

THE IDEAL OF PHILOSOPHY AS GLOBALLY INFORMED

Nothing that a human being thought or felt at any time anywhere in the world can be alien to another. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Philosophy in India*, p. 160.

The aim of this paper is to articulate and champion the ideal of on-going philosophy as a response to—an evaluation, rejection, continuation, reworking of—past philosophy inherited from great thinkers all over the world. Extra-philosophic elements also inform fresh philosophy, but every philosophic tradition exhibits the pattern of succeeding generations responding evaluatively to an ideative heritage having previous philosophy at its core. In some cases, the response has been destructive, the French encyclopediasts tearing down the religious thought they saw as hindering the advance of science, for example. In other cases, the response has been ameliorative, e.g. Gaṅgeśa systematizing and developing the insights of Udayana and other earlier Naiyāyikas. The range of evaluative response cannot be easily specified, because there is great diversity in the history of the individual traditions and because it is impossible to anticipate precisely future responses. Furthermore, a philosopher should not be exclusively an intellectual historian nor a futurist. We have to make our responses now, decide what to further and

what to let wither on the vine and die. To my mind, one of the greatest challenges facing philosophers today—perhaps the greatest challenge—is a new globalism, the forging of a sense of a world history of philosophy and the making of an integrative response to the individual traditions of the past. With respect to this task, Professor K. Satchidananda Murty is a leader, a pathfinder who both has insisted on globality in the study of philosophy and has created an attractive integrative response in his own asserted views.

Professor Murty is and has been for a considerable time a prime mover within the professional community of philosophers in India. In this role, he has fostered—to judge less from personal acquaintance with the professional community than from his published writing—breadth of purview. He has made many explicit statements encouraging others to be open to the multiple traditions—as the motto of this paper illustrates clearly^[1]—and he is the author of an admirable tract on the classical philosophies of China and Japan.^[2] He is a highly learned scholar not only of Vedānta but of Buddhism, with several books and published lectures on both to his credit.^[3] Murty has also fostered breadth of purview in the study of philosophy by personal example, citing, for instance, great figures in the history of Chinese philosophy, such as Chuang Tzu, as well as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Nāgārjuna, Śaṅkara, and Jayanta Bhaṭṭa,

when he has advanced his own views. The extensiveness of Murty's command of the history of philosophy worldwide is truly outstanding. Since any philosopher draws on the theories of the past to articulate his or her own stance, the wide range of citations in Murty's books and lectures could be expected by anyone appreciating the breadth of his study. One's sense is not that he is aiming at showing the extensiveness of the sources that inform his reflections but that showing such extensiveness is simply natural for him, being so widely read. However, in another vein Murty has devoted much attention to the relation between philosophy and culture, and has worried about the nature of an Indian philosophic identity.^[4] It is his sense of the special value of classical Indian philosophies for the Indian professional community that I wish especially to address.

Murty finds important connections historically between societal forms and practices, on the one hand, and a philosophic tradition's peculiar interests, methods, and theories, on the other, particularly with respect to the classical civilization in the Subcontinent but also with respect to modern India. In this way he encourages us to ask the question of what it is to have a philosophic identity and in particular what special responsibility, if any, there is for professional philosophers working and teaching in India for the preservation of Indian cultural forms through

defending classical philosophies. I shall argue—against the thrust of some of Professor Murty’s statements (e.g. the need for a cultural rootedness among modern Indian philosophers^[5])—that the global ideal (so well embodied in most of his work) is the right one, and that, despite the weight of particularistic duties that do indeed qualify the universalism recommended, professional philosophers in India have no special call to be loyal to the classical reflection. Admittedly, the issue is not clear cut, and as I say I will present considerations that do support a particularistic counter-view. Moreover, to soften the opposition let me say straightaway to those who (like myself) do feel especially loyal to Yājñavalkya or Śrīharṣa or Gadādhara that it is my sense that the greatness of these figures—and of Vātsyāyana, Dharmakīrti, Vācaspati, Raghunātha—need not be magnified through any special encouragement: the time is ripe for the great moments of critical reflection preserved in Sanskrit to become staples in the education of philosophy professionals throughout the world, much like Spinoza and Leibniz, Plato and Aristotle. There is a special duty for those with the linguistic facility to make accessible in modern languages the thought of the ancients, to make them part of contemporary debates; further, philosophers generally do have a particular obligation, I believe, to address the forms of religious and political life present in their immediate environs. But there can be no special call for a philosopher of

whatever background to attune her views to a classical tradition beyond being aware of it. We have so much to learn; once the classical traditions of India become thoroughly known, philosophers all over the world cannot fail to make important responses by them informed.

