

THE DEFINITE AND THE INDEFINITE

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In the history of philosophy we find radical disagreement as to the relative value of the definite and the indefinite. In metaphysics sometimes the definite is called real, sometimes the indefinite. In ethics sometimes behaviour directed by a predilection for the definite is called wise, sometimes that directed by a predilection for the indefinite. Since the definite and the indefinite are the two most fundamental categories, other categories being species of one or the other, this controversy is a very basic one.

The controversy is most striking in Chinese philosophy. The story of Chinese thought from time immemorial has been the story of the opposition between the two philosophical traditions which we call Confucianist and Taoist. Confucianism is dominated by the ideals of rationality, symmetry, order, and definiteness. Man should be orderly in his inner life, and also in his domestic, social and political life. Government should be in the hands of the philosophers, rivers should be kept in their channels by dredging, and Heaven and Earth should be worshipped with due ceremony at their annual festivals. Taoism, which in modern times has merged with Chinese Buddhism, is dominated by the ideals of spontaneity, asymmetry, naturalness, and indefiniteness. Man should follow his instincts, have as little government as possible, and adjust himself to the natural course of the rivers and the whole way of nature. Confucianism produced the traditional Chinese political system, which has been the wonder of the world both for its intrinsic rationality and for its practical success over long periods of time. Taoism and Far Eastern Buddhism produced the Far Eastern poetry and art, in which the greatest canon is asymmetry, and which are also the wonder of the world for their beauty.

It used to be said that a Chinese scholar was a Confucianist when in office and a Taoist when out of office. This was

doubtless an exaggeration, yet it suggested an important truth, namely that the distinction between Confucianist and Taoist is not a distinction between men or faiths but between concerns and attitudes. The scholar dismissed from office, going from capital to hermitage, did not change his beliefs about the facts of life, either natural or social, but he changed his orientation toward those facts. The change—from Confucianism to Taoism is a change of interest from interest in the definite to interest in the indefinite.

In ancient Indian thought both attitudes are found. The Vedic hymns glorify various definite aspects of nature, and the Brāhmaṇas require an organized society in which definite rituals are duly performed. The Upaniṣads search for an indefinite reality beyond all phenomena, and suggest a hermit life in which this search can be carried out. But the balance between them has not been maintained in India as it has in China. The Upaniṣadic point of view has prevailed, and has dominated Indian thought in historical times. In India, to be sure, all sorts and varieties of philosophy have flourished. But two schools stand out as predominant, the Vedānta and the Buddhist. The former still dominates philosophical thought in India itself, the latter in other countries which have come under India's influence. Vedānta and Buddhism, for all their difference from each other and for all their variety of sub-schools, agree in belittling the material world of definite things and the mental world of definite minds. The definite may be real, caused by desire, or apparent, as a manifestation of Brahman, or unreal, a mere product of illusion, but in any case it is bad. The good for man is to be lost in Nirvāṇa or to be one with Brahman. Nirvāṇa is conceived negatively and Brahman positively, but both only figuratively, for neither can be conceived at all. Nirvāṇa or Brahman is that in which there are no definite forms but indefinite being, no definite ideas but indefinite consciousness, no definite experiences but indefinite bliss. Although Buddhists and Vedāntists, except absolute Ajātivādins, concede some sort of reality to the world of forms, it is always a concession, and no Buddhist or Vedāntist prefers the definite to the indefinite.

The teachers of these Indian philosophies have usually approached them in a religious or quasi-religious spirit, not

in a purely theoretical one. They have based their doctrine on a concern for release from suffering. They require from their disciples not the learning of new facts but a change of attitude toward facts already known. The teacher does not impose a theory on a reluctant pupil, but chooses a pupil whose temperament accords with his own. Unlike the Chinese scholar whose change of attitude may be either capricious or a consequence of political circumstances, the Hindu, according to the traditional system, is expected to change his attitude deliberately when he enters the third Āsrama of life.

