

The Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Metaphysics: A Perennialist Perspective

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*The possession of all the sciences, if unaccompanied by the knowledge of
the best, will more often than not injure the possessor. (Plato)¹*

European philosophers have been guilty of the insularity which afflicts so many of their counterparts in other disciplines. Many books purporting to give us a history of philosophical thought or some kind of conspectus of philosophical trends within a given period still assume that ‘philosophy’ and ‘Western philosophy’ are synonymous. Eastern philosophical thought is all too often ignored, marginalized or treated as kind of fumbling proto-philosophy, hopelessly mired in religious superstition. As Wilhelm Halbfass has demonstrated, the dominant trend in Western histories of philosophy has been to disqualify the Orientals altogether. Early exceptions, such as can be found in the works of the German Sanskritist Paul Deussen and the Russian orientalist Theodore Stcherbatsky, only confirm the rule.² Here is a characteristic 19th century formulation:

Ancient philosophy is essentially Greek philosophy... That which the mind of other peoples and especially the Orient has aspired to in a related direction has remained more or less at the stage of primeval phantasies of the peoples. Everywhere, they lack the freedom of thought and the concomitant nobility of thought which tolerates the thralldom of myth for only a certain length of time and only in the infant stage of experience and thought.³

These days philosophers might be more cautious in expressing such flagrantly Eurocentric judgements, but the attitudes and values informing this cultural myopia

remain alive and well amongst Western intellectuals. Rationalistic, positivist, materialist and pragmatic philosophers have generally, insofar as Eastern thought comes within their purview at all, adopted an altogether predictable and somewhat condescending stance, reserving their meagre approbations for those aspects of Eastern philosophy which are seen to be ‘rational’, ‘humanistic’, ‘empirical’ and the like. Other influential modern philosophical movements, such as logical positivism and other schools in the analytic movement, have retreated into a rarefied and highly technical domain which has little connection with philosophy’s traditional purpose, the study and pursuit of wisdom; indeed, they may be considered as proponents of what a German scholar has called ‘misosophy’—a hatred of wisdom.⁴ They have also taken for granted that mysticism is necessarily antithetical to rationality and thus thrown the Eastern traditions out of the court of philosophy.⁵ One might also note in passing that African influences on the Western tradition are generally subsumed under the rubric of ‘Greek philosophy’ (as if Hypatia, Augustine, Origen, Cyril and Tertullian were surrogate Greeks—a point made by the African philosopher Innocent Onyewuenyi.⁶)

But the picture is not completely bleak. Over the past two centuries there *have* been some creative philosophical engagements with the thought of the East, and some self-critical recognition of the intellectual parochialism of much Western thought. Although European orientalism has remained, to a large extent, locked in the historico-philological scholarship of the 19th century, since World War II it is no longer unusual to find Anglophone philosophers teaching comparative philosophy—one may mention such names as Charles Moore (the moving force behind the East-West Philosophers’ Conferences in Hawaii), Dale Riepe, Arthur Danto, Charles Hartshorne, Robert Nozick, Ninian Smart, and Eliot Deutsch as well as Asian scholars

who have worked in Western universities—Chang Chung-yuan, Garma Chang, J.N. Mohanty, J.L. Mehta, Arvind Sharma, Purisottima Bilimoria, to name a few.⁷

Over the past fifty years the academic field of comparative philosophy has emerged as one of the intellectual sites where the East-West encounter has produced some interesting results. Certainly the prospects have improved considerably since Thomas Merton, in 1964, wrote the following:

There have of course been spurious attempts to bring East and West together. One need not review all the infatuated theosophies of the nineteenth century. Nor need one bother to criticize the laughable syncretisms which have occupied the talents of publicists (more often Eastern than Western) in which Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Tolstoy, Marx, Nietzsche, and anyone else you like join in the cosmic dance which turns out to be not Shiva's but just anybody's. However, the comparison of Eastern and Western philosophy is, in our time, reaching a certain level of seriousness and this is one small and hopeful sign. The materials for a synthesis of science and wisdom are not lacking.⁸

Tokens of this development include the East-West Philosophers' Conferences in Hawaii and the appearance of journals such as *Philosophy East and West*, and more recently, *Asian Philosophy*. Since the 70s there has also been a steady output of scholarly monographs in this field. A representative sample: Chris Gudmundsen's *Wittgenstein and Buddhism* (1977), Masao Abe's *Zen and Western Thought* (1985), Harold Coward's *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* (1990), and compilations such as *Heidegger and Asian Thought* and *Nietzsche and Asian Thought*, both edited by Graham Parkes, and *Buddhism and Western Philosophy* (1981), edited by Nathan Katz. In such books and in the dozens of disciplinary journals carrying the work of comparative philosophers and religionists one nowadays comes across any number of articles drawing connections and comparisons between the philosophical ideas, schools and movements of East and West: here Nagarjuna is compared to Kant, there

