to rediscover the whole of his own tradition without the aid of Oriental metaphysics.¹⁴ This is because the sapiential doctrines and the appropriate spiritual techniques necessary for rediscovery of the total Western tradition are hardly accessible in the West, and "philosophy" has become totally divorced from the nature of spiritual experience.

¹² We have in mind especially the two-volume work of T. Izutsu, *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism: Ibn 'Arabī and Lao-Tzu, Chuang-Tzu* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1966-1967), which contains a profound study of these men and then a comparison of their doctrines.

¹³ This symbolism is the basis of Suhrawardī's "Theosophy of the Orient of Light" (*ḥikmatal-ishrāq*), which is both "Oriental" and "illuminative." See Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages*, pp. 64 ff., and the two prolegomenas of H. Corbin to Suhrawardī, *Opera metaphysica et mystica*, vol. I (Istanbul: Ma'arif Matbaasi, 1945); vol. II (Tehran and Paris: Institut Franco-Iranien-Andrien-Maisonnewe, 1952).

¹⁴ Concerning the teachings of Guénon on this subject A. K. Coomaraswamy writes, "It is only because this metaphysics still survives as a living power in Eastern societies, in so far as they have not been corrupted by the withering touch of Western, or rather, *modern* civilization . . . and not to Orientalize the West, but to bring back the West to a consciousness of the roots of her own life and . . . values . . . , that Guénon asks us to turn to the East." "Eastern Wisdom and Western Knowledge," in *The Bugbear of Literacy* (London: Denis Dobson Ltd., 1949), pp. 69-70.

In the traditional East the very opposite holds true. "Philosophy" as a mental play or discipline which does not transform one's being is considered by the dominating schools of the different Oriental traditions to be meaningless and dangerous. The whole teachings of such Islamic philosophers as Suhrawardī and Mullā Ṣadrā and of Ṣūfism are based on this point, as are all the schools of Hinduism and Buddhism, especially Vedānta and Zen. The very separation of knowledge from being, which lies at the heart of the crisis of modern man, is avoided in the Oriental traditions, whose dominating characteristic is to consider legitimate only that form of knowledge that can transform the being of the knower. The West could learn no greater lesson from the East than the realization of the central role of spiritual discipline in the attainment of any true knowledge of permanent value.

One observes among most who are affected by the modernist spirit the most abominable lack of discernment and the dangerous tendency of mixing the sacred and the profane, thus creating an eclectic collection of sacred doctrines and profane and transient "thoughts," which becomes a most deadly instrument for the destruction of all that survives of true intellectualism and spiritualism in the East. The errors committed by Easterners in this domain are perhaps even graver than those of Western scholars, because there is greater possibility of spiritual damage in the East where traditions have been better preserved. Some of the most destructive of those forces that have played havoc in Eastern societies during the past century are the result of a shallow and facile "synthesis" of Eastern and Western thought and superficial attempts at their unification. A more serious comparative study therefore also would enable Eastern scholars to know better the very complex and complicated thought patterns of the modern world and the real nature of the modern world itself. They may be able to defend more carefully, and from a stronger position, the authenticity of their own traditions while seeking to express the timeless truths of these traditions in a contemporary manner without betraying their essence. In this supreme task that today stands before every genuine Muslim, and in general the Oriental intellectual, the fruits of serious comparative studies can be of much value.

Finally, a comparative study in depth of Eastern doctrines and Western schools can help achieve an understanding between East and West based on immutable truths, whose attainment is made possible by the spiritual experience that is accessible to qualified men, Eastern or Western. It is only intellectual intuition and the spiritual experience, of which a metaphysical doctrine is in a sense the fruit, that can make possible the attainment of that Unity which in its transcendence comprehends both the East and the West. Today many men who have been exposed to the modern world, in a sense, carry both the Orient and the Occident as two poles and tendencies within themselves. A comparative study in depth can make possible, through the removal of those current errors

which together comprise the modern world, the attainment of that “light that is neither of the East nor of the West,”¹⁵ wherein alone the East and the West can be united. To seek this noble end, which would mean the rediscovery of the immutable nature of man generally forgotten in the modern world and which is the only way possible to correct the optical illusions to which the modern world is victim, must be the purpose of all serious comparative studies of Eastern and Western doctrines and philosophies. It is a goal whose achievement the truly contemplative and intellectual elite are urgently summoned to by the very situation of man in the contemporary world.

¹⁵ This is in reference to the light verse (*āyat al-nūr*) in the Qur’ān XXIV.35.