

## Foreword

To the profound regret of Indologists, philosophers and scholars of religion and cross-cultural studies, our esteemed colleague Wilhelm Halbfass passed away on May 25, 2000, after suffering a severe stroke. He passed away peacefully the next day. Halbfass' premature death, shortly after his sixtieth birthday, has bereaved Indologists and philosophers of a major and unique voice, and of an irreplaceable authoritative presence. In an obituary John Taber said:

He was kind, generous, gentle and jovial. As a teacher at the University of Pennsylvania he was very popular, even loved. Although he could be tenacious in debate, he engendered no ill feelings in his colleagues. He loved good conversation – for his memory was vast and infallible, his interests unlimited – and always seemed to have time for other people. Many young scholars benefited from his assistance and support.<sup>1</sup>

Halbfass' breadth of scholarship was extraordinary. Indeed, most of the forty-eight essays united in this volume to commemorate the scholar and friend that he was to so many of us deal with topics and areas of studies to which he made original and significant contributions. Whether it is the intellectual dialogue, encounter or confrontation between India and Europe studied by Clooney, Ludo Rocher, Fox Young and Gaeffke, or the history of Indology addressed by Rosanne Rocher and Karttunen, cross-cultural studies conducted by Dallmayr and Scharfstein, or comparative philosophy by Clayton, Indian doxography treated by Mejer and Gerschheimer, Mīmāṃsā studied by Verpoorten, Yoshimizu, Harikai and Heestermann, Vedānta by Mesquita, Fort and Elkman, Sāṃkhya by Bronkhorst and Motegi, Vaiśeṣika by Nozawa and Stern, or even Buddhist logic examined by Oetke – in all these areas, Halbfass' studies stand as continuously inspiring contributions.

I might be expected in the present context to sketch a short intellectual biography of Halbfass; however, such a sketch has already been provided in the introductory essay to the volume *Beyond Orientalism*,<sup>2</sup> whose contributions address Halbfass' three major publications *India and Europe*, *Tradition and Reflection*, and *On Being and What There Is*.<sup>3</sup> Instead of repeating or summarizing what we said in our editorial essay in *Beyond Orientalism*, and following Federico Squarcini's lead, I would like to take another look at *India and Europe*. It has been a quarter of a century since *Indien und Europa* was published (in 1981, the revised and enlarged English edition followed in 1988), and it is possible to attempt now a brief assessment of its achievements, its impact, its success and perhaps failure in the context of the ongoing intellectual dialogue between India and Europe and in cross-cultural studies in general. I think that everybody will agree that the issues raised in *India and Europe* are as rele-

---

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 28/5-6 (2000): 426.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Franco and K. Preisendanz, *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, Amsterdam 1997, pp. i-xxiv.

<sup>3</sup> The only major work published by Halbfass after 1997 is his book on *karma* (*Karma und Wiedergeburt im indischen Denken*, Diederichs gelbe Reihe 161, München 2000), a subject on which he had worked on and off for more than twenty years. Surprisingly enough, only two of the contributions in the present volumes mention this book. It had been written for a general readership, and Halbfass accomplished an old dream of his, namely to write a book without a single note. The book displays all the familiar and admirable Halbfassian characteristics: incredible erudition which covers the entire Indian civilisation from the Vedic period to the present day, the capacity to discover profound philosophical issues even in non-philosophical literature, and an inimitable elegant and captivating style of writing. One can only regret that Halbfass did not live to expand on this work in the context of the planned English version of the book that was meant for a more specialised readership.

vant today as they were twenty-five years ago, and that they will remain so in the foreseeable future. In this respect Halbfass' work has not aged at all and will also not age in the near future. Halbfass' analysis of the hidden, and not so hidden, presuppositions underlying the spiritual and intellectual encounter between India and Europe remains un superseded. Squarcini (p. 4 below) summarises these achievements:

With this book Halbfass provided an important contribution to the philosophical-comparative debate and participated in the process of broadening the views of philosophical discourse as such. While exploring with rare mastery and acumen the most crucial and delicate moments in the encounter between South Asian and European intellectual traditions, he established a solid foundation for reworking the problem of commensurability of cultures, the issue of mutual influence among intellectual constructs, the question of "translatability" with respect to different philosophical areas, and especially the issue of modalities in conducting a dialogue.

