

Ben-Ami Scharfstein: A Philosophical Farewell

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This essay highlights Ben-Ami Scharfstein's major philosophical projects: first, philosophizing that includes non-western philosophies, especially Chinese and Indian, and that creates a dialogue between philosophers and philosophical traditions without prioritizing any of them, and without taking western philosophy as the point of departure. Second, a similar, inclusive move in the field of art, art without borders if you wish. Here the inclusivity applies not just to east and west, north and south, but even to animal-made art. Just as he wrote about philosophy in China and India, attempting to say something broader about humanity and humanism, so too does Scharfstein's argument about animals and art have far-reaching implications, above and beyond the question of the demarcation of art. He aims to tell us something about the human-animal relationship, about lack of solidarity between fellow inhabitants of planet earth, not just humans, and about cruelty and exploitation and blindness to the other, whichever other. And finally, I touch on Scharfstein's work The Philosophers, beautifully translated into Hebrew as Philosophers as Human Beings, where "he dares to imply that philosophizing is in fact a sublimated expression of the unconscious," as Yoav Ariel—sinologist and much more—puts it. Such a move, Ariel continues to argue, "dethrones philosophy of its unique position of honor and supremacy, and disperses the atmosphere of conceptual terror that philosophy created generation after generation."

Key words: Ben-Ami Scharfstein; comparative philosophy; art without borders; death; context; dialogue; Daya Krishna

Ben-Ami Scharfstein, a visionary of comparative philosophy, passed away in Tel Aviv in December 2019 at the age of one hundred. He was born in New York and studied at Brooklyn College (BA), Harvard University (MA), and Columbia University (PhD, 1942). He later taught philosophy both at Brooklyn College and at Columbia University, before immigrating in 1950 to Israel, where he was one of the founders of the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University and headed the department for many years. Not in every university and in every department of philosophy are Indian and Chinese philosophies, and more generally non-western philosophies, taught and given equal place. Paradoxically, this seems to be the case even in India today. If Indian philosophy is taught at all, it is usually segregated and taught separately, not within classes on ethics, aesthetics, phenomenology, etc. Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden suggest that each department of philosophy that ignores non-western philosophies should be renamed a "department of European and American philosophy" (Van Norden 2016: 9). Scharfstein too realized that a map, whether a philosophical map or any other map, consisting of only one or two continents is lacking. It is as much an intellectual lacuna as it is an ethical flaw. "Ani Ve'afsi Od," as the Biblical phrase puts it (in the books of Isaiah and Zephaniah): "I am, and there is none beside me." Everyone speaks of dialogue, but very few are willing to go the extra mile and actually engage in a dialogue. Scharfstein was one of these few.

Scharfstein was a prolific writer (a list of his numerous books is appended below), in comparative philosophy, art and aesthetics, philosophy and biography, and other issues in philosophy. He was unbelievably panoramic, curious, interested, and knowledgeable in a vast spectrum of topics, disciplines, and fields. I always thought of him as *sarvajña*, All-Knower.

In the following lines I can hardly attempt to cover Scharfstein's enormous oeuvre. Each of his books, chapters, and essays deserves to be carefully looked into. I will only touch on two or three of his writings, as a farewell to a teacher and a philosopher without borders.

The Sanskrit word *dvitrah*, which means "two or three," is a compound (*dvi* and *tra*) which is always used in the plural. But why always in the plural? If I end up discussing just two, not three of Scharfstein's writings, should the number not be dual instead of plural? Sanskrit grammarians would say that whenever there is a doubt (two or three?), the plural number keeps you on the safe side. But when you visit the Tel Aviv University Sourasky Library, and collect Scharfstein's books from their shelves (some under "philosophy," others under "art"), you realize that the plural use of *dvitrah* was decided by scholars who knew, firsthand, that a good book always leads to the next, hence two-or-three always end up in the plural three. And in the case of a polymath such as Scharfstein (or Daya Krishna, or G.C. Pande),¹ the *dvitrah* can easily transform into *triciturāḥ* or *pañcaśāḥ*, three-or-four or five-or-six.