In European thought also, both attitudes appear at the beginning of history. As Diogenes Laertios says, Greek philosophy had two founders, Anaximander in Ionia and Pythagoras in Italy. Anaximander identified ultimate reality with the indefinite, from which definite things arise by a process of separating out and into which they are destined to pass again. The definite is inferior not only ontologically but also morally. Existence as a definite thing is unjust, because definite things encroach on one another, and consequently, if justice is to prevail, all definite things must revert to the indefinite. The doctrine of Pythagoras was just the opposite. The *Periphyseos* of his principal disciple Philolaos begins with the words "Nature in the cosmos was compounded of indefinite and definite." Evil belongs to the indefinite, good to the definite. Science is applied mathematics, knowledge is the comprehension of the definite number of each element, philosophy is love of beauty, which is definite proportion, and the goal of man is to attain harmony, that is, the definite.

The development of philosophy in Europe, however, followed a course the opposite of that in India. The institution founded by Pythagoras exerted on the intellectual life of Western civilization an influence which is still dominant at the present day. Plato, who popularized and transmitted the cult of the definite, was influenced by two principal sources: the teaching of the Pythagoreans, from whom he learned the ideal of quantitative definiteness in science, and that of Socrates, from whom he learned the ideal of qualitative definiteness in clear thinking. These two strains combined to produce the Platonic theory of ideas, the classical apotheosis of the definite, according to which anything is real insofar as, and to

the extent that, it participates in a definite intelligible form. Aristotle purged his own Platonism of its Pythagorean component and produced a philosophy of purely qualitative definiteness—but still of definiteness. He acknowledged that the indefinite (which he called “timber”, the word we translate as “matter”) is also necessary for substances, but he considered it epistemologically as outside the scope of knowledge and ontologically as mere potential, not actual, being. Later Greek philosophers agreed in identifying the real with the definite, be it the definite *logoi* of the Stoics or the definite atoms of the Epicureans. Anaximander’s theory had no following. Plotinus, to be sure, exalted the indefinite as a reality transcending the realm of definite ideas, but he identified it with Plato’s Good, which for Plato was the most intelligible and definite of all ideas. Among Christian philosophers, Dionysius the Areopagite was indeed an uncompromising champion of the indefinite, and many Christian mystics exalt the indefinite or ineffable. Scotus Erigena is conspicuous as a philosopher who insisted on the *equal* reality, importance, and interest of the definite and the indefinite. But in general Christian philosophers have followed the Greek tradition. Even God is conceived as a Trinity, with the relations of the persons strictly defined. Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa were faithful followers of Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras respectively. Descartes, the founder of modern European philosophy and science, reaffirmed and extended the Pythagorean ideal of mathematical knowledge. Newton described the physical world in terms of mathematically definite forces, Locke described the mental world in terms of introspectively definite ideas, and later physicists and psychologists have followed their lead. Our own day has seen some signs of revolt in the indefinite unconscious of Freud’s psychoanalysis, the indeterminacy principle of Heisenberg’s electron theory, and the indefinite duration of Bergson’s intuitionism. But none of these intrusions seems to have affected seriously the general philosophical outlook of the West, and scientists today, notably in the quantum theory, are glorying in definiteness more and more.

Kant is a special case. Kant is a very irritating philosopher. It is not that he is difficult, as German philosophers go.

His writing is far from elegant, but it can be understood, and he makes perfectly clear exactly what he means. But he never makes clear which side he is on. His philosophy is as hard to grasp as an account of a war by an unbiased historian who refuses to say which side was right. Unlike Erigena, who cheers simultaneously for both sides, Kant seems to cheer now for one side and now for the other. He distinguishes between the phenomenal world, which is definite because organized by the categories of the understanding, and the thing-in-itself, which is indefinite because not determined by any categories. But which is real? At one time Kant seems to say that the phenomenal world is the only world we can know, the only world real for us, the only world we can even care about, but at another time he seems to say that it is mere appearance as contrasted with the reality of the thing-in-itself.

This historical survey suggests that the controversy between the champions of the definite and the champions of the indefinite may be a matter of concern rather than a matter of fact. This has a bearing on the problem of the perennial philosophy. Is there a perennial philosophy or not? Obviously there *is* a perennial philosophy, for truth is one, and wise men must see it—more or less fully, and a sympathetic study of the great traditions in all cultures shows how they do in fact consist of variations on the same eternal themes. But equally obviously there is *no* perennial philosophy, since it is notorious that the most distinguished philosophers disagree with one another on the most fundamental questions. I suggest that this paradox can be resolved by distinguishing between insight and evaluation. Insight is apprehension of being. Evaluation is reaction to that being. Insight depends on the object and consequently is the same for all subjects, except insofar as they may be liable to error. Evaluation depends on the subject and so is different for subjects of different temperament. All philosophers should agree on facts, since facts are what they are, but philosophers should not agree on their evaluations, since the philosophers are not alike. There is a perennial philosophy of insight, but there is no perennial philosophy of evaluation.