My argument has a historical component. Nationalism, including nationalism in philosophy, though once playing arguably an important role in the defense of (in particular, Indian) cultural autonomy (witness Aurobindo's polemic), is no longer called for. Colonialism, of whatever variety, is no longer a threat. Or, if a threat still persists in the economic sphere (a proposition I personally find dubious with respect to massive India), the recent past has proved that protectionism—roughly the analogue of particularistic philosophic loyalty—is not the best policy. Indeed, the richness of classical Indian and Chinese traditions of philosophy are now widely enough recognized that philosophically imperialist statements now seem, as they should, only uneducated and pitifully ethnocentric. Professor Murty rightly decries a dearth of specialists in classical Indian philosophies in the philosophy departments of the West. And he also rightly says, “Western philosophy departments have perhaps been the losers by ignoring the eastern [traditions].”^[6] But all this is changing; there is growing professional opportunity for specialists in non-Western traditions to hold academic lines in philosophy

at least in the United States. Graduate students are demanding a broader education. I predict that in a hundred years there will no longer be cause for such complaint.

However, this historical contextualization is not the main point, which has to do rather with the nature of philosophy. No philosophy deserving the name can by its nature belong only to one culture. A person's background no doubt shapes much of his or her view of the world. But there is no element of any view, however thoroughly culturally determined, that cannot in principle be examined, revised, expanded, or replaced. Moreover, any philosophy—and any element of any view—can in principle be embraced by persons with cultural backgrounds enormously different from that of the originator of the view and from the circumstances in which it has developed and thrived. Indeed, no philosopher can achieve a lasting influence except by having his or her views championed by those of diverse cultures and climes. Aristotle, for example, would not be widely read today except for those who, agreeing with much that he proposed, upheld his views in languages other than Greek in extremely different circumstances and times. Today more than ever before—because of global media—a philosopher has to speak to the world. We belong to a common world culture, with diverse influx from the past. As philosophers, our goal must be that the great

ideas of the past, whatever be their particular place of origin, live on and have a role today. The principles of ethics do not change, nor those of metaphysics. Gaṅgeśa's veridical awareness (*pramā*) of a pot is, I dare say, substantially the same as my own, and his analysis thereof may have been matched but it has not, to my mind, been surpassed, the intricacies of contemporary epistemologies notwithstanding. Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Buddhist logic, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika cannot fail to take a place of distinction in the history of world philosophy and elicit important contemporary response from those all over the world who are committed to wisdom and the value of critical inquiry and truth, as to the world community of professionals they become well known.

On the other hand, there are some important particularist considerations of context that mitigate the universalism I have tried to express. Let me return to some of these. There seems to be today, even in the face of expanded awareness of the many cultures that feed into the global civilization, some true cause for concern about preservation of social patterns and practices that would appear endangered as a global cultural mainstream becomes increasingly pervasive. The business community in particular seems peopled throughout the world only by men and women in standard issue, the gray suit. Globalization in business, science, or even the arts seems too often to demand a uniformity that

