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The Modern Tripartition, the Axial Age Thesis, and East-West Philosophical Communication

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Abstract: In this essay I examine the relationship of religion, philosophy, and science. I argue that despite their apparent epistemological and methodological differences, these three modes of human enquiry can be aligned together in thought as well as in experience. I contend that science provides us with contingent cognitions and that all such cognitions stand in an acute need of an ontological principle that can support them. Furthermore, following Karl Jaspers I suggest that the knowledge of Being necessitates a transcendence of the natural world and scientific framework associated with it. I conclude that Jaspers notion of "encompassing" and Buddhist theory of emptiness can be useful not only in resolving the conflict between religion, philosophy, and science, but also in fostering philosophical communication between East and West.

At the outset one may say that an individual's intellectual enquiry and imagination take various forms and expresses themselves in various ways. Some of these enquiries fall in the realm of science, others in the realm of religion and some in the realm of philosophy; but common to all these realms is a shared cognitive current that runs through all of them and binds them together in their pursuit of truth, understanding of the world and existential situation of humankind. However this proximity of the three branches of knowledge is far from clear and subject to much dispute as well. On numerous occasions in the past, and sometimes even in the present, religion has indeed hindered scientific progress. Compared to religion, philosophy has been much more critical in its pursuit of truth but it too can have a fanciful aspect. As a protestation against religious and philosophical speculations, a sharp tri-partition of religion, science and philosophy has occurred, which leaves these disciples to their more or less tightly demarcated space. But the above separation, Jaspers rightly points out, carries its own risk and contradiction. The main risk lies in the thinness of epistemic content of the scientific pursuits;[1] and moreover it can also undermine scientific goals and projects by turning them into a pseudo-science or dishonesty.[2] More clearly, the above tri-partition implies that any phenomenon which

[1] Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, p. 84. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

[2] Gregory J. Walters, "Philosophy of Gene-Being: A Prolegomenon," in *Technology and the Changing Face of Humanity*, ed. Richard Feist et al, Ottawa: Ottawa University Press 2010, p. 213. [Henceforth cited as *PGB*]

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falls beyond the natural world or is not susceptible to the known modes of verification oriented cognition would remain unscientific and hence unworthy of a scientific investigation. Secondly, its contradiction resides in the fact that even though science is inspired by a drive to know, it is ill-equipped methodologically to go beyond the natural world and grasp the realm of supernatural (*OGH* 83). In other words, for Jaspers, scientific enquiry is bound to be limited to the natural world only, and it cannot possibly comprehend the Ultimate Reality or Being, which supports the world. But these are serious limitations.

Tripartition of Religion, Philosophy, and Science

I want to begin with the obvious point that human beings live in the world and that they are endowed with a rational capacity and that they desire to know the world and everything else associated with its existence. In other words, for now I wish to assume the epistemological distinction between subject and object and want to take cognition as a revealing process, which discloses the object to the subject. I shall further contend that religion, philosophy, and science start off with similar assumptions regarding the possibility of the existence of matter and human subject, but part ways in their explanations of the above realities. Religion, particularly in its Judeo-Christian manifestation, believes that God is the final source of all matter and spirits, and that all truth and knowledge must be ultimately aligned with divine thoughts.

Unlike religion, philosophy does not make colossal statements regarding the world, self or God on the basis of a belief. Philosophy, since Socrates, seeks to investigate the nature of truth and reality and refuges to confirm what cannot be confirmed on rational grounds. However, the difficulty with the above religious and philosophical pursuits of truth is that neither of them meets the standards of a scientific enquiry. In contrast to religion and philosophy, science adopts a verification-driven approach towards cognition and tends to examine the world and all possible truths in their empirical manifestations—not mere speculations. Thus in principle, religion claims to provide us with a comprehensive knowledge, philosophy remains open to all possibilities, and science appears to forces a clear distinction between what can be legitimately known and verified, how far our knowledge claims can be extended on the basis of empirical observation, and how to differentiate genuine knowledge claims from phantom-like speculations. According to Karl Jaspers, this difference in understanding of cognition and cognitive methodology is the fundamental source of modern tripartition of religion, philosophy, and science.

Modern science makes a clear distinction between genuine knowledge claims and pseudo-knowledge claims. Whereas the pseudo-knowledge claims can be neither proved true nor false on experiential grounds, the scientific knowledge claims are open to further research and verification. Scientific claims are objective in the sense that they can be verified through reason and experience. For example, medical isotopes behave in a certain way under certain conditions and their behavior can be explained in terms of physical or material causation, that is, one event provoking the other. The behavior of isotopes is not dependent upon an individual's perception, but rather on the casual chain of the involved substances.

