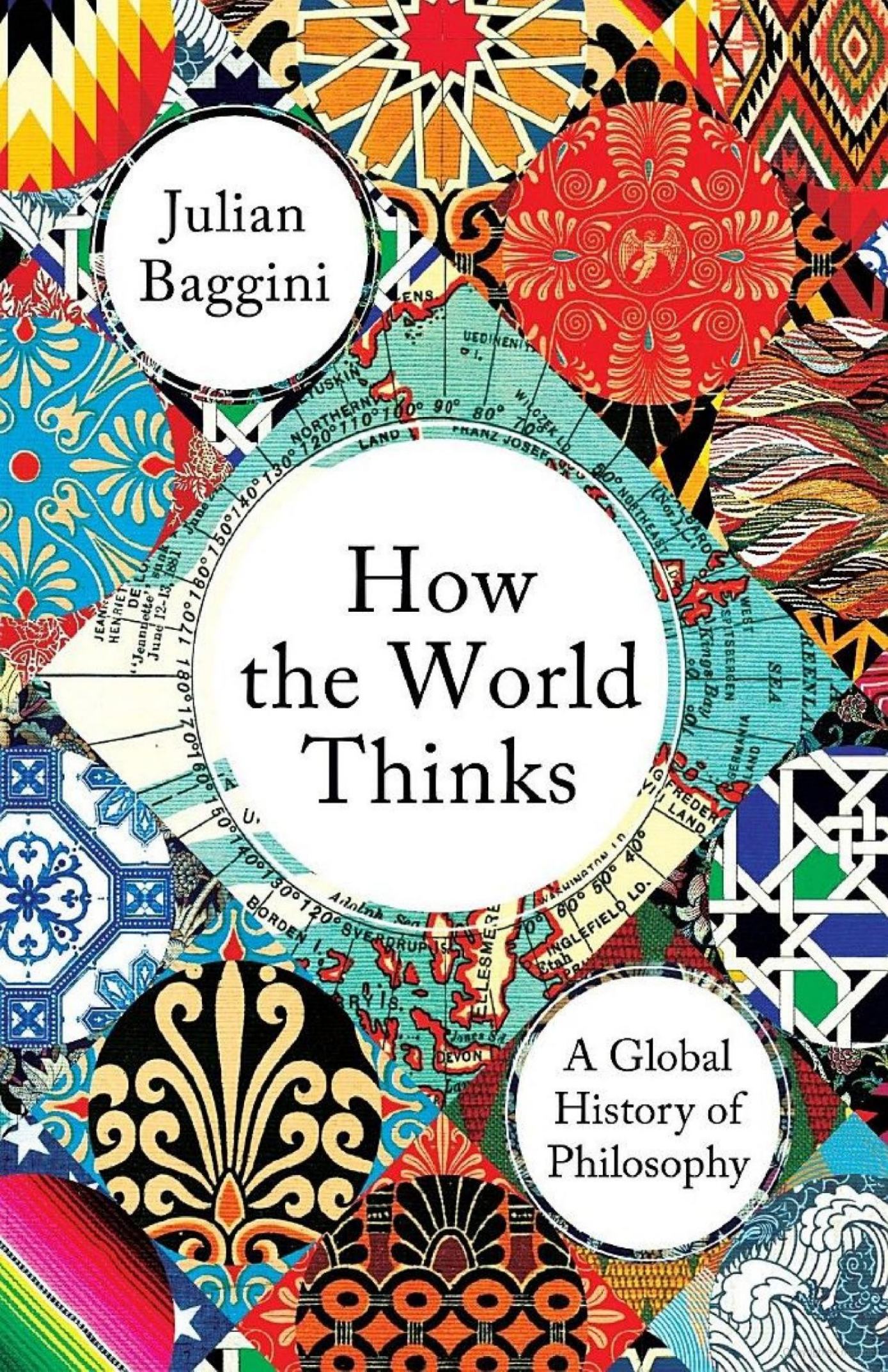
Julian
Baggini
How
the World
Thinks
A Global
History of
Philosophy

Contents

A NOTE ON NAMES

In China, Japan and Korea, the convention is for the family name to appear before the given name. However, many people of East Asian ancestry who live in the West refer to themselves by the Western convention of given name first, family name last. I have tried to follow the usage each individual customarily follows. This means most, but not all, East Asian names have the family name first. It should usually be clear in the context which is which. Chinese names are given in either pinyin or Wade-Giles romanisation.

Introduction

One of the great unexplained wonders of human history is that written philosophy first flowered entirely separately in different parts of the globe at more or less the same time. The early *Upaniṣads* – the foundational texts of Indian philosophy, of unknown authorship – were written between the eight and sixth centuries BCE. China's first great philosopher, Confucius, was born in 551 BCE, while in Greece the first notable pre-Socratic philosopher, Thales of Miletus, was born around 624 BCE. The Buddha's traditional birth date also places him in the sixth century bce, although scholars now believe he probably wasn't born until around 480 bce, about the same time as Socrates.

These early philosophies have had a profound impact on the development of distinctive cultures across the world. Their values and tenets have shaped the different ways people worship, live and think about the big questions that concern us all. Most people do not consciously articulate the philosophical assumptions they have absorbed and are often not even aware that they have any, but assumptions about the nature of self, ethics, sources of knowledge, the goals of life, are deeply embedded in our cultures and frame our thinking without our being aware of them. Evidence of their influence is even embedded in the fabric of the world's great monuments, which can be read like living books, expressions of the philosophies of the people who built them. The Forbidden City in Beijing is constructed on Confucian principles, the Alhambra in Granada is infused with Islamic thought, while even the cafés of the Parisian *rive gauche* testify to the existentialist vision of philosophy as a personal, everyday pursuit.

The process of cultural absorption of philosophical world views is sometimes called *sédimentation*. 'If it were possible to lay bare and unfold all the presuppositions in what I call my reason or my ideas at each moment,' wrote the twentieth-century French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, 'we should always find experiences which have not been made explicit, large-scale contributions from past and present, a whole "sedimentary history" which is not only relevant to the *genesis* of my thought, but which determines its *significance*.'[1] Just as a riverbed builds up sediment comprised of that which washes through it, values and beliefs become 'sedimented' in cultures. In turn, those values and beliefs begin to sediment in the minds of people who inhabit those cultures from birth, so that we mistake the build-up for an immutable riverbed. Through these channels of the minds our thoughts and experiences flow, not noticing how they are being directed. One value of comparative

philosophy is that by exposing the different assumptions of others – their philosophical sediment, if you will – our own assumptions come to the fore.

Yet, for all the varied and rich philosophical traditions across the world, the Western philosophy I have studied for over thirty years – based entirely on canonical Western texts – is presented as the universal philosophy, the ultimate inquiry into human understanding. 'Comparative philosophy' – study in two or more philosophical traditions – is left almost entirely to people working in anthropology or cultural studies. This abdication of interest assumes that comparative philosophy might help us to understand the intellectual cultures of India, China or the Muslim world, but not the human condition.

In fact, Western philosophy is so parochial that it is Balkanised. When I lived in Manchester I attended senior philosophy seminars at both its universities in buildings on opposite sides of the same street, no more than half a mile apart. Because one department focused on Continental European philosophy and the other on anglophone philosophy, I was almost the only one to cross the road between the two, even though both claim a common ancestry through Descartes and Spinoza back to the ancient Greeks.

This has become something of an embarrassment for me. Until a few years ago I knew virtually nothing about anything other than *Western* philosophy, a tradition that stretches from the ancient Greeks to the great universities of Europe and America. Look at my PhD certificate or the names of the university departments where I studied, however, and there is only one, unqualified, word: philosophy.

Recently and belatedly, I have been exploring the great classical philosophies of the rest of the world, travelling across continents to encounter them first-hand. It has been the most rewarding intellectual journey of my life. I have discovered that to understand a culture's philosophical tradition better is to understand that culture better. To borrow an analogy from the Zimbabwean philosopher Joram Tarusarira, understanding the philosophical framework of a people is like understanding the software their minds work on: 'If you don't know their software there will always be this gap in terms of understanding in conversation.' Such gaps explain why, for example, so many development aid projects in Africa have failed. 'If you want that aid to be of effect, then you have to engage with the people; if you want sustainability, you have to engage with the people. But many a time we have had white elephant projects basically because the people bringing them have no understanding of the philosophy and religion of the people.'

The software analogy is neat, but the relationship between classical

philosophical texts and the 'folk philosophy' of a people is clearly not a simple one. Ideas that are developed and analysed in depth by scholars do have their counterparts in the general culture, but in simpler, vaguer, broader forms. Most Americans and Europeans, for example, assert the value of individual freedom and liberty without any deep knowledge of how these concepts have been justified and explained by their philosophers. Millions of Indians live their lives according to principles of *karma* without an in-depth knowledge of the rich and complex literature articulating what precisely this involves. Ordinary Chinese assert the importance of harmony with little more than a cursory knowledge of the Confucian and Daoist texts that analyse and describe it. There is nonetheless a relationship between high scholarship and everyday living, which is why harmony, freedom and *karma* play very different roles in different parts of the world.

Even if we take the most sceptical view possible, that the folk versions of these philosophical ideas are diluted and bastardised beyond recognition, it is still important to understand how these concepts create the rhetorical space in which cultures think, explain and justify. When an American politician speaks in praise of freedom, it is because the culture demands that the value of freedom is upheld, just as in China it is harmony which must be defended. What is salient in the world's philosophies also tends to be salient in their host cultures, and in that way at least understanding philosophy is a window into culture.

Philosophies are important for understanding not just peoples but their histories. This is a view that became somewhat unfashionable in Western historiography, which has emphasised the actions of important individuals or economic and social forces. But until the mid-nineteenth century it was assumed that philosophies and religious beliefs were the primary causes of the major social and political upheavals of the epoch. Ideas not only mattered but could be deadly. 'There was once a man called Rousseau who wrote a book containing nothing but ideas,' said the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle to one who doubted this. 'The second edition was bound in the skins of those who laughed at the first.'[2]

The historian Jonathan Israel argues that we need to regain our sense of the importance of ideas in history. 'Without referring to Radical Enlightenment,' he argues, 'nothing about the French Revolution makes the slightest sense or can even begin to be provisionally explained.'[3] What Israel says of the Enlightenment 'revolution of the mind'[4] is true of history and historical change more generally. 'Although a philosophy is itself a cultural phenomenon, it can not only understand but also change a culture,' says philosopher Tom Kasulis.[5]

Kasulis reminds us not only that ideas matter but that they continually evolve. New forms of thinking are always being created to make sense of our changing aspirations and to give voice to our discontent. When we look at 'traditions' it is easy to overlook or downplay these changes. The temptation is always to look out for the continuities over time which make things seem to fit together. As a result, the dissident Chinese writer Xu Zhiyuan observes, people 'ignore intrinsic complexities and, having made their neat comparisons between present and past, or found a satisfying descriptive label, they sit back smugly to enjoy their understanding of things'.[6] Given that one of the oldest Chinese classics is the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, to deny the importance of change in the tradition it began would be a mockery. We need to be alert to the discontinuities within cultures as well as to the sometimes surprising commonalities between diverse societies separated by time and space. For example, Kasulis thinks that during Europe's Dark Ages the dominant mode of thought might well have been closer to that of the modern East.[7]

A proper understanding of philosophical traditions does not efface all developments and differences over time, but it does appreciate how developments and dissent never emerge in a vacuum. Ideas and philosophies have histories that are constantly in the making. We have little chance of coming up with new ideas fit for new times unless we understand the ideas and times with which they are contiguous. Western democracy, for example, cannot simply be exported or imposed on countries with very different histories and cultures. For democracy to travel, it must adapt. Comparative philosophy should therefore be seen as the study not of philosophies set in stone like museum pieces but of dynamic systems. Understood properly, they give us insights not only into the present and past but also into potential futures.

As the relationship between philosophies and the cultures in which they emerge is a complex one, it is difficult to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Did Confucius shape the Chinese mind or did the Chinese mind shape Confucius? The answer, as it is to all these questions, is a bit of both and it is impossible to determine the actual weightings. 'A culture reflects or assumes a philosophy or set of affiliated philosophies even as it influences the framework within which philosophy takes shape,' says Kasulis.[8] For our purposes, it is enough to recognise that there is an intimate relationship here and every scholar I spoke to agreed that understanding the philosophical traditions of a culture helps us to understand that culture more generally.

My philosophical journey has also convinced me that we cannot understand ourselves if we do not understand others. In art and literature,

this is little more than a truism. Novels, plays and films give us imaginative insight into the lives, thoughts and feelings of others, all of which enlarges and enriches our own hearts and minds. Philosophical traditions do the same. As the world shrinks, this kind of self-understanding is essential. If cultures are to meet rather than clash, we need to understand not just how others differ from ourselves, but how we differ from them.

We cannot pretend that we can understand the world's philosophies in a matter of a few years, let alone by reading one book. My more modest intention has been to find out *what we need to understand in order to begin to understand*. Searching for this philosophical entry point is like looking for the secret doors in an ethnographic theme park that allow us entry to the real thing. The Japanese might call this a *nyūmon*. Physically, a *nyūmon* is an entrance, such as the University of Tokyo's Red Gate. The *nyūmon* plays a dual role, both defining the boundaries of a space and inviting visitors in.[9] The word has been used by many Japanese writers for what in English we call 'introductions'. Taken more literally, that word also well describes the function of this book. When introduced to somebody, you are not told everything about them, rather you are given the opportunity to begin an acquaintance. This introductory book, then, is a prelude to closer examination, a first step in a longer, open and open-ended project.

Getting to know others requires avoiding the twin dangers of overestimating either how much we have in common or how much divides us. Our shared humanity and the perennial problems of life mean that we can always learn from and identify with the thoughts and practices of others, no matter how alien they might at first appear. At the same time, differences in ways of thinking can be both deep and subtle. If we assume too readily that we can see things from others' points of view we end up seeing them from merely a variation of our own. We are often told we should put ourselves in the shoes of others, but stepping into someone's footwear is not the same as getting inside their mind. We have to get beyond imagining how things would look to us from an unfamiliar viewpoint and really try to understand how they look to others for whom the landscape is home.

This book is a selective history of global philosophy, one which excavates the often hidden foundations of how the world thinks today. The archaeological metaphor also has another dimension. The more visible, practical aspects of the world's philosophies appear last in these pages because to make sense of them we need to understand the foundations on which they are built. The most fundamental of these concern how the world knows: what justifies belief and claims to knowledge. This is the subject of Part One. Part Two looks at what the world believes about metaphysics and

cosmology: the way the world works and is constructed. Part Three considers how different philosophies conceive of human nature, how we see ourselves. It is only after looking at how philosophies understand the basis of knowledge, the structure of the world and the nature of the self that we can make sense of how they think we ought to live, the topic of Part Four.

I do not claim to be fluent in all the forms of thinking I will be introducing you to. In many ways I am helped in this project by *not* being an expert on every tradition I've looked at. 'An insider is like a fish in a fishbowl,' says Xu Zhiyuan, 'unable to see the exact shape of its surroundings even though those surroundings are perfectly clear to everyone else.'[10] Having a certain distance makes the broad outline clearer than it is to those working close up, who in studying the unique features of every tree often forget that they are all of the same species, the one that gives the whole forest its distinctive character.

I have approached my task as a kind of philosophical journalist. The job of the journalist is to know enough about a subject to be able to track down those who know most, ask them the right questions and explain their answers. This is precisely what I have done, reading canonical texts alongside the words of experts, dozens of whom I have interviewed to find out what it is most helpful to know if we are to begin to really understand the philosophies of the world rather than simply memorise a list of their headline doctrines. Many of their names appear in this book, alongside those of other experts whose work I have read. Everyone I quote is a recent or contemporary expert in the topic under discussion unless described otherwise. All comments not referenced in the notes were made to me in conversation. Throughout I have also quoted extensively from the classical texts of each tradition which often make their points with unsurpassable elegance in distinctive voices, providing us with the opportunity for a direct encounter with these rich literatures.

In the seventeenth century, René Descartes wrote in his *Discourse on Method*, 'In my travelling, I learned that those who have views very different from our own are not therefore barbarians or savages, but that several use as much reason as we do, or more.' I hope that no one today would be so amazed. However, one conclusion Descartes drew is still pertinent, that wherever we live 'we are clearly persuaded more by custom and example than by any certain knowledge'. To travel around the world's philosophies is an opportunity to challenge the beliefs and ways of thinking we take for granted. By gaining greater knowledge of how others think, we can become less certain of the knowledge we think we have, which is always the first step to greater understanding.

Notes

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (Routledge, 2002 [1945]), p. 459. Thanks to Yves Vende for the pointer.

2 This possibly apocryphal quote is cited in Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (Routledge, 1976), p. 182.

3 Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 224.

4 Ibid., p. 37.

5 Thomas P. Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 17.

6 Xu Zhiyuan, *Paper Tiger: Inside the Real China* (Head of Zeus, 2015), p. 146.

7 Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity*, p. 140.

8 Ibid., p. 17.

9 See Robert E. Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (SUNY Press, 2013), p. xi.

10 Xu, *Paper Tiger*, p. xi.

Prologue

A historical overview from the Axial to the Information Age

Philosophy's birth between the eighth and third centuries BCE is described by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Karl Jaspers as the 'Axial Age'. It was a period of gradual transition from understanding the world in terms of myth to the more rational understanding of the world we have today.[1] Rational understanding didn't supplant early folk beliefs and myths so much as grow out of their values and tenets. World views, while shaped by the demands of cool reason, were not always led by it.

Although the classical philosophies of India, China and Greece differ in important ways, there are some highly significant commonalities. Each started with a basic assumption that everything is one. Whatever it is that explains human life must also explain the universe, nature, and anything else beyond. As William of Ockham would famously put it in his principle of the 'razor' much later, in the fourteenth century, it is never rational to postulate the existence of more things than are necessary. You start with the simpler explanation – that everything is governed by the same principles – and only complicate matters if that turns out not to work. The earliest philosophers were therefore implicitly following a rational principle that none had yet articulated.

Also, the project of understanding the universe only makes sense if the universe is understandable. If we thought that there was a motley collection of mechanisms and principles governing different parts of reality, with no connections between them, then the universe would be a less comprehensible place. Assuming a kind of unity is a prerequisite for any serious attempt at systematic understanding.

The unity of human knowledge was more evident in the Axial Age than it is today. For the Greeks, everything we consider the humanities or sciences was a part of philosophical study. Nor were there fundamental divisions of knowledge in China or India. As human inquiry grew, so different branches reached further from the trunk, but they are still fundamentally part of the same tree.

Another commonality was the assumption that a satisfactory account of the world must speak to reason. Attractive stories and myths are not enough: we need to articulate an intellectual case that supports the view we adopt.

Reason – meaning rationality – is in essence the giving of *reasons*, ones which can be scrutinised, judged, assessed, accepted or rejected.[2] Humans have always had ways of understanding the world, but it is only since the dawn of philosophy that they have seriously attempted to provide and defend reasons for these.

