

## Chapter 1



# The Three Philosophical Traditions

*What, in This History,  
Is Considered to Be Philosophical?*

There are three great philosophical traditions, the Indian, the Chinese, and the European. Before I describe them, I want to ask and answer, very briefly, what a philosophical tradition is, why I say that there are only three such traditions, and why it is best to study them together, as they are studied here, rather than separately or successively.

What is a philosophical tradition? A chain of persons who relate their thought to that of their predecessors and in this way form a continuous transmission from one generation to the next, from teacher to disciple to disciple's disciple. Or rather, because a whole tradition is made up of many subtraditions, it is one and the same tradition because all of its subtraditions share common sources and modes of thought and develop by reaction to one another. A tradition is by nature cumulative and it progresses in the sense that it defines itself with increasing detail and density. I define the tradition as philosophical to the extent that its members articulate it in the form of principles—if only principles of interpretation—and of conclusions reasonably drawn from them; and I define it as philosophical to the extent that its adherents defend and attack by means of reasonable arguments—even those that deny reason—and understand and explain how they try to be reasonable. As history demonstrates again and again, no philosophy is purely rational, pure rationality being an unreasonable, impossible ideal. Matters of religion, communal

loyalty, reverence for teachers, and cultural habits, not to mention individual psychology, have always limited rationality, so that philosophical subtraditions or schools are rational by tendency rather than in any absolute way.<sup>1</sup>

I go on to my second question: Why say that there are only three great philosophical traditions? To claim this, one must put aside the correct but, for our purpose, insufficient definitions of philosophy as wisdom or as the group of principles, either stated or implied, by which any person or community views life. In keeping with the original meaning of the term *philosophy, love of wisdom*, philosophers, one supposes, have wanted to be wise, yet experience has taught that there is no good reason to think that they are necessarily so except, circularly, by their own definitions, and no good reason to think that nonphilosophers cannot be equally wise, that is, perceptive, farsighted, and sagacious, in the ways that their particular lives have taught them. Nor is there any good reason to suppose that traditions that are not philosophical by the definition I have adopted have not had their own depth of sophistication and practical intelligence (which is implicitly also theoretical).

Let me pause briefly to give a few examples of what I mean by this last statement. The definition of philosophy that is adopted here implies that ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt had no philosophical tradition. This implication holds true even though the Mesopotamians' religious texts show that they were trying to grasp universal and permanent principles that lie below the surface of things. On the basis of these principles they erected often fantastic hypotheses from which they could extrapolate what could or should happen. A different, more modest kind of understanding can be extrapolated from the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh. Like Greek drama, the epic warns against the attempt to overcome the nature of things. In the end, the hero gets, though maybe refuses, the advice (accepted by Voltaire's *Candide*) to relax his heroics, accept the unheroic pleasures of life, and submit to the fate of all humans. The quite dissimilar *Dialogue of Pessimism* is a debate of a man with himself in which he makes contrary judgments on how he should act. It ends, it seems, with a skeptical, gloomy, yet humorous acceptance of all the contradictory positions—what is good is bad and what is useful is harmful. As in *Ecclesiastes*, the reason appears to be that a human being understands too little to know what it is best to do. Like the wisdom literature of the Egyptians and Hebrews, that of the Mesopotamians teaches the lesson of a temperate acceptance of life and life's duties.<sup>2</sup>

All this suggests the intellectual accomplishment of the Mesopotamians, which is matched by that of the other great, equally ancient civilization, the Egyptian. To give one of many examples, the Egyptians

explain the world with the help of the cosmic goddess Maat, who unites in her person the values of order, equilibrium, truth, and wisdom, and so keeps the world tolerable to the human beings who tenant it. Yet god as conceived by the Egyptians remains ambiguous in number: except for the twenty years during which the pharaoh Akhenaten tried to force monotheism on the Egyptians, god for them remained both one and many, always being discovered in new manifestations. By their refusal to regard monotheism and polytheism as exclusive of one another, the Egyptians expressed their tacit conviction that nature has a certain unity but cannot be summed up in a fixed number of gods or forces.<sup>3</sup>

All this, I repeat, is not philosophy as I mean it here. If we accept a more general definition and think of philosophy as wisdom in the face of the difficulties of life, we discover that "primitives," as we have miscalled them, can be our equals. Let me justify this judgment with the example of the answer given by an Eskimo shaman to the explorer Knud Rasmussen when Rasmussen pressed him to justify his religion. Taking Rasmussen outside, the Eskimo first asked him why the blizzard was so cruel and then showed him a sick woman and asked why the innocent must suffer. When Rasmussen hesitated, the Eskimo said:

You see, you are equally unable to give any reason why we ask why life is as it is. All our customs come from life and turn towards life; we explain nothing, we believe in nothing, but in what I have shown you lies our answer to all you ask.<sup>4</sup>

This answer shows that a cold climate and apparently simple life can produce wisdom; but so can a hot climate, as is proved by African proverbial thought, at times as pointed as anything in La Rochefoucauld or Nietzsche. "Those who are absent are always wrong," says an African proverb; and "Wisdom is like mushrooms that come after you have finished eating (too late!)" ; and "A healthy ear can stand hearing sick words."<sup>5</sup>

Such proverbs are akin to African dilemma tales, which put arguable, humorous problems to a group of listeners. Take the example of the Nigerian tale in which a blind man accompanied by his blind wife, blind mother, and blind mother-in-law, finds seven eyes. Two he gives to his wife, two he takes for himself, one he gives to his mother, and one to his mother-in-law. He is left with a single eye in his hand. If he gives the remaining eye to his own mother, his wife—who is there looking at him—will make him feel ashamed, but if he gives it to his wife's mother, he will be afraid, because one's mother is not to be trifled with. The teller of the tale challenges the audience to make and justify the choice, which is not unlike the choices we try to work out in philosophical ethics or, more practically, in the medical dilemmas now discussed by philosophers and hospital committees.<sup>6</sup>