1 How Death Deals with Philosophy?

I wish to open with a short essay by Scharfstein, "How Death Deals with Philosophy?", published in a book edited by two of my colleagues in Tel Aviv, Hagi Kenaan and Ilit Farber, titled *Philosophy's Moods: The Effective Grounds of Thinking* (Kenaan and Farber 2011).² It was the title that caught my attention first. Not "How Philosophy Deals with Death?" but the other way around. This title treats death as an entity or even persona of its own. Does the title imply that death (or Death) hardly knows how to deal with philosophy, since there is something eternal in philosophy, and since the philosophers—from Socrates to Daya Krishna—are not afraid to die? Fear of death is an interesting notion. Fear of my death? Of the death of my close ones? Of death as total annulment of self, of the familiar and the known? Or perhaps, it is not death that we fear, but dying as a painful process. This is what Vyāsa, the foremost commentator of the *Yogasūtra*, suggests in his gloss of the notion of *abhiniveśa*, the "life instinct," projected in this famous treatise as a natural tendency of every living creature but still however an obstacle on the "path of yoga."

Scharfstein's title, with death as (almost) a person, reminds me of the Kātha-Upaniṣad, a classical text which depicts a dialogue between Yama, god of death and personification of death as concept and presence, and Naciketā, a young and curious boy. The meaning of his name, Radhakrishnan notes, is "one who does not know and therefore seeks to know" (2005: 595).³ It is a dialogue, then, between Death and a proto-philosopher. The boy seeks to know what happens after death. "There is a doubt," he articulates his question, "about a man who is dead. He exists, say some, others He exists not. I want to know this, so please teach me" (KU 1.20, Olivelle 1998: 378-9).⁴ "It is a subtle matter (*aṇur eṣa dharmah*)," Death replies, and tries to bribe him to give up his question. He offers him longevity and wealth, and even beautiful girls with musical instruments. "Girls of this sort are hard to obtain," he tells him in a verse which is nowadays far from politically correct (KU 1.25). But Naciketā refuses to be bribed. He wants to know! "Even a full life is but a trifle," he reflects (in KU 1.26), "so keep your chariots, your songs and dances!" And here comes the twist: since he holds

onto his question, Death honestly pleads: “Do not press me, release me from this” (*mā mōparotsir ati mā srjainam*, KU 1.21, Olivelle 1998: 378-9). Such is the power of the question, or apropos Scharfstein’s title, the power of philosophy, that Death begs to be released and not vice versa.

In “How Death”—an appendix to *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of their Thought* (which was beautifully translated into Hebrew as *Philosophers as Human Beings*)—Scharfstein recalls and describes several encounters with death, from his first encounter with death as a child, to the way Hume and Kant, two famous gurus of western philosophy (my articulation), dealt with and were affected by the death of their parents and saw their own fast-approaching death in old age. Scharfstein depicts Kant, in his twilight days, as an “embittered misanthrope,” and Hume as endowed with “relaxed humanism.” The former, Scharfstein implies, was afraid to die, the latter not at all. On the former he writes that “in time, his full fear of death became more and more evident.” On the latter he writes that,

If I were to choose a hero for this essay, it would be Hume. This is because of his enthusiasm for the progress of thought, his insistence on empirical verification, and, as this essay emphasizes, his ability to turn depression into bold, intelligent philosophy. As for death, he wrote in 1776 to a friend, “Death appears to me so little horrible in his Approaches, that I scorn to quote Heroes and Philosophers as Example of Fortitude [...]. I embrace you, Dear Sir, and probably for the last time” (To Sir John Pringle, 13 August, 1776).

