

REFLECTIONS ON
INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

I have been asked to express in my turn the reflections which a reading of K. Satchidananda Murty's fine paper, "Philosophical Thought in India," have inspired in me. In complying with this request, I would like, first of all, to caution the reader that my aim is not an ambitious one and that my remarks will be formulated with great modesty. They are based, to be sure, on thirty years of intellectual and spiritual contact with Indian thought, but they remain nonetheless those of an analyst and observer from the outside. It is not fitting that a guest admitted into the intimacy of Indian civilization should raise his voice too high in commenting on a statement that is based on knowledge originating from within. Therefore, I propose merely to explain how the data of Indian philosophical history might appear to a mind that has been trained in the civilization of the West and that seeks to achieve a universal view; to indicate where, for such a mind, major emphases should be placed.

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

If it is true that all philosophy worthy of the name presents itself to us as a lucid reading of human experience articulated in a “coherent discourse,” then there is no doubt that Indian thought is rich from a philosophical point of view. But what seems to us to characterize it primarily and distinctively is the incommensurable superiority which it attributes to experience as compared to any other kind of knowledge. Indeed, Indian thought holds, in the last analysis, that there is no experience except spiritual and absolute experience. Sensory experience itself, psychological experience, and, above all, aesthetic experience all resolve into spiritual experience, more or less camouflaged or disengaged. Since the first *Upanishads*, Indian thought has been based on an inverted pyramid—on the diamond point of spiritual experience. And so sure is India that she contains within herself a universal foundation that she multiplies the ways and means of approaching and discovering the spiritual. Yoga, a complete psychosomatic discipline, is perhaps the most skilfully devised of these methods, although it is not the only one.

Serving as the basis for discourse, this experience is nevertheless ineffable, incapable of being conceptualized, devoid of both form and direction. From the point of view of the purest Brahmanic orthodoxy, it represents experience of the “self.” The self is unique and admits of no *other* than itself; metaphysically, it is simple, without internal differentiation or structurization; it is the being, at once pure, eternal, infinite, devoid of essential diversity, denuded of form. Experience of the self is pure spiritual transparency, without polarization in subject and object, without opposition of form and content; it is perfect and serene interiority, without dispersion, avarice, or egoism.

But if fundamental reality and experience must be considered as completely free of any determination and delimitation, how can one account for the apparent multiformity and finitude of things without invoking an original and universal principle of differentiation?

Actually, India did not achieve all at once the elegant simplicity of the pattern that we are sketching here. In her eyes individual differentiation has always seemed to be the outcome of the confluence of a name *and* a form. It will be some time before anyone dares to trace back to the same source both the sacred majesty of the word and the evolving and structured form. This step will, however, be taken. Is it not a fact that the plenitude of ritual silence exceeds the meaningful and organic diversity of sacrificial formulas? And does it not, a fortiori, prevail over the diversity of the looser formulas of the common language

Reflections on Indian Philosophy

in precisely the same way that the pure being, impassive and flawless, surpasses the diverse, by nature both fluid and intermittent, even if reconstituted and effectuated according to certain forms? And henceforth it will be important not to permit, at the root of things, any confusion between the pure being and a form-traversed becoming, between pure experience and mental constructions.

To admit an internal structurization of the real is to philosophize poorly; so say the orthodox Sankara and the Buddhist Dinnâga, each in his own style and system. Form, structures, and static or dynamic syntheses do not enter into collusion with the real; they do not penetrate into its metaphysical density but rather are merely *superimposed* upon it. Similarly, it is an error not to hold pure spiritual experience as transcendently distinct from the mental constructions—whether rational or irrational—that encompass it in the “wordly” and trivial categories of cognition.

Occasionally, rapprochements have been made between experience of the self and the *Cogito* of Descartes or of Kant. This hardly seems legitimate to me. Actually the Cartesian *Cogito* is both experience of *my* existence and intellectual intuition of *my* essence. My being exists, but at the same time it is endowed with an essential and immanent structure, as the notion, at one and the same time inclusive and analytical, which enables my consciousness to apprehend it. Here no distance intervenes between the aspects of my monistic being that are, nonetheless, truly diverse. There is nothing here that resembles either a necessary split of being and form or the obligation to withdraw from all conceptualism in order to arrive at pure spiritual experience.