Sankara to Eckhart, and over there is an inquiry into the relation between Hume's thought and Buddhism, or perhaps a comparison of the Buddha's teaching of *dukkha* and Kierkegaard's *angst*.⁹ Such comparative philosophy also encompasses the impact on Eastern thought of Western philosophers. Scholars like Graham Parkes, for example, have traced the post-war Japanese and Chinese enthusiasm for both Nietzsche and Heidegger.¹⁰ Less common is the analysis and evaluation of Western philosophical constructs in traditional Eastern terms. One of the salutary results of this kind of inquiry is to administer some shock-therapy to the over-valuation of a misperceived 'originality' of this or that Western thinker: any scholar thoroughly familiar with Nagarjuna will be less likely to be seduced by claims along the lines of 'Kant was the first to show...'.

It is not our present purpose to survey these rapidly proliferating and occasionally fertile inquiries but rather to consider the assumptions which often underlie them. Some thirty years ago Seyyed Hossein Nasr, at that time Dean and Professor of Philosophy at Tehran University, laid down the 'conditions for a meaningful comparative philosophy'. It is worth revisiting Nasr's important essay from which, one would have hoped, many more comparativists might have derived considerable profit. We shall reinforce Nasr's argument by reference to some of his predecessors in the exposition of the perennial philosophy.

Early in his analysis Nasr states the nature of the problem which bedevils many of the enterprises of those scholars, of both East and West, who attempt some manner of comparative philosophy (referred to henceforth simply as comparativists):

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 these 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.¹¹

One of the principal sources of this confusion is a failure to understand the crucial distinctions between metaphysics as a *scientia sacra* on one hand, wedded to direct spiritual experience and complementing revealed religious doctrines, and what is usually meant in the modern West by ‘philosophy’, an autonomous and essentially *rational* and *analytical* inquiry into a range of issues and problematics. As Nasr observes,

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.¹²

Thus there is little common measure between the sapiential doctrines of the East which form part of a total spiritual economy and which draw on the wellsprings of revelation, tradition and direct experience, and those mental constructions of Western thinkers which are usually circumscribed by the various alliances of rationalism, materialism, empiricism and humanism which so dominate the ‘philosophical’ thinking of the modern West. As the acidic Agehananda Bharati noted in reference to various Western excursions into comparative philosophy,

No effort, however valiant and well-meant, should disabuse us of the fact that nobody from Kant to Heidegger, Rorty and Derrida has been interested in *moksa* [liberation] while nobody from Nagarjuna to Bhartrhari and Samkara has not.¹³

The only philosophers of the Western tradition who can meaningfully be compared with their Eastern counterparts are those theologians and metaphysicians who were indeed elaborating ‘the doctrinal aspect of a total spiritual way’—Plato, Plotinus, Eckhart, Aquinas, Bonaventura and the like. On the other hand,

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 mental construct, completely cut off from it. A lack of awareness of this basic distinction has made a complete 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.¹⁴

A meaningful comparative philosophy can only proceed on the basis of a proper understanding of the different levels on which metaphysics, theology and philosophy (in the modern sense) are situated.¹⁵ To approach a Sankara, a Nagarjuna, a Chuang-tzu, through the categories of a profane and one-dimensional ‘philosophy’, stripped of all reference to the transcendent and what this implies for the human destiny, is to fall prey to that most pernicious of modern prejudices—the notion that the greater can be reduced to and ‘explained’ by the terms of the lesser:

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 these 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?... One must always remember the dictum of Aristotle that knowledge depends upon the mode of the knower.¹⁶

It is not only possible but highly desirable that scholars, equipped with the proper tools and cognizant of the profound differences between any traditional civilisation and the modern West, should illuminate the similarities and contrasts between the doctrines of the different religious traditions. In the case of comparative studies between traditional doctrines and the ideas of modern thinkers, such a task will necessarily foreground the chasm which separates them. It will also expose the

hazards of glib formulations of similarities which exist only at relatively superficial levels. Furthermore,