Next, modern science also believes in the universality of all cognition. Indeed scientific universality implies that scientific truths are valid across the board and that they would hold good under similar circumstances at all times and all places. Moreover, scientific universality also views the entire world as an object of possible cognition, believing that whatever happens in the world has a casual chain and that it can be understood and explained within the scientific framework, without taking recourse to a supernatural power or being. Jaspers elucidates this overreaching of scientific research and ambition in the following terms:

> Whatever takes place in the world is subject to observation, enquiry and investigation, no matter whether it involves the facts of nature, the actions and statements of men, or their creations and destinies. Religion, too, and every kind of authority, is investigated. And not only every reality, but also every intellectual possibility becomes an object of investigation. There are no limits to enquiry and research. (*OGH* 89)

Thus understood, the engagement of science with the world seems extremely comprehensive and problematic at the same time. Jaspers points out that modern science is driven by an ardent desire to comprehend all possible truths in their entirety, so that it can provide us with a final and plausible explanation of everything around and beyond us. Yet methodologically science is also committed to operate on particular manifestations of the reality alone, and to not engage in the enquiries regarding the nature of reality in its

totality—or reality as such. So, paradoxically the desire to know in the sciences is constantly impeded by its methodological commitment to not-know the world in its complete manifestation. Moreover, scientific method does not tolerate a trespassing of concrete reasoning and experience; but then neither of these two quite exhaust the question regarding what is experienced through the world—or the possibility of Being:

> This forever incomplete cognition is, by intent, directed towards something that exists and that will be disclosed by cognition. But while cognition presses illimitably forward, it is not capable of apprehending the eternal certitude of Being as a whole. (*OGH* 84)

In the present sense scientific cognition must always remain incomplete, a path towards a destination, which must remain unknown and unknowable as well. Or to put another way, science cannot find completeness without turning into something unscientific.

Another major fall out of the scientific method has been the fragmentation of knowledge or lack of internal cohesiveness. Each scientific enquiry illuminates a particular aspect of reality and opens new vista on the world. For instance, physics, chemistry, biology each disclose a particular aspect of reality and even different aspects of reality within the same stream; but taken together, they do not provide us with the knowledge of the whole of reality: "In modern cognition, the systematic character of knowledge, instead of leading to a whole system, leads to the problem of the system of sciences" (*OGH* 86). This results in a contrived cognition and lack of harmony among the known. Indeed a harmony would require some universal inter-connectedness among different expressions of reality, and call for their reconciliation as well. This necessitates a broader comprehension of reality and interconnectedness of its various dimensions and associated knowledge claims. But such things, we saw earlier, run counter to the professed scientific methodology, which discourages the possibility of interconnectedness of all types knowledge. Here, we may also recall that impressed with scientific method and its specificity, many logical positivists in the fifties and sixties dismissed unscientific philosophical knowledge and tried to trim down philosophical enquiry in terms of scientific veracity.

Even though Jaspers is conscious of the limits of modern science and technology, he does not minimize them. On the contrary, he considers science as an important element of human dignity and welfare. Indeed science helps us differentiate between compelling certitude and un-certitude in the realm of human experiences, and supplies us with a clear, cogent and certain knowledge under given conditions. These elements of scientific cognition, according to Jaspers, are essential to human dignity, as they help us understand the world critically and objectively. Moreover, since this world is the collective playground of all individuals, science can definitely help them all understand their existential conditions better and infuse them with fresh insights.

Up to now I have argued, along with Jaspers, that the cogency and certitude of scientific truths are restrictive. They reveal only one aspect of the natural world or world of appearance—and not the totality [of Being]. The knowledge of Being necessitates a philosophical transcendence of the natural world and scientific cognition. We step into the realm of "encompassing," which alone can carry the culmination of all possible possible cognitions. Gerhard Knauss writes: "Jaspers considers the philosophical truth of Being and of that which transcends all being to be fundamentally different from scientific truth, which concerns the appearance of what there is."[3]

The differences between philosophical and scientific knowledge that Jaspers and Knauss elucidate should not be used to increase the separation of the two modes of knowledge, or fact and value dichotomy associated with them. That does not seem to be their intention. Indeed Knauss uses this distinction to highlight two important points. First, he argues that despite scientific interest in precision and accurateness, science does not investigate the fundamental questions regarding meaning and Being. On the contrary, it assumes them. But these are precisely the questions that philosophy struggles to resolve. To suspend the question regarding the meaning of an object or statement or truth or value is definitely not to answer them, but that is exactly what science does when it enters in the corridors of scientific dogmatism: "Hence the great and pressing task of our epoch is the pure apprehension of the meaning and limits of modern science" (*OGH* 94).