Daya Krishna, one of the most original voices of twentieth-century Indian philosophy, read Scharfstein’s essay (the author’s original manuscript, years before its publication in *Philosophy’s Moods*), and told me that he finds it hard to accept the depiction of a thinker, Kant, who wrote an essay such as “Perpetual Peace” in 1795, just a few years before he passed away in 1804, as a misanthrope (personal communication, 2007). Daya Krishna was hesitant about the intimate connection that Scharfstein saw (and which is the crux of *Philosophers as Human Beings*) between biography and philosophy. This does not mean that he was not interested in the personal dimension of philosophy, in the person behind the philosophical text. But he thought that Kant, as a person—and for that matter, every other philosopher and creative artist (Daya Krishna used to refer to philosophy as “the art of the conceptual”)—should be searched for in the philosophical text (in the artwork) itself, not just, or not primarily, in personal letters or in what was written on him by contemporaries and biographers. Daya Krishna believed that philosophical writing can reveal, if not the “higher” or “truer” self of its author, then at least dimensions of his personhood which are as interesting, or even more interesting, than those hinted at by one’s biographical story.

In the last paragraph of his essay, Scharfstein summarizes the main points—“generalizations,” he calls them—that he was trying to convey here, and elsewhere. “I’ve finished,” he writes,

except to recall a succession of generalizations: that philosophers and philosophies are always individual; that the abstraction native to philosophy is always inseparable from affect; that the character of parents’ presence and absence always influences philosophy; and that the philosophies of Kant and of Hume, both of them extraordinarily ambitious and creative, are more fully understood if studied in relation to their different, almost opposite affective lives. [...] One sees that, when grasped as complementary angles of vision, philosophy and psychology make our understanding more subtle and realistic. The effect of joining them

cannot be predicted, but it can as easily increase as decrease our admiration of a great philosopher.

This paragraph accentuates the intrinsic relation that Scharfstein saw between philosophy and psychology. “When grasped as complementary,” they “make our understanding more subtle and realistic.” Or as Yoav Ariel—Scharfstein’s student, friend, and *Bhāṣya-kāra*—puts it, with reference to Scharfstein’s meta-philosophical endeavor in *Philosophers as Human Beings*,

Instead of searching for the meta-philosophical foundation in anthropological theories or in a universal theory of values, he found it in the psychoanalytical world of concepts. The philosophical fraternity was both shocked and astounded. Scharfstein dares to imply that philosophizing is in fact a sublimated expression of the unconscious. The response to this daring move was either sheer rejection, and even resentment, on the grounds that it is allegedly irrelevant to philosophy; or alternately embrace of its far-reaching consequences: Scharfstein dethrones philosophy of its unique position of honor and supremacy, and disperses the atmosphere of conceptual terror that philosophy created generation after generation. His attempt is to incorporate philosophy critically and proportionally as a creation among other creations of human consciousness. (personal communication)

“Dethroning,” “conceptual terror,” “philosophy as sublimated expression of the unconscious”: Ariel lets the cat out the bag and reveals the sharp edge of Scharfstein’s attempt, sketched by Scharfstein himself with his usual, more gentle brush and concealed behind numerous details and anecdotes, intriguing and engaging, about the philosophers’ life and biography.

In closure, in the final line of “How Death,” Scharfstein—in his late eighties at the time—bids farewell and writes: “I’ve finished, except to say, insight comes from many directions.” And he signs, “Ben-Ami Scharfstein.” I remember listening to him reading this essay, including the final line, and the signature, in his own voice, at Tel Aviv University’s Gilman Building. A wonderful closing line, which is in fact the bottom line of his grand comparative project: insight comes from many directions!

2 Without Borders

What is philosophy without borders? Consider for instance Scharfstein’s work *Amoral Politics: The Persistent Truth of Machiavellism* (Scharfstein 1995). Here he dedicates two chapters, the first two chapters, to “The Machiavellian Legalism of Ancient China” and “The Machiavellian Political Science of Ancient India,” before finally reaching “Machiavellism of Renaissance Italy.” This is to say that Machiavelli himself has no precedence over other Machiavellis in Scharfstein’s discussion. It is not just a matter of setting the record straight historically, chronologically, but a matter of changing the intellectual point of departure. Europe does not necessarily come first.