Why are such profound myths, clever proverbs, and dilemma tales not philosophy in the sense intended here? The myths are not because, relying on traditional narratives and on imagination, they do not usually make their meaning explicit and never justify it by careful reasoning—the meaning remains basically implicit. The *Dialogue of Pessimism* is not philosophy as meant here because the speaker does no more than state the opposing views between which he is caught, the Eskimo's insight is not because it is not developed, and the African proverbs and dilemma tales are not, for the same reason, and also because they are not related with enough care to explicit principles—at least to principles by which situations may be analyzed.\*

Yet mythology, debate against oneself, existential emotion, proverbial sharpness, and exercise in hard choices all join philosophy in the sense used here when, in keeping with the definition that has been adopted, they are argued out reasonably; or when the principles on which they rest are distinguished from the conclusions built on them—or it is reasonably argued that there are no such principles; or when the methods of argument are themselves justified; or when the story, emotion, cleverness, or confrontation with oneself or others is put in a relatively unbroken sequence of reasonings. This spelling out of reasons is not necessarily to the good, or all to the good: The tendency of reason to devalue what it has not succeeded in making verbally explicit and logically consistent makes it apt to miss a great deal to which imagination has given the form of mythology, religion, and art. Where abstraction displays clearly defined but skeletally bare principles—one logical lever openly moving another—imagination, as tradition develops it, displays complex images and ambiguous relations that are less easy to analyze or enchain deductively but are far more suggestive.

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\*In a book that influenced many African intellectuals, the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels argued that the thought of the Bantus (of central and southern Africa) is a consistent, rational, and therefore "philosophical" vitalism based on the principle that all being is hierarchically organized force. Another influential figure, the Rwandan priest Alexis Kagame, argued that the Rwandaise language shows an implicit, particularly dynamic notion of structure. Further, the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule attributed to the Dogon, of central Mali, a rich cosmology and a "metaphysics" expressed in rites and actions (*Conversations with Ogotemmel*, p. 3).

In essential agreement with the restrictive definition of philosophy I have given here, Kwasi Wiredu, an Oxford-educated philosopher from Ghana, considers traditional African thought, however humanistic, to be only a "folk philosophy." An African philosophy distinct from traditional world-views is still to be created, he says (*Philosophy and an African Culture*, pp. 6–8, 33–36). And the French-educated philosopher Paulin Hountondji denounces "ethnophilosophies" as European constructs unknown to the Africans to which they have been attributed and insists that the theoretical creativity of the African peoples, arrested by colonialism, is yet to be liberated (*African Philosophy*, pp. 45, 54, 67, 101, 164).

### Why Are There Only Three Philosophical Traditions?

I have still not explained why I have said that there are only three philosophical traditions, the Indian, the Chinese, and the European. What about such others as the Jewish, Muslim, Japanese, and Tibetan? Well, yes and no, as philosophers say, these are and are not separate traditions. The matter is more complicated than it seems at first. To begin with, it is possible to argue that even the Indians, Chinese, and Europeans never arrived at points of view unified enough to justify classifying them as distinct traditions. In all three, there are obvious and unobvious points of cleavage. To mention only the most obvious, in India, the Indians who regarded themselves as orthodox tried to delegitimize, that is, read out of their tradition, the philosophies they classified as unorthodox; in China, the Taoists mocked the tradition that Confucians revered, and during China's later history, orthodox Confucians saw Buddhism as deeply foreign to Chinese tradition; and in Europe, it is not hard to distinguish the different national traditions—philosophy that is in a French, English, German, Italian, or other tradition.

To justify classifying each of the three great traditions as distinct, one therefore has to show that it has a unity that prevails over all the internal differences it exhibits. Or if the attempt to show that unity prevails seems tenuous or subjective, one has to show that each of the three has pervasive habits of thought and a history of self-reference—of person to person, of intellectual group to group, of intellectual group to authoritative person, tradition, or text, and so on. This would demonstrate unity in two separable senses, that of continuity and that of self-reference. Continuity is the relationship that makes everything subsequent in the tradition lead back to the same beginnings in time, place, or attitude—the Vedas, say, in India,

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In contrast especially to Hountondji, Kwame Gyekye, of the University of Ghana, argues that there are cultural ideas common to the African peoples, so that it is justifiable to speak of African philosophy. African philosophers should therefore "turn their gaze on the *intellectual foundations of African culture and experience*. . . ." (*An Essay on African Thought*, pp. 189–90, 212 [quoted]).

It has also been argued that the distinction between folk philosophy and formal philosophy rests on a parochial idea that "captures only the contemporary analytic tradition" (P. Ikunobe, "The Parochial Universalist Conception of 'Philosophy' and 'African Philosophy,'" pp. 194–95, 207).

H. Odera Oruka, whose philosophical training is American, has conducted research in Kenya on what he calls "sage philosophy," which he regards as a logical, critical, didactic form of wisdom distinct from that taught by folk-sages, who are uncritical. He protests that it is only prejudice that grants a Greek sage such as Heraclitus the name *philosopher* but denies it to a contemporary African sage such as Mbuya Akoko (*Sage Philosophy*, p. xxv). Okura's book contains brief life histories of seven Kenyan sages and interviews designed to exhibit the critical quality of their reasoning.

Bibliographical data for this footnote are given in note 6, above.

the godlike culture heroes in China, and the Greek philosophers in Europe. Self-reference, in contrast, is the quality that makes any isolated statement or philosophy difficult to understand without setting it in the contextual web that determines what is internal to the tradition and what is external to it, belongs to another world of thought and, no doubt, action.