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[3] Gerhard Knauss, "Karl Jaspers on Philosophy and Science: Distinction and Relation," in *Karl Jaspers's Philosophy: Expositions & Interpretations*, ed. Kurt Salamun & Gregory J. Walters, New York: Humanity Book 2008, p. 72. [Henceforth cited as *JPS*]

Secondly, scientific knowledge can never provide us with the knowledge of Encompassing and transcendence, which are so central to Jaspers' philosophical thought. It is essential for science to start with some established knowledge claims, rudimentary as they may be—for instance, that we live a world, and then to go on exploring its possible constituents. More clearly, scientific knowledge entails some presuppositions at its core. These presuppositions are crucial to the definition and realization of scientific clarity and certitude. Neither transcendence nor encompassing would be susceptible to this mode of scientific research: not because they are not genuine knowledge, but because they fall outside scientific frameworks. As a matter of fact they both deal with the conditions of the scientific experience and so cannot be given in the experience itself: "The Encompassing and the world as whole have no presuppositions, and for this very reason evade any sort of cognition that is certain as well as contingent on method" (*JPS* 81).

Knauss suggests that the ultimate questions regarding the meaning of the totality of existence are, indeed, philosophically relevant; but science cannot answer them. Despite their philosophical value and overall utility, the above questions are not open to a scientific explanation. For instance, what is the meaning of red or blue, black or white color, and can this meaning be taught to someone who has not seen these colors? The questions regarding meaning of an object, as Wittgenstein has shown, admit multiple answers depending upon their potential use in the language game.[4] If so, then to comprehend the meaning of Encompassing or Transcendence, a different kind of language game would be required. Science is not well equipped to answer this question. This limitation of science does not need to be lamented. On the contrary, it can be taken as a teachable moment that saves science from making unscientific and reductive claims, and provides philosophy with its starting point. Knauss captures this element of Jaspers thought well: "On the one hand, philosophy gives meaning and purpose to science and propels it forward. On the other hand, philosophy needs the content of scientific knowledge of the world in order to transcend with respect to it" (*JPS* 76).

The tension among science, religion, and philosophy that is characteristic of modern Western thought has its roots in some rigid and probably unsubstantiated scientific knowledge claims. It is a mistake to say that we know or that we can know, when we do not know or cannot know. This is the same danger that Socrates warned us against and wanted to avoid. It has revisited us again in the form of current scientific-epistemological dogmatism. In the next section I will show that the Axial Indian thinkers and their contemporary counterparts recognize the power and possibility of human reasoning and experience—sciences, and at the same time make room for genuine doubts, multiplicity of knowledge, and stay ready to negotiate the challenges involved in the cognitive episodes: "if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of science and abandon those claims."[5]

Jaspers, Buddha, and The Axial Age Thesis

There are two fundamental claims to Jaspers' Axial Age Thesis. First, Japers argues that it was during the axial period that human beings, for the first time in their recorded history, became fully self-aware. Confronted with existential challenges and problems of the world, they started asking radical questions regarding human life itself. This interrogation of human life and existence led to a refined self-perception and thoughtful appreciation of the world in the axial age. Jaspers writes:

> Man proved capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe. He discovered within himself the origin from which to raise himself above his own self and world…. What was later called reason and personality was revealed for the first time during the Axial Period. (*OGH* 3, 4)

Second, Jaspers also contends that the modifications that human consciousness went through during the axial period have lasting effects and have anchored human life since then. He writes:

> Until today mankind has lived by what happened during the Axial Period, by what was thought and created during that period. In each new upward flight it returns in the recollection to this period and is fired a new by it. (*OGH* 7)

In what follows, I want to situate Jaspers' analysis

[4] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1967, sections 43 & 66.

[5] The Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, New York: Broadway Books 2005, p. 3. [Henceforth cited as *USA*]

of the axial period in Indian context. In particular, I want to ask: How did axial Indian thinkers view human life? Has their conception of life persisted over time? Does it continue to inform Indian psyche even now? In the same vein, I shall also probe if the idea of reason and personality in the axial Buddhist thought are conducive to modern scientific enquiry, or detrimental to its progress.

A cursory view of the axial Indian thought shows that Indian thinkers were preoccupied with eternal questions regarding human life and existence. The Vedic, the Upanishadic, the Buddhist and Jain thinkers among others grapple with questions regarding the world, self, and God, and propose different, even conflicting, solutions. Despite their differences, these thinkers demonstrate a common tendency. They seem to believe that worldly existence in its current form is somewhat superficial and problematic. In their opinion the world that I live in and that self that I am are presented to me under the veil of ignorance. The Upanishadic thinkers argue that the world is an appearance, a concealment process, which delays our grasp of the ultimate truth and reality. So it must be transcended.

Contrary to the Vedic and Upanishadic formulations, Buddha does not view the world and human life in terms of appearance only. He takes the world seriously, respects its current manifestation and wants to examine it. He is perturbed by the way human life unfolds in this world; that is, the process of birth, growth, and death. He wants to find out why it happens the way it happens. He equally is overwhelmed to see that even the best moments in human life are replete with sadness, and cause pain and suffering in the long run. He wants to know the truth and understand the true nature of reality. This cannot be done with a quick dismissal of the world as Maya. Against the Vedic and Upanishadic thinkers, Buddha maintains that we must comprehend our worldly existence and realize its limitations if we want to lay our hands on the final truth or grasp Nirvana. He espouses this understanding of the world via four noble truths:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is a cause of suffering.
3. There is a cessation of suffering.
4. There is a way to attain it.