Or, as another example of Scharfstein’s “borderless philosophy,” consider the list of illustrations in his book *On Birds, Beasts and Other Artists: An Essay on the Universality of Art* (Scharfstein 1989a)⁵: an illustration from a sixteenth-century textbook of Chinese philosophy; female nude by Edgar Degas opposite a woodblock print by Japanese artist Hokusai; a painting by Emil Nolde (the German-Danish painter and printmaker) opposite a wooden statue from New Ireland (Papua New Guinea); photograph of the studio of sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, taken in 1907; a sculpture by

Auguste Rodin; Japanese storks dancing; a group of chimpanzees playing; the chimpanzee Congo (1954-1964) painting; a painting by Nadia, the autistic girl whose talent was revealed in a monograph published in 1977; a painting by Chinese girl Wang Yani, who began painting at the age of three; an eighteenth-century painting of Radha and Krishna (Kangra Paintings of the Bihari Sat Sai); a painting by Ruth Annaqtuusi Tularialik, the Eskimo painter; a print by Pitseolak Ashoona, the Inuk Canadian artist; a painting by Franz Kernbeis, an Austrian contemporary artist; a painting by Alexander Cozens (1717-1786): landscape composition made of abstract blots on paper; a painting by Paul Klee, *Death and Fire* (1940); the Rainbow Serpent, rock art from Australia; a statue of Shiva Nataraja from the tenth-century; a statue of the Greek god Apollo from the sixth-century BCE; a painting by Chinese painter Chen Hongshou (1598-1652); a painting by Chinese painter and calligrapher Wen Zhengming (1470-1559); a painting by Japanese painter Tachihara Kyosho (1786-1840); *The Chamber of Genius* (1812) by English artist and caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson; photograph of Liberian sculptor “Zra”; self-portrait by Hokusai; a work by the contemporary Canadian artist Bill Reid; and finally, the painting *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings* (early 1620s) by Bichitr, an Indian painter during the Mughal period.

This is an overwhelming list of illustrations. It shows that, according to Scharfstein, art belongs to everyone and no one. His approach is all-inclusive. For him, a chimpanzee and a child-artist are on par with the greatest names of art. Moreover, his map includes Africa, Australia, and the Pacific, not just Europe and North America—and of course east and south-east Asia. No one has monopoly, supremacy, or even priority, whether in art or any other field. Neither the so-called professional artist, or gallerist, or pundit of art, nor the western over the non-western, or the classic over the contemporary (or vice-versa), or even the human over the animal. “We have always been and remain insular,” Scharfstein writes in a different context (in his paper “The Western Blindness to Non-Western Philosophies,” where he looks into the work of early Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu and of the “Indian skeptic and mystic,” as he refers to him, Śrīharṣa).⁶ “The insularity I am referring to,” he continues to write, “is our professional blindness to any but Western philosophy, which fills our whole professional horizon. Insularity tempts us by its overestimation of whatever we have learned wherever we happen to have grown up, but it is no intellectual birthright.” Regarding the non-distinction, at the most essential level, between humans and animals, in art and beyond, which sits well (Yoav Ariel told me) with *Ecclesiastes* 3.19, “And the preeminence of man over beast is naught” (*umotar ha’adam min habehema ayin*), the question is whether elephants or chimpanzees really “paint,” birds “sing,” and storks “dance”? Are these artistic attributes not just a human projection on the animal world? Scharfstein is well aware of this objection. In *Spontaneity in Art: Improvisation, Movement, Naivety, Madness, Surprise, Performance, Inspiration* (a wonderful title for a book), he writes that those who exclude elephants and storks, birds and monkeys, both limit the borders of art and underestimate the capacities of animals (or overestimate the human species).⁷ “Every bird, elephant, and chimpanzee,” he writes here (I am translating from Hebrew), “is a whole world, and each of them is endowed with capacities that humans do not have, despite their impressive lingual, scientific, and artistic abilities.” Moreover, he adds, “Animals have emotions and display empathy, imagination, and intelligence” (Scharfstein 2006: 22 and 25). As I read Scharfstein, I recall Descartes referring to animals as “automatons.” But when I look around, in Tel Aviv, Jaipur, everywhere, and see men, women, and children staring at their “screens,” my feeling is that it is in fact vice-versa, namely that it is rather we, humans, who have become automatons, or cyborgs (the cellular phone has become a human organ).