Oriental doctrines can fulfill the most fundamental and urgent task of reminding the West of truths that have existed within its own tradition but which have been completely forgotten... Today it is nearly impossible for Western man to rediscover the whole of his own tradition without the aid of Oriental metaphysics. This is because the sapiential doctrines and the appropriate spiritual techniques... are hardly accessible in the West, and ‘philosophy’ has become totally divorced from the nature of the spiritual experience.¹⁷

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Thus far we have been considering the case against a profane comparative philosophy as stated in a short but forceful essay by Nasr. Nasr himself belongs to a school of thought which has been called ‘traditionalism’ or ‘perennialism’, and which is closely associated with its three most pre-eminent exponents: René Guénon (1886-1981), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998).¹⁸ Their work turns on an affirmation of a timeless wisdom which lies at the heart of all integral religious traditions and seeks to elucidate the metaphysical and cosmological principles which inform this perennial wisdom—hence the term ‘perennialism’. However, it is crucial to distinguish this school from other forms of so-called perennialism found in Theosophy, some forms of neo-Hinduism and in the works of people such as Aldous Huxley who did much to popularize the term the ‘the perennial philosophy’.¹⁹ What sets the traditionalists apart is their commitment to the preservation of the particular forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d’être* and ensure its spiritual efficacy. Traditionalists adamantly reject any notion of a “universal” religion or the suggestion that some sort of “essence” can be distilled from the different religions in such a way as to provide a new spiritual path.

To Nasr's considerations we can now add an exposition of the traditionalist understanding of the relationship of metaphysics and philosophy, highly pertinent to the subject at hand. 'Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct.'²⁰ This Bradleian formulation, perhaps only half-serious, signposts a modern conception of metaphysics shared by a good many people, philosophers and otherwise. There is, of course, no single modern philosophical posture on the nature and significance of metaphysics. Some see it as a kind of residual blight on the tree of philosophy, a feeding-ground for obscurantists and lovers of mumbo-jumbo. Others grant it a more dignified status.²¹ It is one of those words, like 'dogma' or 'mystical', which has been peyorated by careless and ignorant usage. The word is so fraught with hazards, so hedged about with philosophical disputation, and so sullied by popular usage that we shall have to take some care if the proper sense in which the traditionalists use the word is to become clear. Nasr: 'Metaphysics, which in fact is one and should be named metaphysic... is the science of the Real, of the origin and end of things, of the Absolute and in its light, the relative'.²² Similarly 'metaphysical': 'concerning universal realities considered objectively'.²³ It will be readily apparent that we are here dealing with a conception of metaphysics which would not be shared by most modern Western philosophers.

As René Guénon observed more than once, metaphysics cannot properly and strictly be defined, for to define is to limit, while the domain of metaphysics is the Real and thus limitless. Consequently, metaphysics 'is truly and absolutely unlimited and cannot be confined to any formula or any system'.²⁴ Its subject, in the words of John Tauler, is 'that pure knowledge that knows no form or creaturely way'.²⁵ As Nasr observes elsewhere,

This supreme science of the Real... is the only science that can distinguish between the Absolute and the relative, appearance and reality... Moreover, this science exists, as the esoteric dimension within every orthodox and integral tradition and is united with a spiritual method derived totally from the tradition in question.²⁶

The ultimate reality of metaphysics is the Supreme Identity in which all oppositions and dualities are resolved, those of subject and object, knower and known, being and non-being; thus a Scriptural formulation such as ‘The things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God’.²⁷ As Ananda Coomaraswamy remarks, in traditional civilisations such as that of India, metaphysics provided the vision (or *theoria*) and religion the way to its effective verification and actualization in direct experience.²⁸ The estrangement of metaphysics, philosophy and religion only appears in modern times.

Because the metaphysical realm lies ‘beyond’ the phenomenal plane the validity of a metaphysical principle can be neither proved nor disproved by any kind of empirical demonstration, by reference to material realities.²⁹ The aim of metaphysics is not to prove anything whatsoever but to make doctrines intelligible and to demonstrate their consistency. Metaphysics is concerned with a direct apprehension of reality or, to put it differently, with a recognition of the Absolute and our relationship to it. It thus takes on an imperative character for those capable of metaphysical discernment.