What obscures and what strengthens the unity of each of the three traditions? Even China, which alone of the three traditions has had a single government for much of its history, has undergone dramatic changes of dynasty and probably of the character we identify as Chinese; and, like India and Europe, it has always contained a great variety of territories, people, languages, and cultural traditions. All the same, most Chinese thinkers have shared the same classical language, same historical reference points, and (in imperial China) same education, which was essential to their prestige and to their usual competition for government office.

The unity of India and Europe has been more tenuous. However, the great old classics of the one were Sanskrit and of the other were Greek and Latin, and just as classical Chinese was the learned language of educated Chinese, Sanskrit remained that of learned Indians and Latin of learned Europeans, so that, in each tradition, reference to the past would normally be to the same classical literature. As for Japanese thought, philosophically it depends mainly on the Chinese, as the Tibetan depends mainly on the Indian, that is, Buddhist, while Jewish and Muslim thought, though each has its own history and dogmas, draw their philosophy proper from the same Greek and Roman sources and, in this limited but real sense, are part of the European tradition.\*

Philosophy, it turns out, had just three territorial origins, three beginning languages, three historical pasts, and three webs of self-reference. That there have been just three major philosophical traditions is, therefore, a fact, a brute fact, I would say. Whoever is so minded can emphasize the breaks in each and the vagueness at times of the borders between them,

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\*No doubt, pride in one's Jewish or Muslim heritage may prompt one to minimize this dependence on European, that is, Greek and Roman thought. The dependence is explained in chapter 9, which discusses, among other philosophers, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Maimonides. Each of the three has his own, sometimes considerable degree of philosophical independence, but the thought of no one of them can be conceived without the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic principles that underlie it. As will be explained, the Muslims themselves reserve the term *philosophy* for thought based on these Aristotelian-Neoplatonic principles. The often philosophical theology that departs from the principles is called *kalam*, which may be translated *dialectical theology*. For its logic, *kalam* depends on Hellenistic, especially Stoic logic, and for its practices of debate and its dissociative kind of atomism—which denies natural causality—perhaps on Indian philosophy.

borders like those of diffuse clouds; but the notions themselves of breaks and borders imply something that is single enough to be broken and separate enough to have borders of some kind.<sup>7</sup>

*Why Is It Best to Study the Three Traditions Together  
Rather than Separately or Successively?*

As the interrelationship between human beings everywhere grows stronger and more visible, it grows more obvious that a point of view that takes account of no more than a single culture is to that extent provincial. This provincialism has been shared by persons of otherwise great intellectual distinction, too proud, I suppose, to realize how narrow-minded they were, or still are. I do not hesitate to say that anyone who believes that philosophy (in the relatively technical sense adopted here) has been confined to Europe is demonstrating either ignorance or prejudice. So far as I know, this belief is never held by those who have studied Indian or Chinese thought with care.

Granted that there are three philosophical traditions and that interest in them all is justified, why claim, as I do, that it is best to begin by studying them together or—to diminish the claim—to begin by comparing characteristic examples of all three in revealing detail? One reason is that each of the traditions is so great in extent and depth that if any one of them really seizes your interest, you sink into it and the chances of studying another tradition seriously are greatly diminished; and if you do take up another, it is likely to be as a subject of only minor interest. That is, by concentrating exclusively on any one tradition, you in practice tend to prejudge its importance and reduce the likelihood that you will be able to understand it in just relationship to the others.

A second reason for learning the three together is that you then become aware of a much greater variety of positions. The result is that every philosophy is seen in the light of more contrasts, and more contrasts yield a greater variety of interpretations and, it is reasonable to hope, a greater ability to modulate any point of view. And if the three are learned together, it is easier to explore the possibility that there are philosophical positions and arguments that are truly universal or that, taken together, make up a kind of periodic table of the elements of philosophy. This possibility is one in favor of which, on pragmatic, psychological, and personal grounds, I myself incline. But the opposite, I should say, more romantic inclination, makes things even more interesting: By changing your eyes, you see things—meanings, relationships, and values—to which you have so far been blind. A perceptive traveler in philosophy learns to grasp what has been invisible



because it is too familiar or, on the contrary, too distant, and is led to take greater care in discriminating exact meanings.

Let me give an example: The Chinese philosopher Hsün-tzu, of the third century B.C.E., says, "The nature of man is evil; his goodness is the result of his activity," and the German philosopher Kant, of the eighteenth century, says, "The question here is: whether man is *good* by nature, or *evil* by nature, or whether he is by nature equally receptive to good and evil, according as one or another hand happens to mould him." Anyone curious enough to explore the likeness between both statements must first learn their contexts. To begin with, one must ask what both mean by *good*, *evil*, and *nature*? And then one must ask how much of the similarity is the result of translation from, respectively, Chinese and German, into the same standard English? The questions are not trivial nor the answers simple.<sup>8</sup>

Yet even if what I have been contending is true, there remains a practical objection, which is that no one knows enough to teach the three traditions together except very superficially. In answer, I admit that no person can know all three in great depth—I certainly do not pretend to. Yet those who make this objection ought to think further and take into account that much the same argument applies to the history of even a single tradition. It is easy to make an arithmetical estimate to show that no person, however industrious, has nearly enough time to make a more than superficial study of the works of all the philosophers and schools considered important in either the Indian, the Chinese, or the European tradition. Our human limitations are such that it is an accomplishment to learn even a single philosopher really well. How difficult it is to bend one's understanding to fit that of someone else, especially someone different in culture and experience, someone who may have written thousands of pages and made acknowledged and unacknowledged shifts of position and have shown all the coherence and incoherence of which a thinker is capable! If a fully adequate knowledge of the sources was required, it would be extremely unlikely that anyone could write a history of modern European philosophy or, for that matter, write any history of any kind of any extended period or large area. I have heard a specialist in Hellenistic philosophy say that it is now impossible for anyone to know even Greek philosophy—scholarship has grown too detailed. But since we have and need general histories, it stands to reason that they can be written only because their authors are ready to contend with their relative ignorance. Unless they were willing to do so, in history, as in other fields of learning, we would be left with the work of specialists too narrow to see anything whole and would be unable to see any subject in a wide yet relatively informed perspective. To study or write the history of philosophy of *any* tradition or period, one must be ready to omit very much, to take more



than a little on the authority of others, and to try to make clear to oneself what is of great and what of less importance.