The four noble truths provide us not only with the synopsis of human life and existence in their current form, but also a crux of the Buddhist theory of causation, which is developed more thoroughly in the doctrine of dependent origination. The first noble truth asserts, upon examination, that worldly existence is full of pain and suffering. This is not so because something has gone wrong and someone is grieving. This is not so because someone has died and someone has turned into an orphan. The suffering is there because the world is there. The world carries the elements of suffering; and in this sense our worldly existence is synonymous with suffering. The second noble truth locates suffering into a cause. It proclaims that suffering does not arise out of nothing. In other words, suffering has its roots and is situated in a cosmic cycle. The third noble truth is about the cessation of suffering. The worldly pain and suffering need not continue forever. They can be stopped. Finally, the fourth noble truth prescribes a clear path to stop suffering. This is known as the eightfold path: 1. right view, 2. right resolve, 3. right speech, 4. right action, 5. right living, 6. right effort, 7. right thought, 8. right concentration. So in essence, the first noble truth identifies a phenomenal condition, the second traces the cause of the above condition, the third carries a hope, and the fourth noble truth realizes the highest spiritual progress imaginable.

I want to look at the second noble truth a little more closely, as the idea of causation is crucial to the Buddhist, as well as modern scientific, thought. The second noble truth is particularly significant because unlike many other spiritual masters Buddha does not hand down an uncritical doctrine based on faith, but pleads for an existential elucidation of truth and reality. In the 38th discourse of *Majjhima-nikāya*, he speaks thus: ""Then, monks, what you have just said is only that *you yourselves* have recognized, what *you yourselves* have comprehended, and what *you yourselves* have understood; is it not so?' 'It is even so, Lord.'"[6] What the monks in the *Majjhima-nikāya* have just comprehended is that the ordinary view of reality—along with its notion of material causation and subject-object dichotomy—is misleading and false. The ordinary person sees reality in terms of being and non-being, existence and non-existence. She looks at a particular phenomenon or truth and proclaims that it exists or that it does not exist, and takes her categories of characterization as exhaustive modes of judgment. Likewise she looks at herself and contrasts herself with her body or with the world, her

[6] Majjhima-nikāya, 38th Discourse, cited in *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* by Mysore Hiriyanna, Delhi: Motilal Manarsidass Publishers Private Limited 2005, p. 150. [Henceforth cited as *OIP*]

soul from the body, and again believes in her good judgment. But for Buddha the nature of reality is such that it cannot be comprehended within the framework of conventional and dualist judgments. He wants the monks to understand that everything that exists has a cause, and everything that has a cause is transitory, without a semblance of permanence. As a result, neither being nor non-being, but only seamless becoming can truly approximate reality. Hiriyanna remarks:

> Since there is incessant production, but no *new things* are brought into being, the world becomes the world-process—'a continual coming-to-be and passing away.' Neither the world as a whole, nor any object in it, can be described as subject to the process. The process is the thing. (*OIP* 142)

The Buddhist denial of material and spiritual permanence appears to have equally upsetting effects in the realm of science as well as religion. It undermines the idea of natural causation by showing that the so-called material properties are not as permanent as ordinarily assumed—even by the modern scientists. These properties are subject to quick succession and change, and are conventional by nature. They come into existence and pass away, arise again but perish the moment after: all existence is momentary. If true, the Buddhist view removes matter as a permanent object of scientific observation. Furthermore, the doctrine of momentariness conceives of self, not as a spiritual substance, but as a series of experiences attached together, without a permanent spiritual substratum synching them. One wonders at this point if the Buddhists, like the skeptics, have annulled the possibility of all material and spiritual growth, scientific and religious progress. This might seem a little odd given that we have argued earlier that Buddha wanted to study reality empirically and that he "felt that the world would be better for the triumph of the natural law over supernatural."[7] Or did we miss something?

