PHILOSOPHY EAST/PHILOSOPHY WEST: A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF INDIAN, CHINESE, ISLAMIC AND EUROPEAN PHILOSOPHY

by Ben-Ami Scharfstein, Ilai Alon, Shlomo Biderman, Dan Daor, Yoel Hoffman. Edited by Ben-Ami Scharfstein. (Basil Blackwell, Oxford; 1978).

The subtitle of the book is ambitious; it suggests a comprehensiveness which could be achieved, if at all, only on an encyclopedia scale. What the book actually tries to do is much more modest. The book is divided into two Parts: the first (200 out of the 330 pages) consists of four introductory chapters, discussing the possibility of comparing philosophies from different cultures, and some issues arising out of the relations between philosophies and the cultures they arise in; and Part Two gives several comparisons between particular arguments and conclusions of Western and Eastern philosophers. This structure is well conceived, but in my opinion little of it is carried out satisfactorily. I am not sure that the authors have any very clear idea of the nature and point of comparative philosophy; and sometimes their hold on their material is rather less than secure.

The discussion of the possibility of comparison and translation, in Chapter 1, sketches some reasons for believing that the thought of one culture might be radically incomprehensible to another — there is the inevitable mention of Whorf and the Hopi, and a comparison between Chinese and Indo-European grammar and syntax — but nothing clearly follows from these sketches, and the conclusion of the chapter owes nothing to them; it is the common-sense observation that translation and transmission of philosophical ideas from one culture to another is obviously possible, because it has been done. Chapter 2 describes at some length the cultures from which the philosophies arose. This material — the afflictions of the Chinese peasant, etc. — is worthwhile in itself, but the author wisely refrains from committing himself to explanatory theories about the genesis of philosophical movements. "How a European child's upbringing may have been the cause or partial cause of the characteristic mentality that animates European philosophy, I, of course, cannot pretend to know" (p. 95). Neither can most of us, except in idle conversation; but then how are these 80 pages of generalised cultural history to be justified? Chapter 3 is about the relation between philosophy and religion, narrowed down to the possibilities of conflict between revelation and reason. Different philosophers, Eastern and Western, have, we are told, tried in different ways to compromise on this issue, always with unfortunate results. But it seems to me that the concepts of revelation and reason are problem areas in themselves, rather

than tools lying ready to hand. The discussion remains at the level of generalities, with no examples of particular conflicts. (The positions of Anselm and Aquinas are discussed, without even a *mention* of the ontological argument or the Five Ways.) Chapter 4, "Modes of Argument", by Dan Daor, is competent and interesting. For readers who might think that truly philosophical reasoning exists only in the Western tradition, Daor presents obviously philosophical arguments from Indian, Chinese, Greek and European sources; and draws modest but sensible conclusions about the forms philosophical argument may take.

Part Two consists of five chapters comparing individual philosophers and philosophical arguments from West and East. Some of the philosophers discussed are beyond my competence; I shall comment on three of the chapters. What can we hope to gain from such brief comparisons? What should we look for, in deciding whom to compare? My own experience has been that a study of Indian philosophy throws new light on Western philosophical problems because Indian philosophical theories are so different from Western ones that they challenge what seems necessarily and obviously true in the fashions of our tradition. Nevertheless there is no gulf of rationality; the more we work to understand them, the more they seem to be philosophers as we are, participants in the same enterprise. The method of comparison adopted in the present book is to look for similarities, rather than differences; but is the philosophical enterprise advanced by showing that two philosophers have said the same thing? In Chapter 5, "Cogito ergo sum: Descartes, Augustine and Śaṇkara", the initial 'comparison' is between Descartes and Śaṇkara, based on the apparent similarity between the *cogito* argument and passages in Śaṇkara, e.g. *Vedanta Sutras ad I.*i.1: "Everyone is conscious of the existence of (his) Self, and never thinks 'I am not' ". But Scharfstein immediately points to the special Vedantic sense of Self, *Ātman,* and so the deep differences between Descartes' argument and Śaṇkara's. Where does this leave the comparison, if the only interesting comparisons are concerned with similarities? Scharfstein recovers by tracing a tenuous line from Descartes to Augustine and then to Plotinus, and pointing out the structural similarities between the meta physical systems of Plotinus and Śaṇkara. But would it not have been more challenging to set against the *cogito* the Buddhist *anattā* doctrine; or against Scharfstein's version of the *cogito:* "anyone who confronts himself and pronounces the words, aloud or silently, 'I do not exist', knows that they are false because he . . . is there confronting himself", (p. 205) the Sāṃkhya concept of *asmitā,* the pseudo-self which is all we succeed in (confusedly) knowing, when we try to think of or know