threatens the rich cultural heritage of our planet. The danger of loss varies greatly with the nature of particular practices. Surely at the top of the list has to be concern about regional languages. Bright young people are insisting on having classes in English—and not only in India with its history of relationship with Britain but in Spain, France, Japan, China, and all over the world. And rightly they so insist since facility in the global *lingua franca* is often a prerequisite to success. Nevertheless, as the situation in India so well demonstrates, the vitality of a regional language need not be sacrificed: children have little difficulty becoming multilingual if encouraged at a young enough age. The higher reaches of science may require classes taught in English, but this need not affect in the slightest the writing of vernacular novels. Culinary habits et cetera—matters intrinsically of little importance—face comparatively less danger through regimentation. Then there are the practices of religion—and religious doctrines—an area with much overlap with philosophy. Indeed, it seems to be Professor Murty's sense of the overlap of religion and metaphysics, along with his understanding of the centrality of faith to both—with such faith as appropriately colored by particularistic loyalty—that grounds his call for rootedness among his Indian compatriots in philosophy. So let me try to grapple with that the deep issue.

To review to this point, note that most of what I have said follows the main thrust of Professor Murty's recommendations, which, let me add, he makes with great clarity and force. Still, there is outstanding the rootedness he promotes for Indian philosophers, advice that tempers his globalism. And this bit of his counsel seems founded in his sense of the nature of metaphysics and its relation to religion. Thus we seem to have arrived at the key issue.

In a series of lectures delivered at Annamalai University in 1960 and reworked for publication in 1963, Murty argues that metaphysics, in distinction to other intellectual domains, has to be grounded ultimately in faith, not strictly in evidence impartially weighed, for "Metaphysics is faith, a set of absolute presuppositions, self-consciously grasped."^[7] This statement is perhaps not in entire accord with the views of his dissertation, reworked and published as (the now modern classic) *Reason and Revelation in Advaita Vedānta*, which first appeared in 1959. Moreover, Professor Murty would doubtless make a few modifications were he to redo these books now. Still, I repeat that it seems to be his view of the importance of faith in metaphysics that grounds his counsel about rootedness, and that indeed the views expressed in these two works do not so significantly differ from those expressed in later works—or from each other—that to focus on them would be out of place. (There is a important

work in the philosophy of religion, *The Realm of Between*, published in 1973. But as it is historical, exploratory, and non-assertive in the main, I shall largely ignore it, although the tenor of its wide-ranging criticisms are in consonance with the other two books.) In any case, it is from the two books that I shall chiefly draw to discuss Murty's views of metaphysics, religion, and faith.

When Murty says that metaphysics is faith, he does not mean that there are no considerations that favor one set of suppositions over another, for he argues, for example, that the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara and company is inferior, as a metaphysics, to that of e.g. Jayanta Bhaṭṭa.^[8] And not only does he bring forth reasons—broadly considered—that favor a theistic metaphysics over the Advaita view, he identifies and endorses a method for arriving at metaphysical truth. This is *arthāpatti*, “postulation,” the putting forth of postulates outstripping evidence in order to understand it. This is similar to the method of science in coming up with explanations, but while the theories of the individual sciences are circumscribed, confirmable, and lead to technology, metaphysics is comprised of absolute postulates that would explain our experience and all facts as a whole. They are uncircumscribed, unconfirmable, and have no technological implications. Only something so grand as God, Brahman, or Nature can thus be a candidate for what the postulates of metaphysics

are centrally about, for propositions about merely a finite and circumscribed reality do not have a chance to accomplish the metaphysical task. Indeed, as we enter metaphysical reflection we discover that the task is bound to remain incomplete. That whose existence, or reality, explains everything is the Unconditioned, for were it conditioned it would be part of the *explanandum* and not the *explanans*. To ask authentically “What is the Unconditioned?” leads (Murty is not pellucid concerning how, though he waxes eloquent about the depravity of our conditioned existence and the evils of disease, decay, and death) to the realization that “it has no answer adequately expressible in any way other than an affirmation of Being through one’s way of living, characterized by repose and tranquility.”^[9] One also concocts, or accepts another’s concoction, of the most adequate, though strictly inadequate, set of propositions to capture one’s and everything’s relation to the great Being and its nature in itself. Because these postulates of metaphysics are unconfirmable and because one needs realize that one cannot know propositionally precisely what the Unconditioned is—the best understanding would seem to be instead a mystical awareness—faith is called for. Faith is the appropriate sort of intellectual assent to the set of propositions that best capture the meaning of the Unconditioned for oneself.