Recall that one of the main criticisms that Jaspers mounts against modern science is that it fails to realize its limitations. Even though it aspires to disclose reality in its totality, it is theoretically bound to remain unsuccessful in its ultimate quest. Buddhists too face these limitations of phenomenal knowledge and sciences, though for different reasons and in different ways, and seek their way out of the current predicament. I wish to consider their two main arguments. In the first place, they suggest that modern science relies upon reason and experience for the verification of scientific knowledge, but construes them both in a restrictive and discursive way. The Dalai Lama points out that an experience, in order to be scientifically valid, must be demonstrable to others. In other words, if I make a scientific discovery then I must be able to present it to others and they must be able, in theory, to verify the veracity of my claim. In sciences, this is known as the third person argument. The main difficulty with the third person requirement is that it rules out the scientific authenticity of all possible experiences which are not open to a third party verification, including an individual's meditative experiences. Yet such experiences are part of an individual's cognitive frame and capable of facilitating the highest spiritual and existential encounters:

> But though Buddha's doctrine is accessible to normal consciousness, it cannot be effective without suprasensory experience. The rational thinking of our finite mind is not adequate vessel for it. The core of the doctrine is perceived only by meditation, and rational formulation can give no more than a pale shadow or imitation of it.[8]

Next, Buddhists also raise serious issues with the very idea of causation itself. They classify causation under two broad categories: dualistic causation and monistic causation. Dualistic causation conceives of a cause independently of its possible effects and holds that all such effects come into existence after the activation of the material cause. In other words, on the dualistic view, cause and effects always remain separate and independent of each other. Monistic causation on the other hand traces all effects to the original cause and explains them all along with their cause in some spiritual or material fashion. The difficulty with the dualist view is that it is conceptually incoherent. It cuts cause and effects into two halves, both equally independent and self-enveloped, and stifles the possibility of any interconnection between the two. This objection finds extensive expression in Nagarjuna and the Dalai Lama:

[7] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, intr. Jitendra N. Mohanty, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2008, p. 299.

[8] Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: The Paradigmatic Individuals* [from *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 1], ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Ralph Manheim, San Diego: A Harvest Book 1962, p. 28. [Henceforth cited as *TPI*]

> Effectively, the notion of intrinsic, independent existence is incompatible with causation. This is because causation implies contingency and dependence, while anything that possesses independent existence would be immutable and self-enclosed. (*USA* 47)

The dualistic view of causation requires an additional cause that can initiate the first movement, sort of a prime mover, which can set the ball rolling, but then the fear is that this might collapse into some form of monistic causation. The monist view does not take us any further. It falsifies the possibility of any genuine development or growth, as the effects are already entailed in the cause. Buddhists reject both these views of causation, and replace them by the theory of dependent origination.

The idea of dependent origination takes its start in observation or sense experience of the individual. I perceive an object with a particular shape and size and call it an apple. Or, I hear someone knocking on my door and realize that she is Maria. Now in both the instances all that I have been presented with is a particular kind of sense experience—sense datum, if you like. Also keep in mind that the moment of perceptual encounter passes right at the moment of perception, and with it goes the experience that I originally had. But my impressions of the above events persist. Moreover, I start characterizing them as if they are something real, concrete, independent and individuated. Note that no such property was the constituent of my initial perception. These properties, Buddhists believe, are inferred. They are the result of a combination of ideas, mental exercises, and samskara (emotional and spiritual conditioning), and are ultimately unreal. They do not possess an independent truth of their own and cannot be attributed to an agent (material or spiritual) because no such agent is experienced or exists. We infer the existence of an agent on the basis of our experiences, but upon examination we find that our inference is as empty as the experiences that support it. On this view, the notion of individual self turns out as empty as an apple, spiritual substance as empty as material: "Both soul and matter exist only as complexes and neither is a single self-contained entity" (*OIP* 141). All is empty.

Before closing this section, we may want to take note of some important objections against the emptiness theory. It is said that the emptiness theory if true demolishes all practical endeavors and forces some sort of nihilism upon us. Why should I act if I do not exist, at least the way I think I exist? Do my actions have any value? Furthermore an action presupposes an actor, but emptiness denies the very possibility of such actors. These are different ways of asking the same question: Without an agent, can an action take place? To this Buddhist reply that the above questions smack of conventionalism in so far as they seek to grasp the existence of self and reality in general under four logical categories. These categories are: (1) something is, (2) something is not, (3) something is and is not, and finally, (4) something neither is nor is not. However, these categories cannot explain the ultimate truth. The emptiness doctrine shows that actions are manifestations of conditioned becoming and just as there is no specific physical cause likewise there is no individual agent in the ultimate sense. This does not stop Buddhists from recognizing that in the phenomenal world some individuation is bound to occur. And so we need to work towards the removal of those conditions that cause this individuation in the first place: "In emptiness I gain awareness of that to which signs such as birth and death no longer apply, of something motionless, for which all coming and going have lost their meaning."[9]

Another objection deals with the relevance of the Buddhist law of karma and the idea of transmigration. Both the law of karma and transmigration necessitate that an agent performs certain actions, is subject to certain consequences, reaps the reward of good karma, and suffers the consequences for the bad ones. This is how the law of karma unfolds in the *Bhagavadgita* and also in other Hindu texts, which seem to inspire the Buddhist doctrine. Some interpreters have suggested an interesting resolution to the above problem. They argue that we must not view the law of karma and transmigration in an historical sense. These are dynamic occurrences entailed in the conception of conditioned becoming, and emptiness itself. More explicitly, an individual goes through karmic cycle and transmigration every moment, much like a burning flame: "The belief in the karma doctrine really presents no new difficulty to Buddhism; for if there can be action without agent, there can well be transmigration without transmigrating agent"(*OIP* 153).