What we see in early philosophy is an attempt to move from stories handed down and accepted on authority to more systematic explanations that could withstand the scrutiny of reason. In general, this led to an evolution of those old myths rather than the creation of entirely novel paradigms. In India, scholars generally divide the development of philosophy into four periods. The Vedic period preceded the Axial Age, roughly between 2500 and 600 BCE, and is described by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore as 'an age of groping, in which religion, philosophy, superstition and thought were inextricably interrelated and yet in perpetual conflict'.[3] It was during this period that four key *Vedas* considered by orthodox schools as revealed scriptures, *śruti*, were written: the *Ṛg, Yajur, Sāma* and *Atharva Vedas.*

The epic period followed (c. 500/600 BCE–200 CE), when the *Mahābhārata*, of which the *Bhagavad Gītā* is part, was written. Together with the *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtras*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* forms the 'triple foundations' (*prasthāna-traya*) of orthodox Indian philosophy. Although not yet works of systematic philosophy, the doctrines which were developed in these earliest periods 'have determined the tone if not the precise pattern of the Indian philosophical development ever since'.[4] Chief among these is the idea that ultimate reality is *Brahman*, an infinite, unchanging, universal soul. The individual self, *ātman*, only has the illusion of independence. Our ultimate goal is to dissolve the ego and return to *Brahman*. It was also during this period that thinkers such as Gautama, Pạnini and the Buddhist Nāgārjuna developed rich logics.

The schools of Indian philosophy that maintain the validity of the *Vedas* are known as orthodox or *āstika*. Those that do not are known as heterodox or *nāstika*. Although since around the turn of the late twentieth century this has been the standard classification of schools, it is not clear when the philosophies were first divided up along these lines, nor how straightforward the divisions are. With that caution in mind, the orthodox schools are Nyāyá, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mimāṃsā and Vedānta; and the heterodox schools are Buddhism, Jainism, Cārvāka, Ājīvika and Ajñana.

In China, in the absence of a strong religious culture featuring gods or other-worldly heavens, the new philosophies were more naturalistic than those of India. Confucius (551–479 BCE) based his teachings on the cultural norms of order, respect for elders and tradition. The other major tradition,

Daoism, valued harmony with nature above all else and its foundational text, the *Daodejing*, was written between the fourth and third centuries BCE.

In contrast, Greece had to accommodate its gods. But since these were often portrayed as human superheroes in myths, interacting with mortals in the same physical spaces, there was no fundamental problem in explaining the universe in terms of principles that would apply to gods and humans equally.

These three philosophical traditions – Indian, Chinese and Greek – relied on different sources of knowledge. Only in Greece, with the creation of logic, was systematic reason developed to any great degree. In India, emphasis was placed on knowledge attained by seers in states of heightened awareness and on revelations in the sacred texts, the *Vedas*. In China, history and everyday experience provided the benchmarks for truth. The Buddha walked a middle path, arguing that the only evidence available to us is that of experience, which makes speculation as to the nature of 'ultimate' reality fruitless. Nonetheless, he shared the orthodox Indian assumption that ordinary experience was illusory and effort is required to see beyond it. In Greece, the power of reason took centre stage, with Socrates's maxim that we should follow the argument wherever it leads, letting 'our destination be decided by the winds of the discussion'.[5] Each classical tradition that emerged had its own ideas about the right methods for philosophising.

In the Axial Age, many foundational texts were produced which are placed at the centre of contemporary traditions. Indian philosophers still study the *Vedas*, Chinese philosophers the works of Confucius and Mencius, Western philosophers the works of Plato and Aristotle. Joel Kupperman observes that 'there are countries, India and China especially, in which a small number of philosophical texts are foundational, not merely to later philosophy but to the entire culture'.[6] While the ancient Greeks are just names to most Westerners, the Indian *Vedas* and the Chinese classics are familiar to most of the populations of these countries.

If the first phase of philosophy can be seen as an intercontinental move away from myth towards a more rational understanding of the universe, the direction of travel thereafter differed according to region. In the West, philosophy took a step back. The major challenge of medieval philosophy was to negotiate between the claims of Christian faith and the demands of rationality. Philosophy was no longer responding to folk myth but to doctrines established by ecclesiastical authorities in a systematic theology. In keeping with this, the most significant and influential philosopher of this period was the thirteenth-century priest St Thomas Aquinas. As in the ancient period, philosophy did not represent radical alternatives to the dominant

religious culture, but rather worked with the grain of its doctrines. Natural theology provided a rational justification for faith, while the embrace of dualism, with its strict distinction between mind and body, fitted with the Christian stress on the superiority of the spiritual afterlife over the physical life here and now.

There are complications in this narrative as there are with that of the Middle East and North Africa, where religion rather than secular philosophy came to acquire the greatest authority. In the so-called golden age of Islamic philosophy, from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries ce, *falasīfa* translated and commented on ancient Greek classics, particularly the work of Aristotle. (This was critical for the transmission of Aristotle's philosophy to the West, where he became so significant that he became known simply as 'the philosopher'.) During this time there were fierce and learned debates between *falasīfa* such as Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and more theologically inclined *kalām* thinkers such as al-Ghazālī, a tussle the latter eventually won, ending the prospect of the independence of Islamic philosophy from theology.

In India, the picture is yet more complicated. Philosophical attention turned to the interpretation of the ancient *sūtras. Sūtra* means 'string' or 'thread' in Sanskrit, referring to a genre of writing in which short, aphoristic teachings were collected together, most importantly in the *Vedas*. During the Sūtra period from the early centuries CE and the scholastic period which followed, a lot of commentaries on the ancient *sūtras* were written, subjecting their doctrines to rational analysis and justification. As Radhakrishnan puts it, 'Strenuous attempts were made to justify by reason what faith implicitly accepts.'[7]

An important divide also opened up in the Vedānta school. Śaṅkara founded Advaita Vedānta, which maintained a 'nondualism' in which individual selves were illusory and all was in essence part of the ultimate one, *Brahman*. Thinkers like Rāmānuja and Madhva, however, rejected this and asserted a dualism in which selves are real and *Brahman* is a separate deity, Vishnu. Although Advaita Vedānta has been the dominant philosophical school since, this theistic Vedānta has arguably had more impact on wider society.

In the Far East, movement was steadier. In the absence of growth in religious authority, there was a gradual intellectual evolution, another example of the extraordinary continuity in Chinese thought and history. Confucianism was revived and revised by the Neo-Confucians, from the Northern Song era (960–1127 CE) through to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), absorbing influences from Daoism and Buddhism.

The development of philosophy in the middle period illustrates how philosophy is in part led by developments in wider culture. The most obvious negative aspect of this is that women's voices are almost entirely absent from the world's classical traditions. This is only now changing. As recently as 2008/9, women held fewer than one in five of the most senior academic positions in British philosophy departments. Statistics in the USA and Australia are similar.[8]

As we enter the modern era, the increasing geopolitical power of the Western world means its philosophy has had impacts far beyond its boundaries. The growth of science and the Western emphasis on autonomy that arose in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment took the nascent naturalism of early philosophy to its logical conclusion, driving the last remnants of religious and mythological thinking from the philosophical mainstream. Many developments in global philosophy are a response to Western thought, not reciprocated in the same measure. Most influential have been the philosophies that suggested concrete action, which were seen by many as offering a challenge to traditional philosophies that were increasingly used to maintain the status quo. In India, both the Practical Vedānta movement and Mahātmā Gandhi were provoked by Karl Marx and the utilitarian John Stuart Mill to balance the traditional emphasis on spirituality with concerns for social justice. In China, European Marxism and Darwinism, along with American pragmatism, influenced both the reformist monarchist K'ang and the first communist leader of China, Mao Tse-tung. At the same time there have been reactions against Western thought, in particular in the Japanese Kyoto School's renunciation of individualism.

The power of the West to set the global agenda is reflected in the fact that the word 'philosophy' and its many translations only came to be used to describe all these divergent traditions relatively recently. The Japanese, for instance, did not have a word for philosophy until the nineteenth century, when Western philosophical ideas started to be discussed after the Meiji restoration, which lifted a 250-year ban on foreigners entering the country or Japanese leaving it. The word *tetsugaku* was coined, a compound of the words for 'sagacity' and '-ology'.[9] China too only got its word for philosophy (*zhexue*, literally 'wisdom learning') around the same time.

This raises the difficult question of what to count as 'philosophy' in the first place. Start with too narrow a definition and you end up excluding much or even most thinking from other traditions and 'philosophy' becomes nothing more than your own culture's version of it. Hence Richard Rorty's claim that 'the philosophers' own scholastic little definitions of "philosophy" are merely polemical devices – intended to exclude from the field of honour

those who pedigrees are unfamiliar'.[10] Too loose a definition, however, and there is nothing that isn't let in.

Rather than narrowing the scope of philosophy, I think it is better to accept that it is a loose category, what Wittgenstein called a 'family resemblance' concept. We can't set out strict rules for what does or doesn't count as philosophy, but we can see that it has a set of shared features and that an intellectual tradition should be treated as philosophy if it shares enough of them. People are doing philosophy, badly or well, whenever they set their minds to a systematic investigation of the nature of the world, selfhood, language, logic, value, the human good, the sources and justifications of knowledge, the nature and limits of human reason. When such issues are dealt with purely by myth or dogma it is religion and folklore, not philosophy. When methods have been agreed upon to answer the questions empirically, inquiry becomes scientific, not philosophical. The borders between these two poles and the philosophy that lies between are not sharp, but they are clear enough for us to identify most of its territory and to see that what we call the world's great philosophical traditions all occupy parts of it. But none owns it and none has the right to deny others their share because it has come to its own conclusions about what philosophy at its best should look like. The nature of philosophy is itself a philosophical issue and so there must be a debate about this too.

This is most evident when we consider how, in addition to the great classical traditions, there are cultures in which something recognisably philosophical has been transmitted orally, with no historical thinkers credited with its creation. I'll refer to these collectively as 'oral philosophies'. There is a lot of academic debate as to whether these bodies of thought comprise 'philosophies' or are better described as mythologies or mere 'folk beliefs'. Whatever the ultimate answer to this (I'll consider this more later), these traditions contain too much that is clearly related to philosophy for the family resemblance to be dismissed. More importantly, they are sources of ways of seeing and understanding that can challenge and enrich the great written traditions.

Despite the rise of the West and its heavy influence, and no matter how tightly connected the philosophies and cultures of the world are in our global community, there remain clearly identifiable global philosophical traditions with their own distinctive characteristics. Ideas within these traditions do not stand in isolation. They form parts of wider wholes, networks of beliefs that mutually sustain and support each other, while sometimes also being in tension. It is this overall shape that gives each system its general character.

We must be careful, however, not to slip from the undeniable truth that

these distinctive characters exist to the mistake of 'essentialising': thinking that each culture has a unique and homogeneous essence that all its members uniformly share. This exaggerates both the similarities within societies and the differences between them. For instance, 'Whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary,' says Kwame Anthony Appiah, who as a British-born Ghanaian-American knows a thing or two about the complexities of cultural identity. 'Many African societies have as much in common with traditional societies that are not African as they do with each other.'[11]

However, we should not be so afraid of over-sweeping claims that we avoid making any generalisations at all. Mogobe B. Ramose, for instance, would probably agree with Appiah, but he also says 'a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a "family atmosphere", that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa', albeit one with variations.[12] Generalisations are perfectly legitimate and accurate, so long as they are not mistaken for universal statements. 'Men are typically taller than women' is a true generalisation; 'all men are taller than all women' is a false universal statement. To say, accurately, that there are general characteristics of different philosophical traditions is not to say that every thinker or school in that tradition shares that characteristic. Generalisations have many exceptions, just as a mountainous country may have its plains or a serious person might be capable of great laughter. I have tried to provide gentle reminders of this throughout by the use of words such as 'often' and 'usually', but it would be tedious to press home the point too much too often, so it is up to the reader to keep this important caveat in mind.[13]

One good reason not to essentialise is that there is virtually no way of thinking which is unique to one culture. Whatever your cultural background, when we come to look at notions such as autonomy, harmony and insight, you will have some grasp of what they mean and why they matter. There may be differences in nuance of meaning which can throw you off course, but these are easily enough corrected. The main differences you will note will rather be about the different weight each idea carries in different cultures, 'what aspect of our humanness a cultural tradition tends to emphasise, enhance, and preserve as central', as Kasulis puts it. 'What is foreground in one culture may be background in another.'[14]

A philosophical tradition has a lot in common with a language. We can only communicate in a specific language: there is no universal human tongue. But that does not mean we should complacently assume that there is only one language – our own – that can express the truth. Without ever giving up our

mother tongues, we can expand our understanding by learning others. Just as some can be bi- or multilingual, we can make ourselves culturally bi- or multi-orientational, making use of more than one philosophical tradition.[15] Research in social psychology suggests that the multicultural mind bestows many advantages and that bicultural people score higher on creativity.[16]

Today, there are signs that we are becoming more interested in improving our cultural literacy. The emergence of China as a global superpower has led to a flurry of books attempting to explain Chinese values and culture. Western academic interest in other philosophies is growing, albeit from a low base. Commonalties are recognised, such as those between Buddhist and anglophone conceptions of the self. In East Asian universities, there is interest in both indigenous philosophies and Western ones. We appear to be seeing less antagonism, less of a sense of having to choose which is superior, and more desire to learn from wisdom wherever it is found.

I was encouraged by a comment made to me by Leah Kalmanson, inspired by the work of postcolonialist thinker Dipesh Chakrabarty. As she says, 'When we read Aristotle we let him live in two times. He lives in his time and we understand him in a cultural and historical context and there's a kind of fidelity to his thought. But then he can speak to us today. We tend not to do that with non-Western texts.' My hope is that we can read the classical philosophies of the world and let them live in both two times and two places. If we forget when and where they wrote, we are doomed to misunderstand them. But if we fail to see how what they say applies to here and now, we are doomed to waste or misuse them.

Notes

1 See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953 [1949]).

2 See Julian Baggini, *The Edge of Reason* (Yale University Press, 2016).

3 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (eds.), *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. xviii.

4 Ibid.

5 Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 90.

6 Joel Kupperman, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 157.

7 Ibid., p. 350.

8 See 'Women in Philosophy in the UK: A Report by the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK' (2011), www.bpa.ac.uk/uploads/2011/02/BPA_Report_Women_In_Philosophy.pdf, and Eric Schwitzgebel and Carolyn Dicey Jennings, 'Women in Philosophy: Quantitative Analyses of Specialization, Prevalence, Visibility, and Generational Change', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 31 (2017), pp. 83–105.

9 Thomas P. Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 18.

10 Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing', in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 92.

11 Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 26, 91.

12 Mogobe B. Ramose, 'The Philosophy of *Ubuntu* and *Ubuntu* as a Philosophy', in P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2003), p. 230.

13 'Generalisation is a necessary part of organisation. A generalisation is not the same as a universal qualifier: a generalisation cannot be refuted by a simple counterexample', Kasulis, *Intimacy or Integrity*, p. 8.

14 Ibid., p. 20.

15 Ibid., pp. 154–6.

16 See Carmel S. Saad, Rodica Damian, Verónica Benet-Martínez, Wesley G. Moons and Richard R. Robins, 'Multiculturalism and Creativity: Effects of Cultural Context, Bicultural Identity, and Ideational Fluency', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 4 (2013), pp. 369–75.

PART ONE

How the World Knows

At an international school in Maastricht in the Netherlands, a pair of bright and precocious teenagers are going through the answers to a quiz they have set their peers. They admit they can't be 100 per cent sure they've got their facts right. But they can assure us that everything is correct 'according to the Internet'.

The question of what grounds our knowledge, what justifies the confidence that our beliefs are true, is one of the most fundamental in philosophy. That for a whole generation the answer might be 'the Internet' is frightening. It's one thing to have too much faith in Wikipedia, which is after all just one site with a pretty good record of integrity. To take the Internet, a motley collection of diverse sites with vastly different pedigrees, as an authority on truth en masse looks reckless.

Throughout history people usually haven't held their beliefs for philosophical reasons. People generally take on the beliefs that surround them, and only a minority rebel wholesale. That Pavel grew up in Krakow and Priti in Delhi better explains why Pavel believes in the resurrected Christ and Priti in *karma* than any theological justification either might give.

Nonetheless, at a societal level – if not the individual level – there are always some justifications for belief which carry more weight than others; reasons why some things are accepted as true and others rejected as false. Every culture has an implicit, folk epistemology – a theory of knowledge – just as almost every philosophy has an explicit one and these formal and informal epistemologies are connected.

The international students who cite the Internet as their source of knowledge provide one piece of evidence that folk and formal epistemologies are linked. Underlying the students' gullibility that the Internet is a trusted repository of truths is a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge that is widely taken for granted today yet was not shared by others at different times and places in history. Their trust in the Web reflects a culture that has for several centuries understood knowledge as collectively produced by human beings with different areas of expertise. In their understanding, genuine knowledge is comprised of the most up-to-date true facts that can be listed and collected. If properly recorded, anyone with time and resource can discover this knowledge for themselves. Truth is not owned by elites, it has been democratised.

Ordinary people have not always been deemed competent to find out and understand truths for themselves. Human inquiry has not always generally been seen as the sole legitimate source of knowledge – divine revelation has

often been taken to be far more reliable. Nor has being ‘up to date’ always been seen as a virtue. In fact, many traditions still assert that the deepest truths about human nature were revealed to ancient sages, prophets and seers.

This brief sketch outlines one example of how everyday ways of thinking are rooted in the rich soil of a philosophical tradition. If we want to understand why people believe the things they do, it is essential to start by asking what sources of knowledge the philosophical traditions they grew up in take to be valid.

Insight

For someone like me, used to the rituals and traditions of modern, Western academic conferences, the 90th Session of the Indian Philosophical Congress was a strange affair. Some of the differences were more quantitative than qualitative. The failure to stick to a timetable and the tendency for speakers to talk for longer than their allocated time were merely exaggerated versions of familiar scholarly foibles. But in several respects the gathering differed more significantly from Western conferences.

Extreme deference was shown to invited speakers and grandees. The opening ceremony ran on for two hours, most of which was taken up with the feting of (mostly male) dignitaries, several of whom arrived late, delaying the start by half an hour. Each was honoured in turn, cloaked with a kind of golden shawl and handed a gift from a tray carried by a parade of young women students in elegant saris. This ritual respect-paying continued throughout the congress, with almost every speaker starting by thanking 'all the eminent scholars on the dais and off the dais'. People used the words 'humbly' and 'humility' a lot, a verbal corrective to the prouder reality.

The official fawning contrasted with the lack of any evident attention from the audience, who often chatted, wandered in and out, or played with their mobile phones. The audience applause at the end of each talk was generally perfunctory and involved fewer hands than were in the room. The rule seemed to be that everyone should speak but no one need listen, as long as all were given the necessary honour and the seats were filled.