Just as he wrote from the 1970s onward—to the astonishment of his Eurocentric readers—about philosophy in China and India, attempting to say something broader about humanity and

humanism, and through philosophy to illustrate that human beings “there” are as human as we are “here,” so too does Scharfstein’s argument about animals and art have far-reaching implications, above and beyond the question of the demarcation of art. He aims to tell us something about the human-animal relationship, about lack of solidarity between fellow inhabitants of planet earth, not just humans, and about cruelty and exploitation, and blindness to the “other,” whichever other. In this respect, Scharfstein’s work has an acute political edge.

With regard to Congo, the artist-chimpanzee, Scharfstein draws on Desmond Morris, who suggests that he was interested in the process (the pleasure of painting), not in the result or the finished product (Scharfstein 2006: 93). This reminds me of the *Bhagavadgītā*. In this classical Indian text, Krishna teaches Arjuna that one should focus on one’s action, not on its fruits, or goal, or objective. “*Kṛpāṇaḥ phala-betavaḥ*,” he famously tells him (in BG 2.49): “Miserable are those driven by the fruit.” In this sense, Congo is a true *karma-yogin*. Scharfstein implies that we have a lot to learn about the creative act from this monkey-artist, and from other animal-artists.

From among Scharfstein’s numerous writings in comparative philosophy, I wish to mention two books, *Philosophy East/Philosophy West: A Critical Comparison of Indian, Chinese, Islamic and European Philosophy* (1978, written with Shlomo Biderman, Yoel Hoffmann, Dan Daor, and Ilai Alon) and *A Comparative History of World Philosophy: From the Upanishads to Kant*, which I consider as the crown jewel of his work as a comparativist (Scharfstein 1998b). Chapter 1 of the former book, titled “Cultures, Contexts and Comparisons,” is essential reading for anyone interested in philosophy without borders. In the segment “The Matter of Comparison,” Scharfstein touches on comparison as a *pramāṇa*, namely as an elementary source of knowledge. But he is well aware of the risks of comparison across cultures. “It is only too easy,” he writes, “to lift ideas out of their cultural contexts, to translate the terms in which they are expressed into familiar ones, and to come to plausible but misleading conclusions” (Scharfstein 1978: 9). And he soberly adds that “translation has always been a difficult art” (Scharfstein 1978: 35). The structure of this book is interesting. “I propose to begin,” Scharfstein explains, “with the Indian civilization, to use it as background and compare it, relevant feature after relevant feature, with the civilizations of China and the West” (Scharfstein 1978: 52). Yet again, the west is not the point of departure. (As I write these lines, I focus on Indian philosophy, in which I feel at home, but Scharfstein was no less fascinated by Chinese philosophy.)

He opens his discussion with the suggestion that “India is a subcontinent and cosmos,” a beautiful articulation. He later discusses debates in classical Indian philosophy, highlighting the place of debates, disputes, and disagreements in the development of a philosophical tradition. He further spotlights Raghunātha Śiromaṇi, or “Raghunātha the rebel,” as Daya Krishna refers to this unique Nyāya thinker of the sixteenth century, “who openly and deliberately flouted and criticized the well-known accepted positions of his own traditional school of thought” (I quote from Daya Krishna’s *Indian Philosophy: A New Approach*, his alternative textbook of Indian philosophy, 1997: 174).⁸ Scharfstein, a teacher as much as scholar and *sarvajña*, mentions an anecdote about Raghunātha defeating his own teacher in a philosophical debate, and the latter telling his wife with sheer delight that “this morning he [Raghunātha] vanquished me by an obstinately conducted argument. In my opinion, his intellect is more luminous than the full moon itself” (Scharfstein 1978: 77). Interested in pedagogy and education, Scharfstein further turns his spotlight on “the university of Nālandā, as we may call it, [which] was open to everyone who could pass the entrance examination.” Moreover, he adds that “all possible and impossible doctrines” were taught, not just Buddhist studies (Scharfstein 1978: 78). This quote (“possible and impossible”) is from Chinese visitor Hiuen Tsang’s [Xuanzang’s] account (in S. Beal’s translation).

