Chapter 1

Introduction

'World Philosophies'

The title of this book is ambiguous. 'World philosophies' might refer to philosophies from around the world, or it might mean something like 'world-views', theories on the grand scale *about* 'The World'. My title is intended to bear both senses, so it is a pun.

It is not necessary to be a devotee of 'political correctness' to regret that the great preponderance of histories of philosophy, many passing themselves off as 'general', deal only with Western thought. A few Arabs are sometimes included but, so to speak, as honorary Westerners, deemed worthy of inclusion for their commentaries on Aristotle and hence their influence on mediaeval Christian thought. Exclusion of the Indian, Chinese and Japanese contributions to philosophy was forgivable, perhaps, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the German philosopher Hegel passed his scathing verdicts on those traditions: for precious few of their works had been translated. It was less excusable a century later, after the explosion in oriental scholarship, for Edmund Husserl to express doubt as to the very existence of non-Western philosophy. Today, after a further century of scholarship and translation, such an exclusion ought to seem absurd. If to many people it does not, this must be mainly due to the feeling – encouraged, admittedly, by some enthusiasts for 'the wisdom of the East' – that these traditions are too indelibly 'religious', 'irrational' and 'mystical' to warrant a place on today's hard-nosed, 'analytical' curriculum. This book will have failed in one of its aims if that feeling persists with the reader to the end.

A better reason, arguably, for keeping non-Western philosophies out of the curricular sun would be that life is short, especially the life of the undergraduate. No student – indeed, no teacher – has time to savour the riches of all philosophical traditions: better then, some would say, to restrict attention to the tradition of the culture in which the students have grown up. But, in the first place, many of the ideas of, say, ancient India and Kamakura Japan are no

more and no less 'relevant' to the contemporary culture of young Britons or Americans than those of ancient Greece and mediaeval France. Second, in philosophy as in gastronomy, the sensible response to an overstocked larder is surely to choose the best items, not those which happen to lie on one side or the other of an imaginary line. I am unimpressed, incidentally, by the consideration that few teachers or students are likely to be masters of Sanskrit, Mandarin and other mediums of non-Western philosophy. Most are not masters, either, of the languages in which Plato, Aquinas and Kant wrote, but that is no reason for students to be kept away from these thinkers.

The present book, then, attempts to redress an imbalance: the 'world philosophies' it presents are indeed from 'around the world', sizeable chunks of it, at any rate: India, China, Japan, the Near and Middle East, and Africa, as well as Europe and North America. Doubtless, there are other parts of the world which have made their contribution to philosophy, but which I do not discuss. Total comprehensiveness, however, cannot be my aim in a book which would otherwise, as Vikram Seth charmingly puts it at the beginning of his massive novel, 'strain your purse and sprain your wrists'.[1]

Indeed, it is not only geographical comprehensiveness that the book lacks: for its subject is not philosophy at large, but philosoph*ies*. 'Philosophy', as the name of a very general intellectual activity, does not have a plural, no more than does 'music'; and philosophies no more exhaust the field of philosophy than music consists entirely in the outpouring of musicals. Philosophies, like musicals, are particular products of the more general activity. The singular of 'philosophies' is 'a philosophy'; and by 'a philosophy', I mean – as 'the man in the street' tends to mean – an account on the grand scale of the nature of reality, the place of human beings within it, and the implications of all this for how people should comport themselves in the world and towards one another. Taoism, Thomism, Cartesianism and Existentialism – to mention but a few – are philosophies in this sense, and it is on such '-isms' that the book focuses. There are, on the surface at least, some exceptions to be found in the book, such as Logical Positivism, whose champions would certainly reject that theirs were philosophies in the sense just characterized. But these are best seen as self-conscious reactions against grand accounts like those mentioned, and in that respect parasitic upon them. Anyway, it is unclear that, despite the intentions of their authors, these reactive exceptions avoid offering accounts of the very kind they condemn.

It is partly out of consideration for readers' purses and wrists that my focus is philosophies, not philosophy at large. This focus enables me to ignore a great range of philosophizing, especially in the areas of logic and the theory of knowledge, except of course where considerations from these areas have had a marked input into systematic philosophies. It thereby enables me, too, to be brief with many thinkers who, in more general histories of philosophy,

receive the more expansive coverage they doubtless deserve. Socrates and Gottlob Frege, for example, were great philosophers, but neither was the creator of *a* philosophy in the sense characterized: hence their modest treatment in this book. (Incidentally, the book is not, in the main, done 'by blokes', as Australian students are wont to put it, but by movements or '-isms'. Only three thinkers, Plato, Aristotle and Kant – each too big, as it were, to squeeze in others next to him – have whole sections of chapters devoted to them.)

