

Meeting Some Asian Philosophers¹

by

A.N. Prior²

As a rule, philosophical conferences last about four days, and they're usually attended by from 30 to 100 people. This one was different on both counts. There were only 16 of us – 2 from Pakistan, 2 from New Zealand, 5 from India, 7 from Australia – so that we could have our discussions round a committee table, instead of the usual performer-and-audience set-up. And we were together not for four but for eleven days, eight of them organised working days. On a working day we would meet round our table at half past nine in the morning, the topic of the day would be briefly introduced by one Easterner and one Westerner, and then we'd hammer at it till half past twelve, and sometimes for a further hour and a half between afternoon tea and dinner. The discussions were fast and lively – you'd throw out a thought or two, and be conscious in no time of half a dozen restless people itching to get at you, and then someone else would be up and you'd find yourself thinking 'Hey – I can't let him get away with that!' and in you'd go in the competition to catch the chairman's eye. After eight three-or-four-hour doses of that, together with the informal contacts we were making in the interstices, we really did begin to know one another's minds – people took shape as definite individual intellectual characters, so to speak. That's the main thing I've brought back with me – knowledge of those Asian philosophers not just as Asians, but as individuals, each with his own personal standpoint rather than a national or racial one; and I'm sure the Indians and Pakistanis have gone back home {2} knowing us in the same way. And one thing that struck us all very forcibly was this – we argued like anything, and again and again split up into sides and schools and parties, but not once was the division a simple case of the Eastern delegates versus the Western ones. In fact, as often as not an argument would start up between two people from the same country, old sparring partners no doubt, and then the people from other parts would join in on one side or the other as the drift of the dispute became plain.

I can't tell you about all of those people, but let me just mention three or four; and to begin with, the two Pakistanis, Sharif and Hakim. They were, I think, old friends, and of course both Moslems, but for all that as different as chalk from cheese. Hakim is a leading figure in a liberalising movement within the Mahommedan religion, and he's something of a popular preacher – he could easily have been some pillar of contemporary American Methodism, say; getting on in years, stoutish, accustomed to play the oracle and be listened to, full of amusing and instructive anecdotes with a great rumbling echoing laugh of his own, and always coming out with quotations from 19th Century poets. He was no fool either, and had some gift for repartee. He had studied in Heidelberg in the 20's, and plugged what the Germans call *Lebensphilosophie*; that is, he was always talking about Life with a capital L, and how it can't be contained in a formula and how everything else must serve it – "All theory is colourless", he

¹ Edited by Sara L. Uckelman and Adriane Rini. The original MS is kept in the Prior collection at Bodleian Library, Oxford, Box 6. The page numbers in the original MS have been put in curly braces.

² Added in the MS: East-West Philosophical Working-Party in Canberra, December 1957.

quoted from Goethe, "while life's golden tree is green." That's a point of view, you see, and not just an Asian point of view, yet not an Un-Asian point of view either – it's a personal form that the Islamic belief in a Living God may take.

{3} Sharif, the other Pakistani, left quite a different impression. He had studied not in Germany but in Cambridge, Just before World War I, in the hey-day of the young Moore and Bertrand Russell and Maynard Keynes, and I don't think I've met anyone, certainly no Westerner, in whom the ideas and ideals of the Cambridge of that day are no [sic] visibly and indelibly preserved. In the spirit of Moore especially, Sharif had no bold generalisations to throw before us, but rather a persistent appeal for clarity and accuracy – when someone came out with something woolly, he would say "Do you mean this, or do you mean that, or if you don't mean either what do you mean?" Not that he was purely negative and critical and sceptical; on the contrary, he obviously believed that clarity and accuracy were worth asking for because they can be had, if we'll take enough pains to get them; and he believed also that there are some things which, once we have distinguished them and picked them out, we can intuitively know to be true. Well, that's something else that was certainly not just Asian; yet again it wasn't un-Asian either – that unbendingness of Sharif's mind, and his eye for the beauty that comes when life and thought don't just run wild but are compressed, channelled, disciplined, seemed to me like the spirit behind some perfectly designed Arab or Persian mosque. This man has written some books about the theory of beauty, and I'm going to get them, because I know they will be good.

Now let me take two of the Indians. From Calcutta we had Dr. Das, a bearded oldish wisp of a man with a piping voice, who said many of the things that we Westerners had come expecting to hear, for example that "a truly good life can be lived under almost any political or economic conditions", for "the soul may remain free and our mind active and vigorous" even when we suffer from political bondage or economic want.