In Europe and America, I would expect the keynote addresses to present an argument which was in substantial part new and original. At the IPC, the talks were more demonstrations of the erudition of the speaker, whose main job appeared to be to represent a traditional school of philosophy. As one of the invited speakers put it, 'Here, the thinker is not important, but wisdom is important.' So a Buddhist gave what sounded more like a sermon than a lecture, delivering a message familiar even to me, who knew little about Buddhism: if we live with good heart, good speech and good action, life will be good. (I was told this paper got a rave review in the *Hindustan Times* the following day.) In a similar vein, a Jain offered a paean to Aacharya Tulasi, a great Jain monk; the Gujarat Vidyapeeth Lecture on Gandhian Philosophy and Peace praised Gandhi as a philosopher, politician and saint who showed the

way for a morally better world; a couple of speakers advocated Advaita Vedānta; another Saiva Siddhānta and so on. At the conclusion of each, the chair summarised and praised some combination of the eloquence, clarity, scholarship and profundity of the speaker. No questions were taken, which seemed fitting because no debate was going on. This feature of contemporary Indian philosophy not only frustrated a minority at the congress but irks a lot of scholars working outside the subcontinent too. One India-based philosopher told me that philosophy on the subcontinent has become all about repetition with no originality. One foreign speaker complained to me that most so-called philosophy in India today is reporting, not thinking. Ironically, even he gave a lecture endowed in the name of his teacher, whom he only praised.

At the congress, there was a strong current of animosity towards Western culture and philosophy, directed at both its manifest failings and its condescending sense of superiority to Indian culture, something I fear my sceptical comments might suggest I am guilty of. Several of these remarks were shameful reminders of the West's racist and colonial history. One speaker told the audience that the supposedly great liberal John Stuart Mill had dismissed the whole of India and Asia as the dark continent which needed civilising. That it was actually his father, James Mill, who talked of the 'feeble and half civilised people' of India and 'the darkness, the vagueness, and the confusion' of the 'Hindu mythology' in his 1817 *History of British India* hardly matters, since there are plenty of other examples the speaker could have used.[1] 'Humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the whites,' wrote Immanuel Kant in 1802. 'The yellow Indians do have a meagre talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples.'[2] The racism of his near contemporary David Hume only differed in the degree of its certainty: 'I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites.'[3]

Much of the dismissal of contemporary Western culture, however, was made on the basis of little more than selective anecdote. One speaker noted that looting took place after floods in the United States, but that after floods in Chennai the temple was left open around the clock to help victims. Another cited the suicide of a Harvard philosophy student as evidence of the nihilism of Western thought and its 'astounding failure in attaining a holistic vision of reality'.

It is tempting to explain these features of the Indian Philosophical Congress purely sociologically. It might be said that Indian society is more traditional and hierarchical than society in the West, and this – along with its colonial history – is all we need to understand the deference, the championing

of traditions and the anti-Western rhetoric. However, this fails to take the philosophical setting seriously. To explain why Indian philosophers do philosophy in the way they do without paying attention to the philosophy reduces them to anthropological curiosities. To take them seriously as philosophers, we need to ask whether there are philosophical as well as sociological reasons for the way they conduct their intellectual lives.

This is surely only what Westerners would demand of their own tradition. Certainly there are matters of custom and etiquette which explain some of the peculiar goings-on at philosophy conferences in the West, such as why there is invariably a conference dinner that manages to be formally grand and gastronomically crummy at the same time. But to explain why philosophers at conferences advance arguments and take part in extended question and answer sessions you need to know how these fit the conception of philosophy they adhere to, in which individual thinkers present justifications for original conclusions in the form of rigorous arguments. In other words, to explain how philosophy is practised you need to explain the ideals such practice aims to exemplify. What, then, are the ideals behind the way in which the philosophers in India presented their ideas?

A clue is in the traditional word for philosophy in India: *darśana*. *Darśana* comes from the root *dṛś*, meaning 'to see'. It means both philosophy and to see, or to look at.[4] It has these dual meanings because to a large extent philosophy has been conceived in India as a kind of seeing. For instance, the original poets of the *Vedas* were the first *ṛṣis* (*rishis*), meaning seers.[5] It was believed that the route to understanding involved not so much reasoning as learning practices of *ānvīkṣikī* – looking at – which enable us to attain direct realisation (*sākṣāt-kāra*) of reality as it is.[6] That helps explain why one of the giants of Indian thought, Śaṅkara (sometimes Śaṅkarācārya), who is believed to have written in the eighth century CE, used the terms *māya* (illusion) and *avidyā* (ignorance) interchangeably. Ignorance is a failure to see correctly, the flip side of the view that seeing and knowing are identical.

This emphasis on a kind of subtle perception runs through the entire history of classical Indian philosophy, which identifies *pratyakṣa* as a valid source of knowledge. Although the original meaning of *pratyakṣa* was ordinary sense perception, it came to include all immediate apprehension, sensory, spiritual or intellectual.[7] Hence the *Upaniṣads*, for instance, say that knowledge of the great/universal self (*Ātman*) 'is not to be obtained by instruction, nor by intellect, nor by much learning'. Rather, 'He is seen by subtle seers with superior, subtle intellect.'[8] The kind of seeing required is not that of normal sense perception. 'Not by sight is It grasped, not even by speech, not by any other sense-organs, austerity, or work.' Only 'by

meditating, one does behold Him who is without parts'.[9]

Radhakrishnan endorses this characterisation of the classical Indian tradition. Talking primarily of the orthodox schools, he says, 'Reason is subordinated to intuition. Life cannot be comprehended in its fullness by logical reason. [...] The philosophy of India takes its stand on the spirit which is above mere logic, and holds that culture based on mere logic or science may be efficient, but cannot be inspiring.'[10] More pithily, he says, 'Philosophy carries us to the gates of the promised land, but cannot let us in; for that, insight or realisation is necessary.'[11]

We have to be careful not to assume this means that *all* of Indian philosophy is a kind of mystical insight gained by meditation. The various schools of Indian philosophy take great care to enumerate and describe what they take to be valid *pramāṇas* (sources of knowledge). Although every school understands the *pramāṇas* differently, there are essentially six which they either reject or endorse. It's impossible to make sense of them by their names alone, but even a cursory overview shows that there is much more to Indian philosophy than mystical insight. The six *pramāṇas* are: *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison and analogy), *arthāpatti* (postulation, derivation from circumstances), *anupalabdhi* (non-perception, negative/cognitive proof) and *śabda* (word, testimony of reliable experts). Of these, *anumāna* is almost as ubiquitous as *pratyakṣa*, making it clear that for many schools at least forms of reasoning are as much a part of the Indian philosophical tradition as any insight.

Charles Moore warns that intuition, along with authority and scepticism about reason, tend to be overstated by both Western and indigenous commentators on Indian philosophy. The way to correct this overemphasis is to appreciate that intuition is not believed to trump all else but is simply an essential component of a system of understanding that involves all human capacities. As S. K. Saksena put it, the source of knowledge is 'neither sense, nor reason, nor intuition, but the whole of man'.[12] The point of difference is that in many schools *pratyakṣa* plays a much more important role than in other global traditions.

Pratyakṣa is intimately connected to another *pramāṇa*, *śabda*. The *Nyāya Sūtra* defines *śabda* as 'the instructive assertion of a reliable person'.[13] The two usually work as a kind of team in that we are to believe the testimony of *ṛṣis* because they had exceptional capacities to perceive reality for what it is. As Deepak Sarma puts it, sacred texts are taken as valid sources of knowledge because 'they are rooted in the *pratyakṣa* of *ṛṣis*'.[14]

Sometimes, these capacities are supernaturally extraordinary. Several biographies of Śaṅkara, founder of Advaita Vedānta, tell a story which begins

with him arguing with a philosopher couple in favour of the renunciation of worldly life and hence of their marriage. When the wife points out that Śaṅkara is rejecting a life he has not himself experienced, he uses his yogic powers to enter the body of the recently deceased King Amaruka, brings him back to life and then proceeds to master the arts of lovemaking. When he is done, he returns to his own body able to confirm from first-hand experience that he had been right all along.[15]

In the hierarchy of sources of knowledge, the testimony (*śabda*) of the greatest seers (*ṛṣis*) usually trumps the perception (*pratyakṣa*) of even great minds, which in turn trumps the most impressive rational argument. Śaṅkara dismisses 'reasoning which disregards the holy texts' as resting 'on individual opinion only' with 'no proper foundation'. We cannot trust the reasoning even of 'men of the most undoubted mental eminence, such as Kapila, Kanâda, and other founders of philosophical schools' since they contradict one another.[16]

Anyone judged to have achieved a high degree of insight is treated with great deference and respect. The roots of the word *upaniṣad* reflect this: *upa* (near), *ni* (down) and *sad* (to sit). Groups of pupils would sit near their teachers to receive truth from them.[17] *The Laws of Manu* has a passage which stresses just how wicked it is to defy your teacher: 'By censuring his teacher, though justly, he will become in his next birth an ass; by falsely defaming him, a dog; he who lives on his teacher's substance, will become a worm, and he who is envious of his merit, a larger insect.'[18] Note the 'though justly': it is wrong to censor your teacher even if your teacher is wrong. This is deference in the extreme.

As my experience at the Indian Philosophical Congress suggested, deference to seers remains important in India today. One of the first groups I met were devotees of Dr Ramchandra Pralhad Parnerkar (1916–80), who, they told me with great enthusiasm, combined Vedic and Western philosophy, objective and subjective, mind and matter. They were so eager to spread his philosophy of *Poornawād* that they gifted me his book of the same name. At the front there is a series of colour plates with portraits not only of the author, but of 'our inspiration', his son and intellectual heir Adv. V. R. Parnerkar and his father, Vedmurti Pralhad Guru Ganesh Guru Parnerkar, to whom the book is dedicated. These portraits are an almost ritual honouring of great men in book form.

The deferential attitude towards the speakers made interviewing them difficult. They generally seemed to take my questions as invitations to preach their schools of thought. Our exchanges were not so much questions and answers as cues for monologues. Nor is this deference to authorities confined to academic conferences. Meera Baindur told me that the idea of insight as

direct experience of ultimate reality remains mainstream in Indian culture, reflected in the saying 'One has to eat the sugar to know the taste.' India has many gurus presumed to have had direct experience of *Brahman*. They are taken as authorities to be trusted, so much so that their behaviour is often overlooked. 'There's a lot of blind belief,' says Baindur. In 2012, 'one of these fellows got caught having sex in a room with an actress. Someone put in a camera and they released it to the press.' His justification was that he was simply fulfilling a need, like a god, and his reputation didn't seem to suffer. It is as though once gurus achieve the status of *swamis*, recognised religious Hindu teachers, they are beyond reproach. As the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* says, 'Cognition of advanced sages, as also vision of the perfected ones, results from *dharma* [right conduct] or merits.'[19] The logic seems to be that to be a *swami* requires having insight; only the good have insight; therefore a *swami* is good, whatever their behaviour suggests to the contrary.

Baindur speaks with some authority on this since for several years she too was a *swami*, though not one who did 'anything of that sort', she stresses. Many people assumed that she had almost mystical powers. Once someone came to her and said, '*Swami*, explain to me this. You came to me in a dream and gave me a *gangajal* [holy water from the Ganges] and then I put a garland on the statue of Ganesh, who then turned into Krishna. How did you make that happen?' She told them she didn't make anything happen, it was just a dream. 'That's why I didn't succeed as a popular guru and had to come back to academics.'

Her devotee was not unusual in her belief in the reality of dreams. In the Nyāya school it is maintained that dream objects are real, for they too are perceived, and *pratyakṣa* is a valid *pramāṇa*.[20] Only the rigorously materialistic and empirical Cārvāka (or Lokayata) school, which is often the outlier in Indian philosophy, restricts *pratyakṣa* to sensory perception alone as the only valid source of knowledge.[21] Cārvāka hence has no time for the *ṛṣis* at all, claiming, 'The three authors of the Vedas were buffoons, knaves, and demons.'[22]

In the other schools, *pratyakṣa* is vitally important. Take Vedānta, one of the most important schools of Indian philosophy. One of the founding texts of its major subschool, Advaita Vedānta, is Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*. Śaṅkara wrote that although 'reasoning also is to be allowed its place', this 'must not deceitfully be taken as enjoining bare independent ratiocination, but must be understood to represent reasoning as a subordinate auxiliary of intuitional knowledge'.[23]

But how is *pratyakṣa* achieved? Sometimes, it comes as a kind of gift, from nowhere. The *Yoga Sūtras* say, 'The experience of extraordinary capacities may

occur naturally (that is, as a result of inborn capacities at the time of rebirth).' If you're not lucky enough to be so gifted, taking herbal medications (*oṣadhi*, including elixirs and hallucinogens) or performing incantations (*mantra*) could achieve the same effect. More usually, however, *pratyakṣa* is the result of spiritual exercises such as ascetic practices (*tapas*) or *samādhi*, a form of concentration meditation in which practitioners enter a trance-like state.[24]

Other schools generally emphasise the need for a long spiritual practice. 'Cognition of advanced sages, as also vision of the perfected ones, (results) from *dharma* or merits,' says the *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra*.[25] Chief among these practices is meditation, which allows for a kind of understanding that goes beyond ordinary cognition. 'Meditation (*dhyāna*), assuredly, is more than thought,' as it says in the *Upaniṣads*.[26] There is too much variation between the schools for a simple account of what meditation entails, but many have in common an emphasis on practices of the body. Instructions for meditation always involve details of posture and breathing. This, suggests Sue Hamilton, is perhaps the most alien feature of Indian philosophy for Westerners in particular.[27] We see it most clearly in the classic *Yoga Sūtras,* written in the third century CE, but the general principle is accepted beyond the numerous yoga schools.

Outside India, these days yoga is often seen as little more than an exercise and relaxation technique. Its basic definition in the *Yoga Sūtras* sounds very calming, being 'the cessation of the functioning of ordinary awareness'.[28] However, the purpose of this mind-calming goes beyond mere relaxation. The basic principle behind it is that in daily life we are led astray by our senses and the mind is kept busy with ordinary, everyday things. By stopping this activity, we not only regain calm and control but can see things as they really are.[29] It is as though the world usually appears to us like a blur through the window of an express train and with practice we can slow time down and see what's really there. This is a view common to orthodox and non-orthodox schools. Hence, one Buddhist academic told me, 'A state of mind has extraordinary energies inside. If you clean your thought process, this causes a flowering of intuition in our minds, it is a source of knowing anything.'

All the classic texts give some guidance on the physical practices we need to follow to achieve this stillness and insight. In the *Upaniṣads*, the insight we are seeking is our unity with *Brahman*, the supreme self. To achieve this it advocates the 'sixfold yoga', which comprises 'restraint of the breath, withdrawal of the senses, meditation, concentration, contemplation, absorption'.[30] The *Bhagavad Gītā* also gives precise descriptions of the physical requirements of yoga:

He should set in a clean place his firm seat, neither too high nor too low,

> covered with sacred grass, a deerskin, and a cloth, one over the other. There taking his place on the seat, making his mind one-pointed, and controlling his thought and sense, let him practice *yoga* for the purification of the self.
> Holding the body, head, and neck erect and still, looking fixedly at the tip of his nose, without looking around. [...] Verily, *yoga* is not for him who eats too much or abstains too much from eating. It is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much or keeps too much awaked.[31]

There is widespread belief in India that such practices lead not only to insight but to almost supernatural powers. In the *Yoga Sūtras*, there is a long list of what can be achieved with meditation, not just 'knowledge of what is subtle, concealed, or distant'. With proper attention, you might achieve 'knowledge of various universes' and 'the orderly arrangement of the stars', as well as gain 'the strength of an elephant'. Almost miraculously, 'When the base of the throat becomes the focus for comprehensive reflection, cessation of hunger and thirst becomes possible.' And 'when the relation between hearing and space becomes the focus for comprehensive reflection, celestial hearing (the "divine hearing") becomes possible'.[32] Such beliefs persist today, especially in rural India, where holy men and women are routinely ascribed magical powers.

Special powers aside, the idea of insight, both direct and via *ṛṣis*, is clearly a potent and live one. What, then, is the role of reason in all of this? The answer is partly historical. Although there was little by way of systematic philosophy in the earliest Vedic and Epic periods, certain key doctrines were fixed at these times and much of the philosophical work of the Sūtra and scholastic periods was to make rational sense of them.

A comparison could be made here between later Indian philosophy and the natural theology of medieval Europe. There too faith and reason were seen as being in harmony, with reason's role not to provide the foundations of faith, merely to explain it. Philosophy was largely apologetics: the rational justification of revealed truths. Even as late as the seventeenth century, philosophers who by the use of reason reached conclusions that contradicted the Church's doctrines would be suppressed, even if they supported the existence of the Christian God. Such was the fate of Descartes, whose works were put on the Roman Catholic Church's list of banned books, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1663, until its discontinuation in 1966.

The spirit of apologetics has for a long time been strong in India. One of the eminent endowment lecturers at the Indian Philosophical Congress, C. D. Sebastian, said that 'the main purpose of advaitic philosophy is to guard its

revealed truth against all possible doubts and criticisms as well as to demonstrate its possibility to our reason. [...] By no amount of logical thinking about the facts of experience, you can ever come to the conclusion which denies all facts. The nature of ultimate reality is revealed by scriptures and accepted on faith.'[33] There is no neat separation between philosophy and religion in India. (As we shall see, this is also true in most other traditions.) In his presidential address to the IPC, L. N. Sharma said, '*Darśana* is the meeting ground of philosophy and religion, as it includes both of them. Those who hold that *darśana* is not philosophy only show their ignorance about the true nature of *darśana*.'[34] Religious themes were often addressed by speakers at the congress, one of whom was surely preaching to the converted when she titled her paper 'Indian Philosophy: The Ideal Combination of Philosophy and Religion'.

Another endowment lecturer, Chandrakala Padia, agreed that religion and philosophy are mixed in India and this is what makes Indian thought distinctive. This mixing reflects a wider permeation of religion in society. 'We can't just snatch religious feelings from persons,' says Padia. 'It is a deep-rooted, unconscious activity.' India may have a secular constitution but it does not keep religion and state separate, as in France or America. Rather, it is (or is supposed to be) even-handed on religious matters. In areas of personal law, covering issues such as marriage, each religion can operate under its own laws, so that Muslims, for instance, can live under sharia.

Advocates of the link between philosophy and religion tend to claim that there is no contradiction or conflict between the two, that they are in perfect harmony. 'The worlds of reason and religion do not turn in different orbits,' says Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. 'Indian thought is firm in its conviction that religious propositions should be grounded in reason.'[35]

A vocal minority – more numerous off the subcontinent – challenges this interconnection of philosophy and religion. At the congress, P. George Victor said openly in his talk, 'We are preaching theology, teaching as philosophy.' He insists we must extract philosophy from theology to defend Indian philosophy against the attack that it is not philosophy at all. Another invited speaker confided privately that the IPC was the anti-philosophy conference, saying it represented a way of thinking about Indian philosophy which sought to differentiate itself from Western philosophy as much as possible by emphasising its deep links with religion, in contrast to the materialistic, unspiritual West.

The argument about how important religion is to Indian philosophy is very difficult for outsiders to present fairly. On the one hand, to emphasise its religious nature risks playing into tired stereotypes about Indian spirituality.

However, to deny the links risks both contradicting what most Indian philosophers themselves say and forcing Indian philosophy into a foreign mould. One can stand accused of a colonial mindset by either setting Indian thought outside philosophy as the West knows it or making it fit philosophy as the West knows it. It's clear that the links between religion and philosophy are historically strong in both India and the West. Whereas they have weakened in the West, they remain firm on the subcontinent. But there remains much of interest in Indian philosophy to secular thinkers, just as there is in the work of overtly Christian philosophers such as Aquinas and Descartes.