It is obvious that in our intellectual encounter with the South Asian tradition and in our attempt to study and understand it we cannot become "like the Indians." Halbfass emphasised, however, that this should not even be regarded as a desirable, albeit unachievable ideal to strive for. We have no choice but to bring along our own cultural and intellectual baggage, but should become aware of what we carry in our bags: backgrounds, presuppositions, premises and prejudices.

It is less obvious, however, to what extent Halbfass' recommendation has been followed. *India and Europe* is undoubtedly one of the most widely read books ever written by an Indologist, and Halbfass indefatigably travelled throughout India, Europe and North America to lecture on topics dealt with in this book, and always to enthusiastic acclaim. Yet, as far as I can see, the conditions of the intellectual encounter and dialogue between India and Europe have not changed decisively. Dummett's plea and warning pronounced in 1986 (quoted in Squarcini's contribution pp. 3-4) are still valid today: Indian, Arabic and Chinese philosophies are studied almost exclusively within the context of Oriental languages and literatures.<sup>4</sup> By and large, philosophers continue to ignore the intellectual treasures of these traditions and, in Dummett's words, "are hampering the participation of contemporaneous philosophers of these countries in a common enterprise."

To be sure, we are no longer in the days of Hegel, and no one who is reasonably informed would deny that there is philosophy in India, even though, as judiciously pointed out by Squarcini, there are some who manage to remain spectacularly uninformed. However, this general acknowledgment has not changed the way philosophy is being taught and practised. Rather than (vehemently) denying the existence of Indian philosophy, academic philosophers nowadays politely ignore it. The future cooperation between philosophy and Indology (*India and Europe*, p. 286) remains just there – in the future – and there are no signs of it moving to the present. Halbfass' invitation, to use Squarcini's words once more (p. 12), "to observe how a particular philosophical discourse has been conducted in the context of different cultural constructs and how it can be conducted today" has practically not been accepted. Has a "global philosophical debate" really been started? The world becomes interconnected, but not intercultural.

In his introductory and concluding remarks to *India and Europe* Halbfass says:

---

<sup>4</sup> Although this statement mainly refers to the situation in the Anglo-Saxon world, it is certainly also valid with regard to Europe as a whole. In Germany, for instance, where I am currently working, not a single chair in any department of philosophy is devoted to Indian philosophy.

Modern Indian thought finds itself in a historical context created by Europe, and it has difficulties speaking for itself. Even in its self-representation and self-assertion, it speaks to a large extent a European medium. This does not, however, mean that the dialogue and debate between India and Europe has been decided in favour of Europe, or that India has been superseded by Europe. The power of the Indian tradition has not exhausted itself in the self-representation and self-interpretation of modern India. The dialogical situation is still open. (*India and Europe*, pp. xiii and 375)

For the time being, however, we do not see that the Indian tradition has been revived and become creative again. In what sense is the dialogical situation still open? The dialectic between modern and traditional self-awareness, in which some South Asian intellectuals, such as J.N. Mehta, are caught, remains, on the whole, a purely Indian affair. And outside India, Indian philosophy continues to be studied only by a handful of lovers, like medieval philosophy. Except in the odd individual case, neither a “confrontational dialogue” nor a “merging of horizons” with the respect to the Indian tradition seems to take place in the Western world. A new hermeneutically fruitful dialogue continues to be a desideratum, but may just be wishful thinking. The gap between the Indian and the Western philosophical traditions remains as large as it was twenty, thirty and forty years ago,<sup>5</sup> and the Indian tradition does not show any signs of a serious revival. This is true not only for philosophy, but for all the other traditional intellectual disciplines such as Mīmāṃsā, Dharmaśāstra, Vyākaraṇa, and Alāṅkāraśāstra. Traditional medicine (Āyurveda) is perhaps the only notable exception. In all these disciplines, as well as in philosophy, the encounter with the colonial power(s) seems to have brought the indigenous developments to an end.