The total number of philosophical works that can possibly be studied by a historian who deals with all three traditions is no greater than the number that can possibly be studied by a historian of any one of them, so that the selectivity of the comparative historian must be greater, as must surely be the dependence on other scholars—the mere linguistic competence demanded grows almost beyond human possibilities. I am confident, however, that once the philosophical classics of each of the three traditions are more widely known, their strangeness in the other two traditions will wear off and the easier texts will be as accessible in translation as the easier native ones. The denser or more technical texts, whether native or foreign, will always need elaborate commentaries.<sup>9</sup>

### *A Distant, Preliminary View of the Three Traditions*

This first view of the three traditions begins with a chronological chart of the philosophers to be discussed here.\* In choosing just these philosophers, I may have been influenced by their suitability for comparison. But this influence, conscious or not, can only have been marginal because most of those listed are indispensable to the traditions to which they belong and which they largely define; and though I hope not to forget the philosophers' individuality, it is the part their ideas play in creating their respective traditions that I intend to emphasize. That is, I have ordinarily adopted what I take to be each tradition's retrospective view of its own development and of the contribution that each of its philosophers made to it. I must concede that a few of the persons who appear in the chart—Confucius is the most conspicuous example—are not philosophers by the definition I have adopted, but they belong here because they are the fathers of their respective philosophical traditions. I must also concede

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\*A good many of the dates I give are doubtful, and some, especially of the Indian philosophers, are known only vaguely—all that is really known of the dates of Uddalaka and Yajnavalkya is that they precede the Buddha. As for the Buddha, there are scholars who go beyond minor adjustments of his dates and situate him a full hundred years later. In this chart, which aims at maximal simplicity, I have not allowed myself more than two question marks nor used the abbreviation *c.* or *ca.* to indicate approximation. Vasubandhu may represent two philosophers rather than one, but this is not the place to discuss dividing him. While a number of undoubtedly great philosophers do not appear in this chronology, some of the philosophers I do write about are absent here because I could not stretch the notion of a great philosopher enough to include them. As explained in the text, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Maimonides are considered to belong to the European tradition. For the sake of a perhaps quixotic and merely relative neutrality—the birth of Christ is still the chronology's starting point—I use the abbreviations *B.C.E.* and *C.E.*

that, to write a coherent history of a practical size, I feel compelled to leave out more than a few philosophers that I take to be great. Besides, the philosophers that do appear are not invariably great, and a number of them, chosen to represent certain points of view, might have been exchanged for others.

The italicized names on the chart are those of philosophers I should have taken up if I had wanted to make this history more nearly complete and, especially, if I had continued it up to our own times. In spite of their relatively early date, I do not deal with the Buddhists Hui-neng, Fa-tsang, and Dogen. This is because Hui-neng and Dogen, who are, respectively, Chinese and Japanese Ch'an (Zen) thinkers, are best compared with Europeans such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, these four comprising a group, as I see it, of postmetaphysical irrationalists. And Fa-tsang, with his philosophy of all-in-all, would make a particularly interesting pair with Hegel.

Now, to begin with, look not at the names of the particular philosophers but at the way in which the names cluster at some points and are absent at others (see Figure 1.1).

The names we see clustered at the top of the three columns express the fact that all three traditions went through an early period in which there was enough conflict and enough freedom to encourage the simultaneous appearance of many quite different points of view. Competition between these points of view stimulated the intellectual self-assertion that constitutes philosophy. In all three traditions, this was a time of the breaking and building of social structures that encouraged adventurous intellectuals to think aloud, to play, pray, and dream in the mode of reasoning. In response to their own ambition or the urging of their disciples or rulers, they dueled with neighbors of like philosophical or other ambitions, neighbors who varied, according to distinctions then already drawn, from hide-bound conservatives to wild radicals and damnable sophists.

It is not chance that in the geographical areas of each of the three traditions there were then many small states rubbing shoulders in amity or enmity. In some of these states—in Europe, Athens is the best example—the habit of freedom was strong enough for it to be possible to argue almost anything—though in Athens, Anaxagoras, Socrates, and maybe others paid for the freedom they exercised. The upshot was that in all three traditions there were sages or intellectuals, typically with entourages of followers, to argue for or against the already existing tradition of a golden age, for or against this-worldliness, and for or against altruism or egoism. However religious or traditional India and China may appear to later eyes, everything sacred and everything profane could then be mocked by those of a turn for mockery, or debated by those of a mind to debate. These wars waged with reasons led to the development of thought about