The inclusion of Islamic philosophy in the book under discussion (covered by specialist Ilai Alon) is worth a special mention. Scharfstein is interested in “connected philosophies” (apropos Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s notion of “connected histories”),⁹ and Islamic philosophy has had close interactions with Greek and later European philosophy. Scharfstein is interested in the connecting threads, both subtle and more explicit, since he aims to sketch nothing less than a map of “world philosophy.” This map is comprehensively sketched in Scharfstein’s book *A Comparative History of World Philosophy: From the Upanishads to Kant*, with chapters such as Early Logical Relativism, Skepticism, and Absolutism: Mahāvīra, Chuang-tzu, Protagoras, Gorgias, Plato (chapter 4); Religio-Philosophical Synthesis: Udayana, Chu Hsi, Avicenna [Ibn Sina], Maimonides, Aquinas (chapter 9); Immanent-Transcendent Holism: Śaṅkara, Spinoza (chapter 11); and Perceptual Analysis, Realistic and Idealistic: Asaṅga/Vasubandhu, Locke, Berkeley, Hume (chapter 12). I chose these chapters randomly, to demonstrate the breadth of the map, and to display some of its philosophical coordinates. But I wish to return to the title. As I was searching for the book at the Sourasky Library, I found besides the published version the author’s original manuscript. It struck me that the subtitle of the manuscript is slightly different: not *From the Upanishads to Kant*, but *From Uddālaka to Kant*. This looks fair. An Indian philosopher opposite a European one. It is Scharfstein who warns against generalization of the “other.” But this is exactly what happened in the title finally chosen (by the publishers?). Indian philosophy (or non-western philosophy) is represented here by the Upaniṣads, a massive textual corpus; western philosophy by a particular philosopher, a particular name. I remember Daya Krishna roaring in his Shimla Lectures (2005):

Indian thinking is not anonymous, it is varied to particular persons, and we must know their names, we must know their opinions, we must know their diversities. This country will never be known to itself unless it hears the diverse voices which are there; conflicting voices, but respectful voices. People respected others who were totally opposed.

Daya Krishna’s attempt, throughout his writings, was to reveal the plurality, diversity, and multivocality of Indian philosophy. Scharfstein, in his book, explains why he chose Uddālaka for the original title:

Uddālaka is the person I would like to dramatize as the first philosopher. He may have lived earlier or later than the date I assign him, the ninth century BCE, but it is safe to assume that he preceded the earliest Greek philosophers. (Scharfstein 1998b: 57)

Yet again, Scharfstein sets the historical record straight. Uddālaka preceded the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Yet again, Europe is not necessarily the point of departure. Scharfstein makes an attempt to write a new narrative. For him, pluralism is the name of the game—pluralism, not insularity. I cannot delve here into the chapter dedicated by Scharfstein to Uddālaka, the first philosopher (chapter 2, The Beginnings of Metaphysical Philosophy: Uddālaka, Yājñavalkya, Heraclitus, Parmenides). Instead, I am saving my last segment for Scharfstein’s book *The Dilemma of Context*.