The paradox of Indian philosophy is that although it is rooted in the authority of ancient, sacred texts, for centuries commentators have interpreted them with such originality and creativity that philosophy has indeed progressed enormously. Moore calls these thinkers 'commentators only in what might be called the polite sense of the word'.[36] They 'claim for their views the sanction of the *Vedas* and exercise their ingenuity in forcing that sanction even when it is not spontaneously yielded', he and Radhakrishnan say. 'Besides, the very vastness of the *Vedas*, from which authors could select out of free conviction any portion for their authority, allowed room for original thought.'[37]

One of the endowment lecturers at the IPC, R. C. Sinha, thinks that this misunderstanding of originality lies behind a lot of the prejudice against Indian philosophy. 'Originality lies in interpretation,' he said. He recalled an international congress of Buddhist studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in which one professor declared Indian philosophy dead because, after Śaṅkara, it was merely repetition. 'I explained to him that originality in contemporary Indian thought is very remarkable,' said Sinha. 'Originality does not mean just constructing a system on original things, it means interpretations of the classical thought, of Indian thought. This is also original.' Contemporary Indian philosophers are well versed in both Western and Indian thought, contributing to this interpretive creativity. For instance, K. C. Bhattacharya created a new philosophy reconciling Kantian and Vedantic philosophy.

Śaṅkara himself provides a good example of originality rooted in the attempt at faithful interpretation. Although he is considered to be a great, creative thinker, he himself said that he was merely expounding what is contained in the *Vedas*,[38] offering as a conclusive argument for his position 'because it is directly stated in scripture'.[39] At the same time, he swept aside the conflicting accounts of the creation of the world in the *Vedas* 'since the creation of the world and similar topics are not at all what scripture wishes to teach'.[40] The *Vedas* provide such a rich list of philosophical ingredients that

philosophers can cook up virtually anything from them.

India's emphasis on *pratyakṣa* is distinctive, but it is by no means the only philosophical tradition to allow a role for a kind of acute perception as well as reason. Indeed, the idea is not entirely alien even to Western philosophy. Aristotle, one of its founding fathers, wrote in the fourth century BCE that we should 'pay no less attention to the unproved assertions and opinions of experienced and older people than to demonstrations of fact; because they have an insight from their experience which enables them to see correctly'.[41] 'Practical wisdom' here is the standard translation for *phronēsis*, which is a kind of skilfulness in judgement which comes from long experience. (The concept of *zhi*, usually translated as 'wisdom', is used very similarly by the classical Chinese philosopher Mencius.[42]) Aristotle did not invent the word and it is likely that *phronēsis* was widely valued in ancient Greece. Western philosophy subsequently developed to emphasise forms of reasoning that are objective and capable of being broken down into discrete steps, leading to the sidelining of practical wisdom. Ironically, the whole edifice of logical philosophy was constructed on Aristotelian foundations, blocking the view of *phronēsis*.

Although the insight of the wise has no official status as a *pramāṇa* of Western philosophy, I think it has always had a large, and largely unacknowledged, role. It strikes me that many of the key moves in Western philosophy have not been arguments but acute observations. For example, when Descartes concluded in the seventeenth century that the one thing he could not doubt was his own existence, he did not offer an argument but an observation: 'I am, I exist.'[43] You cannot doubt your own existence without at the same time affirming it, by the mere fact that *you* doubt.

The major difference between this kind of insight and *pratyakṣa*, however, is that the latter demands a kind of trust. When Western philosophers use their insight, they invite you to attend in the same way and observe yourself. As one of the senior scholars at the Indian Philosophical Congress explained to me, in Indian philosophy too 'any individual can develop his own faculties and can acquire the power to see something, particularly the things that are beyond, to have a direct perception of those realities'. But before you can do that you need to trust the *ṛṣis* that you are on the right path. If you do not see what the superior mind sees, the response is that you are insufficiently developed in your wisdom and must practise harder, perhaps for years.

In that sense, Indian insight is unashamedly elitist, Western insight determinedly egalitarian. But it is not obvious which is more plausible. The idea that some talented and experienced people have better insight than

others is no more shocking than the idea that some people are better than others at playing music, designing bridges or conducting scientific research, because they have a hard-earned combination of explicit learning and implicit skill. The idea that no one has better insight than others is arguably less credible than the idea that some do.

In other non-Western traditions, insight is valued more overtly. Robert E. Carter contrasts the Western tendency to make philosophy a 'purely cerebral affair' with the Japanese assumption that 'knowledge is also an experiential affair which can be achieved and honed through *practice* rather than reason alone'.[44] This is evident in the historical importance placed on martial arts, flower arranging, archery, calligraphy and the tea ceremony, all of which help us to achieve a kind of enlightenment by attending rather than ratiocinating.[45] Even in the highly technological Japan of today, this sensibility thrives. The Hakutsuru Sake Brewery Museum in Kobe shows the visitor the traditional way in which the rice wine was made. One of numerous important stages in the process is steaming the rice, which should make the grains *gaiko nainan:* hard outside and soft inside. The narrator of the video explaining this is keen to point out that although the modern brewery is a high-tech operation, 'even today the condition of the steamed rice is checked in the same way. Sake production involves more than just science and theory. Human intuition and experience play a crucial role.'

The importance of human insight has been stressed by many Japanese philosophers. The early twentieth-century Kyoto School philosopher Nishida Kitarō wrote about *kenshō*, seeing into nature (*ken* being seeing or having a view and *shō* being the nature, essence, the 'suchness' of a thing). He argued that through pure experience one could have direct knowledge of reality as it is: 'To experience means to know facts just as they are, to know in accordance with facts by completely relinquishing one's own fabrications.' This is experience that is not 'adulterated with some sort of thought'.[46] 'This seeing is not a knowledge of the mind, analytically arrived at, but a direct, immediate view of it, as when the eye perceives an object before it.'

The parallels with *pratyakṣa* are obvious. One difference is that in Japanese philosophy perception is primarily aesthetic and this-worldly rather than spiritual and other-worldly. Nishida wrote, 'It is the artist, not the scholar, who arrives at the true nature of reality.'[47] The prestige of Zen poetry reflects this. Take this haiku by Bashō:

> The old pond
> A frog jumps in –
> The sound of the water.

For Nishida, the haiku evokes the sound of splashing without actually attempting to mimic it. The poem works because it conveys to the reader the pure experience of the frog entering the pond, perhaps even better than watching it without sufficient sensitivity.[48] Takeuchi Yoshinori interprets the poem differently, saying that what is evoked is not the sound of the water but the stillness that the splash disrupts. A similar effect is sought in an old Chinese poem which says 'A bird gives a cry – the mountains quiet all the more.'[49] (This is also perhaps the real meaning behind Hakuin Ekaku's famous eighteenth-century-BCE koan 'What is the Sound of the Single Hand?': it is an invitation to attend to the silence, the emptiness.[50]) These interpretations differ, but they share something more important in common: a belief that the purpose of the poem is to facilitate *kenshō*, a seeing into nature as it really is, by aesthetic rather than rational means. As D. T. Suzuki put it, 'We must accept the fact that the intellect has its limitations, and that things or facts belonging to our innermost experiences are altogether beyond its domain.'[51] Koans are 'to be meditated upon in order to break the hold of rationality on the self,' says Edward Slingerland, to 'fast away the mind'.[52]

One important way in which this kind of insight differs from intellectual understanding is that it breaks down the barrier between the known and the knower. 'To understand reality one must grasp it in one's own hands, or, better, one must *be* it,' says Suzuki.[53] Nishida's explanation of this is that 'the seeing in the experience of *kenshō* is not dualistic or dichotomous, because there is no separation here between the object of sight and the seeing subject, because the seer is the seen and the seen is the seer, the two are completely identical'.[54] Nishida believes this aspiration to dissolve the dualities of subject and object is typically Japanese. What Japanese people 'strongly yearn for', says Carter, is 'to become one with things and events',[55] collapsing the distinction between knowing and doing, thought and action. Nishida explored this idea in his late work through the concept of 'action intuition', the sense that we get to the heart of reality better by acting rather than by reflecting. True, complete awareness is not merely intellectual but actively experiential.[56]

The contemporary Japanese philosopher Kobayashi Yasuo described this experiential dimension as the 'aesthetic' character of Japanese thought, which contrasts with the Chinese ethical focus on right conduct, politeness, ceremony and so on. The 'charm of Japanese philosophical thought' is that it is about being touched by what is near. 'The most important thing happens not over there but in this present,' he told me. 'The important thing is to feel, not to conceptualise. Concepts always indicate something over there, it's very abstract.'

Time is a good example of this. 'Time is always present to us, not as a concept, but this feeling: cherry blossoms disappearing, something like that. We find out the truth of time in this sense. But we can't conceptualise this aesthetics.'

Achieving this kind of pure experience means accepting the limits of reason as well as language. Kyoto School philosopher Tanabe Hajime's take on this is metanoetics, which is giving up on the possibility of knowing through one's own efforts, one's own reason. Describing his own realisation of the importance of this, he wrote, 'In the thick of my distress, I let go and surrendered myself humbly to my own inability. I was suddenly brought to new insight! My penitent confession – metanoesis – unexpectedly threw me back on my own interiority and away from things external.'[57] It is noteworthy that he wrote about this autobiographically. Such a first-person approach is as natural in a philosophical culture that emphasises first-person experience as it is alien in a Western tradition that emphasises third-person objectivity.

Tanabe explicitly compares his experience to the one that led Shinran in the thirteenth century to establish Jōdo Shinshū, or Shin Buddhism, the most popular form of Buddhism in Japan. Shin is a school of Pure Land Buddhism, which teaches that enlightenment can be reached simply by the practice of *nembutsu*, reciting the phrase '*Namu Amida Butsu*' ('I take refuge in Amitābha Buddha'). (Amitābha, or Amida, is the principal Buddha of Jōdo Shinshū, not Gautama, the founder of all Buddhism.) The practice requires a worshipper to let go of the illusion that enlightenment can be achieved by oneself. Instead, one must give oneself over to 'other-power'.[58]

These Japanese takes on insight have roots which run through East Asia, back to the origins of Buddhism in India. The predecessors of Zen in Japan were the Chán Buddhists of China, who belong to the Mahāyāna tradition. From the Mahāyāna perspective, says Tom Kasulis, 'wisdom (*prajñā*) surpasses discriminating understanding (*vikalpa*)' and 'expressing an engagement with reality is of greater value than analysing it with detachment'.[59]

It is perhaps no coincidence that insight as a source of knowledge is stressed most in the traditions the West finds least philosophical. Western philosophy's self-image has largely been constructed by distancing itself from ideas of the philosopher as a sage or guru who penetrates the deep mysteries of the universe like some kind of seer. This distancing has blinded it to the obvious truth that all good philosophy requires some kind of insight. There are innumerable very clever, very scholarly philosophers who can pick apart an argument better than anyone but who don't have anything worthwhile to contribute to their discipline. What they lack is not an ability to be even more systematic in their analysis, but an ability to spot what is at stake, what

matters. Insight without analysis and critique is just intuition taken on faith. But analysis without insight is empty intellectual game-playing. The world's philosophies offer not just insights but ideas about how to achieve them, and we would profit by sympathetically but critically engaging with both.

Notes

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THE INEFFABLE

At Ikuta Shrine in the centre of Kobe, Japan, fashionably dressed young people are among the stream of visitors performing the simple Shintōrituals that have been a familiar sight here since its founding in the third century CE. Not all of them remember to bow as they pass through the *torii* gate marking the boundary between the holy space within and the secular world without. But all stop at the *temizuya* water pavilion to perform the *misogi*, a purification of body and soul. Scooping up a single ladle of water with their right hands, they first pour some over their left hand before transferring the ladle to their left hand and pouring over the right. Without touching the ladle with their mouths, they then take some of the water to rinse out their mouths before tipping any remaining water away. Thus cleansed, they are ready to greet Wakahirume, the female *kami* (spirit) housed at the shrine.

At the altar, they first make an offering of coins to the *kami*, then ring the bell to greet her. They bow twice and clap their hands twice to express joy at meeting the *kami* and respect for her, then bow once to pray. After the second clap, the hands remain together for a moment as the devotees silently express their feelings of gratitude before a final bow.

I found myself wondering how many of these worshippers actually believe in the *kami* they ostensibly come to honour. But perhaps that is the wrong question. As someone brought up in a Christian culture, I take religious belief to be primarily a matter of assenting to a list of doctrines. At the Roman Catholic Church I sometimes went to as a child, we would ritually repeat the Nicene Creed, beginning with 'We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of all that is, seen and unseen ...' and concluding, 'We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.' At Shintōshrines, however, the entire ritual is wordless, even the inner expression of gratitude, which is supposed to be more of a feeling than a thought. Since visitors to the shrine are not required to assert belief in anything, perhaps asking what they really believe is to miss the point.

The relative unimportance of asserting doctrine helps to explain the syncretic nature of religion in Japan, where a common expression is 'Born Shintō, live Confucian, die Buddhist'. When I visited the Buddhist temple of Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, for example, the Shintōshrine Jishu Jinja was so seamlessly adjoined to the site that it took me a while to realise they weren't

part of the same complex. Japanese visitors performed rituals at both.

Doctrines are less important than they are in Western Christianity in part because it is believed that the purest knowledge of reality comes from direct experience and so the most fundamental truths cannot be captured in language. They are ineffable, literally unsayable. This is a common idea in East Asia, most evident in Chinese Daoism (or Taoism). Daoism has deep roots in Chinese culture and can be traced back to at least the fourth century BCE, when the earliest of the great Daoist teachers, Laozi, is said to have lived and written the *Daodejing* (or *Tao Te Ching*), one of Daoism's foundational texts. Whether Laozi was actually a historical figure or not is far from clear and matters little to most Daoists. Daoism's other key text is the *Zhuangzi*, named after its author and probably written a few centuries later. Every philosophical school has its *dao*, which simply means 'the way'. Where the *Dao* of Daoism most differs from that of Confucianism is that it emphasises naturalness and a kind of spontaneity rather than rules and rituals.

In China, Daoist thinkers often point to the inability of language to capture the true meaning of the *Dao*, which defies understanding and is always somewhat mysterious. 'The clearest Way seems obscure;/The Way ahead seems to lead backward,' says the *Daodejing*, in its typically paradoxical way.[1] It states, 'To know that one does not know is best; not to know but to believe that one knows is a disease.'[2] Because of its ineffability, the *Dao* is better understood by doing than by thinking.

> Look for it and it cannot be seen;
> Listen for it and it cannot be heard;
> But use it and it will never run dry![3]

The third-century-BCE classic *Lüshi Chunqui* says of the *Dao*, 'Forced to give it a name, I would call it "Great One".'[4] There is a very similar line in the *Daodejing* which reads, 'Forced to give it a proper name, I would call it "great".'[5] Both texts talk of being 'forced' to use language, the implication being that it would be better not to resort to words at all. 'Those who know do not talk about it;/Those who talk about it do not know.'[6]

If some of Daoism's paradoxical statements sound a little like jokes, that is no coincidence. Daoism celebrates humour and is often funny, which Joel Kupperman says is for a good reason: 'Because one never has a final truth, or a final "take" on anything, or a final adjustment to the world – Zhuangzi's philosophical training appears designed to encourage the ability to laugh at oneself. The philosophy is not intended to lead to a comfortable "complacency".'[7]

There's a wonderful passage in the *Zhuangzi* which explains the limits of

language in a typically wry way:

> A trap is for fish: when you've got the fish, you can forget the trap. A snare is for rabbits: when you've got the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words are for meaning: when you've got the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find someone who's forgotten words so I can have a word with him?[8]

The mistrust of language in Daoism leads to a suspicion even of classical philosophical texts, which are dismissed in the *Zhuangzi* as 'leftovers'. In one passage a wheelwright named Slab explains this to his master by example of his skill:

> 'When I chisel a wheel, if I hit it too softly, it slips and won't bite. If I hit it too hard, it jams and won't move. Neither too soft nor too hard – I get it in my hand and respond with my hand. But my mouth cannot put it into words. There is an art to it. But your servant can't show it to his own son, and he can't get it from me. I've done it this way seventy years and am growing old chiseling wheels.'[9]

Slab has a skill that can be transmitted neither by words nor by mere showing. Rather, each new generation has to learn the craft anew, under careful tutelage. In the same way, Daoism asserts that philosophical wisdom can't be simply passed on in texts. The great sages develop their wisdom over a lifetime and it dies with them. 'The ancients died with what they could not pass down,' says Slab. 'So what M'Lord is reading can only be their leftovers.' His story also underlines the importance of practice over theory: Slab follows the way with his craft better than his scholarly master does with his learning.

Daoism puts greater emphasis on ineffability than China's other main indigenous tradition, although the limits of language are also often noted in Confucianism. For example, Confucius says 'Does heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does heaven say anything?'[10] However, Confucius only advises silence on questions of ultimate reality, which he does not think we need to worry about in order to live well. For the things that matter, he emphasises the need to get words right. In one famous passage he says that if he were to administer a state his priority would be to rectify names, to return them to their true meaning and use. A ruler ought to be a ruler, a son, a son, and so on. People would do what they are supposed to do. Although he mentions this idea once only, 'the rectification of names' became an important idea in Confucian philosophy.[11]

In Japan, ineffability is in part why the indigenous Shintōreligion has relatively little tradition of producing systematic philosophy. The eighteenth-century Shintōpoet Kamo No Mabuchi wrote, 'To try to define things unequivocally in terms of principle is to treat them as dead objects.'[12] This is

why we need poetry: to give us some sense of what we cannot precisely capture in language. Hence the Shintōscholar Fujitani Mitsue wrote, 'When I cannot take just what I am thinking and use either direct language or metaphor but I also cannot refrain from speaking, then of necessity I compose a poem.'[13]

The limits of language are most overtly and fully embraced in Zen Buddhism. Zen originated in Japan in the twelfth century as an indigenous version of the Chán school, which originated in seventh-century China. The founding myth of Zen is that the Buddha silently held up a flower, twirled it and winked.[14] It is the only major religious or philosophical tradition that didn't begin with an utterance of some kind. Buddhism in general is also notable for the number of passages which advise people to ignore the teachings of the Buddha, most starkly in the saying 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.' As ShidōBunan put it less violently, 'The teachings of the Buddha are greatly in error. How much more in error it is to learn them.' They are in error because no words can ever capture the truth, even the words of the Buddha. The best way to avoid error is therefore not to use words. 'If I would make any proposition whatever, then by that I would have a logical error,' wrote the second–third-century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. 'But I do not make a proposition; therefore I am not in error.'[15]

Words are like 'a finger pointing at the moon'. 'Guided by the finger, the other person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon but the finger also. Why, because he mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.'[16] At their best words merely help us to get beyond words, to a place where they no longer stand between us and the world, but where we follow Bunan's injunction to 'See directly. Hear directly.'[17]

In Zen, language and rationality are both intellectual straitjackets. 'Language is a product of intellection and intellection is what our intellect adds to, or rather, subtracts from, reality,' wrote Suzuki.[18] Language adds to reality in that it creates an extra layer on top of it, and this in turn subtracts from reality by obscuring its fullness. 'Meanings and judgments are an abstracted part of the original experience, and compared with the actual experiences they are meagre in content,' said Nishida.[19] One of the purposes of some paradoxical koans – such as 'What is the colour of wind?' or 'When you can do nothing, what can you do?' – is to draw our attention to the inadequacy of words and how apparently perfectly well-formed sentences can nonetheless be meaningless. 'Those who find Zen foolish are still under the spell of linguistic magic,' said Suzuki.[20]

Despite this disavowal of language, Zen teachers have left a lot of written

words. Many see this paradox as an imperfect compromise. Musō Soseki says, 'If nothing was ever to be written down then the ways of guiding people would be lost. Thus the Zen school has resigned itself to publishing the records of the ancients, though this is not what they would have wanted.'[21] A similar rationale was perhaps behind Plato's decision to write his Socratic dialogues, even though Socrates himself refused to put ink to parchment, believing that ossified texts can never take the place of the practice of philosophising. When Zen masters did write, though, they chose their words carefully and sparingly. For Kazashi Nobuo, this shows as much respect for words as it does suspicion of them. He told me of the saying, which originated in China, 'The most important things can only be conveyed from heart to heart.' When a great Zen philosopher like Dōgen set things down on paper, he tried to use words to make this heart-to-heart connection.