## Chronology of Great Philosophers

INDIA	CHINA, JAPAN	EUROPE
B.C.E.		
Uddalaka (?8th cent.)		
Yajnavalkya (?8th cent.)		
Mahavira (599-527)		Heraclitus (fl. 500)
Buddha (563-483)	Confucius (551-479)	Parmenides (b. 515)
	Mo-tzu (480-390)	Socrates (470-399)
	Chuang-tzu (4th cent.)	Democritus (460-370)
	Mencius (371-298)	Plato (428-348)
		Aristotle (384-322)
		Pyrrho (365-270)
		Epicurus (341-270)
	Hsün-tzu (298-238)	Arcesilaus (315-241)
	Han Fei-tzu (280-233)	
		Carneades (214-129)
		Lucretius (99-55)
C.E.		
Nagarjuna (fl. 200)		Plotinus (205-270)
Asanga (fl. 350)		Sextus Empiricus
Vasubandhu (fl. 350)		(3rd cent.)
		Proclus (410-485)
Bhartirhari (450-510)		
Dignaga (480-540)		
	Hui-neng (638-713)/	
Dharmakirti (600-660)	Shen-hui (670-762)	
Shankara (700-750)	Fa-tsang (643-712)	
Jayarashi (fl. 800)		Al-Farabi (870-950)
Udayana (fl. 1050)	Chu Hsi (1138-1200)	Avicenna (980-1037)
Shriharsha (fl. 1150)		Maimonides
	Dogen (1200-1253)	(1135-1204)
		Aquinas (1225-1274)
Gangesha (fl. 1320)		Duns Scotus (1266-1308)
		William of Ockham
		(1285-1347)
Raghunatha (fl. 1500)	WangYang-ming	
	(1472-1529)	Descartes (1596-1650)
Gadadhara (fl. 1650)		Spinoza (1632-1677)
		Locke (1632-1704)
		Leibniz (1646-1716)
		Berkeley (1685-1753)
		Hume (1711-1776)
		Kant (1724-1804)
		Hegel (1770-1831)
		Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
		Nietzsche (1844-1900)
		Peirce (1839-1914)
		James (1842-1910)
		Dewey (1859-1952)
		Husserl (1859-1938)
	Nishida (1878-1945)	Russell (1872-1970)
		Wittgenstein (1889-1951)
		Heidegger (1889-1976)

thought, by which I mean about the hows and whys of reasons and reasoning. Not only do we find the beginnings of an almost formal logic but, along with it, a conscious playing about with paradoxes, the players happy as children with glittering new intellectual toys, and a readiness to demonstrate virtuosity as such in the logic or rhetoric of debate.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers calls this period the axial age because so much on which human thought turns was originated in its course—ours, he says, is another such age, the first in which history ceases to be a collection of local histories and becomes world history.<sup>10</sup> Jaspers takes as his starting point the eighth century B.C.E.; but if we restrict ourselves to the sixth and fifth centuries alone, we find not only the sages and philosophers listed in our chart, but writers, artists, and scientists who were equal creators of the three traditions, and, beyond these three, creators of other traditions, such as the prophets Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, who also helped to extend human thought—philosophy taken in its broader, more simply human sense.<sup>11</sup>

I go on to the relative emptiness of the chart for Europe during the period beginning with the first century C.E. and ending (Muslims and Jews apart) in the thirteenth. It should not be supposed that there are no names to fill the gap, which reflects the judgment that these are not the names of the great creators of the philosophical traditions (for Europe, I have probably been unjust in omitting the leading Stoics and Augustine). As the chart implies, there was a great change in Chinese philosophy that took place when Buddhism became acclimatized to its Chinese home and when Confucianism had to reconstruct itself in competition with Buddhism. But this intermediate period—intermediate from our position in time—is just that of the flourishing of Buddhist philosophy in India, as well as of its philosophical opponents, all of them sharpening one another's philosophical wits by means of their rivalry. It was through the now sophisticated Buddhist philosophy that India made the thought of China, Japan, and Tibet far more varied and subtle than before. For India, however, the chart becomes empty from about the twelfth century.

As compared with the crowded column of European philosophers, the near emptiness of the Indian and Sino-Japanese columns from the seventeenth century and on has an involved explanation, not all of which I am sure. At least some of it is likely to be the result of Western ignorance in general and my own ignorance in particular. I mean that the Indian and Chinese thinkers of this time have been studied in the West far less than their predecessors. To the best of my knowledge—I've confessed my ignorance—the only classical Indian school that continued to be visibly creative, as opposed to just increasingly intricate, was the logic-emphasizing school, in this period called, with reason, the "New Logic" (*Navya-Nyaya*).

The school of Vedanta may, more hesitantly, be added. But other classical schools also remained alive, and the verdict that their later work was uncreative may be the result of our inattentiveness to distinctions that they perceived and that we, too, may sometime come to perceive to be of genuine interest. Or perhaps we already perceive them so but are unaware that others have preceded us in recognizing their interest.

An example of possibly unjust omission is that of the Chinese "searchers for evidence." They were the members of a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century group of reform-minded thinkers. Using philology as their instrument, they hoped to recover ancient truths, purify them of later metaphysical dross, and, with these truths, go about reforming society. The "searchers for evidence" (*k'ao-cheng*) advocated the use of empirical criteria such as stone and bronze inscriptions, genealogies, and chronologically precise biographies; and they discussed Chinese astronomy and mathematics in relation to the European. Some of them (such as Tai Chen [1724–1777]) tried to legitimize this European science by assigning it a Chinese origin. By and large, the skeptical and empirical tendencies of these thinkers served the purpose of reconstructing the antiquity they revered. Their closest European analogues were the Renaissance scholars whose passion was to recover and relive Greco-Roman antiquity. But for all his courage and importance, Tai Chen seems to me not to show an intellectual intensity great enough to be classed as a great philosopher. However, my verdict may be the result of insufficient knowledge.