Now we can come full circle back to Murty's call for rootedness. The disclosures of the Unconditioned—God's revelation of Herself—as recognized by an individual could not possibly exhaust all that She is. Other disclosures, other revelations are ever possible, recognized or recognizable by others in different circumstances and times. Religion provides color and certain social forms upheld by the recognized disclosures of the Unconditioned. And finally, there are no grounds for rejecting another's revelation except insofar as that is taken to be exclusive or closed. Exclusiveness should be rejected, for the Unconditioned by its nature cannot be restricted to any one disclosure or even a large sum.

Indian religion provides luxuriant washes of color from the inspired rhythms and images of the *R̥g Veda* and the proclamations of the Upaniṣads through the stories of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma and other avatāras of God to the lives of the enlightened and living liberated and much, much more. While all this is but a drop to the unfathomable ocean of the Absolute, still it should matter, *particularly* to those breathing the air of the Subcontinent, as it did to most of the great philosophers of classical times, whose theories reflect and indeed promote “repose and tranquility” and mystic ways of life. My question is: why the “particularly”?

Before going on to this religious particularism question, let me hasten

to say that Murty brings several additional considerations to bear on the issues of religious metaphysics, beyond the reasoning that has been reconstructed here. In *The Realm of Between*, for instance, he manages to find ways, after painstaking investigation, to endorse—or, I should say, qualifiedly uphold—certain well-known arguments, both Indian and Western, for the existence of God.^[10] And he examines numerous influential lines of thought on these matters, as of course there has been so much said. But since my point here is to defend the ideal of globally informed philosophy, seeing Professor Murty as an almost unparalleled exemplar of the breadth in philosophy that the ideal demands, I may be forgiven for abbreviating—and leaving much out from—his reasoning about the Unconditioned. My concern is to understand, and examine, the anomalous strand of particularism in the professor's writings.

I have asked why should philosophers of the Subcontinent be especially concerned with classical Indian philosophies, in accord with one element in Professor Murty's counsel. And I have elaborated a suspicion that Murty's advice comes out of views that the long-running traditions of Indian religion provide particularistic color in the disclosures of the Unconditioned, and it is the classical philosophers' valuations of forms of Indian religion that underlies the particularistic advice. Metaphysics demands faith, and faith becomes concrete through special

revelations and sanctified social practices and forms. Of course, some practices and religious institutions may well stand in need of reform; that the Unconditioned can infuse meaning into particularities does not entail that any practice is immune from social review. Times change. But the unspeakably rich endowments of Indian religion are surely not all to be discarded in the name of modernization and under the influence of the secular West. If globalization is to mean secularization wholesale, then it may be best to remain isolated and protectionist. I exaggerate the sentiment to bring it into sharper view.

Now religious attitudes are notoriously impervious to criticism, if they are not, at least in some instances, plainly atavistic. And it is easy to identify the religiously reactionary all over the world as fundamentally the same lot, though the content of the commitment of course varies. Among the Iranian revolutionary guard, “Bible Belters” in the U.S., ultra-orthodox Israeli settlers, et cetera, a religious fanaticism endangers progress, prosperity, or peace. And the non-fanatical religiously faithful are tainted by association whether justly or not. There are also the scars of the war between science and orthodoxy still borne by institutions of learning. Thus while even some of the brightest scientists and philosophers do indeed harbor religious points of view, they do so not only idiosyncratically but aware of the strict unjustifiability of their views.

It is gauche publicly to espouse a religious perspective; it goes without saying that we are bored by another's confession of faith. One may see the wisdom in silence about her own religious commitment, but she will not be audience to another's, so long as she has any choice. Moreover, the age of advertisement and mass marketing is not an age of self-control and restraint of what Aurobindo calls "the vital"—the hungers that drive the demand of the global economy—and religion, particularly the renunciate traditions in India, call for restraint and even phenomenal mastery of all desire. But let me indulge a confession. I agree with Professor Murty that there is in the Indian religious spirit—in the traditions of yogins, sannyāsis, bhaktas, and sādhus along with the intellectual defenses of their practices and points of view found in most of the classical philosophies and with several distinguished moderns in addition to himself—something eminently worth preserving, something (indeed a lot!) that knowing about I would be wrong as a philosopher not to respond to positively myself.