It is not just considerations of length, however, which explain my restricted focus, for it serves, too, to redress another imbalance. 'Grand theory' has, for much of the twentieth century, been suspect. Many philosophers have disowned the ambitions of their predecessors to construct comprehensive philosophical systems. This has been reflected in several recent histories of the subject which, consistent with this suspicion, tend to concentrate on the 'methods' employed by past philosophers, or on their solutions over the ages to particular knotty problems. Such histories have their value, but we need to be reminded that many of the great philosophers *were* ambitious, and that the yardstick by which they would have wanted to be judged is the overall adequacy of their synoptic vision of things. In my view, they were right to want to be so judged, for it is the construction and criticism of the great '-isms' which are the life-blood of the subject, giving vitality to the philosophical enterprise as a whole. It is in relation to these that the methods of argument employed, or the problems tackled, by philosophers assume their importance and fascination. Without the system-builders to scoff or carp at, moreover, it is difficult to see how those who engage in this would ever have been in a job.

The French philosopher Henri Bergson may have exaggerated in judging that 'the whole of philosophy is not worth one hour of trouble' if it has 'really nothing to say' on 'the three Ws' – 'Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Whither are we going?'[2] But students set to read many of today's technical journal articles, whose bearing on such questions is at the very least tangential, may justifiably wonder if they are being taught the subject which they thought they had signed up for. And they might surely conclude that they are not when they hear that philosophy is 'really' the semantics of natural language or the piecemeal clarification of puzzling terms. Such news might, of course, come as good news to some students. The present book is one for the rest, and for anyone, indeed, to whom the name 'philosophy' conjures up, in the first instance, the rather amazing story of human beings' efforts to articulate reasoned visions of their world and their place within, or perhaps without, it.

'An Historical Introduction'

As told here, that story – to move on to my subtitle – is certainly a history in the banal sense of being presented in broadly chronological terms. Since separate chapters are devoted to non-Western philosophies, chronology has to be suspended, of course, when I switch, for example, from nineteenth-century European thought to contemporaneous developments further east or south. Because of such switches, moreover, it sometimes happens that thinkers from one part of the world are discussed before earlier ones from another part – Śaṅkara before Augustine, for instance, or Mao Tse-Tung before Bergson. So the book is, if you will, not a single history, but a set of histories. Even within chapters, moreover, I have not been obsessive about dates. Where thematic considerations make it appropriate, a given philosopher is sometimes discussed before his predecessors from the same period covered by the chapter.

Is the book a history in some more heavyweight sense than that of being broadly chronological in structure? Certainly I do not 'have' a history of philosophy in the manner that Hegel, Marx and Heidegger 'had' histories of the subject. Few are likely to ask, 'Do you find Cooper's history more plausible than Marx's?', but if perchance they do, they shouldn't. For that question would imply that I am promulgating an historical thesis, a large claim – itself philosophical – about the course and destiny of philosophy. I might like to have a thesis, on the same grand scale, to rival such claims as that philosophies are always ideological products of the dominant economic class, or manifestations of Absolute Spirit's progress through time, or ways in which Being has revealed itself over the millennia. But I do not.

On the other hand, this book does have a leitmotif, a recurrent theme that can be heard in every chapter and which does something, I hope, to gather disparate movements together and to attune readers to certain patterns or rhythms among those movements. Goethe once remarked, 'I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting . . . my activity.'[3] Something of that spirit, I suggest, informs nearly all the great philosophies. The motive behind these systems was rarely, if ever, mere curiosity about the world, their aim almost never 'knowledge for its own sake'. A philosophy, I indicated, involves an account of the place of human beings in the world and of the implications of this for how they should comport themselves. A philosophy, then, is 'practical', though not in the narrow sense of being what is these days called 'applied philosophy' – designed, that is, to provide solutions to particular practical, moral problems, like those of euthanasia or the proper treatment of animals. It is rather that philosophies have typically been constructed by authors with at least one eye out for 'the human condition' and how to 'cope' with it, with an ambition to better our lives by substituting an appropriate

stance towards the world for the distorted ones that men and women, in these authors' view, generally adopt.

The book's leitmotif is a little more specific, however, than simply the 'practical' orientation of the systems it examines. Hegel and, following him, Marx saw philosophy as the endeavour to overcome what they called the problem of 'alienation' or 'estrangement'. By these terms, they meant the sense which many human beings – all of them, perhaps, at times – have of being 'strangers', of not being 'at home', in the world. Reading philosophers from all times and climes, I am struck by the accuracy of this perception of the central inspiration behind philosophical speculation, by the constant recurrence – from the earliest Indian thinkers recorded to twentieth-century existentialists – of the theme of alienation. We can ask of our primitive ancestors, 'Staring at the sun, the sky, were they aware of their own being, and if so, what did they think?', but without much hope of an answer.[4] We might, though, with rather more confidence, guess that when people did become 'aware of their own being', they became conscious, at the same time, of its strangeness, of respects in which, for all their affinity with the animal and wider natural world, they were also set apart from it. For with self-awareness, there would also have come the emergent appreciation of being a creature that can reason and deliberate, make free choices, enjoy beauty and feel resentment, care about the past and the long-term future, string meaningful noises together, depict the world of nature in coloured powders or movements of the limbs, and perhaps receive intimations of a purpose lying beyond this world: an appreciation, in short, of the many ways in which a human being belongs, or seems to belong, to a unique order of life.