The requirement for us to recognize the Absolute is itself an absolute one; it concerns man as such and not man under such and such conditions. It is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, and especially of that intelligence which denoted ‘the state of man hard to obtain’, that we accept Truth because it is true and for no other reason.³⁰

Metaphysics assumes man’s capacity for absolute and certain knowledge:

The capacity for objectivity and for absoluteness is an anticipated and existential refutation of all the ideologies of doubt: if man is able to doubt this is because certitude

exists; likewise the very notion of illusion proves that man has access to reality... If doubt conformed to the real, human intelligence would be deprived of its sufficient reason and man would be less than an animal, since the intelligence of animals does not experience doubt concerning the reality to which it is proportioned.³¹

Metaphysics, therefore, is immutable and inexorable, and the ‘infallible standard by which not only religions, but still more “philosophies” and “sciences” must be “corrected”... and interpreted’.³² Metaphysics can be ignored or forgotten but not refuted ‘precisely because it is immutable and not related to change *qua* change’.³³ Metaphysical principles are true and valid once and for all and not for this particular age or mentality, and could not, in any sense, ‘evolve’. They can be validated directly in the plenary and unitive experience of the mystic. Thus Martin Lings can write of Sufism—and one could say the same of any intrinsically orthodox esotericism—that it

... has the right to be inexorable because it is based on certainties and not on opinions. It has the obligation to be inexorable because mysticism is the sole repository of Truth, in the fullest sense, being above all concerned with the Absolute, the Infinite and the Eternal; and ‘If the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?’ Without mysticism, Reality would have no voice in the world. There would be no record of the true hierarchy, and no witness that it is continually being violated.³⁴

One might easily substitute the word ‘metaphysics’ for ‘mysticism’ in this passage, the former being the formal and objective aspect of the ‘subjective’ experience. However, this is not to lose sight of the fact that any and every metaphysical doctrine will take it as axiomatic that every formulation is ‘but error in the face of the Divine Reality itself; a provisional, indispensable, salutary “error” which, however, contains and communicates the virtuality of the Truth’.³⁵

In a discussion of Sankara's *Advaita* Vedanta Coomaraswamy exposed some of the cardinal differences between metaphysics and modern philosophy:

The Vedanta is not a 'philosophy' in the current sense of the word, but only as the word is used in the phrase *Philosophia Perennis*... Modern philosophies are closed systems, employing the method of dialectics, and taking for granted that opposites are mutually exclusive. In modern philosophy things are either so or not so; in eternal philosophy this depends upon our point of view. Metaphysics is not a system, but a consistent doctrine; it is not merely concerned with conditioned and quantitative experience but with universal possibility.³⁶

Modern European philosophy is dialectical, which is to say analytical and rational in its modes. From a traditionalist point of view it might be said that modern philosophy is anchored in a misunderstanding of the nature and role of reason; indeed, the idolatry of reason could otherwise hardly have arisen. Schuon spotlights some of the strengths and deficiencies of the rational mode in these terms:

Reason is formal by its nature and formalistic in its operations; it proceeds by 'coagulations', by alternatives and by exclusions—or, it can be said, by partial truths. It is not, like pure intellect, formless and fluid 'light'; true, it derives its implacability, or its validity in general, from the intellect, but it touches on essences only through drawing conclusions, not by direct vision; it is indispensable for verbal formulations but it does not involve immediate knowledge.³⁷

Titus Burckhardt likens reason to 'a convex lens which steers the intelligence in a particular direction and onto a limited field'.³⁸ Like any other instrument it can be abused. Much European philosophy, adrift from its religious moorings, has surrendered to a kind of totalitarian rationalism and in so doing has violated a principle which was respected wherever a metaphysical tradition and a religious framework for the pursuit of wisdom remained intact—the principle of adequation, articulated thus by Aquinas: 'It is a sin against intelligence to want to proceed in an

identical manner in typically different domains—physical, mathematical, metaphysical—of speculative knowledge.’³⁹ This, it would seem, is precisely what modern philosophers are bent on. No less apposite in this context is Plotinus’ well-known maxim ‘knowing demands the organ fitted to the object’.⁴⁰ The grotesqueries of modern philosophy spring, in large measure, from an indifference to this principle. The situation is exacerbated further by the fact that many philosophers have been duped by the claims of a totalitarian scientism and thus suffer from a drastically impoverished view of reality and of the avenues by which it might be apprehended.

