

From World Philosophies to Existentialism—And Back

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This essay charts the author's philosophical journey from schoolboy enthusiasms for Sartre, Plato, and Buddhism to the equally intercultural themes of his writings over the last few decades. It tells of his disillusion with the dominant style of philosophy in 1960s Oxford and of the liberating effect of working for three years in the USA. The author relates the revival of his interest in Existentialism and how his reading of Heidegger led to an increasing appreciation of Asian traditions of thought. The essay explains why it is important for philosophers to be acquainted with non-western traditions. This importance is illustrated by the ways in which the author draws upon various world philosophies in his recent writings on, for example, mystery, our relationship to nature, and the significance of beauty.

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My initiation into philosophy, during some lazy summer weeks at my boarding school in England after the exams were over, was a pleasingly cross-cultural one. Three thinkers—from ancient India, classical Greece, and twentieth-century Paris respectively—aroused my enthusiasm at the same time. I had bought an anthology of the Buddha's sayings in the hope that his doctrine of rebirth might solve the puzzle, as I then saw it, of the fate of babies who die. Meanwhile, our Classics teacher turned from talking about Greek verbs and Roman legions to telling us about Plato, specifically his *Republic*. I was also, during these weeks, skiving off to a local arts cinema that was showing a season of films connected with Jean-Paul Sartre, including a movie version of his play *Huis Clos*.

What impressed me about the three thinkers who at this time monopolized my attention was their conviction that concrete issues of human existence—political, educational, moral—could be properly addressed only in the light of a worldview, a comprehensive understanding of the world and the place within it of human life. Each, in effect, was wedded to some version of the insight that wisdom and virtue—the true and the good—are inseparable.

This conviction largely disappeared during my years at Oxford, where I read Philosophy, Politics and Economics for a BA, and then philosophy for a B. Phil., before taking up a college lectureship. Of my three schoolboy heroes, the Buddha was never mentioned by my lecturers, Plato only rarely discussed, and Sartre regarded as a talented novelist with unfortunate metaphysical pretensions. This was, after all, the 1960s, the heyday of “ordinary language” or “Oxford” philosophy. It was difficult not to admire the clarity and precision of the work being done, and occasionally—as with Peter Strawson's lectures on Kant—these virtues combined with sharp attention to large metaphysical issues. But the slogan of the times was that philosophy is not concerned to establish theories or doctrines; rather, it is a piecemeal activity of “conceptual geography,” an attempt to get a perspicuous view of the concepts that people find troublesome.

After eight years at Oxford, I found it liberating—philosophically and otherwise—when I went to the USA as a visiting professor. At the University of Miami, where the fading scent of Flower Power still lingered, I met colleagues and students talking seriously about figures—Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and others—who had been ignored, or treated as jokers, at Oxford. They talked as well about home-grown philosophical movements, such as Pragmatism and Process Philosophy, of which I was entirely ignorant. Some of them even discussed non-western

philosophies. (One colleague was John Knoblock, then working on his authoritative translation and study of Xunzi).

Despite the liberating experience in Florida, my work and teaching over the next few years when I returned to England was mainly within the confines of Anglo-American analytical philosophy. But a decisive moment came when, one morning, I looked at the draft of a book I had begun on modal logic and wondered why I was writing it. To be sure, there were puzzles to be solved in this area, but did I really want to be a puzzle solver? What especially struck me was the complete lack of connection between this research and the rest of my life—with, for example, my interests in music, travel, and animals. So I tore up the draft and took down from my bookshelves a battered copy of *The Portable Nietzsche*.

I was soon absorbed in the themes this remarkable genius addressed, to the extent of writing a book on Nietzsche's educational philosophy. Work on this project encouraged me to get to grips, at long last, with Nietzsche's critical admirer, Martin Heidegger, and to revisit my teenage idol, Sartre. The result was a book on Existentialism, a "reconstruction" that tried to dispel the romantic image of Existentialists as preaching the defiant isolation of human beings from the rest of the world. That image might possibly fit Albert Camus, but Heidegger, Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, far from relishing our alienation from the world, were intent on showing that we are unthinkable except as engaged, embodied beings-in-the-world.