Kant regards the human spirit as incapable of transcending itself, of attaining either a metaphysical awareness of its own spiritual existence or an intellectual intuition of its essential reality. In his opinion, every experience undergone in the human condition is tainted with passivity and empiricism; all knowledge, even scientific knowledge, is affected by relativity. However, there is one kind of human knowledge that is philosophically *pure*, that is not transcendent but exclusively transcendental. It has to do uniquely with the a priori faculties of our knowledge and with the “I think”—their source and their link. It can be attained only by an analytical method of reduction that is rigorously reflective and stripped of all intuition.

However great their divergences might be, Descartes and Kant, like all philosophers who stem from Plato and Aristotle, are implicitly in

agreement in assigning an eminently positive meaning to the process of determination. They are aware that the determinate pays tribute to finitude, to otherness, to non-being. Yet they do not go so far as to conclude, as India does, that any distance professedly ontological and spiritual in character would be but a split, a break, the destruction of both being and soul.

The reluctance of the Greek mind to accept the notion of a positive, absolute infinite has frequently been stressed until Christianity, on the one hand, and Plotinus, on the other, familiarized us with it. This attitude has been looked upon as mirroring the structures of the Hellenic countryside. In regard to the infinitist perspectives of Indian thought, Murty evokes symmetrically and not without justification the geographical conditioning in which it was created and evolved.

Indeed, one cannot overlook the fact that the natural setting in which an Indian spends his life is far less suitable for man than is the Mediterranean. The incomparable altitudes and the overwhelming majesty of the immense Himalayan chain; the practically unlimited spread of plains and rivers of the Indo-Ganges world, which even has its share of deserts; the benefic and also formidable grandeur of the monsoon, without which all life comes to a stop but whose excessive violence can be as pernicious as its absence; the cruel famines and the abundance of tropical fauna and vegetation; the oppressiveness of the heat which occasionally (so an authentic son of India has told me) is capable of goading the organism to the brink of a kind of "physical despair"—all these, far too much for man, cannot fail to exert an incessant and cumulative pressure upon the imagination and the sensitivity of the country's inhabitants.

A condition, however, is not a cause. Western humanism, the primacy which classical Greek philosophy assigns to moderation, to the limited, to *peras* (as compared to the infinite, the *apeiron*), might have been furthered by a more easily established proportion between the stature and the energies of man¹ and his natural habitat or by the clarity and exact contours of the Mediterranean world. But, in the last analysis, the manner in which moderation, the indefinite, and the infinite are balanced in the Hellenistic or Indian civilization gives expression to the original initiative of the human mind, whether it be in Greece or in India.

1. We are speaking, of course, of human energies and of man's power such as they were before the first and the second industrial revolutions.

Reflections on Indian Philosophy

Fascinated by an experience of a mystical nature, India has not been satisfied to denounce the inadequacies of the *human* concept. Rather, she has tirelessly sought the abolition of every concept and verbalization. Yet from time immemorial she has attached enormous importance to meditation upon the mystery of the word, and, from this need for a psychological vacuity, she has inferred the conclusion of the absence of essential form, the necessity of admitting that form is something short of being. Hence her contentions about the unrealness of difference and determination, about the illusory character of the cosmos. It follows that philosophy is not, in her eyes, principally an effort to justify some explanation of the world as it is. "We do not explain the world; we explain it away," says a modern Indian philosopher, heir to the most solid traditions of his country. Philosophy is, above all, a lucid effort to liberate spiritual experience from whatever beclouds and obscures it.

In the second place, however, philosophy must also take into account pragmatic knowledge, which has a rightful place in the world and which, although representing an absolute truth, may be classified as a relative one. Indeed, individual minds share in the great, universal, and productive magic of forms. Among mental constructions one must distinguish between those that are normalized—rational, if you prefer—and those that are not.

Thus there reappears in a philosophy for which pure experience is absolutely sovereign and which is not subject to any higher critical tribunal the idea of the norm, of the a priori rule of cognition. It must be confessed that here we touch upon a difficult phase of the Indian metaphysics of truth. The paradox is not historical in character; the idea of the norm is older than that of experience in Indian civilization and, as seen from this perspective, more fundamental. However, it seems to me that in the domain of doctrine the notion of absolute experience is somehow indifferent to any distinction between factual truth and normative truth. It is clear, on the other hand, that, as the magical function of forms could not of itself have normative value, the only thing that remains is that it obtains normative value from its proximity to the absolute. The undifferentiated simplicity of pure being, which is not confusion, at certain privileged moments lends something of its rigor to the cosmic imagination, and, in the process, form that is evanescent and unreal is raised to regulative form.

Bearing in mind the exact point at which we have thus arrived, let us now compare this indirect advance of the Indian mind with the

direct progress registered by those philosophies that are related to Platonism. They all teach the primacy of form—the Platonic Idea is form—and they hold that form proceeds from the Just Measuring Measure, from the One, from the Good, and from the Pure Act.