The place of reason, of logic and dialectic, in metaphysics is altogether more subordinate as the following sample of quotes make clear. It is worth mobilizing several quotations as this issue is so often misunderstood, with bizarre results. From Schuon:

In the intellectual order logical proof is only a quite provisional crystallization of intuition, the modes of which... are incalculable. Metaphysical truths are by no means accepted because they are merely logically clear, but because they are ontologically clear and their logical clarity is only a trace of this imprinted on the mind.⁴¹

Or again:

Metaphysics is not held to be true—by those who understand it—because it is expressed in a logical manner, but it can be expressed in a logical manner because it is true, without—obviously—its truth ever being compromised by the possible shortcomings of human reason.⁴²

Similarly Guénon:

... for metaphysics, the use of rational argument never represents more than a mode of external expression and in no way affects metaphysical knowledge itself, for the latter must always be kept essentially distinct from its formulation...⁴³

Metaphysical discernment proceeds more through contemplative intelligence than through ratiocination. Metaphysical formulations depend more on symbol and on analogy than on logical demonstration, though it is a grave error to suppose that metaphysics has any right to irrationality.⁴⁴ What many modern philosophers apparently fail to understand is that thought can become increasingly subtle and complex without approaching any nearer to the truth. An idea can be subdivided into a thousand ramifications, fenced about with every conceivable qualification and supported with the most intricate and rigorous logic but, for all that, remain purely external and quantitative for ‘no virtuosity of the potter will transform clay into gold’.⁴⁵ Furthermore,

... that a reasoning might simply be the logical and provisional description of an intellectual evidence, and that its function might be the actualization of this evidence, in itself supralogical, apparently never crosses the minds of pure logicians.⁴⁶

Analytical rationality, no matter how useful a tool, will never, in itself, generate metaphysical understanding. Metaphysicians of all ages have said nothing other. Sankara, for instance: ‘... the pure truth of *Atman*... can be reached by meditation, contemplation and other spiritual disciplines such as a knower of *Brahman* may prescribe—but never by subtle argument.’⁴⁷ The Promethean arrogance of much modernist thought, often bred by scientific ideologies, is revealed in the refusal to acknowledge the boundaries beyond which reason has no competence or utility. This has, of course, prompted some quite ludicrous claims about religion. As Schuon remarks,

The equating of the supernatural with the irrational is characteristic... it amounts to claiming that the unknown or the incomprehensible is the same as the absurd. The rationalism of a frog living at the bottom of a well is to deny the existence of mountains: this is logic of a kind but it has nothing to do with reality.⁴⁸

The intelligibility of a metaphysical doctrine may depend upon a measure of faith in the traditional Christian sense of ‘assent to a credible proposition’. As Coomaraswamy observes

One must believe in order to understand and understand in order to believe. These are not successive, however, but simultaneous acts of the mind. In other words, there can be no knowledge of anything to which the will refuses its consent...⁴⁹

This mode of apprehension is something quite other than the philosophical thought that

...believes it can attain to an absolute contact with Reality by means of analyses, syntheses, arrangements, filtrations and polishings—thought that is mundane by the very fact of this ignorance and because it is a vicious circle which not merely provides no escape from illusion, but even reinforces it through the lure of a progressive knowledge which in fact is inexistent.⁵⁰

It is in this context that we can speak of modern philosophy as ‘the codification of an acquired infirmity’.⁵¹ Unlike modern philosophy, metaphysics has nothing to do with personal opinion, originality or creativity—quite the contrary. It is directed towards those realities which lie outside mental perimeters and which are unchanging. The most a metaphysician will ever want to do is to reformulate some timeless truth so that it becomes more intelligible in the prevailing climate.⁵² A profane system of thought, on the other hand, is never more than a portrait of the person who creates it, an ‘involuntary memoir’ as Nietzsche put it.⁵³

The metaphysician does not seek to invent or discover or prove a new system of thought but rather to crystallize direct apprehensions of Reality insofar as this is possible within the limited resources of human language, making use not only of logic but of symbol and analogy. Furthermore, the science of metaphysics must always proceed in the context of a revealed religion, protected by the tradition in question

which also supplies the necessary supports for the full realisation or actualization of metaphysical doctrines. The metaphysician seeks not only to formulate immutable principles and doctrines but to live by them, to conform his or her being to the truths they convey. In other words, there is nothing of the ‘art for art’s sake’ type of thinking about the pursuit of metaphysics: it engages the whole person or it is as nothing.⁵⁴ As Schuon states,

The moral exigency of metaphysical discernment means that virtue is part of wisdom; a wisdom without virtue is in fact imposture and hypocrisy... plenary knowledge of Divine Reality presupposes or demands moral conformity to this Reality, as the eye necessarily conforms to light; since the object to be known is the sovereign Good, the knowing subject must correspond to it analogically...⁵⁵

A point often overlooked: metaphysics does not of necessity find its expression only in verbal forms. Metaphysics can be expressed visually and ritually as well as verbally. The Chinese and Red Indian traditions furnish pre-eminent examples of these possibilities. Moreover,

... the criterion of metaphysical truth or of its depth lies not in the complexity or difficulty of its expression, having regard to a particular capacity of understanding or style of thinking. Wisdom does not lie in any complication of words but in the profundity of the intention; assuredly the expression may according to the circumstances be subtle and difficult, or equally it may not be so.⁵⁶

One is irresistibly reminded of the Buddha’s Flower Sermon.