[9] Karl Jaspers, *Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plotinus, Lao-Tzu, Nagarjuna* [from *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 2], ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Ralph Manheim, New York: Harcourt Brace and World 1966, p. 125.

The East and West Philosophical Communication

In the recent past, there has not been much philosophical communication between the East and West. There are many reasons for this neglect. Jaspers has rightly suggested that the West met the Eastern civilization at the time of its decline, not advancement. There was a time much before the European renaissance and a lot prior to modernity when the East was at its peak and was the source and center of many fresh ideas in various fields, including religion, philosophy and science; but then that time had long passed when the European mind came across its Eastern counterpart. As a result, the relation that developed between the two cultures was not that of intellectual engagement but that of pride and prejudice. Even the most sympathetic European readers of the Eastern works remained judgmental in their valuation. Commenting upon the literary texture of the Vedas, Max Müller writes:

> People do not yet see the full importance of the Veda in an historical study of religion. The bridge of thoughts … that spans the whole history of the Aryan world has the first arch in the Veda, its last in Kant's Critique. While in the Veda we may study the childhood, we may study in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* the perfect manhood of Aryan mind.[10]

The genius of Kant is undeniable; but Müller's account of the Vedas is disputable. Muller's reading of the Vedas and of other Indian texts perpetuated the stereotypical view of the Indian thought in the Western mind. The spiritual and mystical insights of Indian tradition were emphasized and conflated beyond proportion, but not its rational or philosophical or scientific side. We still see some scholars entangled in the monotheistic, pantheistic, and henotheistic interpretations of the Vedas despite sharp evidence to the opposite: "Neither polytheism nor henotheism nor even monotheism," according to Chandradhar Sharma, "can be taken as the key-note of the early Vedic philosophy."[11] The Upanishads and the Buddhist texts too have met similar interpretations and stereotypes. It is not being suggested that these interpretations are baseless. I take it that they have their foundation in the texts interpreted, but they do conflate one aspect over others, in the case of the Vedas, henotheism or monotheism over spiritual absolutism. This conflating has compromised the philosophical value of the text interpreted.

Another reason, which probably stunted the East and West philosophical communication more than anything else in the nineteenth and twentieth century was colonialism. Ram Adhar Mall illuminates this difficulty in following terms: "I have always wondered how the Greco-Eurocentric conception of philosophy succeeded in exclusively absolutizing itself, and I came to the conclusion that major factors were of an extraphilosophical nature, such as imperial, colonialistic, and political forces" (*IP* 2). The moral justification of colonialism came in the form of spiritual emancipation of the unenlightened-barbarians. Rudyard Kipling characterized it "white man's burden" and many Europeans assumed this responsibility without much fuss. A close a look at the moral compass of Indian philosophical traditions tells a different story. Both Hinduism and Buddhism developed subtle theories of morality and grappled with the problem of pain and suffering, not only at the human level but at all existential levels. This is especially true of Buddhism. Buddha anticipated the modern utilitarians and also went beyond them when he pleaded that we ought to develop a loving compassion not only towards human beings, but for all beings or whole existence.

Both Jaspers and Ram Adhar Mall regret the above East and West philosophical divide and the prejudices that accompany it. Mall believes that the reading of one tradition from the point of view another can only be a meaningful if it is directed towards the understanding and comprehension of the other and is not laden with value judgments grounded in the home tradition. Indeed the value judgments of a tradition, and even within a tradition, have a particular historical reference points and do not exhaust the truth in its other possible manifestations. Moreover, such judgments run counter to the idea of philosophia perennis which, by definition, cannot be the sole monopoly of one specific philosophical tradition. Jaspers writes: "Every one possesses philosophy only in his historical form, and this of course, so far as it is true, is an expression of philosophia perennis, which no one possesses as such."[12] In the same spirit, Jaspers also reconstructs the

[10] Max Müller cited by Ram Adhar Mall, *Intercultural Philosophy*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield 2000, p. 17. [Henceforth cited as *IP*]

[11] Chandradhar Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Manarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2009, p. 15.

[12] Karl Jaspers cited in *IP* 29.

origin of the history of philosophical deliberations in his axial age thesis, and contends that there were not one or two but three main centers of philosophical enquiry in antiquity.