This whole late period, during which European philosophy flourished and non-European philosophy appears, rightly or wrongly, to have lessened its creative intensity is also the period that experienced foreign rule. Such rule may well have sapped the life of the Indian and then the Chinese philosophical tradition by weakening their social power and by impelling them in the direction of an at first necessarily crude encounter with Western thought. In India, Muslim raiders and conquerors exercised an increasing influence from the early eleventh century. Some Muslim rulers were simply intolerant, while others were tolerant either out of conviction or for merely pragmatic reasons—the extraordinarily tolerant emperor Akbar created a monotheism based on Hinduism and Christianity as much as on his native Muslim religion. In wartime, Muslim rulers often demonstrated their piety by desecrating or destroying Hindu temples, which in the villages were centers of social life and of potential resistance. In retaliation, a Hindu rebellion was likely to result in the same treatment of mosques. The clash was not between peoples who felt themselves to be equals because, to the intolerant on either side, the other was composed of the uncivilized or dangerous, of infidels, as the Muslims saw the Hindus, or of barbarians, as the Hindus saw the Muslims. The fact that the center of

the school of New Logic was in Northeast India, which had remained untroubled by the earlier, more fanatical Muslims, may help explain the school's continued creativity.

It is not a priori unlikely, as modern Indian Muslims have claimed, that the Hindus who willingly converted to Islam were those who felt themselves most victimized by the caste system; and the mystical sects of Islam might pull at already mystically inclined Hindus. But for Hindus generally, the contact with the Muslims was external because the Muslim religion was imageless, ruled by dogma, and relatively egalitarian, while they, the Hindus, worshiped images and belonged to hereditary groupings, *jatis*, into which they were born and in which they lived, worshiped, worked, and died. To leave or be expelled from such a group was to become culturally naked and humanly isolated.

I have been speaking of the Hindus in relation to the Muslims, but when the British became dominant, as happened in the later eighteenth century, the results were just as complicated and hard to summarize as those of Muslim dominance. I allow myself to avoid any detail here and to say only that, in the long run, European thought proved to be a dangerous, sometimes demoralizing rival to the traditional thought of India.<sup>12</sup>

In China, the first great outside influence, which came from India in the form of Buddhism, was quite peaceful. By about the fourth century C.E., Buddhism had been transformed from a foreign into a native, Chinese religion. However, in the eyes of orthodox Confucians it was offensive and even dangerous because, they argued, a Buddhist was encouraged as such to transfer allegiance from the family and from the Confucian hierarchy of teachers and officials to the Buddhist monastery, and was encouraged, at least in principle, to renounce marriage and even the most usual and innocent animal pleasures—all the goals that most ordinary humans pursue without question. As it was actually lived, Buddhism proved far more pliant than such orthodox complainants could admit, and many individuals were Confucian and Buddhist (or Taoist) at once, with a feeling, attested to by poets and artists, of inward wealth rather than inward contradiction.

As a result of the different form of life it encouraged, of the shift in allegiance it demanded of those deeply faithful to it, and of its heavy involvement in court politics, Buddhism aroused strenuous opposition and was subjected to persecution, though not of the most drastic kinds practiced in Europe. The monasteries' wealth was confiscated and their monks were dispersed, causing the decline of all but two sects, Ch'an (Zen) and Pure Land.<sup>13</sup>

The Europeans who first influenced the Chinese were the missionaries. Their influence was mostly on the scholars or court officials who

were intrigued by their foreign learning or by the clocks and other devices they brought with them. However, the missionaries were eventually expelled and their converts subjected to persecution. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a serious contest began between the Chinese who favored tradition and those who wanted to introduce Western learning or practices. This contest, like the contests elsewhere between traditionalists and Westernized reformers, was fierce and bred great fears and hopes.

We have to leave such political contests and go back to philosophy proper and to the causes for its real or apparent loss of creativity in India and China. In both traditions, threats from the outside have led to repeated retreats inward. The kind of retreat I mean is to an orthodoxy that demonstrates its faithfulness to tradition by insisting on remaining fixed, that is, by ignoring or pretending to ignore the worth of everything that is foreign to it. Such a retreat was possible because the Indian and Chinese traditionalists were unable to conceive that there could be languages equal in refinement and exactness to Sanskrit—taken to be utterly sacred and beautiful—or, in the case of China, to classical Chinese—taken to be incomparably superior in every way—and unable to conceive that there could be other philosophical cultures that might at all approach the richness and rightness of their own. As the Indians and Chinese understood it, their thought had undergone a process that began in inspired wisdom and continued by way of the differentiation, refinement, and expansion that made each culture inexpressibly right and deep, so that those who had formed themselves by its means could retire into its depths without feeling any sense of narrowness, that is, of provinciality or loss of universal truth. Both the Chinese and Indian traditions of philosophy have functioned as “a sophisticated theoretical structure of self-universalization and self-isolation.”<sup>14</sup> The European tradition, too, has usually exhibited this narcissistic attention to itself. But this should not lead us to forget the obvious, that a community preserves itself by excluding from power any foreigners and foreignness that endanger its unity, such as it may be.

History shows that the Buddhists were able to look outward more than the Hindus but unable to survive in India itself. Deeply Hindu or deeply Confucian philosophers felt alienated from Buddhism. It was rare for them to acknowledge any need to consider a foreign tradition as if it could teach them anything of intellectual or spiritual value. By the twentieth century, of course, such a view had become implausible to an increasing and finally dominant number of intellectuals.