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The relationship between metaphysics and theology, and theology and philosophy, demands a similar exposition. However, given that we are here primarily concerned with the practice of comparative philosophy we shall restrict ourselves to two

passages from Schuon which go to the heart of the matter. From Schuon's *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1953):

... intellectual or metaphysical knowledge transcends the specifically theological point of view, which is itself incomparably superior to the philosophical point of view, since, like metaphysical knowledge, it emanates from God and not from man; but whereas metaphysics proceeds wholly from intellectual intuition, religion proceeds from Revelation... in the case of intellectual intuition, knowledge is not possessed by the individual insofar as he is an individual, but insofar as in his innermost essence he is not distinct from the Divine Principle... the theological point of view, because it is based in the minds of believers on a Revelation and not on a knowledge that is accessible to each one of them... will of necessity confuse the symbol or form with the naked and supraformal Truth while metaphysics... will be able to make use of the same symbol or form as a means of expression while at the same time being aware of its relativity... religion translates metaphysical or universal truths into dogmatic language... What essentially distinguishes the metaphysical from the philosophical proposition is that the former is symbolical and descriptive... whereas philosophy... is never anything more than what it expresses. When philosophy uses reason to resolve a doubt, this proves precisely that its starting point is a doubt it is striving to overcome, whereas... the starting point of a metaphysical formulation is always something intellectually evident or certain, which is communicated to those able to receive it, by symbolical or dialectical means designed to awaken in them the latent knowledge that they bear unconsciously, and it may even be said, eternally within them.⁵⁷

In this context it is worth recalling Bertrand Russell's assessment of St Thomas Aquinas in *A History of Western Philosophy* (1946):

There is little of the true philosophic spirit in Aquinas... The finding of arguments for a conclusion given in advance is not philosophy but special pleading. I cannot, therefore, feel that he deserves to be put on a level with the best philosophers either of Greece or of modern times.⁵⁸

George Steiner was quite right to refer to Russell's history as 'a vulgar but representative book'!⁵⁹

The distinctions elaborated above by Schuon should be qualified by an observation he made in a later work:

In our first book [cited above]... we adopted the point of view of Ghazali regarding 'philosophy': that is to say, bearing in mind the great impoverishment of modern philosophy, we simplified the problem, as others have done before us, by making 'philosophy' synonymous with 'rationalism'.⁶⁰

We have followed more or less the same procedure here and will only modify it with two brief points. Firstly, the term 'philosophy' in itself 'has nothing restrictive about it'; the restrictions which we have imposed on it in this discussion have been expedient rather than essential. Schuon has exposed some of the issues raised by both the ancient and modern use of the term in an essay entitled 'Tracing the Notion of Philosophy'.⁶¹ Secondly, it must also be admitted that our discussion of the relationships of philosophy, theology and metaphysics has been governed by some necessary simplifications. From certain points of view the distinctions we have established are not as clear-cut nor as rigid as our discussion has suggested. As Schuon himself writes,

In a certain respect, the difference between philosophy, theology and gnosis is total; in another respect, it is relative. It is total when one understands by 'philosophy' only rationalism; by 'theology', only the explanation of religious teachings; and by 'gnosis', only intuitive and intellective, and thus supra-rational, knowledge; but the difference is only relative when one understands by 'philosophy' the fact of thinking, by 'theology' the fact of speaking dogmatically of God and religious things, and by 'gnosis' the fact of presenting pure metaphysics, for then the genres interpenetrate.⁶²

It is only in the context of the considerations elaborated above, admittedly at some length, that we can return to the question of East-West comparative philosophy.

In the light of the preceding discussion it will come as no surprise that the scholars and thinkers whose comparative studies have produced the most impressive results are precisely those who have a firm purchase on traditional principles. Of the traditionalists themselves one must particularly mention the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. Earlier in this work we have highlighted the role of René Guénon in explicating the metaphysical doctrines of the East in such works as *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* (1925). In the present context, however, he recedes somewhat into the background for several reasons. Guénon proceeded on the basis of first principles with comparatively little concern for their historical manifestations and applications. His scholarship was sometimes precarious and he was entirely disdainful of modern thought in all its guises. To undertake comparative philosophy of the kind with which are here concerned requires some sensitivity to the historical milieux in which traditional doctrines were given expression. Schuon and Coomaraswamy were much better equipped to undertake this kind of task. Nasr himself has produced some of the most authoritative works in the field of comparative philosophy but these have been concerned primarily with the Islamic and Christian worlds.