{3}³ Das also insisted that philosophy, and along with it morality and art, were higher things than science – science, he said, is sense-bound, but these other things are activities of the spirit. Philosophy in particular doesn't just accumulate facts about objects, but is content with nothing short of absolute truth, in which nothing is a mere brute fact but all is explained. Das didn't claim to have attained to this last, but he thought the philosopher must seek after it, and not turn himself into a scientist content with lesser things. Well, there was a voice of the mystic East; and all the more impressive because we knew that Das kept up assiduously with current Western thought, and was one of the first, for example, to insist that Indian philosophical students ought to be doing a lot more formal logic than they are. But Das himself pointed out that there were Western as well as Eastern philosophers who had developed this mystical or idealistic view of their subject; and when it came to discussion, the man from whom criticisms just poured out in a stream was not an Australian or a New Zealander, but one of Dr. Das's fellow-Indians, a striking young man from Delhi named Daza (spelt D-A-Y-A). We others spoke too, of course; I can especially remember Passmore of Canberra replying to Das's statement that the absolute truth is "that which does not lead to any further questions". The magnificent thing about the search for truth, Passmore contended, is just that all our discoveries do lead to further questions, so that the thing is in principle never-ending. But it was Daza who turned the heat on. Das, he said, seemed

³ [Transcriber's note:] This should be page 4 but is given in the MS as 3.

to assume that social institutions just "leave you to yourself" and don't touch a man's inner being; but this is to ignore such things as the brain-washings of totalitarian tyrannies. And if Das's conception of politics was outmoded, so according to Daza was his conception of science {4} and art. Science is no more "sense-bound" than art and beauty are; certainly it takes more than the eyes to discern and express the beauty of things, but it takes more than the eyes to construct a scientific theory too. The senses must be used in testing scientific theories, but the construction of such theories is as much an activity of the spirit as any work of art.

Part of what impressed one about Daza was his familiarity not only with current Western philosophy – Das had that too – but with contemporary Western culture generally, and especially with what is going on in the social sciences; and all this despite his never having been out of India before. But you would be quite wrong to think of him as just a brash young up-to-date Philistine who happens to have a dark skin. There's another side to Daza which I can only convey in fragmentary glimpses. I remember, for example, some discussions I had with him about formal logic. Like Dr. Das, he thinks Indian students should do more of this, and he obviously has a reasonable flair for it himself. But he left me with a curious impression that he doesn't really believe in logic in the way in which I believe in it. It gave him an obvious satisfaction, for example, when I admitted that if two disputants not only have different opinions but different logics, different views as to what follows and what doesn't follow, there is in the end just nothing we can do about it. And I remember another small scuffle I had with him after a brilliant public address he had given on "Indian Ethics." He spoke of a certain way of life that a man might tape [sic] up for a time, in which all impulses were given free play and none was suppressed. "But look", I said to him, "suppose one of a man's impulses is to suppress and censor other impulses – what is he to do about that one?" – and his answer was brief and scornful "That's {5} logic, but I'm not talking about logic now, but about a way of life." And as with logic, so with other sciences. He knew and said, that many of the strange states of mind that a Yogi might get himself into could also be found in cases of schizophrenia, or induced by taking drugs like mescaline; he had all the facts of that sort at his fingertips and revelled in them; but he insisted that the assumptions of Western science are as much a leap in the dark as those of Eastern mysticism are. At another time, when Boyce Gibson of Melbourne was saying that one's religion ought to influence one's philosophy and vice versa, and that one shouldn't just keep them in different baskets, Daza retorted that we ought to have different baskets for different things. You see, this man has a compartmental mind and is proud of it – I think his motto is, "Let the wheat and the tares grow together till harvest – and let them both grow hard too – and only then will we know which is which."

Having heard of all this diversity, you will not expect me now to give you a list of philosophical conclusions which we all finished by agreeing to. There's no such list; there are no such conclusions; philosophical conferences just don't finish like that. But one brief contact has I think been of practical as well as theoretical benefit to all of us. We have a better idea of what books from our various countries are really worth reading, and if students or teachers want to move from one of our countries to another, we will have a much better idea of what their accompanying letters of reference really mean. These are quite big things in a contracting academic world like ours.

[MS ends here.]