Despite what I have said, it should not be assumed that the Hindus isolated themselves completely from Muslim thought; but the mutual influences of various kinds were never of great importance to classical



philosophy. Finally, however, whether earlier or later, Western thought, along with Western commerce and Western arms, became a subversive influence everywhere. The effect of the West became so dominant that a Hindu or Chinese was (and is) likely to accept Western values while insisting that his native tradition developed their equivalents earlier, or at least by itself: Everything Western worth anything was already there in the Upanishads or *The Book of Changes*. To give a more subtle though more doubtful example, researchers into the intellectual life of seventeenth-century China point out, as I have implied, that it resembles European thought in being oriented (ironic word here) toward the critical, empirical, and even material. It is true that the Chinese have always had an interest in history, philology, and archeology, all of them needed to subject documents and ideas to a critical analysis. But perhaps the researchers were tempted by the desire to show how far the Chinese tradition could go toward an educated empiricism by means of its own resources alone.\* The play of pride and shame in one's tradition never disappears. And of course, both Indian and Chinese nationalists have responded to humiliation by outsiders by stressing the essential superiority of their native thought.<sup>15</sup>

### *Is the Conception of Philosophy the Same in the Three Traditions?*

We are still not clear of initial problems. This is because in speaking of philosophy I have been making the perhaps mistaken assumption that such an enterprise or profession in fact exists in India and China. One interesting though much too simple way of testing the assumption is to ask whether terms for *philosophy* exist in Sanskrit and Chinese, and if they appear to exist, whether their meanings are close enough to the

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\*Modern Western philosophy is said to have first entered Chinese intellectual life in the form of an article on Francis Bacon, written by Wang Tao (1822–1897), who collaborated with the missionary James Legge on a pioneering translation of the Chinese classics. Wang Tao's article on Bacon was published in 1873, and a translation of Bacon's *Novum Organum*, in 1877. In 1889, an essay competition in a Shanghai college ("supervised" by Wang Tao) was based on the unusual question, in what does the Chinese way of "investigation things and extending knowledge" differ from and resemble that initiated in the West by "the Englishman Bacon," whose ideas "affected the writings of two other [English] intellectuals, Darwin and Spencer. Since their works have proven to be so beneficial, can you provide a detailed account of the sources of these influences?" The four answers that have been preserved show a basic understanding of Bacon, and two of them, a basic understanding of Darwin as well. After the abolition, in 1905, of the imperial examination system, Bacon's ideas were widely accepted among intellectuals (Yuan Weishi, "A Few Problems. . . .," pp. 164–66, 174–75).

European meanings to justify their use as equivalents. Although I am committed to saying yes, this answer is not self-evident. The moment of word investigation that follows gives a useful reminder of the kind of difficulties that comparative philosophy faces.

It soon becomes evident that the Sanskrit or Chinese terms that Westerners have perhaps thoughtlessly used to translate *philosophy* and *school of philosophy* have meanings that are unique to their own languages.<sup>16</sup> This mismatching has sometimes been a source of both pride and shame, and it has made it easy to declare that not only the terms but also the subject matter and the institutions of the European tradition, such as its schools of philosophy, are unique to Europe. But while it is true that, by a philologist's standards, the terms themselves for *philosophy* are different in meaning, observation of their use shows that this difference is not in itself crucial. It might have been crucial if each tradition had permanently fixed the technical meanings of its philosophical terms. Sometimes equivalents were stabilized by the need for exactness in translation. In China—notably in the seventh century under the direction of Hsüan-tsang—Sanskrit originals were translated by large groups of specialists. In Tibet, the meanings of Sanskrit terms came to be fixed either by usage or official decree: according to the late eighth-century *Word Combination*, misleading translations were revised and terms whose meaning “had to be fixed in accord with an interpretation” were given official equivalents.<sup>17</sup> All the same, the meanings of general philosophical terms have varied a good deal in all three traditions, so even though the terms' webs of relationship vary, there is a good deal of overlapping. As long as the likelihood of similarity-in-difference is understood and it is taken for granted that philosophically important terms are clarified when studied in context, no great misunderstanding need arise from the equation of a term like *philosophy* with the terms it translates. It can be just as misleading to be overexact, by insisting on distinctions finer than the context makes necessary, as to be careless; and the level of abstraction—of distance of terms from their local associations—should be appropriate to the translator's particular aim.

Let me spell out what I have just said in enough detail to make the point convincing. I begin with Greece, where the term was invented.<sup>18</sup> There, in Greece, the word *wisdom* (*sophia*) could be used, as it was by Plato, to distinguish between true wisdom and the false wisdom taught, he complained, by the sophists. Aristotle used the word to name the highest intellectual virtue, which he contrasted with practical wisdom. As for *philosophia*, *the love of wisdom*, Socrates explains in the *Apology* that what he does is to persuade young and old to care less for body or money than for excellence of soul. Later, in the *Phaedo*, when he speaks of his impending execution by the Athenians, he explains that God has laid on him the

duty of living a life of philosophy and examining both himself and others, and that because he believes that he has spent his life in this way, he is confident that he will be greatly blessed after death. For this reason, he goes on, all those rightly engaged in philosophy are training themselves for dying—philosophy is the proper training for death! But *philosophia* is also used in the Platonic dialogues to name the search for true knowledge in the sense of the discovery of the unchanging principles of knowledge. Afterward, the Greek concept of philosophy becomes whatever the history of Western philosophy had made it become—there are very many variations.

Perhaps to our astonishment, we find no term in traditional India for *philosopher* as distinguished from *sage*, *saint*, or the like (for *logician* there is the rough equivalent *tarkika*). But there are two old terms, *anvikshiki* and *darshana*, that can be equated with *philosophy*.<sup>19</sup> The first of these, still sometimes translated by *philosophy*, appears to have meant a method of reasoning or science of investigation. Considered to be “a source of light for all sciences, an instrument for all activities, a foundation for all religious and social duties,” it was appropriated by the Logic School (*Nyaya*) as a self-description; but it continued to be used in the neutral sense of *logical reasoning*.<sup>20</sup> Since it was associated with logic, the term could also be associated with sophistry and with secular, antitraditional points of view, and its nuances were sometimes unfavorable. The more orthodox or believing philosophers kept such analytic reasoning in its place by insisting that it could always be corrected or refuted and therefore could not reach the absolute truth, which only the authority of scripture or intuition could establish.