Ananda Coomaraswamy was one of the few scholars of the century who was equally at home in the worlds of Eastern and Western philosophy. Recall his observation that ‘my indoctrination with the *Philosophia Perennis* is primarily Oriental, secondarily Mediaeval, and thirdly classic’.⁶³ His later work is saturated with references to Plato and Plotinus, Augustine and Aquinas, Eckhart and the Rhinish mystics, to Sankara and Lao-tse and Nagarjuna. Amongst his most profound

studies in the field of comparative philosophy we find ‘The Vedanta and Western Tradition’ (1939), ‘Recollection, Indian and Platonic’ (1944), ‘Akimcanna: Self-Naughting’ (1940), and ‘Atmayajna: Self-Sacrifice’ (1942)—but one can turn to almost any of his later writings to find profound comparative exegeses. He was, of course, keenly interested in the philosophical underpinnings of traditional art, and produced two brilliant comparative works in *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934) and *The Christian and Oriental, or True, Philosophy of Art* (1939). Readers familiar with these works will not quarrel with the claim that they offer us a comparative philosophy of the most fruitful kind.

Much of Schuon’s vast corpus focuses primarily on the Sufi tradition and on classical and Christian thinkers. Nonetheless, one is likely, at any turn, to come across illuminating references to Eastern metaphysicians and theologians, Sankara and Ramanuja being two to whom Schuon often refers. However, four of his works entail more detailed comparisons of Eastern and Western doctrines: *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (1954), *Language of the Self* (1959), *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (1967) and *Logic and Transcendence* (1975). The last-mentioned work is also where Schuon confronts the profane philosophies of the modern period most directly.

Many traditionalist works also fall under the umbrella of comparative mysticism, the distinction between ‘philosophy’ and ‘mysticism’ being somewhat fluid in the traditional worlds of the Orient. In the academic domain we might say that comparative mysticism oscillates between philosophy and comparative religion. Impressive work has been done in this arena by several scholars and thinkers some of whom we have already encountered. Rudolf Otto’s *Mysticism East and West* (1926), D.T. Suzuki’s *Mysticism Christian and Buddhist* (1957),⁶⁴ Toshihiko Izutsu’s *A Comparative Study of the Key Philosophical Concepts in Sufism and Taoism* (1967)

and Thomas Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) are amongst the more commanding works.

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- ¹ Plato quoted in W. Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p. 731.
 - ² On Stcherbatsky see P.V. Bapat, *2500 Years of Buddhism*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1956, pp. 343-344
 - ³ E. Dühring quoted in W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, Delhi: Motilala Barnarsidass, 1990, p. 153.
 - ⁴ See S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, p. 43. See also I. Watson, 'The Anti-Wisdom of Modern Philosophy', *Studies in Comparative Religion* 6:4, Autumn 1972, pp. 221-224.
 - ⁵ See R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, Indian and the 'mystic East'*, London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 28-34.
 - ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29.
 - ⁷ See W. Halbfass, *op.cit.*, 162-163.
 - ⁸ T. Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, New York: New Directions, 1963, p. 3.
 - ⁹ Some of the linkages and comparisons have become commonplace: Confucius—Aristotle; Mencius—Aquinas; Sankara—Eckhart, Spinoza, Kant, Bradley; Nagarjuna—Hume, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida; Dogen—Heidegger.
 - ¹⁰ See G. Parkes, 'Nietzsche and East Asian Thought: Influences, Impacts and Resonances' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. B. Magnus & K.M. Higgins, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
 - ¹¹ S.H. Nasr, 'Conditions for a Meaningful Comparative Philosophy', *Philosophy East and West*, 22:1, 1972, p. 53.
 - ¹² S.H. Nasr, 'Conditions for a Meaningful Comparative Philosophy', p. 55 (italics mine).
 - ¹³ A. Bharati, review of Harold Coward, *Derrida and Indian Philosophy* in *Philosophy East and West*, 42:2, April 1992, p. 340.
 - ¹⁴ S.H. Nasr, 'Conditions for a Meaningful Comparative Philosophy', p. 55.
 - ¹⁵ See K. Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy*, Ch 8.
 - ¹⁶ S.H. Nasr, 'Conditions for a Meaningful Comparative Philosophy', 57.
 - ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.
 - ¹⁸ For an overview see K. Oldmeadow, *op.cit.* For a recent and often ill-informed "critique" of traditionalism see M. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: traditionalism and the secret intellectual history of the twentieth century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
 - ¹⁹ See Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (first published 1944), New York: Harper & Row, 1970.
 - ²⁰ From F.H. Bradley *Appearance and Reality* quoted by S. Radhakrishnan: "Reply to My Critics" in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. P.A. Schilpp, New York: Tudor, 1952, p. 791.
 - ²¹ For some discussion of this term by a modern philosopher see J. Hospers *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956, pp. 211ff.
 - ²² S.H. Nasr *Man and Nature*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, p. 81.
 - ²³ F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975, p. 204 n9.
 - ²⁴ R. Guénon, 'Oriental Metaphysics' in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, pp. 43-44.
 - ²⁵ Tauler quoted in C.F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977, p. 4.

