

COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Comparative philosophy is the systematic study of culturally-diverse philosophies of the world, with the aim of engaging them in global philosophical discourse. This cross-cultural enterprise involves the world's major philosophical traditions, especially the Indian, the Chinese and the Western. The term comparative philosophy in this specific sense of cross-cultural study of the world's major philosophical traditions was first used by the Indian educationalist Brajendra Nath Seal, arguably in his *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915), and it gained currency with the French positivist Paul Masson-Oursel's *Comparative Philosophy* (1923). Indian, Chinese and Western philosophies are given special consideration in comparative philosophy because of their long and continuous history, richness and variety of ideas, and vast literature.

The first acclaimed advocates of comparative philosophy were S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and P.T. Raju (1904-1992). Despite their apologetic interest in defending Vedantic idealism, their writings, like Radhakrishnan's *An Idealist View of Life* (1932) and *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (1939) and Raju's *Thought and Reality: Hegelianism and Advaita* (1937) and *Introduction to Comparative Philosophy* (1962), gave great

impetus to East-West studies in philosophy. However, it was Charles A. Moore (1901-1967) who made comparative philosophy a collective venture. He organized four East-West Philosophers' Conferences at the University of Hawaii (1939-64) and edited their proceedings. In 1951 he founded *Philosophy East and West*, a quarterly of comparative philosophy.

After its heyday of the 1960s, comparative philosophy hardly made any great strides. In 1984, however, the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy organized an international conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, to take stock of the current state of comparative philosophy and to fashion some new research agendas for the future. A collection of essays resulted from this conference is entitled, *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy* (1988). Though this conference did not come up with any concrete suggestions for future comparative philosophizing, it did emphasize the need for more critical and creative interaction between different philosophical traditions. Maybe, the recently launched journal (2010), *Comparative Philosophy* (published by Center for Comparative Philosophy, San Jose State University, California), is a welcome step in the direction of this constructive engagement of various philosophical traditions in global philosophical enterprise.

NEED FOR NEW APPROACH

Even though comparative philosophy has been in existence since 1920s and its proponents made very earnest efforts, it (comparative philosophy) has not succeeded so far to establish itself as a mainstream philosophical discipline or to deliver on its high promises of East-West understanding and

engagement in philosophy. The reason for it is partly philosophical and partly procedural.

Eastern philosophies have not become part of mainstream philosophy in the West, although there are many scholars of Eastern philosophies in the West and there is no scarcity of literature on Eastern philosophies in European languages. When it comes to India, philosophical landscape is different. Many, if not most, contemporary Indian philosophers have successfully engaged Western philosophy in their philosophizing and Western philosophy is part of mainstream philosophy in India. This is not because Indians are more open-minded and philosophically more ingenious than others. It is simply because of the introduction of Western philosophy in universities and colleges during the British period. This becomes more evident when we realize that the presence of Chinese philosophy in India is meager, given that China is India's next-door neighbour. Coming to contemporary Chinese philosophers in mainland China and outside (particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States), we find among them a progressive trend of constructive engagement with Western philosophy. This too did not happen overnight. The Chinese enlightenment thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extensively introduced Western thought to the Chinese, leading Chinese philosophers to study Western philosophy and to eventually revisit the narrative of Chinese philosophical tradition itself. Starting with Peking University in early 1920s, philosophy departments introduced increasing number of courses in Western philosophy. What contemporary Indian and Chinese philosophies indicate is that comparative philosophy suffers from a procedural problem in the first place. Comparative philosophy will arguably not achieve its goal of East-West understanding, unless the

undergraduate and graduate students in our philosophy departments are adequately introduced to Indian, Chinese and Western philosophies.

The philosophical problem which comparative philosophy apparently faces is two-fold. Comparative philosophy, at least in its classical model, is based on the assumption that different philosophical traditions are complementary to each other and hence a genuine philosophizing should synthesize the perspectives of Eastern and Western philosophies. This goes against the very nature of philosophy. Philosophy, as an enterprise of critical reflection, cannot part with pluralism. If philosophy parts with its radical pluralism, philosophy itself will be done away with. The second philosophical problem comparative philosophy confronts is the collapse of East-West divide in contemporary philosophy. Indian, Chinese and Western philosophical traditions have developed for centuries more or less in isolation from and independently of each other. This is not the situation any more. The old cultural divide in philosophy has almost collapsed in today's more interdependent and globalized world. Is an Indian philosopher who philosophizes using a Western method or school of thought, say Husserlian phenomenology or Whiteheadian process thought, less Indian than a philosopher who does philosophy following traditional Nyaya philosophy? Does an American philosopher become a Chinese philosopher, because he is a Confucian? Or, can a British philosopher be called Indian philosopher, simply because she is a Vedantin?

The procedural and philosophical problems comparative philosophy faces today call for a revamp of entire comparative enterprise. The future development of comparative philosophy

will depend largely on how we address some of the key problems this discipline faces today. But one thing is certain, that global philosophy cannot afford to lose comparative philosophy altogether. Comparative philosophy should be on the scene in some form as a constant reminder to philosophers of their need for dialogical openness to culturally diverse philosophical traditions and thought-patterns.

INDIAN TRENDS

As far as comparative philosophy is concerned, we can notice three main trends or approaches in twentieth-century Indian philosophy: interpretation, reinterpretation and integration. The first approach, the approach of interpretation and defence of Indian philosophical tradition, was the predominant trend up until the early 1970s. Philosophers and writers on Indian philosophy tried to articulate and defend the apparent, but sometimes alleged, idealist and spiritual nature of Indian philosophy. S. Radhakrishnan was at the forefront of this approach. His assessment of Indian philosophy became the received version which teachers and students of Indian philosophy continued to follow to this day.

Since early 1980s, a small but increasing number of philosophers began to rethink some of the received interpretations of classical Indian philosophy. Daya Krishna (1924-2007), J.N. Mohanty (1928-) and B.K. Matilal (1935-1991) are certainly among the lead figures of this trend, which may be called the approach of re-interpretation and re-construction. They cogently argued that Indian philosophy, although different in some of its philosophical concerns and literary styles, is rationally as rigorous as Western philosophy and that philosophical content should be distinguished from its religious tinge.

Many contemporary Indian philosophers have integrated, to varying degrees, ideas and concepts from both Indian and Western philosophies in their practice of philosophy. For example, K.C. Bhattacharyya (1875-1949), Radhakrishnan and Raju, among others, have successfully used Western (German and British) idealism in articulating their philosophical positions. This trend of adopting ideas from different philosophical traditions for creative thought may be called the approach of integration. This trend is one of the hallmarks of the entire modern Indian philosophy, from thinkers of Indian renaissance to the present.

We can only speculate on what course comparative philosophy will take in the twenty-first century. The last two trends, namely the approach of reinterpretation of classical Indian philosophy and the approach of critically engaging ideas from other traditions, are likely to continue and advance. What is almost totally missing from Indian comparative philosophy is engagement with Chinese philosophy. Possibly, this lacuna will also be addressed.

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