You could say that it is because Japanese have such respect for words that their poets and thinkers use them so sparingly. It is not so much a mistrust of language as a reverence for it. Maeda Naoki, a junior priest from the Shingon sect of esoteric Buddhism, recently said, 'Speech is the silver medal. You get a gold medal for not speaking.'[22] But the very meaning of 'Shingon' is 'True Word', so it would make no sense for silence in Shingon to imply a disregard for language.

The deep respect for words in Japan is reflected in the Shintōbelief in *kotodama*, a compound of 'word' and 'soul': the soul of a word. From this belief flow superstitions around words that sound like other, ominous ones. Four (四), for example, can be read as '*yon*' (よん) or '*shi*' (し), which sounds like the word for death, *shi* (死); hence the number four is considered unlucky. Something of the spirit of *kotodama* is found all over East Asia, where the sounds of words are imbued with powers and homophones are considered lucky or unlucky. In both Chinese and Korean, the number four also sounds like some words for death and is often avoided, with Korean hotels often missing room fours. In Chinese, the number three, *sān* (三), is propitious because it sounds like the word for birth, *shēng* (生).

Buddhism, of course, originated in India, and ineffability can also be found in the brahmanic tradition against which Buddhism reacted. In the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahman* is said to be inscrutable:

> It is conceived of by him whom It is not conceived of.
> He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.
> It is not understood by those who [say they] understand it.
> It is understood by those who [say they] understand It not.[23]

Ultimate truth is beyond not just language but any rational understanding. 'Do not question too much, lest your head fall off,' warn the *Upaniṣads*. 'In

truth, you are questioning too much about a divinity about which further questions cannot be asked.'[24] The supreme self is 'Incomprehensible [...] not to be reasoned about, unthinkable'.[25]

The ineffability of *Brahman* is perhaps most clearly expressed in a phrase found in both the *Upaniṣads* and the *Avadhuta Gītā* which describes *Brahman* as 'not this, not that' (*neti neti*). Another *Upaniṣad* passage says that *Brahman* is that 'wherefrom words turn back'.[26] Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad says that this is particularly emphasised by the Advaitains, who 'maintain that language cannot touch brahman; it is *ineffable*'.[27]

The deep appreciation of the limits of language and a refusal to confuse the world as it is with our conceptual categorisations are enduring strengths of philosophy all across Asia. In my experience, the West tends to see all limits to knowledge as an affront, a border to be crossed. The unknown presents the challenge 'to boldly go where no man has gone before'. Elsewhere, human limits are not just accepted but celebrated. At the Indian Philosophical Congress, Duvan Chandel quoted from the greatest poet of modern India, Rabindranath Tagore: 'Truth loves its limits, for there it meets the beautiful.'[28] It's a sentiment that has resonated in India for centuries.

The million-dollar question raised by an embrace of the ineffable is whether, having seen that the world is not the same as our linguistic conception of it, we can then see it how it really is. Many eastern traditions say we can. I remain unconvinced. Even if we can perceive reality unframed by concepts, it will still be framed by our perceptual and cognitive apparatus. You can take off the glasses of language, but our experience of the world still has to come through the lens of human nature. The idea that we can completely dissolve our human-specific ways of experience and see or become one with reality in itself is incoherent. There cannot be a view from either nowhere or everywhere: every view has to be from somewhere. To escape our human perspective altogether would be to cease to be human and thus cease to exist not only as we know it, but as we could know it.

My thoughts on ineffability owe something to the eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant, like many thinkers from the East, grappled with the idea that there was a distinction between the world as it is (the noumenal world) and the world as we perceive it (the phenomenal world). Reading the works of contemporaneous empiricist philosophers such as David Hume, he was worried that once we accept that all our knowledge of the world comes to us through our senses it would seem that we are trapped in the phenomenal world and can know nothing of the noumenal one. Rather than try to escape the trap, Kant embraced it.

Kant's starting point is the realisation that all the time we insist that our

thoughts and concepts must conform to the way objects are, independently of us, we are doomed to failure. No matter how much we try to examine nature *as it is in itself*, we only observe nature *as it appears to us*. Even when we think we are getting close to nature itself, such as when we investigate the subatomic structure of the universe, we can only be looking even more closely at the world as it appears, not as it is. There is no escape from this: we can only experience the world through the eyes, minds, ideas, models and constructs of humans.

Kant's solution was to question the basic assumption about what knowledge must involve: that we must conform our knowledge to the way objects are. Why not consider the possibility that objects must conform to the way we are? The world is only as it is because our minds frame it in a certain way. It is only because we experience the world in three spatial directions and in tensed time – with past, present and future – that there is a world in space and time. In other words, it is only because we perceive the world in the way that we do that the world that we know even exists. Rather than taking the thinker to the world, Kant brought the world to the thinker.

This might seem a cop-out: that Kant is solving the problem that we do not know the world as it is by saying it is just as good to know the world as it seems. But his argument is more subtle than that. He says that it is not a human tragedy that the noumenal world is beyond us, but a universal necessity for any conscious creature. For anything to have experiences, it needs to have a perceptual and cognitive framework. These can be radically different. Bats place themselves in space by echolocation; time passes four times more slowly for a fly than for a human being.[29] We don't know how extraterrestrial life forms might perceive the universe, but we do know that for them to be conscious at all they would have to see it *in some way,* and that would mean that they too were stuck in their own phenomenal universe, alienated from the noumenal one. In other words, for there to be any real world for any conscious life, there must be a phenomenal world. Such a world is real, for there is simply nothing else that could be more authentically real for any conceivable life form.

Kant does not deny that there is a world independent of human experience, the noumenal world of things-in-themselves. But he thought it senseless to believe we could ever know it. In that way, he is closer to Confucius and to the Buddha, both of whom advocated silence on the ultimate questions of metaphysics. From a Kantian perspective, all the other Asian philosophies that claim the possibility of concept-free, ineffable experience of the world as it truly is are clinging to an impossible dream of being able to escape our human cognitive apparatus. You can strip away language, but you can't strip away the

human mind.

I think Kant's basic insight is very powerful. It explains to me why certain mystical or meditative experiences cannot be taken as reliable sources of knowledge of the world as it is. Many have believed that having an experience of the self as one with *Brahman,* or of the self as empty, or of past, present and future dissolving is some kind of evidence that this is how things really are. The Kantian response is that all such experiences are still just experiences. They tell you something about how things seem to you, but they cannot tell you about how things are. Feeling one with *Brahman* does not mean that you are one with *Brahman*; feeling yourself freed from the flow of time does not make you free from the flow of time. Most importantly, the fact that such experiences might feel more real to you than everyday experiences does not make them more real. Extraordinary states may be more powerful than ordinary ones, but that is not evidence that they reveal truth better than ordinary ones. 'Heightened' experiences may simply be ones where our feet lose touch with the ground, not ones that take us closer to the heavens. The irony is that the attempt to go beyond experience to how things really are depends even more on the particularities of personal experience than ordinary knowledge of the everyday world, which can at least be corroborated by objective, third-party observations.

I would even argue that concepts and language can help us get closer to reality, rather than stand in our way of such knowledge. To see why, we need to think more carefully about what objectivity means. There is a temptation to believe that objective knowledge transcends all points of view, all concepts, all language. Rather than objective knowledge being a view from somewhere it is a kind of view from nowhere. Such an objective account of the world has been the implicit or explicit goal of most Western philosophers. One of the clearest expressions of this came during the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment in d'Alembert's introduction to the *Encyclopédie*. He looked forward to a unified science in which 'the Universe would be only one fact and one great truth for whoever knew how to embrace it from a single point of view'.[30]

But as Kant suggests, a view from nowhere is no view at all. Hence the title of Thomas Nagel's contemporary classic *The View from Nowhere*, in which he criticises this notion of objectivity. But Nagel critiques objectivity in order to save it, not to bury it. He invites us to see objectivity as not an unachievable absolute but as a direction in which to aspire.

We all start with subjective experience. As babies, we are the centre of the universe and we don't even understand that others have different perspectives. We take our first step towards a more objective understanding

when we realise that things still exist when they move out of sight. We begin to see that the way things are does not depend purely on how we happen to perceive them. We learn that some people are colour blind and so green for us is not green for all, or that a stick that looks bent in water is actually straight to the touch. This illustrates how objectivity for Nagel is a matter of degree. Our understanding becomes more objective the less it depends on the idiosyncrasies of our specific viewpoints, sense organs or conceptual schema. Nagel illustrates this with the image of concentric circles, the smallest at the middle the most subjective, the largest at the outside the most objective. Circles become larger as more people are able to share the same perspective.

The pinnacles of objective knowledge are found in maths and science, since these are ways of understanding the world that do not depend on which language you speak, where you live or even which of your senses are fully functioning. Even this kind of knowledge is not completely objective. We do not know whether extraterrestrials would be able to make sense of our science, or us of theirs. Nor can we ever know whether there is some fundamental limitation of human cognition that prevents us from achieving an even more objective understanding. Nonetheless, in science and maths we do reach very high degrees of objectivity, ways of understanding that transcend particular perspectives. This objective knowledge, however, requires concepts and language. Far from being obstacles to objective truth, they are enablers of it.

There is still value in the traditions that seek to get beyond words and symbols, in cultivating ways of relating to the world that are more rooted in direct experience, that set aside conceptual categories. At the very least, it is surely useful to remind ourselves that the way we currently experience the world might not exhaust all the possibilities that such a world has to offer. And there may be ways of knowing that can't be expressed in linguistic propositions. Anglophone philosophy tends to distinguish between know-how and knowing-that, arguing that only the latter generates real knowledge. But this seems to be an arbitrary stipulation. To deny that the wheelwright Slab has knowledge because he can't set it down on paper looks like moving the epistemological goalposts to fix the philosophical result.

Interestingly, in the early twentieth century, that most analytical of philosophers Bertrand Russell, no fan of the ineffable, distinguished between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. I know Bristol, the city I live in, by acquaintance, but I know Trieste only from descriptions I've read of it. Russell also claimed that all knowledge by description is rooted in knowledge by acquaintance, that experience of the world is primary. The people whose descriptions of Trieste I read are (hopefully) actually acquainted

with the city. However, only propositions can be true or false, so although these *descriptions* of Trieste can be true or false, we cannot talk of their *experiences* of Trieste as being true or false. But what if some experiences cannot be adequately translated into language? We would then have knowledge by acquaintance without any associated knowledge by description. Could we not call that knowledge ineffable? Russell didn't consider this possibility, but it seems to me that this small twist makes a very Western philosophy suddenly look almost eastern. Some acquaintance with other traditions creates the possibility to redescribe our own in fruitful and fascinating ways.

Notes

1 *Daodejing*, 1.41, in Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Hackett, 2005), p. 183.

2 Ibid., 1.71, p. 198.

3 Ibid., 1.38, p. 181.

4 Robin R. Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 48.

5 *Daodejing*, 25, in Ivanhoe and Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, p. 175.

6 Ibid., 1.56, p. 190.

7 Joel Kupperman, *Learning from Asian Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 183.

8 *Zhuangzi*, 26, in Ivanhoe and Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, p. 250.

9 Ibid., 13, p. 245.

10 *Analects*, XVII.ix.3, in James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. 1 (Clarendon Press, 1893), p. 326.

11 Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, *Eastern Philosophy* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 146.

12 Kamo No Mabuchi, 'The Meaning of Our Country', in James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), p. 468.

13 Fujitani Mitsue, 'On *Kotodama*', ibid., p. 501.

14 Ibid., p. 160.

15 Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Part 2.29, in Deepak Sarma (ed.), *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 44.

16 *Shurangama Sūtra,* 2, www.fodian.net/world/shurangama.html.

17 Shidō Bunan, 'This Very Mind Is Buddha', in Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy,* p. 191.

18 D. T. Suzuki, 'Self the Unattainable', *Eastern Buddhist*, III:2 (1970), pp. 1–8, reprinted in Frederick Franck (ed.), *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries,* pp. 6–7.

19 Robert E. Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (SUNY Press, 2013), p. 19.

20 Suzuki, 'Self the Unattainable', reprinted in Franck (ed.), *The Buddha Eye,* pp. 3–4.

21 Musō Soseki, 'Dialogues in a Dream', in Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy,* p. 171.

22 Quoted in Barney Jopson, 'A Pilgrim's Progress', *FT Magazine* Japan supplement, 10–11 September 2016, pp. 16–21.

23 Kena Upaniṣad, I.1–3, in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (eds.), *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 42.

24 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, III.iv, ibid., p. 84.

25 *Maitri Upaniṣad,* VI.17, ibid., p. 95.

26 *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.8, ibid., p. 60.

27 Ram-Prasad, *Eastern Philosophy,* pp. 168–9.

28 Rabindranath Tagore, 'Fireflies' (177), at www.tagoreweb.in.

29 See Emilie Reas, 'Small Animals Live in a Slow-Motion World', *Scientific American*, 1 July 2014.

30 The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert: Collaborative Translation Project, hosted by Michigan Publishing, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/, d'Alembert, 'Preliminary Discourse', https://goo.gl/LmG5Qa.

Theology or philosophy?

At a conference on medieval Islamic philosophy, one of the leading academics in the field was fulminating in the cloakroom after a talk by an equally esteemed colleague. He was livid that his peer had basically dismissed most of what has been written in the Islamic intellectual tradition since Avicenna (also known as Ibn Sīnā, 980–1037) as theology, not philosophy. As he vented his spleen, his peer arrived unseen from behind to collect his coat, potentially overhearing some of the invective. Far from being embarrassed, the academic turned his fire on the object of his ire.

His peer defended himself, saying that he was simply asking whether the major thinkers were 'philosophising or simply recycling beautiful arguments to prove a mythological narrative'.

'You're talking about books that you haven't read,' accused the academic, adding that according to his peer's criteria one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Western philosophy, St Thomas Aquinas, is 'not a philosopher'.

'Of course he's not a philosopher!' said his peer, enthusiastically biting the bullet.

A peacemaker in the small throng that had gathered to witness these intellectual fisticuffs suggested a compromise. 'You can say it's a very philosophical theology. He's very philosophical but he's not a philosopher.'

The leading academic was having none of it, accusing his peer of restricting 'true' philosophy to what came in Europe after the Enlightenment.

'Go back to the Greeks, for heaven's sake!' his peer replied. 'That's our understanding of philosophy.'

'And there's no mythology that they want to explain?' retorted the academic. 'You're basically saying that if they employ philosophical arguments only for religious motives, then they are no longer philosophers. That cuts out the whole pre-Enlightenment philosophical tradition.'

It would have gone on but the melee was blocking the cloakroom and we had to vacate the building. Dinner beckoned. A temporary truce was tacitly called in what was clearly a long and bitter war.

I was glad to have witnessed this skirmish. It confirmed that one of the key debates concerning the history of Islamic philosophy is the extent to which it is philosophy and the extent to which it is theology. This debate is found almost everywhere that you find philosophy. It's certainly evident in the

classical Indian tradition, where revelation and religion are deeply entwined with philosophical thought. The question also arises in East Asia, where Confucianism and Daoism are sometimes thought of as religions, and where Buddhism is a strong influence in many philosophical traditions. And one reason why many do not treat ancient oral traditions as philosophical systems is that they are assumed to be essentially religious in character.

Attempts to distinguish philosophy and theology are particularly difficult in Islamic philosophy, as the incident in the conference cloakroom illustrated. Even the way you describe the tradition is potentially controversial. To call it 'Islamic philosophy' is to suggest it all has a religious character, so some prefer the term 'philosophy in the Islamic world'. We don't, for example, call René Descartes or John Locke 'Christian philosophers', even though they were in fact both philosophers and Christian, identities that were not hermetically sealed from each other in the seventeenth century. Locke, for instance, praised toleration as 'the chief characteristic mark of the true Church' but insisted 'those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God' because 'promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist'.[1] However, for the sake of simplicity and nothing more, I will continue to call it Islamic philosophy on the understanding that that does not prejudge the extent to which it is all infused with theology.

The standard way of framing the debate about the religious nature of Islamic philosophy is to focus on the battle for supremacy between *falsafa* and *kalām* in the Middle Ages. *Falsafa* is usually translated as 'philosophy' while *ilm al-kalām*, to give it its full name (literally 'the science of the word/discourse'), represents the harder to translate idea of a kind of theological philosophy specific to Islam. The key protagonists in this historical dispute were Avicenna and Averroes, who spoke in support of the *falāsifa* (philosopher), and al-Ghazālī, whose *Incoherence of the Philosophers* attacked the pursuit of reason without revelation. The crude version of history is that al-Ghazālī won, and the decline of *falsafa* heralded the decline of secular philosophical thought in the Islamic world which has not been reversed to this day. '*Falsafa*' is a 'dirty word' in the Arab world, wrote Omar Saif Ghobash recently. 'It is seen as a distraction from the importance of keeping the faith pure and unsullied by questions that will only serve to divide and separate the Muslims.'[2] Religion claims priority over reason, which means that it has been difficult to reinterpret Islam in the light of contemporary science and to force its teaching to accommodate secular knowledge.

Although no serious scholar would entirely subscribe to the simplistic narrative today in which theology drives out philosophy, in broad terms it

does represent a received wisdom which is still a matter of dispute. Dimitri Guttas is foremost among the internationally respected scholars whose views are close to this default story. In his account, Avicenna marked the high point of Islamic philosophy. Avicenna was born during the time of the Persian Samanid dynasty (819–999), when science and philosophy flourished. 'The Samanid rulers were not interested in having a hard line, sticking to the literal narrative of Islam as it expressed itself in the Qur'ān,' Guttas told me. 'The philosophers and scientists interpreted it metaphorically as almost everyone does anyway in social contexts in which religion is not being used by political agents for political purposes.' The openness of the early Islamic world contrasted with the more closed-minded Christendom of late antiquity, where 'the Hellenic scientific outlook on life was not allowed to continue because of the extreme adherence to the literal narrative of that kind of orthodox Christianity'.