In the case of the controversy between the definite and the indefinite, most philosophers agree as to the facts. These

facts, set forth in objective and unemotional words, in order to avoid evaluation, are as follows. There are two aspects of being. One is the aspect of definite, and therefore intelligible, form or structure, with distinguishable objects known by distinguishable minds through distinguishable categories. The other is the aspect of indefinite, and therefore unintelligible, formlessness. The definite aspect arises out of the indefinite aspect through the imposition of form by a force capable of imposing it. The indefinite aspect arises out of the definite aspect through the cessation of the force which imposes form. The forms which are actual in the definite aspect are potential in the indefinite aspect.

There is no question as to what definite being is. It is the world of ordinary experience with its definite things known by sense perception and its definite forms known by intellectual conception. We are all well acquainted with this world, but we call it by different names which, while denoting the same world, connote different evaluations of it. If we like it, we call it the world of civilization with Confucianism, the world of harmony with Pythagoras, the cosmos with Anaxagoras, the world of ideas with Plato, the world of substances with Aristotle, the world of creatures with Christian theologians, or the universe with scientists. If we do not like it, we call it artificial convention with Taoism, illusion with Vedānta, suffering with Buddhism, injustice with Anaximander, or sin with the mystics. If we do not care to commit ourselves, we can call it the phenomenal world with Kant. If we like it but without disliking its opposite, we can call it nature created with Erigena.

There is likewise no question as to what indefinite being is, because it is not any thing. It is imperceptible, unintelligible, and ineffable, known, if at all, by feeling, emotion, or mystical contemplation. If we like it, we call it the way of nature with Taoism, Brahman with Vedānta, Nirvāṇa with Buddhism, the Indefinite with Anaximander, or ecstasy with the mystics. If we do not like it, we call it barbarism with Confucianism, discord with Pythagoras, chaos with Anaxagoras, necessity with Plato, matter with Aristotle, nihilo with Christian theologians, or thermodynamic equilibrium with scientists. If we do not care to commit ourselves, we can

call it thing-in-itself with Kānt, and if we like it without disliking its opposite, we can call it nature uncreated with Erigena.

While there is no question as to what the definite is or what the indefinite is, there is a tremendous question as to what that force is which brings the definite out of the indefinite by imposing form on formlessness and so making potential things actual. This is perhaps the greatest problem of metaphysics and the greatest mystery of the world. The problem of the nature of this mysterious force is not solved by giving it a name. The names we give it are laudatory or disparaging depending on our partiality for the definite or for the indefinite. Among the laudatory names, it is called nature by Confucianism, number by Pythagoras, mind by Anaxagoras, demiurge by Plato, unmoved mover by Aristotle, God by Christian theologians, and radiant energy by scientists. Among the disparaging names, it is called corruption by Taoism, ignorance by Vedānta, desire by Buddhism, separation by Anaximander, and pride by mystics. Among the emotionally neutral names, it is called categories of the understanding by Kant and division of nature by Erigena. Everybody agrees that the definite does, or would, revert to the indefinite when this force does, or if it should, cease to operate.

Civilized society is human nature being definite, and our attitude toward it depends on our metaphysical predilection. The Confucian scholar, Pythagorean philosopher, Platonic guardian, Aristotelian gentleman, Christian priest, and modern scientist take an active part in society; but the Taoist sage, Hindu hermit, Buddhist arhat, and Christian monk withdraw from society. Kant was a professor.