3 Out of Context?

The question of context is pertinent in every comparative work. It makes sense to read Śāṅkara following the *Upaniṣads*, the *Gītā*, the *Brahmasūtra*, and even Nāgārjuna, and before later Vedānta writings. Or to put it more lightly, when you are meeting a friend for coffee at the Gilman Building cafeteria of Tel Aviv University, a hub of philosophical (and more broadly, intellectual) exchange, you will not be surprised to see Śāṅkara drinking his coffee with Sureśvara and Vācaspatiśrī, or Uddālaka and Yājñavalkya. But with Spinoza (as in Scharfstein's *A Comparative History*), or Heidegger (as in John Grimes¹⁰)? Will it not be totally "out of context"? I suspect that it was this type of objection that triggered Scharfstein to write *The Dilemma of Context*.¹¹ He convincingly suggests that despite the importance of the question of context, "we have no theory of context." His aim, therefore, is to think about "context in itself" or "context as such," namely context above and beyond any particular context (Scharfstein 1989b: 3-4). Scharfstein distinguishes between five levels of context: the microcontext, the correlative context, the macrocontext, the metacontext, and the universal or meta-metacontext (Scharfstein 1989b: 63). The microcontext involves minute scrutiny, as Scharfstein puts it, of the vocabulary, style of expression, and even the personality of the author (Scharfstein 1989b: 64). Yet again, author and text, according to him, are inseparable. The correlative context "include[s] the book in which the philosophical text occurred, the text or texts on which it draws or to which it was responding, the other writings of its author, and so on" (Scharfstein 1989b: 63). "The macrocontext deals with such larger matters as the disputes between schools to which the text is relevant, the cultural conditions it reflects, and so on" (Scharfstein 1989b: 65). The metacontext "deals with the text from above. From above, one asks why the kind of questions the text deals with are raised at all, or why such arguments are used." Scharfstein adds that "wide-ranging comparative studies of all kinds" belong in this level of context (Scharfstein 1989b: 66). Finally, "the universal or meta-metacontext is established by joining all the other, partial contexts and setting them in their relationships to one another, so as to make visible the full intellectual universe of the text. Of course, the universal contexts we construct are, in fact, no more than hopes or sketches" (Scharfstein 1989b: 66).

"Each level," Scharfstein writes, "is legitimate and supports the others; but in the long run it is the most general, I believe, that is the most important." He adds that "to search for the general is to search for the unity of the world" (Scharfstein 1989b: 188). And he further suggests that,

experience of the unfamiliar has the power to intrigue or alarm us into awakening. If awakened, what would we find? The answer must be individual at first, but it would be astonishing if we could find nothing for ourselves in traditions in which men grappled with insoluble problems at least somewhat like ours and, generation on generation, perfected modes of analysis and synthesis, sometimes quite demandingly technical, sometimes thoughtfully humane, and sometimes intelligently and even humorously skeptical and fantastic. Laughter is a release from insoluble problems, so that people who worry over contexts, relativism, and the like, should welcome it with the seriousness it deserves. (Scharfstein 1989b: 191)

On one hand, Scharfstein speaks of a global or universal picture that we (philosophers, intellectuals) should aspire to achieve, piece after piece in a jigsaw-puzzle with myriad pieces. Even if we cannot expect to finally assemble all the pieces and reach the "full picture," Scharfstein believes that the very act of collecting pieces, especially unfamiliar pieces, is fruitful and awakening. Every visit to unknown landscapes, especially philosophical landscapes, is bound to bear fruits. Implied is a sense of self-

revelation through the other, or more precisely, others in the plural. The comparative philosopher, it is further implied, is the most equipped (and broad-minded) to reach the “meta,” or even “meta-meta” levels of context. Scharfstein’s fivefold context scheme is his answer to the initial question about context and comparative philosophy. The “meta” and “meta-meta” levels are his answer to all those who believe that context only comprises of levels 1-3. Scharfstein’s scheme projects the comparative project as utterly systematic. Comparative philosophers work their way up from the microcontext, which is not forgotten or neglected.