The ideal of globalism in philosophy need not thereby be compromised. It is not in the Indianness of an Indian yogin—nor in the Sanskrit of e.g. Vijñāna Bhikṣu's defense of a yogic asceticism—that calls for a philosopher's response. It is not Indian spirituality so much as the spirituality so well exhibited in India that deserves attention, along with the systematic moves made by those who have philosophically defended

it. There are special duties to address the issues closer to home. Thus there may be some special call for philosophers in modern India to attend to the beliefs of bhaktas and sādhus, particularly as they have found cohesive expression through the efforts of the great classical philosophers. But much culture is habit, and beyond what is universalizable in the forms of Indian religion, what could the most sympathetic philosopher rightly uphold? Most people's acquaintance with—and indeed education concerning—great literature remains to this day ethnocentric. As a boy, I knew thoroughly Greek mythology; the richer Indian mythology remained to me entirely unknown. Habits change. Even without a valuation of the religious side of e.g. the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the time is bound to come when young people—say in the twenty-fifth century in North America—delight as much in its stories as those of Homer. A philosopher's rightly founded valuation of the religious depends, in my view, on the efficacy of mystical practices—a matter in principle subject to empirical investigation—and on past and continued spiritual enlivening on the part of what Murty calls the Unconditioned—a matter that, Murty may be right, on our part calls for informed faith.^[11] If it is the Indian spirit to be open to fresh infusions of life from what is beyond life, then may that spirit spread over the globe. Much of the contemporary world may be unreceptive to anything that threatens our personal pleasures, but

philosophers, after all, have their own tradition of being faithful, as Socrates' death attests. Global civilization does not mean a European civilization. Despite the adamant partialities of the religious the world over, in the long run the wisdom of the religion and mysticism of the Subcontinent as defended in rich philosophic traditions cannot fail to provoke the proper contemporary philosophic responses wherever philosophy is practiced, for the spirit of philosophy is similarly universal and open.

Stephen H. Phillips
Department of Philosophy
University of Texas
Austin, Texas (USA)

NOTES

1. There are several other arguments and exhortations to this effect in *Philosophy in India*; see especially pp. 157-161 and 198-203.
2. To wit, *Far Eastern Philosophies*, where Murty illumines Confucius, Moism, Lao Tzu, etc. by extended references to classical Indian systems as well as to Western reflection.
3. As several reviewers have remarked, his book, *Nagarjuna*, published in the National Biography Series, is an unparalleled achievement in combining scholarship and critical inquiry, resulting in a highly readable account of the great Buddhist's life and thought. His Vedāntic studies plumb the depths of, in particular, the Advaita system.
4. See especially *The Indian Spirit*, chs. 1 and 5, and *Philosophy in India*, chs. 1, 6, and 7.
5. See e.g. *Philosophy in India*, pp. 199-200.
6. *Philosophy in India*, p. 199.
7. *Metaphysics, Man and Freedom*, p. 12.

8. *Reason and Revelation in Advaita Vedānta*, esp. Book Two, Part Two.

9. *Metaphysics, Man and Freedom*, p. 23.

10. *The Realm of Between*, pp. 129-68.

11. These two points are not only contentious in themselves, I am well aware, but may stand in tension with one another, though I think not. Murty favors principally the second point, often expressing suspicion about special experiences grounding religious or metaphysical belief. For elaboration of the case for a mystic empiricism, see Chapter One, “Epistemology of Mysticism,” of my *Aurobindo’s Philosophy of Brahman* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 5-51; see also the recently published wide-ranging probe by Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1992). Concerning the second point, see esp. Murty’s *Reason and Revelation in Advaita Vedānta*, pp. 278-85 and 320-26, and *Metaphysics, Man and Freedom*, pp. 20-34 and 72-75.