The same metaphysical facts seem to be called by different names in accordance with our different temperamental reactions to these facts. This suggestion, however, involves certain paradoxes. It requires that the definite actuality of one system be identified with the definite actuality of another, and that the indefinite potentiality of one system be identified with the indefinite potentiality of another. For example, what Vedantists call Brahman, Aristotle calls matter. This seems absurd, for Brahman is the Supreme being or God, while for

Aristotle God is not matter but the completely immaterial unmoved mover. But we must not confuse fact with evaluation. *God* is a purely emotional word. To call an entity *God* is not to describe it but to pledge your allegiance to it. Aristotle pledges his allegiance to the unmoved mover. The Vedantist pledges his to Brahman. But in intrinsic nature Brahman is indistinguishable from Aristotle's matter. Ineffable, lacking any actual form but possessing every potential form, it is the existential ground underlying the observed world of definite things. According to Vedānta, there is a force which acts on the indefinite being to make some potential forms actual and so produce the world of ordinary experience. According to Aristotle, the same. The Advaitin calls this force ignorance and Aristotle calls it God. But *ignorance* and *God* are emotional terms which do not indicate any difference in the nature of this force itself. They do indicate an evaluation of it. Aristotle is pleased that definite substances are produced by the imposition of form on the formless, while Śāṅkara wishes they wouldn't be. Vedānta can be summarized : form arises from the formless, alas ! Aristotelianism can be summarized : form arises from the formless, hurrah !

It is impossible to have incompatible insights into the structure of being except by error. The most fundamental fact about its structure is the relation between the definite and the indefinite. But it is possible to have incompatible evaluations, in fact it is necessary, because evaluation varies with temperament. Value judgments, including the predication of such terms as *appearance* and *reality*, vary even in the same individual as his mood varies. They vary more between individuals, since a person's temperament has a certain constancy. They vary also between cultures, because each culture tends to have its own temperament. This is not caused by geography or race but by the cultural tradition transmitted by education. We tend to think alike because we have been taught alike, and that is why there is a Chinese or Hindu or American philosophy. Insight into the structure of being is science, and science is universal, but appreciation of various aspects of being is art, and each culture has its own art, and each period or group within a culture, and to a certain extent even each person. Philosophers are bound to agree

in their insights, that is, structural descriptions, but bound to disagree in their evaluations, that is, distinctions between real and unreal. This does not mean that evaluations are less important than insights, or that we should purge our thoughts of these varying evaluations in order to contemplate their unvarying insights. On the contrary, I would suppose that the evaluations are rather more important. Our propositions are less important than our hurrahs and alases.

There is a proverb, "There is no disputing about tastes." This strikes me as false. I would suppose that tastes are the only things we *should* dispute about. Facts force themselves on us, and cannot be argued about. About what should we dispute if not to urge our friends to enjoy those values which we have learned to appreciate? There is an austerity about science, which deals with incontrovertible facts. But disputes about tastes give a richness to art and to philosophy. There cannot be one science for India and another for America, but nobody would want all countries to have the same art, and I hope that all countries will never have the same philosophy. Let those who will, magnify the definite by calling it real, and those who prefer, magnify the indefinite by calling it real. And let philosophers dispute not as enemies trying to destroy one another, nor as scientists trying to convert one another and themselves to the one truth, but as artists trying to enrich one another by sharing the wealth of values they have come to appreciate.

Their disputes are not, of course, confined to the alternative claims of the definite and the indefinite. Among those who advocate the definite there is no consensus as to wherein its definiteness consists. Here also we must distinguish between fact and evaluation. All agree that every definite thing we know has a form (else it would not be definite), consists of stuff (else it would not be a thing), and is knowable (else we would not know it). But it is a matter of choice whether you delight in contemplating, and so apply the laudatory term *essential* to, the form, the stuff, or the knowability. For a realist like Plato, the essential being of a thing is its eternal definite form, while the stuff is disparaged as mere becoming and its knownness as a consequence of the form's intelligibility. For a materialist like Democritus, the essential being of a thing

is the imperishable definite atoms which compose it, while its form is disparaged as transient and its knownness as subjective secondary qualities. For a subjective idealist like Berkeley, the essential being of a thing is to be perceived at some time as some person's idea, the form being merely the complexity of the idea and the stuff the component simple ideas. Realism, materialism, and idealism result from the artistic, the analytic, and the introspective temperaments respectively. The dispute does not involve any question of fact. In India realism and idealism are called respectively *shriṣṭi-driṣṭi* and *driṣṭi-shriṣṭi*; the difference is which word you put first. I am not suggesting that this is unimportant. It is of the greatest importance, and it is important just because it is not a mere question of fact, which would be solved by appropriate research. The newspapers will never have a headline, "Problem of the External World Solved!"