During this period, ancient Greek philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle, was translated into Arabic and had a profound impact on thinking in the Islamic world. Guttas argues that Avicenna was basically doing science, by which he means 'open-ended inquiry into the nature of reality', which is also how he characterises classical Greek philosophy: 'In Avicenna we get the pinnacle of this scientific development because he puts together all the different sciences that were being developed and he creates an integrated system that is scientific and at the same time holistic.'

In one sense Avicenna was too successful and his system 'became itself a dogmatic outlook. Because he put together the scientific view of the world so consistently, with such integrity, the main purpose of philosophising after that became not so much doing more research science and finding out things as to try to criticise it or to defend it. The scientific system of Avicenna became frozen as *the* scientific outlook, and the rest tried to take it down.'

After Avicenna, however, Guttas argues that 'the theological motivations became paramount' as *kalām* came to dominate over *falsafa*. However, we have to be careful here, because *falsafa* does not mean philosophy in its modern, general sense. *Falsafa* is a transliteration of the Greek word *philosophia*, 'understood by everyone to be the works of Aristotle primarily, as well as of the mathematicians and astronomers, the Greek scientific literature'. In other words, *falsafa* referred to the sciences generally, as inherited from the Greeks, not just to what we would call philosophy today.

Guttas argues that *kalām*, in contrast, is 'what we would called theology, a kind of exercise of trying to understand religion in a rational way'. It had a 'double function to present religion in a more orderly, systemic way and also to argue against the people of the book, the Christians and the Jews'.

Initially, *kalām* and *falsafa* were not in conflict, as they were understood to be doing different things. This changed as much for political as for philosophical reasons, says Guttas. Rulers increasingly 'found it to their advantage to sponsor scholars and thinkers who would play the religion card' in part to get support from the people. The result was not so much *kalām* wiping out *falsafa* as subverting and subsuming it. The same pattern can be seen in scholastic philosophy in the medieval Christian world. The scholastics 'started using all the language, methods and arguments that the philosophers were using, but expunging it of the doctrinal aspects that they did not like, introducing their own so it seemed as though it was basically philosophical, but it wasn't. The skeleton of the arguments and the doctrines seemed to be philosophical, but the contents were Christian.' Likewise in the Islamic world, 'The arguments themselves seemed to be philosophical but the content was Islamic.' The difference is that around the seventeenth century in the Christian world, scholasticism started to decline and a more secular style of philosophy came to dominate, whereas in the Islamic world, *kalām* retained the upper hand.

To other scholars, there are many problematic elements in this account. A peak was passed simply because, as Richard Taylor put it, 'Avicenna was incredible. There would always be a decline in some sense after Avicenna.' But Taylor rejects the standard imperialist narrative of Islamic waning and Western ascendency which sees this decline as a form of degeneracy. 'The discourse of decline is rooted in European perceptions of the Islamic world which is generated out of Enlightenment ideas and the colonial context,' Frank Griffel told me. 'If you look for evidence of decline you find it on the battlefield. Islamic armies, starting in 1798, are regularly defeated and that increases in Europe the sense of a civilisation in decline.' From the point of view of someone living in say, Cairo, that looks less like an advert for the superiority of Western civilisation than a reflection of 'Europe as an aggressive culture, that aims at subjugating other cultures'.

For instance, in India and the Middle East there used to be very strong educational institutions and a high value placed on learning. Griffel says that 'there was an expectation that if you became a state functionary in the Moghul empire you needed to know your Avicenna. This was regarded as an intellectual exercise, not as something to be subscribed to.' Time and again it was the West that killed these institutions. For instance, after the 1857–8 uprising in India, 'the British basically took away the endowments from these institutions, and three years later they were all dead. The only real education that was offered was a school that would prepare you for the British Colonial Service.'

Another source of the perception of decline is that the Enlightenment gave birth to a strong idea that philosophy 'needs to be a secular discipline' while theology's 'premises are rooted in revelation. In Enlightenment discourse, philosophy comes up stronger. There is also this idea in France of the *philosophes*, like Voltaire, who are atheists. That shaped the expectation of what philosophy is, so when in the nineteenth century European observers looked into the Islamic world they found no Voltaire, no *philosophes*.' But they did see that in the classical tradition there were thinkers such as Avicenna and al-Farabi who did not talk much about religion openly. 'They called themselves *falāsifa*,' says Griffel, 'so the word is there as well. Everything matches. And we see that these societies are in decline, they are poorer than us, they are weaker than us. You put it all together and you get the narrative that once you had the great culture of the Islamic world and of course they declined because they had given up *falsafa*, philosophy.'

Griffel says that he struggles with this narrative because in some sense there does seem to be something of a decline in Islamic civilisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Islamic societies weren't as productive or as innovative as Western ones. 'Progress, innovation, material riches, the production of material wealth, the projection of military power overseas – all of this is something we connect to a successful society.' But is this the true measure of success and is decline its opposite? 'Decline?' asks Griffel. 'It depends on how you look at it. If you think of a successful society as one that aggressively pursues empires, yes.'

Others are even more outspoken. Yahya Michot says that when we judge the relative thriving of the Western and the Islamic worlds over recent centuries 'it's too early to compare. You will be dead, I will be dead. We will have the opportunity in fifty years, after climate change, which is knocking down civilisation everywhere on this planet. Then it will be time enough to see what was more useful to mankind, so-called Western modernity or the more traditional civilisations that did not contribute or did not initiate that kind of climate change.'

He is insistent that the problems of the Islamic world come more from without than within. 'Instead of speaking of decline I speak of a fantastic capacity for survival. The Roman Empire fell for less than what the Muslim world had to go through in the thirteenth and the following centuries, starting with the Mongol invasions.' In more recent times, the West has been more dynamic, but do not assume that is a good thing, he warns. 'When you have a general cancer in an organism you can indeed speak legitimately of the dynamism of the cancer cells, but the result is what we know. And so you can say that compared to the cancer cells the healthy cells that are unable to

resist are decaying, declining etc.'

Listening to leading scholars debate these issues with me and among themselves at the conference, it struck me that the disagreement was not as polarised as it might at first seem. The argument appears to be whether Islamic thought is truly philosophical or a kind of theology. This is often assumed to be an inherently value-laden disagreement: Islamic thought is 'proper' philosophy (good) or 'just' theology (bad). But of course the belief that proper philosophy has to be purged of all theological taint is itself an expression of a value that not everyone would agree with. In other words, it is possible to accept that Islamic thought has not been secularised in the same way as Western philosophy and to say it is all the better for it.

'Who says that a philosopher cannot be motivated by Church and God?' asks Griffel. 'You have major figures in the British tradition whom we consider philosophers, deeply pious people who didn't write about their faith, yet their motivation for understanding and explaining the world is still theological. Arabic authors are open about that.' Similarly, Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat says that 'you will have a very narrow conception of philosophy' if you insist it must conform to the strongly secular parameters of the Enlightenment.

All experts agree that there is no clear-cut distinction between theology and philosophy in Islamic thought and arguably in most other intellectual traditions in history. Talking of Cairo at the height of its intellectual vigour, for example, Griffel says, 'The distinction between theology and philosophy is something that these people in 1798 would have no idea of.'

Richard Taylor agrees, saying that there is 'absorption back and forth' between theology and secular philosophy in the Islamic world, 'parallel intellectual tracks which quite often come together and come apart, and they're watching one another to some extent'. An example of this is al-Ghazālī, often accused of destroying philosophy with his attack on Avicenna and *falsafa*. A much better way of looking at this, says Taylor, is to see that his study of Avicenna 'introduced philosophy to theology'.

Peter Adamson also thinks it unhelpful to see the *falsafa* and *kalām* distinction as a battle between faith and reason. 'Rather there was a struggle within *kalām* itself between more and less rationalist approaches to understanding the revelation brought by Muḥammad.'[3] The distinction is not really about two different ways of thinking. Rather, it is a division within a single body of Islamic-philosophical-theological thought. Al-Ghazālī, an archetypal proponent of *kalām*, not only argues philosophically but appeals to arguments by Plato and Galen, claiming that the *falāsifas* have misunderstood them.[4] Similarly, the *falāsifa* al-Kindī begins one of his philosophical treatises with 'May God grant you long life in the happiest of states and the purest of

deeds, O son of noble lords and pious leaders. The beacon of faith, the precious gem, the best of both worlds!'[5] Even as he reaches his conclusion based on Neoplatonic reasoning, he does so in religious terms: 'Therefore, there are not many agents, but One without any multiplicity whatsoever (glorious and exalted is He above the descriptions of the heretics!)'[6]

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) is also keen to establish the theological licence of *falsafa*, arguing that the Qur'ān mandates it. He takes lines such as 'Reflect, you [who] have vision'[7] as Qur'ānic authority for the obligation to use philosophical methods.[8] He is also clear that philosophy cannot be done without piety and that its ultimate end is also piety:

> From this it is evident that the study of the books of the ancients is obligatory by Law, since their aim and purpose in their books is just the purpose to which the Law has urged us, and that whoever forbids the study of them to anyone who is fit to study them, that is, anyone who unites two qualities, (1) natural intelligence, and (2) religious integrity and moral virtue, is blocking the door by which the Law summons them to knowledge of God, the door of theoretical study that leads to the truest knowledge of Him.[9]

Avicenna also uses scripture in his arguments, arguing against those who believe there was no being or time before God created the present being and time, saying, 'These opinions about the world do not conform to the apparent [i.e. evident] meaning of scripture' and 'It is not stated in scripture that God was existing with absolutely nothing else: a text to this effect is nowhere to be found.'[10] He also claimed that 'the purpose of scripture is simply to teach true science and right practice'.[11]

The struggle to find the right balance between revelation and reason continues across the Islamic world today. There have been times and places where the theological constraints on reasoning have been loosened and secular ideas have gained ground. For instance, Christopher de Bellaigue has chronicled what he calls the 'Islamic Enlightenment' of the nineteenth century, when creative Muslim thinking thrived in Cairo, Istanbul and Tehran. However, even de Bellaigue, a debunker of the idea that Islam and open-minded philosophy are incompatible, acknowledges that this was preceded by centuries in which free inquiry was almost impossible and much of the direction of travel in recent decades has been the same.

'If Islam engaged so successfully with modernity until the First World War,' he asks, 'why since then has reactionary revivalism been able to impose itself on ever larger swathes of the Muslim world?'[12] Much of the rest of the world has been too impatient to soberly try to answer this, demanding a more extensive Islamic Enlightenment along the lines of the European one (overlooking, among other things, the very long time it took for the

3 Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 31.

4 Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers,* 'The First Discussion', in Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources* (Hackett, 2007), p. 241.

5 Al-Kindī, 'The Explanation of the Proximate Efficient Cause for Generation and Corruption', ibid., p. 1.

6 Al-Kindī, 'On Divine Unity and the Finitude of the World's Body', ibid., p. 22.

7 Qur'ān, 59:2.

8 Ibn Rushd, *The Decisive Treatise,* Chapter 1, in McGinnis and Reisman (eds.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy,* p. 309.

9 Ibid., p. 312.

10 Ibid., Chapter 2, pp. 318–19.

11 Ibid., Chapter 3, p. 323.

12 Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment* (The Bodley Head, 2017), p. xxiii.

13 Ibid., p. 25.

14 Robert E. Carter, *The Kyoto School: An Introduction* (SUNY Press, 2013), p. 6.

15 Tanabe Hajime, 'The Philosophy of Dōgen', in James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), p. 684.

16 Takeuchi Yoshinori, 'Buddhist Existentialism', ibid., p. 745.

17 Carter, *The Kyoto School*, p. 6.

18 Takeuchi, 'Buddhist Existentialism', in Heisig, Kasulis and Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy,* p. 746.

19 Carter, *The Kyoto School*, p. 8.

Logic

The French Revolution of 1789–99 was fought in the name of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité.* Standing unnamed alongside them – or perhaps supporting them from underneath – was the general of the campaign: *raison*. The new society the revolutionaries hoped to create would be a better one because it would be established on rational grounds.

This was evident in the manner in which they set about their work. After their victory, their priorities were not simply giving power to the people and removing the heads of the *ancien régime*. With revolutionary zeal they sought to rid society of its illogical quirks, without considering how these measures affected the plight of the ordinary citizen. Decimalisation was more important than nationalisation. 'The metric system is for all the people for all the time,' said the philosopher Condorcet, with a rhetoric more in keeping with social than mensural reform.

In 1795, out went the *livre*, the unit of currency for over 1,000 years, with its illogical subdivision into twenty *sous* (or *sols*), each of twelve *deniers*. In came the decimal *franc*, more pleasingly comprised of ten *décimes* or 100 *centimes*. In the same year, five decimal units of measurement were created: the *mètre* for length, the *are* for area, the *stère* for volumes of dry goods, the litre for volumes of liquid and the *gramme* for mass. These units could be magnified or shrunk by the addition of prefixes such as *kilo* (1,000), *hecta* (100), *deci* (a tenth) or *centi* (a hundredth). They were adopted nationally in 1795.

More radical but less enduring was a new calendar. Its weeks of ten days were divided into twenty hours of 100 decimal minutes, each comprising 100 decimal seconds. Introduced in 1793, the revolutionary calendar was used for only twelve years, and most gave up on revolutionary time after two.

These reforms reflected the importance revolutionaries placed on reason in general and logic in particular. The *Encyclopédie*, the defining text of the French Enlightenment, which was edited and largely written by Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert between 1751 and 1772, had the ambitious purpose to 'collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us'.[1]

In his introductory 'Preliminary Discourse', d'Alembert writes how important logic is to the acquisition of this knowledge. Logic

> teaches how to arrange ideas in the most natural order, how to link them together in the most direct sequence, how to break up those which include too large a number of simple ideas, how to view ideas in all their facets, and finally how to present them to others in a form that makes them easy to grasp. This is what constitutes this science of reasoning, which is rightly considered the key to all our knowledge.[2]

There was little that the French enlightenment *philosophes* did not think could be improved by the application of logic. Writing about punctuation, for example, Diderot observed that 'the pause of a voice in discourse, and the signs of punctuation in writing, always correspond, indicate equally well the connection or separation of ideas, and complement countless expressions. Therefore,' he concluded, 'it will be useful to determine their number according to the rules of logic, and fix their value through examples.'[3]

Faith in the power of logic and reason was perhaps never as strong as it was during the French Enlightenment and Revolution. Arguably, however, the stress on logic has been the most distinctive feature of Western philosophy throughout its history and has shaped the entire culture. Logic is founded on the idea that reasoning should proceed by strict deductive steps, giving argument a kind of quasi-mathematical rigour. Aristotle first set out the basic principles of logic, and his rules would be followed until the emergence of symbolic logic in the nineteenth century. Defenders of Western philosophy argue that its emphasis on logic has given it a unique robustness, while critics say it has trapped the Western mind in crude, inflexible, dichotomous either/or ways of thinking. Ironically, sometimes this criticism itself betrays crude binary thinking. Tom Kasulis, for instance, once heard a Japanese scholar say, 'Unlike you Westerners, we Japanese are not dualistic.'[4] Western philosophers are not the only ones who make sharp distinctions.

'Logic' can look like an imposing, technical term but its essence is simple enough. Logic is simply the systematic working through of the implications of true statements. Its most uncontroversial principle is the Law of Excluded Middle. Put in its simplest form, it is the seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz's 'principle of contradiction': namely, 'a proposition is either true or false', and hence there is no middle, third alternative.[5] Its first explicit articulation was probably in Aristotle. 'It is impossible, then, that "being a man" should mean precisely "not being a man", if "man" not only signifies something about one subject but also has one significance,' he wrote. 'And it will not be possible to be and not to be the same thing, except in virtue of an ambiguity.'[6]

This is the plain English meaning of what in contemporary symbolic notation can be rendered as ¬(p&p) or (p ∨ p). Here 'p' stands for any statement that can be true or false (any 'proposition' with a 'truth value'). The

symbolic '¬' is a negation, while 'v' is an exclusive 'or' (a 'disjunction') where it must be either/or and cannot be both. Hence ¬(p&p) expresses the principle that a statement cannot be both true and false, while (p ⋁ p) puts it another way: namely, a statement must be true or false and cannot be both. The common usage of such notation has deterred many a potential and actual student of logic, while attracting those of a more mathematical bent.

Although I said the Law of Excluded Middle was uncontroversial, many find themselves resistant to it, claiming that the world is more complicated than this. Some people are both very clever and very stupid, for example, while hermaphrodites are both male and female. But the Law of Excluded Middle does not deny this. Aristotle makes it very clear that for the either/or logic to work it is essential that there is no ambiguity, and that meanings are precise and have only 'one significance'. These conditions are not met when we colloquially say that something is true and not true. Someone who is both clever and stupid is clever in some ways or contexts and stupid in others. They are not clever and stupid in exactly the same way at the same time. For instance, someone can be a genius novelist and a complete fool in love. Even the precise same action can be clever in one way and stupid in another. A tactically brilliant military victory might be a strategic disaster, such as a successful operation to oust a dictator that creates a toxic power vacuum.

I would bet that it is impossible to come up with an example of something that appears to contradict the Law of Excluded Middle which on closer examination does not involve ambiguity (where the meaning is unclear) or equivocation (where more than one meaning is possible). The only real controversy about the law is how useful it is, given that the world *is* often ambiguous or unclear. This is the power behind traditions that might superficially appear to reject the principle. Both Daoism and Zen, for example, are replete with apparent paradoxes that assert that something is both true and not true. For instance, the *Daodejing* says, 'Sometimes diminishing a thing adds to it;/Sometimes adding to a thing diminishes it.'[7] You might parse this as meaning that losing can be not losing and gaining not gaining. But it doesn't take long to see that there is no logical contradiction here. There are two possible interpretations. One is that what first appears like a loss can actually turn out to be a gain. ('I have not so much lost a daughter as gained a son,' as the tired old father of the bride speech goes.) The other is that a loss might be part of a process that leads to a gain. (If I hadn't lost that job I wouldn't have got this much better one.) Neither means that an actual loss is in reality not a loss at all.

Or take the Zen saying 'The Bodhi tree is not a tree, and the bright mirror is not a mirror.' Here, the central idea is that there is a difference between

ultimate reality and perceived reality. There is in one sense a Bodhi tree, but since nothing has a fixed essence, in another sense there is nothing that makes it a tree. Again, we have not a breach of the Law of Excluded Middle but a deliberate attempt to use the law to make us attend to the fact that there are different senses of 'exist'.