To be sure, our tradition, too, does not desist from invoking experience—original philosophical experience. In our day this has been attested particularly by Bergsonianism and the various kinds of existentialism. But, except for Plotinism, the object of our tradition's quest is scarcely a mystical experience denuded of all internal diversity. And even those of our philosophers who take great care to found their doctrine on an irreducible spiritual experience seem to me to have remained too responsive to the lessons of Plato to place this experience definitively beyond the reach of all critical reflection grounded a priori.

Christian mystical experience—which, for other reasons, belongs not in the category of immanent spirituality but in that of a spirituality of grace and transcendence—likewise refrains from eliminating the critical criterion. It represents, after all, experience within the framework of theological faith and under the sway of the rule of this faith. It does reach beyond the Word, and the Word is consubstantial with the innerness of God.

It seemed necessary to stress at length—although in a summary fashion—what appeared to us to be the essence of the outpouring of Indian thought. Let us now take up a few other themes so happily chosen by Murty, in particular the discussion entitled “The Glory of the Soul: Human Dignity.” It is quite true that Brahmanic philosophies regard the soul as *increate*; in this respect, they maintain an insuperable distance between philosophies of Christian inspiration. However, we shall refrain from considering the formulas that Murty uses impartially as if they were equivalent: the eminent dignity of the *soul*, the eminent dignity of *man*. To lend authority to his manner of using them, our Indian colleague cites from the *Mahābhārata* (a classic among the classics of India): “There is nothing greater [literally, more excellent] than man; and this . . . is the great secret.” But this text, one might say, is too beautiful; it does not mean what a Westerner reads into it. For, in emphasizing the eminent dignity of man—not only the human *soul*—does not one profess, at least implicitly, some form of humanism?

It is difficult to conceive of the non-Christian West save as humanistic. It is dedicated, according to Valéry, to a quest for “that marvelous and mysterious point . . . the knowledge of which would make man master

Reflections on Indian Philosophy

of his own miracle . . . the point where the infinite, despairing of natural proliferations, yields its place to the astonishing finite of accomplished works which are, at the same time, masterpieces." Furthermore, according to Jean Gu henno, it fixes the existence of this point "at the outer limit of man, but nonetheless within man." We are far from assuming such a position. But there exists a Christian-centered humanism the Western context of which has certainly facilitated its development; it is not, however, bound to the West, and neither is it the whole of Christianity, although constituting a necessary phase.

On the other hand, Indian civilization is characterized by an impatience with man's limitations and criteria. This finds expression horizontally in the high place given to the cosmic exemplars of spiritual reflection and practices and vertically in an untiring will to transcend all limitations, including the human condition. But the soul, the self, taken in their absolute state, which is their true one, cannot be transcended. Consequently, spiritual progress is accomplished according to the internal dimension, and Brahmanic spirituality consists ultimately in a spirituality of immanence, a spirituality of the increate self.

Metaphysically speaking, the soul is eternally free, since it is absolute. But, insofar as it is illusorily affected by the human condition, or any other worldly condition, it is captive. Its enslavement would be without end as it is without beginning if the magic of forms operated in only one direction—that of darkness and captivity. But this magic is merely ambiguous; hence the enslaved soul remains capable of forging its own destiny, of choosing the best or the worst, of obstructing the liberating experience, or, on the contrary, of furthering its advent.

Indian thought has never traversed the phase from which Western thought is just emerging, a phase in which determinism and free will frequently clashed because of their incompatibility. According to the Indian point of view, the solution of this problem is dictated by the doctrine of the act (* arma*), certain aspects of which we shall briefly recapitulate. The act (by which we mean one that can be undertaken by virtue of a responsibility) is *not* intrinsically determined, although it is strictly conditioned. In this sense it is free. But it is also rigorously determinative; this is so because of its twofold efficacy. First, just as a seed develops into ripe fruit, so the act, by a necessary fructification, commands its own retribution. This retributive fecundity is reflected in the agent and assumes the form of a happy or unhappy affective experience, depending upon whether the germinal action has conformed to the

norms of action—whether it has been deserving or blameworthy. On the other hand—and these two projections of an identical act are interdependent—a habit tends to become engraved upon the agent's unconscious. It will delineate his future character and condition his future acts either in his present existence or in an ulterior one, for the projective power of the *ḥarma* is capable of crossing the frontiers of deaths and rebirths.