It appears to me that, except for the Logic School, orthodox Indian philosophers were more likely to use logic in order to bare contradictions in their opponents' views than to establish their own positive doctrines. In the usual ways of metaphysicians, these doctrines were simply proclaimed at the start or were accepted as the revealed truth, the *Veda* intuited by the sages who founded their respective schools. The doctrines were then defended by logical counterattacks on those who had attacked them logically. To interject my own opinion, I think that it was sensible of these philosophers to use logic to attack and refute rather than to prove, because logic finds flaws in reasoning but cannot build philosophies by its own power alone.

*Darshana*, the other Sanskrit term equated with *philosophy*, is taken etymologically to mean (*the act of*) *seeing*. When extended to mean *realization*, the term has been used to strengthen the presumption of Indians that their tradition is superior to the analytic, wholly theoretical interests they (mistakenly) attribute to Western philosophy in general.<sup>21</sup> However, some

Westerners have claimed that the difference between the Indian and Western terms shows that the Indian tradition has lacked the very concept of philosophy as the West has understood it.

In time, especially for the purpose of classifying their philosophies, most Indians came to prefer the term *darshana* to designate an Indian view, doctrine, or system. In the nineteenth century, when the Indians began to study European philosophy, they used *darshana* to translate *philosophy*. But not all of them have been happy with the translation. Sometimes they have complained that it helps to deprive Indian thought of its native difference from Western ways of thought. Sometimes, too, they have proclaimed that all philosophy should be understood in the light of the spiritual doctrine of India, which defines philosophy more profoundly than philosophy itself is able to—the true (more than) philosopher is the seer.

What of China?<sup>22</sup> It turns out that China, too, lacked an exact equivalent to *philosophy*. The invention of a new term for it, by a Japanese, makes another illuminating footnote to comparative philosophy. The story of the term begins in 1862, when a young Japanese named Nishi Amane was sent to study in Leiden, from where he brought books by Comte, Mill, Montesquieu, Hegel, and other philosophers, along with the ambition to reform Japanese thought in their light. Back in Japan, he joined a group of "Illuminists" dedicated to encouraging Western liberalism in Japan. One of the group said sarcastically that all that Japan had to be proud of was its scenery. Another member of the group favored Western science on the grounds that it was not Western but universal, and said, in addition, that only Western-style, constitutional government conformed with human nature. As always, such sentiments provoked a conservative reaction.

Nishi himself, who favored and translated Mill's *Utilitarianism*, created (or transcribed phonetically into Japanese) much of the philosophical terminology the Japanese were to use. Long before, when preparing to lecture on Greek and European philosophy at the Center for the Investigation of Barbarian Books, he had tried to approximate the Greek meaning of *philosophy* by abbreviating the Japanese words *science of questing wisdom* into the term *kitetsugaku*. But then he had applied the word to philosophy in the Western sense alone. Now he decided to coin a more general word. To this end, he analyzed the Western concept of *philosophy* and found a possible Chinese analogue, an old word composed of a character of two hands and an axe (meaning, perhaps, *to break open*, as with an axe) and another character, for mouth (meaning *by using thought or speech*). As a whole, the word means, roughly, *to speak with deliberation* or *to conceive*. Having discovered the concept of philosophy, as he thought, in classical Chinese, Nishi felt justified in abbreviating his earlier term to *tetsugaku*, to be applied to philosophical thought universally, Sino-Japanese (Confucian,

Taoist, Buddhist, etc.) and Western alike. Invented in 1874, the term proved very successful and was widely adopted in East Asia, including China, though only, of course, in its ideographic, pictorial form, the Chinese sound of which is transliterated *che-hsüeh* (in pinyin *zhe-xe*.)<sup>23</sup>

Not only *philosophy* but also *school* (of philosophy) creates a problem. In Chinese, the nearest old term is *chia*, literally *family*, used in the sense of *scholarly lineage*, which implies that the task of those it designates, like that assumed by an Indian school, is to keep an intellectual and spiritual heritage. The Indian schools kept their heritage by a method that made their philosophies grow, like trees, in concentric rings of argument and counterargument. That is, although they supposed that their respective positions expressed a truth that was timeless, they kept investigating it in increasing detail, mostly, it seems, to defend their versions of the truth against the always renewed objections of their rivals. Indian philosophers were likely to conceal their originality, much as did medieval Jewish, Muslim, and Christian philosophers, who had committed themselves to preserve rather than renew the truth—Maimonides and Aquinas and their followers are good examples.

The view that one should concentrate on preserving an already revealed truth must often have lowered interest in the philosophical changes brought about by individuals. To the extent that it did so, the present history's concentration on individual philosophers reflects a distinctly Western rather than Indian point of view. But this statement, too, has to be qualified because the story of Indian (including Buddhist and Jain) philosophy, as the Indians themselves tell it, is filled with incredibly able heroes. Characteristically, the Chinese accounts are historicized, although they too begin with mythically improved or invented ancestors.

Such comments on Indian, European medieval, and Chinese philosophers are not meant to imply that the present account succeeds in neutralizing the biases of the modern West. If—as I am not sure—the desire to understand those different from oneself and the desire to go beyond stereotypes are predominantly Western, then I do not really want to escape completely. In any case, whatever our ideal, we cannot wholly avoid remaining the persons we early grew up to be.<sup>24</sup>

What I have told of the relation between the Indian, Chinese, and European terms for *philosophy* and *school of philosophy* implies that an exact correspondence of such concepts is impossible but that a working correspondence is not hard to reach. This is because, as I have noted, the old terms were subjected to such a variety of interpretations that if one wants to be as exact as possible, the meaning of every use, Indian, Chinese, and European, has to be worked out in detail. Such understanding profits by conscious analysis, but the more usual and subtle