Concerning the definite aspect of being, then, there is one set of facts but there are three alternative philosophies about them. Each is inadequate from the point of view of the other philosophies in that it fails to emphasize what is most significant. But each is adequate from its own point of view in that it gives a coherent account of the things we know. A synthetic view evaluating all equally would reject the concept of *essential*, and a neutral view of insight without any evaluation would not be philosophy at all, it would be science but not wisdom. There is no transcendent point of view from which form, stuff, and knownness can be impartially judged. They are alternative definites. Or, since the definite is always definite in relation to something, they might be called alternative relatives.

It might be supposed that, while definite being can be considered from various points of view, indefinite being cannot, since it is indefinable and ineffable. One of K. C. Bhattacharya's greatest contributions to philosophy was to show that the absolute also has alternative forms. I take it that the word *absolute* is a laudatory synonym for *indefinite*. The absolute is that which is not limited and so not definite but indefinite. But, as he points out, there are different ways in which we can approach the indefinite absolute, starting from the definite relativity of ordinary experience. We can free the

object from the subjective categories which make it definite, we can free the subject from the objective forms which make it definite, or we can free the experience from the subject-object dichotomy which makes it definite. The resulting "alternative forms of the absolute" cannot be judged by any higher standard, for each is the absolute; cannot be combined into a synthesis including them all, for they are incompatible; and cannot be contemplated without preference, for it is preference for the absolute which reveals any one of them behind the pattern of ordinary experience. A predilection for any one alternative can be justified only psychologically, in terms of temperament or attitude—what Kalidas Bhattacharya calls the objective, subjective, and dialectical attitudes. But once the commitment is made, it must be followed. We cannot keep subject and object both and separate unless we lapse into a philosophy of the definite, rejecting the predilection for the absolute.

There are then at least three alternative forms of the absolute, which K. C. Bhattacharya himself called truth, freedom, and value. His disciples disagree as to whether absolute objectivity or absolute subjectivity deserves the designation *truth*, which as Vedantists they apply to the alternative they prefer. This is a philosophical controversy, concerned with evaluation rather than fact. The neutral, unphilosophical fact about the indefinite or absolute is expressed by the formula *thou art that*. The use of pronouns indicates the absence of concepts, the unintelligibility and ineffability of the absolute. But this formula can be pronounced in any one of three ways. We can stress the *that*, contemplating the absolute or indefinite object underlying all data of experience—Brahman. We can stress the *thou*, contemplating the absolute or indefinite subject underlying all acts of experience—Atman. Or we can stress the *art*, contemplating the absolute or indefinite togetherness of subject and object—Mokṣa. Thus we have the three "alternative forms," or, strictly speaking, three alternative formlessnesses, of the absolute.

The philosophies resulting from these three attitudes toward the indefinite and the philosophies resulting from the three attitudes toward the definite make a total of six alternative philosophies. This analysis is not necessarily exhaustive; the

important point is not the number but the alternation. If we were passive receptors of fact, like photographic plates, we would have science but not philosophy. Being human, we actively portray the facts, as artists, according to our diverse temperaments. These diverse portrayals do not pervert the facts but perfect them by making them significant. Active portrayal requires a commitment to some evaluation. Even the searcher for absolute objectivity has a commitment, though a paradoxical one, for he has committed himself to purging his experience of all subjectivity, to finding his soul by losing it. Searchers for absolute subjectivity, absolute togetherness, definite form, definite matter, and definite thought have made other commitments. Only science is noncommittal. Every philosophy is based on a primary commitment to the definite or the indefinite and a secondary commitment to one of the alternative forms of either.

Commitment to an alternative is opposed both to the dogmatic view that there are no alternatives and to the liberal view that different alternatives may be pursued simultaneously. According to the dogmatist, there is one path leading to the mountain top of truth. According to the liberal, there are different paths converging to the same peak. According to the alternatist, there are different paths diverging to different peaks. There are many mountains, but each has only one summit, and the climber who attains it has achieved his goal.