Jaspers traces the genesis of philosophia perennis in ancient India, China and Europe. He argues that the philosophical ideas and insights that evolved at these three places, roughly between 800 to 200 B.C., have shaped human conscious and being ever since. "It is there," he writes, "that we meet the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being" (*OGH* 1). It was at this time that the Vedas and Upanishads were composed, and Buddhism and Jainism emerged as alternative philosophies and religions, and other important schools of Indian philosophical traditions such as materialism and rationalism came into prominence. The nature of truth or reality was vigorously debated and carefully examined. The existence of the phenomenal world was challenged and sometimes refuted after a thoughtful examination. Upanishadic thinkers, deeply disappointed with the impermanent nature of phenomenal world, called it Maya or pure illusion and contrasted it with rational self—Atman, and espoused the ultimate identity of Atman and Brahman. Even though Buddha adopts a more measured approach in his study and description of the world and reality, yet he too believes that the ultimate truth defies conventional, linguistic and logical categories and can only be grasped in Nirvana. This view that the world in its finality is an appearance, and that it lacks an authentic foundation, has often been reinforced in Indian literature and psyche, and has stayed with them till today. One may never understand a Hindu or Buddhist mind if one is not ready in some way to pass over the world as total illusion or without any permanent essence whatsoever. So, I do agree with Jaspers that the axial thought continues to anchor Indian consciousness even today.

Implicit in the idea of philosophia perennis, as understood by Jaspers and expounded by Ram Adhar Mall, is the view that different philosophical traditions partake in their common pursuit of truth and reason. Though each tradition remains conscious of its philosophical positions and viewpoints, and expresses them honestly, it does not discredit the other traditions. As a matter of fact, philosophia perennis calls upon these traditions to engage each other whenever possible, and to deepen their understanding and perception of each other. In the axial age the major three centers, India, China, and Europe, symbolized the above idea of mutual engagement and respect when they came face to face with each other for the first time: "Between these three realms a profound mutual comprehension was possible from the moment they met. At the first encounter, they recognized that they were concerned with the same problems" (*OGH* 8). Jaspers defends the above engagement in two main ways.

He shows, first, that all three axial centers were reflecting over the same eternal questions regarding meaning and value of human life, the possibilities it carries, and limitations that curtail it. Later, Jaspers also strengthens this common concern on the grounds of his epistemological pluralism. He argues now that each-cognition is historically situated, implies a particular method, specific facts and definite standpoints. The implication is that we must resist posturing and avoid passing quick judgment on other traditions and the philosophical positions that they envision. Our knowledge is ours—it has its uniqueness and particularity, and may not hold in other cases at all times and under all conditions. We need to create space for the possibilities not known yet. In this spirit Jaspers remarks: "I should like to hold the question open and leave room for possible new starting-points in search for knowledge, which we cannot imagine in advance"(*OGH* 18). Jaspers philosophical position reminds us of the Jain theory of *anekāntavāda*. It trusts in similar multiplicity of truth and cognition, and holds that universe can be looked from different perspectives and to different effects, and that none of these perspectives exhaust the totality of all knowledge possible. The Jains often illustrate the issue by comparing the object of knowledge with an elephant and knowing subjects with blind men. Epistemological absolutists are like the blind men. They touch and feel one aspect of the elephant, her belly or leg or trunk and mistakenly take that aspect as the whole elephant. This error can be avoided.

Jaspers also insists that a legitimate universal philosophy of history must facilitate a boundless communication between all humankind. It is one thing, he says, to look at history and philosophy from one's own spiritual and cultural backyard and another to examine them from an open and unhindered perspective. From one's own point of view, one tends to value the things that are closer to home, grounded in one's country and culture, and closes eye towards other things distant and foreign. But this narrow horizon is detrimental to the pursuit of truth. It has many negative effects on an individual's life. It has caused much grief in the past. In its extreme form, it amplifies one's cultural,

religious or political loyalties to absurd and fanatical proportions, violates human consciousness, and inflicts much pain and suffering on the whole populace. To realize my full existential possibilities, I must transcend the above narrowness of mind and culture and make genuine efforts to reach out to others. I must try to relate with the alien consciousness and connect with her at the deepest level of her being. This communion with others has an enriching effect upon an individual's life and soul. It can help us grasp the truth of Buddha and Christ, East and West, without being polarized.

Now that we have identified some of the impeding issues between the East and West philosophical communication and laid out, along with Jaspers, the framework for possible dialogue between the two traditions, we may note the areas of possible convergence and co-operation. There appears to be a common agreement between both traditions that science, with its manifestation in modern technology, is a double-edged sword. It can be an instrument of maximum good or maximum evil, depending upon its use:

> Technology is only a means, in itself it is neither good nor evil. Everything depends upon what man makes of it, for what purpose it serves him, under what conditions he places it. The question is what kind of man will take possession of it, what sort of creature will man prove himself to be through the use he makes of it. (*OGH* 125)

To understand the implications of Jaspers' view, we need to realize that what is good, and what is bad, and what makes it so, are primarily philosophical questions. Their answer will depend not only on the cognitive capacity of an individual, but also her moral and spiritual development. In other words, even though science and technology claim to be thoroughly objective, their application necessitates subjective elements. Indeed the pressing problem of our times is to reconcile these two elements. This reconciliation of opposite elements, such mind and matter, thought and feeling, and subject and object, is done in the Buddhist philosophy through the theory of emptiness.