Reading Nietzsche and Heidegger had an unexpected and longer-term bonus. It rekindled, and helped to guide, an interest in Asian philosophical traditions, for both of them made observations on these traditions that raised questions for me. Was Buddhism really the decadent, nihilistic doctrine that Nietzsche accused it of being? Were there not striking parallels between the Buddhist teaching of "not-self" and Nietzsche's own hostility to the existence of an enduring "I"? Why was Heidegger such an admirer of the Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki? And why had he agreed to collaborate on a translation of the *Daodejing* and explicitly invoked Daoist terminology in his essay, "The Nature of Language"? My interest in Buddhism and Daoism soon radiated out, naturally enough, in the direction of other Indian or East Asian traditions with which these two were in dialogue—Vedanta, for instance, and Confucianism.

Familiarity with a reasonably large sample of Asian traditions gave me the confidence—suitably tempered by trepidation—to accept an invitation from a publisher to write a history of philosophy that wouldn't be confined to the west. My trepidation was, of course, at the amount of work required to cover such an enormous field. But the book never attempted to be impossibly comprehensive. An important way in which its scope was restricted was indicated by the plural noun in its title, *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*. Not all philosophizing takes the form of developing a philosophy in the sense of a relatively systematic worldview, any more than all dancing takes the form of performing a dance (a tango, say). Logic and conceptual analysis, for example, don't.

So the book was largely confined to introducing readers to more or less systematic worldviews—Daoism, Platonism, Advaita Vedanta, Islamic Illuminism, Transcendental Idealism, Marxism, and so on. Its scope was further restricted by focusing on those aspects of these philosophies that revolved around the central issue of my earlier book on Existentialism—the issue of alienation. What drives the construction of philosophical systems, I argued, has not been "the problem of knowledge," but that of giving an account of human beings and their world that, without making them "strangers" in this world, acknowledges the respects in which humankind is distinguished from everything else. Each great philosophy tries, the book sought to show, to reconcile our continuity with and our differences from the rest of existence.

During the years immediately after completion of *World Philosophies*, I edited a number of volumes of "classic readings" in aesthetics, ethics, and other branches of philosophy. In each of them, I ensured that non-western texts were included, so that in the metaphysics volume, for

example, Laozi, Nāgārjuna, and Śaṅkara sit alongside Aristotle, Kant and Spinoza. Why? Why, indeed, had I spent years writing a book devoted, in significant part, to non-western philosophies? It wasn't, certainly, out of a purely historical interest. Nor was it solely out of a sense of the injustice of attributing to thinkers in the west positions established much earlier in other parts of the globe. (The *Nyāya-Sūtras*, for example, anticipate just about every view of perception later articulated by, say, Aquinas, Locke, or Russell). Other motives, including the following, were at work in my ambition to acquaint people with non-western traditions.

First, a good way of obtaining critical distance from the *idées fixes* of a culture or an age is to recognize that in other cultures or times these ideas would have been treated with suspicion, even incredulity. Contrast, for example, the contemporary conviction that reality is what the physical sciences tell us it is with the ancient schools of Indian philosophy's failure to regard materialism as a serious competitor. Or consider how foreign to the sages of China, India, and indeed ancient Greece would be the modern emphasis on rights, equality, and autonomy as the principal concern of ethics.

Second, attention to non-western philosophies helps to secure the conviction—one easy to lose in our age of professional, technical philosophy—that reflection on how we should live needs to be grounded in understanding the way of things. For the Buddha, Zhuangzi, Black Elk, and the unnamed architects of African philosophical traditions, it was evident that a person can live well, and authentically aspire to happiness, only in the light of appreciating how reality is. It helps to secure, too, the recognition that a concern with understanding the way of things is not the hobby or affliction of a few intellectuals, but a need experienced in every culture by people for whom the purpose and direction of their lives matters.

Finally, familiarity with non-western traditions teaches a salutary lesson about the scope and limits of argument and reason. The point is not, as Hegel imagined, that Indian or Chinese philosophical texts, for example, are “dream-like” fantasies uncoupled from rational enquiry. What is true, however, is that much of the argument found in these texts is intended to demonstrate the limits of what can be known through rational argument. Consider, for example, the many great philosophies that reject the possibility of arriving at a conceptual and linguistic articulation of reality as such. In these philosophies, reality is ineffable, mysterious. Brahman, Dao, and Śūnyatā are not interchangeable terms, of course, for they belong within very different discourses, but each is a name for what, in all these discourses, cannot be literally spoken about.