Thus, in the perspectives of India, determinism and indeterminism are very closely articulated, like the dimensions and phases of a single process in which the mind, completely enslaved as it is and even because it is enslaved, somehow engenders nature (the latter being but petrified habit). Every determinist exigency of reason centers in the necessary transition from action to retribution, yet the act itself contains a reserve of indetermination because, behind its empirical structure and mechanism, it presupposes the hidden presence of the mind, incommensurable with any functional determination.

But true freedom for India consists precisely in freeing herself from the act and its tragic fecundity. The Indian, like other men, knows pain, illness, death, the precarious and ephemeral nature of earthly life and happiness. But the doctrine of transmigration affects this commonplace experience of a transfinite coefficient. In fact, this doctrine teaches that, since time immemorial, and during a future which might be without end, individual beings have been and will continue to be born but to die and that they have died and will continue to die only to be reborn and to die once again. And so the transmigratory soul is doomed not only to undergo the ephemeral and the precarious but to experience their perpetual recommencement, and its affective and vital deception becomes, if it is aware of this, metaphysical deception.

The “tragic sense of life” which Murty correctly attributes to the philosophies of India has no other roots than these, even if he finds a favorable soil in that indifference to the measures of man which constitutes the natural context of Indian life. It is not spontaneous disillusionment of the heart but a doctrinal construction intensely experienced, and accepted, with the passage of time, as direct evidence.

The twofold theme of metaphysical liberation and servitude thus forms a closely ordered whole: there is no recognition of the deceptive nature of life except on the basis of glory—barely glimpsed—of the spiritual experience. And the freedom of the mind, although eternal in itself, is won for the enslaved soul as a state from which there is no

Reflections on Indian Philosophy

return, from which there is no relapse into the torrent of rebirths and re-demises. Since philosophy centers in pure and sovereign experience, and inasmuch as the latter is identical with the definitive state of freedom which blissfully seals a destiny, Indian philosophy necessarily appears as a wisdom of salvation.

In the perspectives of Christianity, salvation is a gift exclusively conferred by means of grace and the supernatural; human wisdom, learning, and virtue can play but a preparatory or auxiliary role in seeking and obtaining it. It follows from this that, wherever Christianity has left its imprint, philosophers, save for very few exceptions, do not believe themselves capable of suggesting a doctrine of salvation. Their discretion and reserve in this domain are therefore not to be explained fundamentally in terms of a speculative or aesthetic indifference to the practical search for God. They regard themselves solely as the disinterested guardians of the purity and authenticity of primordial intellectual certitudes and of rational discourse.

Yet it is quite true that the history of modern Western philosophy is marked by breaks that stand in vivid contrast to the skilfully maintained continuities of Indian traditionalism. The advent of existentialist philosophies has precipitated a crisis over the very notion of wisdom, to say nothing of the idea of salvation. In actuality, whoever uses the term "wisdom" has in mind, among other characteristics, a regulative knowledge contained within a synthesis of universal intent. But our new philosophies, although not rejecting the need for a coherent and communicable discourse, profess above all to be an invention of values that is original, authentic, exact, and extremely lucid, yet bursting with a unique freedom that no norm can measure in a priori fashion. Here, everything is oriented more toward innovation than toward the eternal; this, at least, is true of atheist existentialism. Etymology notwithstanding, philosophy is no longer a quest for wisdom but merely a quest; in no sense is it consummated wisdom.

On the other hand, according to the Indians, accomplished sages, "re-deemed beings," exist, so to speak, in every generation. They are few in number, to be sure, and the way for them was prepared by a long and gradual evolution extending over eons. However, they have arrived at their final destination. At this very highest level, wisdom for the sage is but pure spontaneity; it ceases to retain anything that savors of a rule which compels. But for imperfect mortals, wisdom is regulation and

norm as regards both knowledge and action. The sage is the living and eternal law.

We greatly fear that our own wisdom is very far from complete. We beg the reader to excuse these overly allusive and hesitant reflections. We have attempted, in regard to several chosen aspects, to reveal the inner mainsprings of Indian philosophy. Our method has been either direct analysis or comparison with other philosophies.

With the aid of an inevitable oversimplification, and employing very broad expressions like the "philosophy of India" or "Indian thought," we have for the most part focused on the Vedantic philosophy of Śāṅkara, where for a long time India herself has desired to rediscover her authentic likeness. By proceeding in this fashion, however, it is clear that we were compelled to sacrifice many shadings and comparisons that are a part of the most legitimate patrimony of India.

In closing, we should like to thank Satchidananda Murty. Our article has derived constant help from the wealth of his suggestions; time and again our path and his cross and recross, even if it is not always apparent.