But on the other hand, Scharfstein, like Scharfstein, prescribes laughter for those “who worry about context.” Between the lines of context, which is broadened rather than forsaken, Scharfstein leaves room for laughter. Laughter can unscrew stubborn screws and bypass the stigma and prejudice that often barricade the comparativist’s attempt not just “to compare,” but to create a dialogue across cultures. If I may borrow two vital concepts from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, then between the lines of *abhyāsa*, Scharfstein provides a scope for *vairāgya*. *Abhyāsa* stands for method, discipline, context. *Vairāgya* connotes effortlessness and a sense of freedom. Scharfstein’s laughter, with its inbuilt *vairāgya*, which transcends linearity and structure, with its implied measure of playfulness, improvisation, and spontaneity, with its here-and-now-ness (as against the toward-ness embedded in the processual progress from micro to meta), is as crucial (and serious, he insists) a philosophical ingredient as context itself.

With serious laughter, I close my philosophical homage to Ben-Ami Scharfstein, and hope that the readers visit and look into his multifaceted oeuvre.

Books by Ben-Ami Scharfstein

The Artist in World Art (Hebrew, Am Oved, 1970); *Mystical Experience* (1974, Penguin Books); *The Mind of China: The Culture, Customs and Beliefs of Traditional China* (1974, Basic Books); *Philosophy East/Philosophy West: A Critical Comparison of Indian, Chinese, Islamic and European Philosophy*, with Shlomo Biderman, Yoel Hoffmann, Dan Daor, and Ilai Alon (OUP, 1978); *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of their Thought* (OUP, 1980); *The Dilemma of Context* (NYU Press, 1989); *Of Birds, Beasts, and Other Artists: An Essay on the Universality of Art* (NYU Press, 1991); *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* (SUNY, 1993); *Amoral Politics: The Persistent Truth of Machiavellism* (SUNY, 1995); *A Comparative History of World Philosophy: From the Upanishads to Kant* (SUNY, 1998); *Spontaneity in Art: Improvisation, Movement, Naivety, Madness, Surprise, Performance, Inspiration* (Hebrew, Am Oved, 2006); *Roots of Bergson’s Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 2007); *Art Without Borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity* (Chicago University Press, 2009); *The Nonsense of Kant and Lewis Carroll: Unexpected Essays on Philosophy, Art, Life, and Death* (Chicago University Press, 2014).

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¹ For a wonderful exposition of the philosophical contribution of Daya Krishna and G.C. Pande, see the special issue of *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 4 (October 2013), titled “Remembering The Work Daya Krishna and Govind Chandra Pande,” and especially the introduction by Arindam Chakrabarti and Jay Garfield, “Remembering Daya Krishna and G.C. Pande: Two Giants of Post-Independence Indian Philosophy” (459-64).

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- Most of Daya Krishna's writings (articles and books, both in English and in Hindi) are now accessible online at Daya Krishna: The Open Library, <https://www.dayakrishna.org>
- 2 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, "How Death Deals with Philosophy?", in *Philosophy's Moods: The Effective Grounds of Thinking*, ed. H. Kenaan and I. Farber (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 201-8. However, for my present essay I quote from the author's original manuscript.
 - 3 trans. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2005).
 - 4 trans. Patrick Olivelle, *The Early Upaniṣads* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
 - 5 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *On Birds, Beasts and Other Artists: An Essay on the Universality of Art*, trans. into Hebrew Dan Daor (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1989a).
 - 6 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Western Blindness to Non-Western Philosophies*, paper presented at Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy (Boston, Massachusetts; 1998a) <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Comp/CompScha.htm>
 - 7 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Spontaneity in Art: Improvisation, Movement, Naivety, Madness, Surprise, Performance, Inspiration*, translated into Hebrew by Amnon Katz (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2006).
 - 8 Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophy: A New Approach* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1997).
 - 9 See for instance, Subrahmaniam's paper "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," in *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3, Special Issue: The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia, 1400-1800 (1997): 735-62.
 - 10 John Grimes, *Śaṅkara and Heidegger: Being, Truth, Freedom* (Delhi: Indica Books, 2007).
 - 11 Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Dilemma of Context* (New York: New York University Press, 1989b).