- 26 S.H. Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968, pp. 81-82. See also Coomaraswamy's undated letter to 'M', in *Selected Letters of Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. R.P. Coomaraswamy & A. Moore Jnr, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Center, 1988, p. 10: '...traditional Metaphysics is as much a single and invariable science as mathematics.'
- 27 *I Corinthians* II.11. The Absolute may be called God, the Godhead, *nirguna Brahman*, the *Tao*, and so on, according to the vocabulary at hand. See F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1996, p. 96 n1.
- 28 A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'A Lecture on Comparative Religion' quoted in R. Lipsey, *Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 275. Also see A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Vedanta and Western Tradition' in *Selected Papers 2: Metaphysics*, ed. R. Lipsey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 6.
- 29 See R. Guénon, op. cit., p. 53.
- 30 F. Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968, p. 33.
- 31 F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 13. See also F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, London: Perennial Books, 1981, pp. 15ff.
- 32 Letter to J.H. Muirhead, August 1935, in A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, p. 37.
- 33 S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1972, p. 86. See also F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, London: Perennial Books, 1961, p. 42.
- 34 M. Lings, *What is Sufism?*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1975, p. 93.
- 35 F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1967, pp. 162-163. Cf. A.K. Coomaraswamy: '...and every belief is a heresy if it be regarded as the truth, and not simply as a signpost of the truth'; from 'Sri Ramakrishna and Religious Tolerance' in *Selected Papers 2*, p. 38. See also F. Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1981, p. 2.
- 36 A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Vedanta and Western Tradition', *Selected Papers 2*, p. 6.
- 37 F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976, p. 24. See also F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, pp. 18ff.
- 38 T. Burckhardt, *Alchemy*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1972, p. 36 n1.
- 39 Quoted in S. H. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, p. 35.
- 40 Quoted in E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1977, p. 49.
- 41 F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, p. 10.
- 42 F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 28.
- 43 R. Guénon quoted in F. Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom*, p. 29 n1.
- 44 See F. Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 28.
- 45 F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 149.
- 46 F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 37.
- 47 *Shankara's Crest Jewel of Discrimination*, ed. Swami Prabhānanda & C. Isherwood, New York: Mentor, 1970, p. 73.
- 48 F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 37.
- 49 A.K. Coomaraswamy: 'Vedanta and Western Tradition', *Selected Papers 2*, p. 8. See also S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 6.
- 50 F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 34.
- 51 F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1995, p. 4.
- 52 Here we are at the opposite end of the spectrum not only from the philosophical relativists but from those who hold a 'personalist' or 'existentialist' view of truth.
- 53 Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, taken from Extract 13 in *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. R.J. Hollindale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977. See also F. Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p. 34 and *The Transfiguration of Man*, p. 4. (For a striking passage on both the grandeur and the 'dementia' of Nietzsche's work see F. Schuon, *To Have a Center*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1990, p.15.)
- 54 See A.K. Coomaraswamy: 'Vedanta and Western Tradition', *Selected Papers 2*, p. 9.
- 55 F. Schuon, *Roots of the Human Condition*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 1991, p. 86.
- 56 F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 111.
- 57 F. Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975 (rev.ed.) pp. xxviii-xxx.
- 58 B. Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (first published 1949), London: Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp. 453-54.
- 59 G. Steiner, *Heidegger*, Glasgow: Collins, 1978, p. 11.
- 60 F. Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, p. 123, n10.
- 61 F. Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, pp. 115-128. See also F. Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man*, p. 3.

⁶² F. Schuon, *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, p. 125.

⁶³ Letter to Artemus Packard, May 1941, A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, p. 299.

⁶⁴ Suzuki was, to some degree, guilty of what Richard King calls the 'Buddhification' of Eckhart. See R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, p. 157.