Remember also the description in Advaita of *Brahman* as 'not this, not that' (*neti neti*). This again might superficially appear to be an assertion that something both is and is not. But the point is to show how language cannot capture the nature of *Brahman*. We end up in a paradox when we try to describe the indescribable, not because ultimate reality is contradictory but because it defies the neat categorisations of our limited words and concepts. Indian philosophy does not embrace true contradiction, and even has something close to the Law of Excluded Middle in the concept of *vipratisedha*, defined by the third-century-BCE grammarian Patanjali as 'mutual prohibition'.[8]

The difference between the dominant ways of thinking in Western philosophy and in Asia is not that the West embraces a Law of Excluded Middle which the East rejects. Rather, the difference is the extent to which this law is foregrounded and taken to be practically important. There is plenty of what could be seen as logical argument in Chinese philosophy for example, but there is no development of logic as a specific discipline in the classical tradition. Perhaps the closest we get is the third-century-BCE White Horse paradox of Gongsun Long, in which it is argued that a white horse is not a horse since 'horse' names a shape, 'white' names a colour and 'what names the colour is not what names the shape'.[9] No substantive point seems to be made in this passage and Ram-Prasad suggests it is probably best understood as a 'refined joke'.[10]

The East has tended to stress the extent to which attempts to understand things in terms of exclusive either/or categories often fail, while the West has stressed the progress that can be made when we bring out contradictions in our common-sense ways of thinking and replace them with new distinctions that preserve logical consistency. Nicholas Rescher describes this as the '*aporetic*' nature of philosophy. An *apory* is 'a group of contentions that are individually plausible but collectively inconsistent'.[11] Philosophy exists because our pre-philosophical understanding of the world constantly generates such *apories*. In ethics, for example, the principle of impartiality seems compelling, but so does the apparent duty to put our families first. These two principles are 'individually plausible but collectively inconsistent'. In epistemology, it seems that we have knowledge and that knowledge implies certainty, but when we look for the grounds of our certainty there don't seem

Yet it would clearly be misguided to get rid of either/or logic entirely. The Law of Excluded Middle is implicit in all philosophies and the only difference is how much it is stressed. Although the West places the most importance on it, there is also a very strong role for logic in the classical Indian tradition. The tenth-century logician Udayana even set out an exact analogue of the Law of Excluded Middle in the wonderfully titled *Nyāya kusumaāñjali* ('A Handful of Flowers of Logic'): 'Between a thing and its contradictory, there is no third way. And there cannot be also a unity of two contradictories, for the mere statements of them will cancel each other.'[12]

Udayana was a successor of Akṣapāda Gautama, the thinker who did the most to develop logic in India and was purportedly the author of the *Nyāya Sūtra*, the key text of the Nyāya school. The *Nyāya Sūtra* is a rich, detailed account of the forms of reasoning and their validity. Among its most interesting features is its taxonomy of the different kinds of dispute with its wonderful lexicon. *Discussion*, for example, is a sincere form of investigation where debaters adopt one of two opposing sides, defending them 'by the aid of any of the means of right knowledge' and assailing the opposition 'by confutation, without deviation from the established tenets'.[13] In contrast, *wrangling* simply aims at gaining victory, 'by quibbles, futilities, and other processes that deserve rebuke'.[14] Wrangling also comes in various forms. *Cavil*, for instance, 'is a kind of wrangling that consists in mere attacks on the opposite side. A *caviller* does not endeavour to establish anything, but confines himself to mere carping at the arguments of his opponent.'[15] We all know the sort.

Every term in these definitions is itself subject to precise specification. *Quibble* is a very specific fallacy of 'wilfully taking the term in a sense other than that intended by a speaker who has happened to use it ambiguously'. If I said a book was long and you said it wasn't, since it only measured twenty centimetres, you'd be quibbling. You can also quibble in respect of metaphors, by taking a word literally when it was meant metaphorically or vice versa.[16]

Written between the sixth and the second centuries BCE, the *Nyāya Sūtra* famously analyses the structure of sound arguments as a five-membered syllogism. The stock example is:

> There is fire on the hill (the *pratijñā*, thesis).
> Because there is smoke on the hill (the *hetu*, reason or *probans*).
> Wherever there is smoke, there is fire; like a kitchen hearth
> and unlike a lake (the *udāharaṇa*, illustration of concomitance).
> This hill is likewise smoky (the *upanaya*, application of the rule).
> Thus, there is fire on the hill (the *nigamana*, conclusion).[17]

According to the *Nyāya Sūtra*, all other valid inferences have the same general

form. You start by stating the thesis you are seeking to establish (the *pratijñā*). You then state the reason (the *hetu*) for believing the thesis is true. However, the *hetu* alone is not enough to establish that the thesis must be true. To do that you have to state the general rule (the *udāharaṇa*), which if you apply it to the *hetu* generates the conclusion, the *nigamana*. So, to take another, non-traditional example:

> This plate of tiramisu is fattening (the *pratijñā*).
> Because it contains lots of fat and sugar (the *hetu*).
> Anything that contains a lot of fat and sugar is fattening, like a doughnut and unlike a carrot (the *udāharaṇa*).
> The plate of tiramisu likewise contains a lot of fat and sugar (the *upanaya*).
> Thus, the plate of tiramisu is fattening (the *nigaman*).

The parallels with Greek logic are striking, despite the fact that both appear to have developed independently. Aristotle introduced the idea of the syllogism, an argument which proceeds deductively from premises to conclusion. The premises are statements which are taken to be true, either because they are evident by observation or because they have been demonstrated as true in some other way. A successful deduction takes premises and draws out the conclusion which results of necessity from them. Standard examples are deliberately banal so that it is easy to see the movement from premises to conclusion. For example:

> John Kettley is a weather man.
> All weather men are mortal.
> Therefore John Kettley is mortal.

This is more concise than the five-membered syllogism, which can appear unnecessarily tortuous in comparison. In Aristotelian logic, the smoke and fire argument can be expressed in a simpler three-line argument:

> Wherever there is smoke, there is fire.
> There is smoke on the hill.
> Therefore, there is fire on the hill.

Aristotelian logic analyses the structure of arguments to create a list of all valid deductions. This one is of the form called *modus ponens* or affirming the antecedent:

> If P, then Q.
> P.
> Therefore Q.

Although this is indeed more economical than the five-membered syllogism, in practice Indian logic often uses a similar three-step process, one which has

the same basic steps as the Aristotelian syllogism but in a different order. So the structure is

> A is qualified by S,
> because it is qualified by T
> (whatever is qualified by T is qualified by S) like (Tb & Sb).

We can apply this to the example and also point out its parallel lines in the Aristotelian syllogism:

> The hill is on fire (the hill is qualified by fieriness) *[Therefore Q]*
> because it is smoking (qualified by smokiness). *[P]*
> Wherever there is smoke, there is fire (whatever is qualified by smokiness is qualified by fieriness), like a kitchen hearth and
> unlike a lake. *[If P, then Q]*

The advantage in the apparently convoluted formulation of the five-membered syllogism is that it combines two forms of argument that are traditionally separated in Western logic. The Aristotelian syllogism is an example of a deduction, in which the conclusion is supposed to flow from the premises with absolute certainty: if x, then y, by necessity. This is logic as mathematics. However, in practice most of the time we can't reason with such certainty. When we are trying to make sense of the world we have to generalise from experience in ways that are not deductively valid. If bread has always nourished and this is a piece of bread, it does not strictly follow that this bread will nourish me. The conclusion only follows if we take as a premise the fact that bread always nourishes, past, present and future. But we can't know that with certainty as we don't know what the future will bring, or whether this particular loaf is poisoned or adulterated. Of course, we all think it perfectly reasonable to assume that it will nourish, and so it is. But that form of 'being reasonable' is not the same as being strictly logical. Our reasoning is not *deductive*, by incontrovertible steps from premise to conclusion, but *inductive*, from past experience to general cases. The fact that this cannot be justified in logical terms creates what is known as the 'problem of induction'.

Indian philosophers were certainly aware of the problem, a version of which was developed by the fourteenth-century Cārvāka thinker Mādhavācarya.[18] He pointed out that the *udāharaṇa* contains a 'concomitance' (*vyāpti*) which grounds the inference: for example, 'Wherever there is smoke, there is fire.' But this can never be established by the senses, which in Cārvāka is the only way to establish any truth. This is simply because the senses only observe particular instances of the concomitance of smoke and fire but the *vyāpti* asserts a universal concomitance.

The five-membered syllogism marries the two forms of reasoning. As Ram-Prasad puts it, 'Indian logic combines the necessary certainty of deduction with the unavoidable need for induction.'[19] Its structure is deductive but in a way that explicitly acknowledges the inductive elements. In particular, a general rule is evoked (the *udāharaṇa*) which is clearly an observation from experience that cannot be counted as an absolute truth. The stock example seems designed to emphasise this, since the expression 'no smoke without fire' is one which we widely recognise to be not necessarily true. It is true often enough for us to make a provisional presumption of fire but not to be certain that there is one.

The application of the rule (the *upanaya*) is also inherently inductive, since the rule itself would only apply if there is a genuine instance of what the rule refers to. We do not establish this by pure logic but by observation and judgement. When we say, 'This hill is likewise smoky,' we could be wrong: we might be seeing steam or the synthetic output of a 'smoke' machine. So what might appear to be unnecessarily unwieldy in the five-membered syllogism could in fact reflect its strength in bringing together two features of argument – generalisations from observation and strict deduction – into one structure, when Western logic keeps them apart.

Where Indian and Western logic differ, however, is in how they fit into the wider philosophical system. For all its emphasis on logic, alongside inference (*anumāna*) and analogical reasoning (*upamāna*), Nyāya also accepts perception (*pratyakṣa*) and testimony (*śabda*) as legitimate *pramāṇas* (sources of knowledge). Hence, 'The *Veda* is reliable like the spell and the medical sciences, because of the reliability of their authors. [...] The sages themselves were reliable, because they had an intuitive perception of truths.'[20] This is why Nyāya complains that a discussion with a Buddhist was 'considerably lengthened', not because he was reasoning badly, but because he 'does not admit the authority of scripture and holds that there are no eternal things, etc.'[21]

The antagonistic mention of a Buddhist here is probably not incidental. Classical Indian philosophy began with the largely mythical, religious teaching of the *Vedas*, in which logical argument was largely absent. During the Sūtra period and through the scholastic period, the tradition faced more challenges, particularly from Buddhism, which put greater emphasis on reason and argument. Nāgārjuna, for instance, often used logic, usually to show the inconsistency of positions. One example is an argument that there can be no ultimate proof that a source of knowledge is reliable because you would then have to prove that the method of proof itself was reliable and so on, ad infinitum. 'If by other sources of knowledge there would be the proof of

a source – that would be an infinite regress.'[22] The mainstream then had to fight back, defending traditional doctrines with reason.

Because Nyāya maintains the authority of scripture, logic is often used as a kind of apologetics, as a tool to justify the *Vedas* rather than to question them. Take how the *Nyāya Sūtra* replies to the objection that the *Veda* 'is unreliable, as it involves the faults of untruth, contradiction, and tautology'. For instance, the *Veda* affirms that when the appropriate sacrifice for the sake of a son is performed, a son will be produced. But it is often observed that a son is not produced, even though the sacrifice has been performed. This would seem to be pretty conclusive proof that the sacrifices don't work and so the *Veda* is flawed. Not, however, if you start from the assumption that the *Veda* cannot be flawed. If you do that, it follows logically that 'the so-called untruth in the *Veda* comes from some defect in the act, operator, or materials of sacrifice'. By this logic, if 'a son is sure to be produced as a result of performing the sacrifice' but a son is not produced, it can only follow that the sacrifice was not performed correctly, however much it seems that it was performed properly. By such argument, the *Nyāya Sūtra* can safely conclude, 'Therefore there is no untruth in the *Veda*.'[23]

From the point of view of Western philosophy, this willingness to put logic in the service of revealed truth is a weakness. But as we have seen, the assumption that philosophy should be free of any theological commitment is peculiar to the modern West. As Ram-Prasad puts it, in Western philosophy, 'Logic is supposed to be about structures of reasons just as they are, regardless of who has them; it is potentially independent of human thinking.' This is a lofty aspiration but not necessarily a realistic one. It could also be thought of as a hubristic illusion of human beings who believe they can use a logic which transcends the human mind. In contrast, in the Indian tradition, logic is very much a tool of human beings, 'to do with the actual thoughts and cognitions people have'. It 'uses logic primarily to attain knowledge of the world, through debate and persuasion'.[24]

The difference in emphasis is perhaps most stark when we consider what it means to be human. For Aristotle and most of his contemporaries and successors, human beings are distinguished by their rationality. In Indian thought, we are differentiated by our capacity for *dharma*, the ability to distinguish right or wrong and live accordingly. An oft-quoted verse is 'Hunger, sleep, fear, sex are common to all animals, human and subhuman. It is the additional attribute of *dharma* that differentiates man from the beast. Devoid of *dharma*, man is like a beast.'[25]

Rationality lies at the heart of the West's conception of humanity. People are rational, autonomous individuals, and 'rational' is what holds the three

‘A WORLD WHERE SCIENCE AND PROGRESS
WILL LEAD TO ALL MEN’S HAPPINESS’

SECULAR REASON

The Panthéon in Paris is often seen as a symbol of the rise of reason, and the fall of faith, in the West. Built by the great architect Soufflot as a Christian basilica, barely a year after its completion in 1791 it was transformed by French revolutionaries into a monument to the great men and women of France. The remains of the arch anti-cleric Voltaire were transferred there later that year, followed by those of numerous others, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1794. The church was overthrown, usurped by a secular temple.

Even the most cursory look at the facts, however, belies this simple story of religion versus reason. Most of the Enlightenment thinkers whose ideas helped lead to the founding of the Panthéon, some of whom were interred there, were not atheists but pantheists, believing in a creator God who played no part in running the world. Nor were the religious elements of the building ever completely removed. A cross still sits at the top of its dome, the interior of which depicts the apotheosis of Sainte Geneviève, to whom the original church was dedicated. Many more images of her and other religious frescoes cover several of its walls and the building has twice reverted to a church, its secular status only officially confirmed in 1885, when it was the scene of Victor Hugo’s funeral.

The true significance of the Panthéon is embodied in the scientific demonstration that takes place sixty-seven metres under its dome. In 1851, the physicist Léon Foucault suspended a weight from a wire attached to the underside of the dome. On the floor beneath it was a circle divided like a sundial into the hours of the day, each number 11.3 degrees apart. The pendulum is released to start swinging from the position of whatever the time is. Over the day, the pendulum’s swing appears to move along the dial, as though its swing is gradually shifting clockwise. In fact, the pendulum does not change the angle of its swing at all. It is the earth beneath it which is moving. The earth’s rotation, usually imperceptible, is made visible.

Foucault’s pendulum captures the spirit of the Enlightenment and the wider philosophical culture from which it emerged, characterised by a secularity which does not require a rejection of all religion. Rather, it requires an endorsement of the power of unaided human intellect. In this temple humanity, not God, comes first. Whereas in the Catholic Church of Saint-

Germain-des-Prés, a mile down the road, images of God and Jesus are everywhere while the tomb of Descartes is difficult even to find, here the memorials to great mortals take pride of place. God may or may not be dead, but for the project of acquiring knowledge he is redundant. The human mind works without supernatural assistance to deliver an understanding of the world and ourselves.

I call this a belief in the power of *secular reason*. It is what almost all schools of modern Western philosophy endorse, implicitly or explicitly, and it unites them more profoundly than their differences divide them. Secular reason is built on the foundation stone of ancient Greek philosophy, which developed logic as an independent discipline, not dependent on insight, scripture or authority. In this world view, the natural world is scrutable and its operations can be described by laws which require no assumption of divine agency.

Belief in the power of secular reason lies behind the conviction that there is no human mystery that science should not try to penetrate. Between 1990 and 2003 the Human Genome Project mapped our complete DNA. Both the Human Brain Project and the Human Connectome Project seek to provide a complete map of the brain, unlocking the mechanisms behind all that we think, experience and feel. Physics searches for a complete 'theory of everything', which physicist Stephen Hawking said would let us 'know the mind of God'.[1] In the twenty-first century, we are creating new humans from three parents, genetically modifying organisms, looking at how to create life from inert matter, trying to freeze the dead to bring them back to life in the future, and starting to grow meat in a laboratory.

There is nothing natural about any of this. In many times and places, strict limits were put on what humans should study. The sacred was protected. Medical learning in the Islamic world, once the most advanced on the planet, was overtaken in part because of the prohibition on dissecting corpses. Astronomy was also prohibited. In Istanbul in 1580, the only remaining observatory in the Islamic world was razed because it was believed that the plague that had ravaged the city had been sent by God in response to astronomy's profanity.[2] Christendom was not much better. Galileo Galilei was allowed to study the stars, but after reporting back that the sun was at the centre of the universe, he was sentenced to indefinite imprisonment by the Roman Catholic Inquisition in 1633. Even today, virtually anything that pushes the boundaries of scientific understanding generates fears and doubts.

Secular reason is one reason why the West overcame these restrictions to lead the world in science for so many centuries. Modern science is the child of the West, born in 1620, when Francis Bacon set out its basic principles in his seminal *Novum Organum*. Other societies also had the material resources to

sustain scientific inquiry, so national wealth alone cannot explain the West's advances. Indeed, for centuries large parts of China were richer than the West. The difference has to be explained at least in part because of the nature of the Western mind, which can only be properly understood in the light of Western philosophy.

The validity of secular reason is widely assumed in the West, whether people have religious beliefs or not. The most religiously devout scientist trusts evidence and experiment and never seeks a scientific breakthrough through divine revelation. Standards of proof and probability are public and assessable by all. All human minds are capable of comprehending reality. There is no place for *ṛṣis* in secular reason. Nor is there any stress on the boundaries as to what the human mind can comprehend, as has been the case in much of the East. Although Chinese thought is largely secular, for example, it generally confines itself to questions of living and is agnostic about the nature of ultimate reality. Western secular reason has as its objective nothing less than a full description of the cosmos and how it works. To grant unaided human reason such a powerful role is historically the exception rather than the norm.

Secular reason was born in ancient Greece but many centuries passed before it became the default mindset of the West. Until the late Middle Ages, Christianity was the centre of gravity for all learning. Scholarship was largely biblical and confined to monasteries and all philosophy had to conform to the Church's teachings at the risk of excommunication or even death. Gradually, however, through the Renaissance and especially into the seventeenth–eighteenth-century Enlightenment, philosophy became more autonomous from theology. Science – then called natural philosophy – gave precedence to experiment and observation over scripture and creed. This emerging form of secular reason was not inherently opposed to religion, merely independent of it. Many of the philosophers of this era were religious and believed that secular reason would and could only confirm the teachings of the Church. The Bible was read as theology, not as science or even always as history.

During its long gestation, secular reason had two wings. One was empirical, examining the world itself and basing conclusions on careful observation. Empiricists are broadly scientific in their reasoning. The other wing was rationalist, looking at what reason alone demands and assuming that the world must conform to it. Rationalists are caricatured as 'armchair thinkers', but the implication that they have no need to go out and study how the world actually works is accurate enough.

It is tempting to overstate this distinction as absolute, dividing Western philosophers into empiricists (Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Hume) and

rationalists (Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), and this is indeed how countless textbooks carve up the canon. There is some sense in this. In particular, there does seem to be a fundamental difference between those who believe it is possible to discover truths about the way the world is by reason alone, without reference to experience, and those who believe that pure reason can only tell us about abstract mathematics and the relations between concepts, and that all knowledge of the real world must be rooted in experience. The technical names for these two types of knowledge express this difference neatly: knowledge can be gained either prior to experience (a priori) or post-experience (a posteriori).

Take cause and effect. The rationalist Spinoza believed that we could know that every event is the effect of some cause a priori. The third axiom in his *Ethics* is: 'From a given determinate there necessarily follows an effect; on the other hand, if there be no determinate cause it is impossible that an effect should follow.' From such self-evident truths he quickly reached substantive conclusions about the fundamental nature of the universe, so that by the eighth proposition he claimed to have proved the remarkable assertion: 'Every substance is necessarily infinite.'[3] Similarly, Descartes thought it 'manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause?'[4] This sounds like common sense, but it is in fact a bold claim to know something about the fundamental laws of the physical universe by armchair reasoning alone.