ourselves? Chapter 8 is called " 'Dream-World' Philosophers: Berkeley and Vasubandhu". The author (Yoel Hoffman) finds the idealism of both philosophers so absurd that he can only explain their beliefs by reference to what he calls extra-philosophical motivation: "Bishop Berkeley was motivated mainly, it seems, by his Christian background" (p. 266). Hoffman thinks that whatever words we use to describe the general nature of the world, be they idealist or not, their meaning is the same, for they refer back to our sense-experiences. Given this attitude to metaphysics, it is hardly surprising that he fails to understand his authors. He misrepresents the doctrine of the three svabhāvas, identifying *parikalpita,* the world of common-sense objects, with Berkeley's "ideas of imagination", and *paratantra,* the world is described by the Buddhist analysis of consciousness, *citta-caitta,* with Berkeley's "ideas of sense" (p. 256). He seems to confuse the realisation of *pariniṣpanna* with one of the stages of *samādhi* (p. 267-8), explaining the Buddhist goal as experiential, forgetting that true realization requires perfection of wisdom. Chapter 9, "The Possibility of Knowledge: Kant and Nāgārjuna", again by Hoffman, is more interesting, because Hoffman's understanding of his authors is here less shaky — although he does get into difficulties over the Hīnayāna philosophy of dharmas. He needs Hīnayāna to be both antimetaphysical, to make the parallel with Hume, and metaphysical, to be objectionable to Nāgārjuna; the Hīnayāna dharmas need to be insubstantial (p. 276) to fit in with *anattā,* and substantial (p. 278), again to allow Nāgārjuna's criticisms to take a hold. But the similarities and differences between Kant and Nāgārjuna can be made to throw light on both, though Hoffman largely contents himself with pointing out these similarities and differences. Would not a useful comparative philosophy set the two in the context of the same debate — for example, does Kant's account of change as a necessary property of experience, constituting both the subject and the object, provide a refutation of Nāgārjuna's dissolution of these concepts; or vice-versa?

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GOD AND THE SECULAR: A PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT OF SECULAR REASONING FROM BACON TO KANT

Robin Attfield (Wales: University College Cardiff Press, 1978) Pp. 231.

In recent times, Western theology has too often rejected the task that is its very *raison de 'etre:* the rational analysis of the relation of God to the world, and of the world to God. This failure of nerve has resulted either in a religiously vacuous secularist theology, or a theological ghetto irrelevant to those outside. In both cases, it has been forgotten that secularisation — "the process of the progressive assertion of human independence from religious authorities and influence" (p. 9) — has had a long and intricate history, and that theology has been intimately and ineluctably connected with it, and it with theology. This book comes as a timely reminder of this process and of the necessity of a rational appraisal of the dialectic of the religious and the secular. Its main aim is to demonstrate that Jewish and Christian Theism is not only compatible with secularisation but also implies and historically endorses it.

The author, Robin Attfield, is concerned with examining the nature and logic of intellectual secularisation during that period — the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries — which, by virtue of the rise of modern science and the development of the philosophy of science, accelerated considerably the development of secularisation. He shows how, as a result of this process, the foundation of the dialogue between theology and a secularising culture was laid and with it, the framework for most subsequent intellectual appraisals of Western religion.

In the first half of the book, Attfield examines the interplay between theology and the development of early scientific method. His first chapter quite rightly makes much of the fact that the possibility of the development of science demanded the rejection of both a dogmatism that imposed explanations upon the world derived from *a priori* principles, and a scepticism that disallowed the possibility of any human knowledge at all. But further, he cogently demonstrates that theology was crucial to this task, for the doctrine of creation implies (against dogmatism) that the created world cannot mirror the thoughts of merely human minds; and (against scepticism) that nature is regular and that God has willed that it be amenable to human observation and investigation. As Attfield puts it, ". . . an appeal to Christian theism was as indispensable as it was valid" (p. 31) for only theism so construed dovetails with an autonomous and secular method of science. By way of contrast, he points out that, as in the cases of Berkeley and Spinoza, philosophers who accorded a secular scientific approach little attention could not treat the doctrine of creation seriously.