On the Buddhist view the gulf between mental and material, physical and psychical phenomenon is not as big as it first appears. We look at the world and it looks so very different from us. So we automatically posit a dichotomy between the self and world, and between body and soul as well. Yet, when we look at our experiences, and analyze them, we realize that the separation of the physical and spiritual, material and karmic is grounded not in truth but in convention. Emptiness doctrine helps us remove our worldly attachments and forces us to see the truth without conventional, samsarika and karmic bias, and makes us realize that the so-called opposites of mind and matter, physical and karmic causation are actually co-dependent categories. One cannot exist without the other. This coherence off mind and matter, which emptiness propagates, has started finding support in the quantum physics as well: "As in new physics [so in Buddhism, Prasangika school], matter cannot be objectively perceived or described apart from the observer—matter and mind are co-dependent" (*USA* 63) The view that mind and matter are co-dependent, that one arises with the other not apart from the other, needs our further attention as it can help us escape the problems of scientific materialism and epistemological dualism as well.

The Buddhist view also exhorts us to pursue the science of self and not just material causation. Our moral and spiritual difficulties arise due to a false understanding of the self and self-interest, and can be probably resolved with a fuller self-comprehension. Nagarjuna, along with other Buddhists, is insistent in holding that it is a mistake to construe self as a substance or ego or other forms of individuation, and that upon examination no such thing can be said to be the constitutive property of the self. Self, he argues, has no essence and is a bundle of perceptions or samskara or karmic forces. Individuation is a product of *panch skandhas* (five factors), including form, consciousness, feeling, perception, and mental dispositions (*rupa, vijnana, vedna, samjna, and samskar*): "The realization of emptiness eliminates that fabrication of essence, which eliminates grasping, contaminated action, and its pernicious consequences."[13]

Once the egoistic and false individuation of the self is overcome, a new kind of individuality is bound to emerge. The emergent individuality would be one like that of the historical Buddha. It would be marked by a deep love and compassion for all creatures and all existence. It would transcend the clash of self and other, good and evil, and remain harmonious and peaceful under various circumstances. In the practical world of daily living, such individuality would be marked by

[13] Jay L. Garfield in *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way* [Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika], trans. & commentary Jay L. Garfield, New York: Oxford University Press 1995, p. 248.

four modes of inner conduct, including loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity towards the evil and hurtful. Buddhists call such enlightened individuals bodhisattvas and put them on the same spiritual pedestal as the original Buddha. Jaspers rightly observes: "There are no essential differences between Buddha and his pious disciples or between one and another of the disciples. They are all little Buddhas" (*TPI* 34).

The Buddhist spiritual and philosophical equality of all human beings—and their potential Buddhahood, is relevant to us today. As we speak our world is reeling under emotional and political strife. And philosophy, as Jaspers has pointed out, has political consequences. The Buddhist ideal of equality of all human beings extends the Western conception of democracy, that is, equality of selves, into the metaphysical realm. It appeals to an individual's better self and demands that we treat each other well and with dignity and respect not because we are under a self-imposed moral obligation to do so, but because that is our real nature—or true human nature. Buddhists want to persuade us to rethink and reshape our world and also our philosophy of life, which is causing so much discord, pain and suffering in the modern world and is forcing its citizenry apart. I think that they do have a point.

Conclusion

The advent of modern science and technology has brought to us immense possibilities. For the first time in the human history, we can now expect to explore the deepest structures of our world, to its deepest corners. Our knowledge of the world is nowhere near complete or perfect; but still it does carry an illusive hope that modern science can probably some day help us succeed where religion and philosophy have failed us for centuries—in disclosing the origin and source of life and grasping the ultimate secrets of our universe. I think that there is something very impulsive about this trust in modern science and technology, and have argued against it. Following Jaspers, I have shown that modern science is inherently incapable of providing us with the knowledge of the ultimate truth or Being. The knowledge of the ultimate truth or Being, I believe, might be facilitated by philosophy or even religion in its philosophical form. To support my contention, I have drawn upon the Buddhist theory of emptiness, which refutes the idea of a material and spiritual substance and puts a serious question mark on the scientific hope of disclosing the ultimate truth. Next, I have also examined the implications of Jaspers' axial age thesis in the present context. I have argued that the axial age thesis envisions the multiplicity of truth in the empirical realm, pleads for a unity of philosophical and spiritual enquiry in different parts of the world, and can be of immense importance in clarifying the meaning and goals of modern science and technology. Finally, I have suggested that a growing and more profound East-West philosophical communication can be instrumental in resolving some pressing problems in the field of science and technology, and ethics and politics.

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