Or consider the non-western traditions of moral thought in which reason or argument is neither able nor necessary to secure recognition of how we should act and live. The good life in these traditions is led in spontaneous response to understanding the way of things. To see that one should be compassionate, the Buddhist does not need to argue from an “is” to an “ought” or from “first principles,” nor does the Daoist who sees that he or she should embrace *wu wei* (“non-action”). For someone who has internalized the truth of “not-self,” the exercise of compassion is spontaneous, and for someone who has come to see how the Way holds sway over things, there remains no temptation to impose upon other beings.

In western philosophy, certainly, there have been thinkers—most famously, Immanuel Kant—who have also wanted to challenge the pretensions of reason so as to make room for faith and appreciation of the noumenal. And there have been thinkers, like David Hume, for whom no moral ratiocination is needed for a person to feel that he or she should be kind and benevolent. But confidence in the power of rational argument to deliver conclusions about the nature of reality or the moral life is surely more entrenched in western cultures than elsewhere.

For reasons like these, my work over the last couple of decades has drawn as freely on non-western thought as upon European and American approaches. When I am writing about a topic—our relationship to animals, say, or the virtue of humility—it is as natural to me to seek guidance from Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or Native American texts as from the works of western philosophy. Let me illustrate.

Some years back, I wrote a book, *The Measure of Things*, which defended a doctrine of mystery. Reality as such, I argued, is ineffable. My reason for rejecting the idea that it is possible, in principle, to provide an objective, “absolute” account of the world was the broadly pragmatist one that our concepts are indelibly marked by perspectives embedded in our practical engagement with the world. I summoned William James, Heidegger, and other western thinkers in support—but also the Buddha and Zhuangzi, both of whom insist that our concepts are too conditioned by our purposes and desires to provide an objective account of reality. And when it came to searching for metaphors that might help us to get a feel or a sense for the ineffable, I found that the Daoist Way—the Way that “gives” all other ways, as Heidegger called it—and Buddhist “emptiness” were more apt than those (the Godhead, the thing-in-itself, and so on) available in the western lexicon.

Since writing that book, much of my work has been concerned with ways in which a sense of mystery might be cultivated, and how such a sense could inform one’s life. Gardening, walking, being with animals, making or listening to music in natural environments... These are among the simple ways that may foster a sense of the mystery of things. And “way” here is intended to reflect the Chinese and Japanese conception of a *dao* or *do*—a practice of self-cultivation, at once a training in and an exercise of virtues. To have a sense of the mystery of things is not to have a Eureka revelation; as Zen Buddhists put it, it’s “nothing special.” It is to engage with the world in simple ways that carry with them a gentle appreciation of their final mystery.

The examples I’ve just given of ways of cultivating a sense of mystery all involve a relationship with nature, and many of my writings over the last few years revolve around this relationship. I see myself engaged in a phenomenology of nature, an attempt to expose and reflect on the significance that environments, creatures, plants, beaches, or whatever have for us in our dealings with them. Today, many phenomenologists are engaged in this attempt, but it is a remarkably recent thing. You won’t find, in western philosophy, very much reflection on our relationship to natural environments before Rousseau. In India, East Asia, and elsewhere, however, such reflection goes back a long way. Think of Daoist meditation on the significance of flowing water, Zen Buddhist appreciation of the symbolic power of floating clouds and falling blossom, or Native American recognition of the meanings that certain animals express.

A theme that runs through these reflections on the significance of our engagement with nature is the intimacy of this engagement. In the final analysis, human cultural practice and our experience of nature are so intimately dependent on one another as to be inseparable. Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarked that it is impossible to say where nature ends and man begins. The same point had already been made, much earlier, by Zhuangzi when he concedes that, in the end, it is impossible to determine “what is done by Heaven and what is done by Man.”

It is rather pleasing that, so many years on from my schoolboy initiation into philosophy, I find myself attending to and reflecting on affinities between thinkers who cross cultures and millennia alike.

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Mystery: Engaging with Nature and the Meaning of Life (2017), *Animals and Misanthropy* (2018), and the novel *Street Dog: A Sri Lankan Story* (2018).