With that appreciation, one might further guess, there ensued an experience compounded of exhilaration and unease, of hubris in the uniqueness of one's species and envy of other, less distinguished creatures whose very lack of the capacities just mentioned made for a more settled existence, 'sunk in nature' as Hegel put it. However things struck our early ancestors, there is an intellectual tension latent in these conflicting emotions which was to become, and remain, the spur to philosophical thought: the tension of which Wordsworth poignantly writes, when he says that 'the groundwork of all true philosophy' is 'the difference between . . . that intuition . . . of ourselves, as one with the whole . . . and that [of] ourselves as separated beings, [which] places nature in antithesis' to us.[5] At any rate, many of the philosophies we shall encounter over the following chapters can fruitfully be regarded as attempts to resolve this difference or tension by offering accounts of human beings which do justice to the uniqueness of the species, yet without, so to speak, rendering its members freaks, outsiders or strangers in the world.

The goal of resolving this tension or difference has, it seems to me, given certain rhythms to the history of philosophy. One observes, for example, a

constant oscillation between those philosophers who would resolve it by trying to show that we are, as it were, more 'world-like' than at first we seem, and those who argue that the world is more 'human-like' than it may at first appear. The former may insist that we are, after all, only complicated physical mechanisms, deny that we are really possessed of free will, or demonstrate in other ways that we are not so very different from everything else. The latter may argue that nature is, after all, 'spiritual' or purposive, or claim in other ways that everything else is not so very different from ourselves. What hardly any philosopher of the first rank has done is to ignore, or remain sanguine about, the tension. Those, like Kant, who confessed to their failure to resolve it, did so with palpable disappointment, even despair. After all, if the German poet Hölderlin was right and it is both 'divine and good' to be 'at one' with the world, then the failure to resolve the tension is not simply an intellectual débâcle, but a human tragedy.

Recent histories of philosophies do not emphasize the leitmotiv I have described. Indeed, their authors often ignore the concern of, say, Plato, Descartes and Wittgenstein to address 'the problem of alienation', focusing instead on their treatment of today's more 'professional' philosophical problems. Some readers may sympathize with the approach of these authors, finding that 'the problem of alienation' is neither as historically salient nor as philosophically central as I do. But these readers will not, I hope, find this book a waste of their time. The 'professional' problems are not ignored, and my leitmotiv, like that of many musical compositions, is kept fairly discreet. Even those who don't like its sound might perhaps agree that it serves to lend a certain cohesion to what would otherwise threaten to be a cacophony of disparate subjects and developments.

Finally, a few comments on the last word in my subtitle. One respect, certainly, in which the book is an introduction is that it concentrates on presenting and explaining, not on criticizing, the philosophers and philosophies considered. Doubtless the very selection of the material, as well as the space devoted to this or that position, reflects critical stances on my part. But except where it has been irresistible, I have resisted the temptation to pass lightning critical comments. Charity, justice or both surely require that one desists from passing hostile verdicts that one is without the space properly to secure. It is a quite different matter, of course, to cite, as I often do, well-known criticisms of a position, ones that themselves belong to the history of our subject.

These days there are too many publishers – my own, it goes without saying, not included – who promote as 'introductions' books which would tax even an advanced postgraduate student. This does not mean that an introduction must be readily absorbable by readers completely virgin in the field. I occasionally daydream of browsers, with no background at all in philosophy, who would see this book on the shelves, like the look of it, take it away and read

it with some profit. But the book is designed, primarily, for people who are studying philosophy and allied subjects, with the help of teachers, and so for use on courses. It is, after all, an introductory account of the history of philosophy – or rather, philosoph*ies* – not an introduction to philosophy itself. Since, more accurately, it is a set of histories, rather than a single history, different readers may take different 'routes' through it. Students mainly interested in Indian philosophy and religion, for instance, could pass from chapter 2 to section 1 of chapter 6, and then to section 1 of chapter 9.

Still, I am not too ready to abandon the dream of the receptive 'general reader'. He or she will not, without instruction, find some of the discussions easy, though I have avoided technicalities wherever possible: for I have preferred to engage in relatively detailed examination of a limited number of thinkers and '-isms' than to provide lightning, encyclopaedic coverage of them all. But then the very difficulties such readers encounter may themselves act as a spur to further study of philosophy. Of course, the greater spur should be the story itself of millennia of thinkers, some of them men of genius, who have endeavoured, on behalf of all of us, to articulate our place in the scheme of things and to offer guidance, and sometimes hope, in coping with our condition. I should be pleased if students taking 'Comparative Religion I', 'Modern Philosophy II', or 'Contemporary European Thought' find the relevant chapters of the book help them through their travails. I would be still more gratified if both they and readers with no such urgent objectives come away from the book as a whole with a sense that the tale, if not the telling of it, is one of depth and grandeur.

Notes

1 Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*.
2 Quoted in Leszek Kolakowski, *Bergson*, p. 37.
3 Quoted in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 59.
4 Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, p. 82.
5 Quoted in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 574.