In the second chapter, Attfield examines the assault on physical theology. This is defined as explanations or descriptions derived from *a priori* beliefs about God or, in the face of the failure or lack of a physical explanation, the filling of this gap with the activity of God. The first position is held by Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz; the second by Newton and the Newtonians. It is argued, reasonably enough, that Newton's invoking of God arises from an unnecessary despair since such explanations ". . . neglect the possibility that future physicists may consolidate the phenomena thus explained, together with other phenomena, in a unifying physical theory, or may require for their theories a broader time span than is imaginable at the time of the supernatural explanation" (p. 97). While I cannot but agree that the method of Newton is 'bad' science, I am more suspicious of Attfield's claim that it is also 'bad' theology. Although it is true that Newton's belief in the spatiality of God is not compatible with a properly construed doctrine of creation, the validation of supernatural intervention does appear to me to buttress a theistic system however improbable such validation may be, and however scientifically non-predictive such interventions may be. (Although I fully endorse Attfield's point that it is clearly preferable to argue to God from regularity in nature rather than from supernaturally caused irregularity). I have, however, no problem with the claim that the method of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz is not only 'bad' science but also 'bad' theology since it is certainly theologically dubious to argue from the unknowability of God to how the world must be rather than from the knowability of the world to God.

The second half of this volume deals (almost too peremptorily at times) with freedom and determinism, moral theory, natural theology, and the problem of theodicy. Attfield convincingly demonstrates that necessitarianism, actualism and determinism are all secularist theories and therefore stand implacably opposed not only to free-will but also to theism. For free-will was perceived to entail not merely the power of creatively choosing between possibilities but also that ". . . this creativity is a reflection of that of the creator who is free to create or not to create, and to bring into being whichever of an infinite set of possible worlds he chooses" (p. 121). Here, at least, Attfield's major thesis is questionable because theism neither reinforces nor is served by this development in secularisation, and his own all too brief attempt to refute determinism receives scant support from his sources.

Be that as it may, on the issue of the secularisation of moral theory he is on firmer ground. Thus, he recognises that moral theories independent of theism such as the utilitarianism of Hume, Bentham, Godwin, Priestly, and Helvetius are evidence of secularisation and as such as to be

applauded. Yet, he also maintains that, insofar as they are committed to ethical hedonism, they are not worthy of approval since they deny that human freedom and rational self-determination are intrinsically good. However, since secular moral theories were the historical and logical outcome of theistic religion, and because a secular moral theory emphasising human welfare rather than human pleasure can be constructed, such a theory is compatible with theism. If God is benevolent, and human welfare and morality are closely connected, then the will of God accords with the instantiation of such acts as are entailed by a secular moral theory.

Although lucid and erudite in his analysis of the ontological and cosmological arguments for God's existence, I find the discussion a little too summary. Nevertheless, the main thrust of his own view of the former is clear. First, that granting the untenability of the ontological argument, theistic belief has nonetheless no need of a necessarily existent being but only of one which is uncreatable, indestructible and necessarily timeless. Second, that if theism is to be rationally defensible it is well rid of the notion of a necessary being (thus making a virtue out of lack of necessity). In Attfield's view, it is the cosmological argument which generates an appropriate notion of God. For, the criticisms of Hume and Kant notwithstanding, the existence of an uncreatable, indestructible and timeless being is suggested in answer to the question why does *any* creatable, destructible being exist in time, or (to avoid an infinite regress of such questions) why does the set of creatable beings have members?

As for the cosmological argument, so also for the teleological, the explanation of the sequence of causes of regularities of succession (like evolution) lies in the existence of a bodiless, rational, and personal agent (but not, on the basis of this argument, one whose existence is self-explanatory). Attfield's analysis of these arguments certainly supports the intelligibility of the cosmological and teleological questions. But, despite Attfield's intimations to the contrary, it ought to be noted that the recognition of their intelligibility does not entail the acceptance of the theistic answers. While I can fully appreciate their intelligibility, I see no illogicality in my rejecting the theistic answer.

As Attfield points out, the conclusions of the two arguments are quite distinct. The agent suggested by the one is not the being implied by the other, since, for example, the cosmological being could (logically) be the creator of the teleological agent. But Attfield argues that considerations of economy ". . . require us to eschew theistic binitarianism and identify the cosmological and teleological deities" (p. 196). However, the principle of economy appears to me ill-suited to bear the weight of such a

conclusion, and, the principle of economy aside, I can see no convincing reason why the two should be identified. Indeed only if there is a further argument for the probability of one God, or the inprobability of one God or the improbability of more than one can such an identification be guaranteed, luminating, particularly in the first few chapters. If the latter, then it is certainly provocative, although some of the issues in the second half of the book could well be illuminated by consideration of parallel discussions in other religious traditions. There are unfortunately a number of misprints and (at least in the review copy) a serious error in binding/printing. Nonetheless, this is a book which is well worth reading.

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