Empiricists are not persuaded that such arguments can work. To use David Hume's terminology, Spinoza and Descartes are merely analysing the 'relations of ideas'. The concept of cause implies an effect, but that doesn't tell us anything about what we think of as causes and effects in the real world. For all we know, some things that happen just happen without any cause whatsoever, or from causes that have random effects. So a priori reason cannot deliver us knowledge of the real world. For that we need a posteriori knowledge based on experience.

That too has its limitations. Hume argued that we can't even observe causation in action: 'When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other.'[5] All we can observe is one thing after another, not the causal connections between them.

The distinction between rationalist and empiricist approaches is real and important. However, it would be misleading to think that the division is clear-

cut. So-called rationalists make use of a lot of the data of experience and so-called empiricists appeal to principles of logic and argument that are established by reason not observation. It is better to think of an empiricist–rationalist spectrum, with different philosophers giving more weight to observation and reason respectively.

Taking a long view of the history of Western philosophy, empiricism has been in slow but uneven ascendency and rationalism in similar decline. In the early days of Western philosophy, empirical methods didn't extend beyond everyday observations. The earliest forms of science were little more than armchair speculation, with Thales proposing that everything was made of water and Democritus suggesting that everything was made up of discrete atoms. Much later many philosophers continued to see an important role for a priori reasoning even as they embraced empirical methods. Likewise, some of the most rationalist philosophers spent a lot of time on empirical inquiry. Descartes, for example, was a keen experimenter who dissected carcasses, Leibniz wrote on chemistry, medicine, botany, geology and technology, while Spinoza was not only a lens grinder but a pioneer in experimental hydrodynamics and metallurgy.

Nonetheless, over time the empirical branch of secular reason, which began with Aristotle observing the plants and animals of a lagoon on the island of Lesbos, gradually became more dominant. By the twentieth century, secular reason had established itself as common sense and science took pride of place at its heart. Consider, for example, the rousing speech that concludes Charlie Chaplin's masterpiece *The Great Dictator* (1940). Chaplin's character, a Jewish barber, finds himself mistaken for the Hitleresque dictator Adenoid Hynkel (also played by Chaplin) and required to give a speech. In it, he attacks the 'greed' which 'has poisoned men's souls' and 'goose-stepped us into misery'. In many ways, his speech is an attack on the ills of modernity. 'We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in,' he says. 'Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. [...] More than machinery we need humanity.' Yet Chaplin ends by reasserting his faith in the bedrocks of the secular reason on which modernity was built. 'Let us fight for a world of reason,' he pleads, 'a world where science and progress will lead to all men's happiness.'

This sentence contains all three elements that make modern secular reason distinctive: belief in science, reason and the progress which will inevitably result if we follow both. 'Science and reason' are so often uttered in the same breath that it is tempting to think either that they always go together or that they simply mean the same thing. In fact, for large parts of history reason has been anything but scientific. Few in the West today, however, would accept as

that we should go wherever our thought takes us, without concern for the practical uses. On the other, it assumes a link between science, reason and progress. But how can we be sure that secular reason will benefit us if it is ethically neutral? Why assume 'science for science's sake' will work for humanity's sake?

The assumption that autonomous reason will inevitably lead to progress also fosters a dangerous complacency among academics, who often baulk if asked to say how their work benefits wider society. The logic of secular reason would answer that if learning has no practical effect, it doesn't matter because inquiry is good for its own sake. If it does have an effect, it is bound to be good because learning leads to progress. But it surely makes sense to question whether the right people are studying the right things in the right way, and we cannot answer this unless we have some idea of what 'right' is. Is it right, for example, if an academic community breeds a kind of consensus that stifles dissenting voices? Excessive belief in the autonomy of secular reason stops us asking these questions, raising the spectre of academic 'censorship'.

Secular reason has been a powerful tool for scientific and intellectual development. But complacency about its benefits needs to be challenged, perhaps by traditions that have maintained that philosophy and science exist only to serve human flourishing. If our ultimate goal is human good, the autonomy of reason cannot be absolute. Who would want to build and stock the finest libraries in the world without caring if they stand amidst desolate streets?

Notes

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4 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy,* 3rd Meditation, Section 40, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge University Press, 1986 [1641]), p. 28.
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6 *Mozi*, 35, in Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd edn (Hackett, 2005), p.111.
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‘A METHOD FOR DEALING WITH
THE PROBLEMS OF MEN’

PRAGMATISM

The USA is a curious outlier when it comes to religious belief. The pattern in the rest of the developed world is that as economies develop and education becomes more widespread religious belief declines. Although there is some evidence that this is belatedly beginning to happen in America, religious belief has been unusually resilient there. One recent survey showed that 56 per cent of Americans describe themselves as religious compared to 27 per cent in the UK, 22 per cent in Sweden and 37 per cent in Spain. Only 7 per cent are convinced atheists, compared to 21 per cent in France, 14 per cent in Germany and 11 per cent in the UK.[1]

There are many theories as to why this is so. One of the most credible is that religious belief correlates less with average levels of wealth than with economic security. America is the world’s richest country but it lacks a European welfare state. Many people feel economically vulnerable, one pay cheque away from poverty.

It would be foolish to ignore such evidence, but it would be equally simplistic to ignore the values and beliefs that have shaped the American mind. If we want to know why Americans tend to be more religious, we might learn something from their home-grown philosophical tradition: pragmatism.

Pragmatism’s philosophical lineage extends back to British empiricism. The nineteenth-century philosopher and psychologist William James explicitly linked pragmatism to ‘the great English way of investigating a conception’ which is ‘to ask yourself right off, “What is it *known as?* In what facts does it result?”’[2]

James’s definition echoes those given by the two other great founders of pragmatism, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce defined the central principle of pragmatism as follows: ‘Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’[3] Similarly, Dewey wrote that ‘knowledge is always a matter of the use that is made of experienced natural events’[4] and that ‘knowing is a way of employing empirical occurrences with respect to increasing power to direct the consequences which flow from things’.[5]

Both the truth and the meaning of beliefs are to be understood in terms of

not abstract ideas or the inner workings of the mind but the practical difference they make. 'Grant an idea or belief to be true,' says James, and pragmatism asks, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life? How will the truth be realized? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What, in short, is the truth's cash-value in experiential terms?'[6]

Pragmatism takes abstractions such as truth and meaning and links them to human action. 'The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit,' wrote Peirce, 'and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise [...] and that whatever there is connected with a thought, but irrelevant to its purpose, is an accretion to it, but no part of it. [...] What a thing means is simply what habits it involves.'[7]

James put it even more clearly: 'Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought's practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought's significance.'[8]

One consequence of adopting the pragmatist viewpoint is that many philosophical problems are not so much *solved* as *dissolved*. 'Intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume – an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest,' wrote Dewey. 'We do not solve them [philosophical problems]: we get over them.'[9] James made much the same point more figuratively: 'The true line of philosophic progress lies, in short, it seems to me, not so much *through* Kant as *round* him to the point where we now stand.'[10] Once you have understood the practical implications of any belief, there is nothing else left to understand. Old philosophical questions are seen to be artefacts of muddle-headed ways of thinking and are simply abandoned, as redundant as asking what phlogiston is made of or how many leeches are needed to cure dropsy.

Hence many traditional metaphysical problems about the fundamental nature of time, being or mind just disappear. They are shown to be pseudo-problems that arose only because philosophers got lost in dust clouds of confusion thrown up by concepts that they had erroneously detached from the world of lived experience. The search for ultimate causes and explanations is a futile one. Peirce, for example, wrote, 'In a recent admired work on Analytic Mechanics it is stated that we understand precisely the effect of force, but what force is we do not understand! This is simply a self-contradiction.'[11]

As Dewey wrote, 'Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device

for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men.'[12] There is perhaps no clearer example of the former than radical scepticism, doubting that the external world even exists. This can be played as a philosophical game but only at the price of detaching words like 'world' and 'existence' from their practical usage. 'We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy,' wrote Peirce. 'Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.'[13]

Pragmatists were bullish about their capacity to transform philosophy but realistic about the difficulty of the task: 'Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories.'[14] Dewey knew that telling philosophers that most of what they have worked on all their lives is a waste of time and space was hardly the way to win friends and influence people.

Pragmatism's non-metaphysical bent perhaps explains why it has had some impact in China and Japan. Chinese admirers included the late nineteenth–early twentieth-century reformist monarchist K'ang and Sun Yat-Sen, the first president of the Republic of China in 1912, whose philosophy, like that of the pragmatists, emphasised action. Traditional Chinese philosophy was generally focused on the practical issues of living and many felt that Buddhism had exerted a bad influence by concentrating too much on spiritual matters. Hence Hu Shih, who studied under Dewey, returned to his own country critical of 'eastern spirituality'. 'What spirituality is there in the old beggar woman who dies while still mumbling the name of Buddha?' he wrote in the 1920s.

In Japan, Nishida was influenced by reading James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which encouraged him to follow an empirical method that took as data the phenomenology of experience, in accordance with Zen tradition. In Nishida's philosophy, the pragmatic emphasis on experience was linked with the Japanese emphasis on the limits of language. 'Meanings and judgments are an abstracted part of the original experience,' he writes, 'and compared with the actual experience they are meager in content.'[15]

The problem many critics have with pragmatism is that it appears to be *too* pragmatic. That is to say, it gives up the traditional conception of absolute truth and replaces it with a 'whatever works' model instead. The negative move is certainly there. Dewey rejects the idea that philosophical knowing involves 'an alleged peculiarly intimate concern with supreme, ultimate, true reality', an assumption he took to be central to the mainstream Western tradition. Such is its ubiquity that even a thinker as radical as Dewey's

they communicate to us, not the footnotes'.[28] This is perhaps most evident when it comes to religion. 'What keeps religion going is something else than abstract definitions and systems of logically concatenated adjectives, and something different from faculties of theology and their professors,' claimed James. 'All these things are after-effects, secondary accretions upon a mass of concrete religious experiences, connecting themselves with feeling and conduct that renew themselves in *saecula saeculorum* in the lives of humble private men.'[29] In other words, people trust their own sense of the divine more than any theological or scientific arguments. Given that outside big cities most communities are religious, these feelings are dignified by the pragmatic justification of convergence.

What's more, having a religious belief appears to work. It has a cash-value in terms of giving people meaning, purpose, values and a sense of belonging. 'Religion says essentially two things,' wrote James. 'First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word.' This is 'an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all', but this does not matter because 'the second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true'.[30] In other words, religion is true because it is useful, and since that is the same as saying it is useful because it is true, it is true, period.

I am not suggesting that a rigorous application of pragmatist philosophy justifies the everyday religious belief of millions of Americans. Dewey argued that traditional religion was being pushed out by our increasingly scientific outlook, while neither Peirce nor James defended Christian fundamentalism. The point is simply that a more broadly pragmatist outlook can help explain the persistence of religious belief.

Even harder for many academic pragmatists to swallow is the fact that a lot of the most notorious utterances in politics over recent years are too close to pragmatism for the connection to be ignored. Take, for example, the then unnamed aide to President George W. Bush, later identified as Karl Rove, who in 2004 told Ron Suskind that journalists like him belonged to 'the reality-based community' where people 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality'. That sounds like common sense, but 'That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out.'

For many this was outrageous, but pragmatism does not need to be distorted very much to get to beliefs like this. Rorty argued that we should

'employ images of making rather than finding', rejecting the idea that we simply study 'discernible reality', and suggested that we create reality with our concepts.[31] If there is no absolute reality, only truths we converge on, then why not direct that convergence to the truths we want to believe? Advocates of pragmatism will see this as a gross distortion of their philosophy, but this misses the point, which is that there is something in the American psyche that if considered carefully and intellectually gives rise to philosophical pragmatism, but if left to express itself more loosely gives rise to something much less rigorous and opportunistic. Folk pragmatism is not the abuse of academic pragmatism, rather academic pragmatism is a refinement of folk pragmatism.

This folk pragmatism has in many ways served America well. Its 'can do' attitude is the clearest expression of a mindset that is unconcerned with intellectual niceties and focused on solutions. More dangerously, it can lead people to take less interest in 'discernible facts' than they should. The most egregious manifestation of the dark side of folk pragmatism is surely President Trump. Take just two of innumerable examples. His first press secretary, Sean Spicer, said, contrary to all objective facts, that Trump had 'the largest audience to witness an inauguration, period', while Trump himself tweeted, 'Any negative polls are fake news.' Many around the world and in the USA were flabbergasted at these outrageous refusals to accept reality. Why were so many Trump supporters not equally disgusted? Part of the explanation must be a deep-seated small-p pragmatism in America that places greater value on efficacy and solidarity than on more objective measures of truth. The solution is not to get Americans to think less like Americans, but to get them to appreciate better the virtues of their indigenous pragmatic philosophers.

Notes

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7 Charles Sanders Peirce, 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', ibid., pp. 55–6.

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19 Richard Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', ibid., p. 369.

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'A TRANSMITTER, NOT A MAKER, BELIEVING
IN AND LOVING THE ANCIENTS'

TRADITION

We find it natural to talk about different philosophical traditions. Yet there is something about that phrase that might seem odd: philosophies have histories but surely they need to be justified ahistorically? You can appeal to the insight of sages, the power of logic, the evidence of experience, but never to the mere fact that a belief belongs to a tradition. Yet, in practice, tradition exerts a strong influence on all cultures, including philosophical ones. Nowhere is this more evident than in China. A visit to the Shanghai Museum, the country's pre-eminent collection of ancient art, brings home just how old this civilisation is. There I found myself admiring a remarkably ornate bronze *fanglei* (a wine vessel) and saw that it was made in the early Zhou period, from the eleventh century BCE. The Zhou dynasty ruled a large area of what is modern China, a culture so developed that written Chinese was already close to its modern form. Northern Europe, in contrast, was in its pre-literate tribal Iron Age.

I was impressed, and soon discovered the collection delved back in time yet further. I came across an equally remarkable bronze pig-shaped *zun* (another kind of wine vessel) from the late Shang dynasty (thirteenth–eleventh century BCE), another highly developed culture with a written script. The oldest object I saw was a *yue* (a kind of axe weapon), inlaid with a coloured tile pattern, from the Xia dynasty (eighteenth–sixteenth century BCE).

It is difficult to overestimate the depth and force of China's sense of its own long history. In Athens, I saw artefacts as old as those in Shanghai, but the Greeks are the exception in a Europe where most nations are merely hundreds of years old and where few feel any connection with the ancient past. In Confucius's hometown of Qufu, in contrast, not only are a great many people direct descendants of the philosopher, but they know exactly how close that relationship is. A hotel chambermaid, for example, told me she was seventy-fourth generation Kong, the family name of Confucius. My guide, who used the English name Frank, was seventy-fifth generation. The past is vividly present to the Chinese in a way that is astonishing to foreigners. Although it is probably not true that the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai told Richard Nixon in 1972 that it was 'too early to say' what the impact of the 1789 French Revolution was, the story stuck because it accurately reflected something

about China's long view of history.

The power of tradition is as potent in philosophy as elsewhere. As Wen Haiming put it to me, 'For Chinese people the ancient philosophical classics are the foundation of Chinese thinking, thinking paradigms, the Chinese way of understanding the world, how we should behave. China has such a long, historical culture, a tradition of over 3,000 years. Everything we have today is not from nowhere, it is from a deep, very thoughtful tradition.'

Even the most ancient Chinese philosophers saw themselves as doing little more than recording the wisdom of their ancestors. 'The tendency in China, as in India,' says Charles Moore, 'is for later thinkers to consider themselves as mere commentators upon or followers of the major classical schools or of the great early thinkers.'[1] Confucius said on several occasions that all he was doing was passing on and protecting the principles of the great sage-kings of his own antiquity. He described himself as 'a transmitter, not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients'.[2]

However, this reverence for the past should not be mistaken for slavish, unthinking devotion to it. Chan Wing-Tsit stresses, 'I have not found a single case in which a philosopher asserted that reading the classics is the only or chief way of obtaining knowledge or that a thing is true simply because the classics say so. Knowledge is always one's own adventure.'[3] That's why, as in India, 'interpreters' of classical texts are often highly original and innovative.

The emphasis on tradition is not essentially conservative and anti-rational. As Chan explains, it is a logical consequence of accepting that 'truth is not understood as something revealed from above or as an abstract principle, however logically consistent, but as a discoverable and demonstrable principle of human affairs. In other words, the real test of truth is human history.'[4]

Traditions evolve but ways of thinking that have been embedded in a culture for centuries, even millennia, continue to shape the way we think around the world today. Kobayashi Yasuo is as aware as anyone of the impact of Westernisation in Japan but still believes that 'the mind, the sensitivity, doesn't change in one hundred years'.

This is as true in the West as it is in the East. Since the Enlightenment the West has stopped venerating tradition and has if anything turned against it. The apotheosis of this came during the French Revolution, when, as we have seen, there was an attack on tradition the likes of which the West has not seen before or after. Reverses in France and less successful attempts at reform elsewhere show that the old ways have endured more than many expected. Nonetheless, respect for tradition has never been restored to its pre-Enlightenment levels.

simply reiterated ideas without being able to analyse them were classified as mere vessels of popular wisdom.

Whether we use the tools of sage philosophy or ethnophilosophy, those serious about African philosophy should see it in its own terms, not through the lens of Western categories and concepts. One way to do this is to attend to how African languages 'structure reality differently, maybe better, for some questions', says Pieter Boele Van Hensbroek. He recalls the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu recommending that a good way to gain a new perspective on a philosophical problem is to translate it into your indigenous language, try to deal with it there in that language and then translate it back.

Western philosophers, who do not present themselves as carrying a torch for their ancestors, are in fact working within a tradition as much as thinkers elsewhere in the world. Anyone who stepped into a Western department of philosophy would be struck by just how much of what is taught there is historical. Undergraduates study the ancient Greeks, universally lauded as the founders of the discipline. Reproductions of Raphael's *School of Athens* decorate walls of many departments, while Socrates's line 'The unexamined life is not worth living' is still the most common marketing tool to recruit students. All across the West, no philosophical education is complete without study of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, supplemented by a slightly different cast of pre-twentieth-century modern thinkers depending on whether they are seen as predecessors of contemporary, mainly anglophone 'analytic' philosophers or predominantly European 'continental' thinkers. That contemporary Western philosophy is less shaped by its traditions than philosophies elsewhere in the world is as deplorable an idea as it is laughable.

Indeed, it is striking that non-Western traditions are more open to Western philosophy than vice versa. While Indian philosophy has synthesised many Western influences (the Indian Philosophical Congress programme was peppered with references to the likes of William James, Wittgenstein, John Passmore, G. E. Moore, Kant, Descartes and Hegel), the programmes of the American Philosophical Association's meetings refer to very little outside the Western tradition. Japanese philosophy has also absorbed a lot from both continental phenomenology and American pragmatism. Western philosophy, officially the most contemptuous of the value of tradition, is arguably the most chauvinistic and traditionbased of all.

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