One may speculate that this situation will change once India has become an economic superpower. However, I doubt that this will be the case. It is enough to look at the case of China to realise that economic and military strength do not necessarily go hand in hand with a cultural influence abroad, and a renaissance at home. Japan has been a considerable economic power for a long time now, but this hardly induced the study of Japanese philosophy in Western universities, and did not result in a philosophical revival in Japan, the Kyoto school notwithstanding. Is it really true that philosophers cannot turn their backs to their philosophical past, as claimed by Dummett (cf. Squarcini, p. 14)? A melting-pot ideology that recognises the superiority of the European tradition has been successfully implemented in many philosophical departments throughout the Third World, India included.

\* \* \*

To what extent was Halbfass himself a Halbfassian? The question may sound absurd, yet it is not only legitimate – is not self-reference a typical Halbfassian move? – but has in fact been raised by John Clayton, another superb scholar who has left us too early. In his contribution to the present volume, Clayton leads us through a very detailed and learned comparison between Rāmānuja’s and Hume’s refutations of God, which appears very much like an example

---

<sup>5</sup> If one compares the first and the second editions of the *McMillan Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, published in 1967 and 2006, one will notice that the space allotted to the Indian tradition has shrunk. For instance, no individual Indian philosopher receives an independent entry (in the first edition there were, after all, eight: Aurobindo Ghose, Iqbal Muhammad, Madhva, Nāgārjuna, Rāmānuja, Śaṅkara and Tagore – a somewhat erratic list, no doubt). This does not mean, however, that things in general are getting worse. Rather, the individual taste of the general editor, the influence of the area editor, and a whole array of fortuitous factors play a role in such cases.

of the objectifying comparative philosophy Halbfass was discouraging us from. At the end of his essay (“Concluding Remarks,” p. 186) Clayton quotes Halbfass’ famous words that

[i]f comparative philosophy is supposed to be a *philosophy*, it cannot just be the comparison of *philosophies*. It cannot be the objectifying, juxtaposing, synoptic, comparative investigation of historical, anthropological or doxographic data. (*India and Europe*, p. 433)

Clayton then continues:

What have we been engaged in here if not that which Halbfass says is *not* philosophy? But then, again, what was he doing in *India and Europe*, if not that which he himself says is *not* philosophy? (Ibid.)

One wishes that the two great scholars would still be with us to clarify this provoking question. It is not easy to draw the line between the philosopher and the historian in the case of Halbfass. As far as I understand him, what makes the difference between the objectifying historian and the truly comparative philosopher is the kind of questions he/she has in mind when entering into an enquiry. Halbfass not only described the intellectual engagement between India and Europe, he also placed it within a particular theoretical framework, and developed his own suppositions about it (cf., e.g., the above-quoted statement on the power of the Indian tradition). At places, e.g., when writing on the Europeanization of the earth or the future of the Indian philosophical tradition, he even ventured into cautious prophesies. As has been repeatedly pointed out, Halbfass was strongly influenced by Heidegger and Gadamer but he was more than an uncritical follower; rather he was constantly modifying their ideas. Even in the relatively short time gap between the publication of *Indien und Europa* and *India and Europe*, Halbfass modified his attitude towards Gadamer and became more critical or sceptical of him (cf. our remark in *Beyond Orientalism*, p. xii). I am tempted to describe Halbfass’ typical approach as follows: “Of course he (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger or whoever Halbfass was reflecting on) is wrong on this point, but he is not entirely wrong; there is also something true in what he says (‘So blöd war er auch nicht,’ Halbfass used to say). Let us try to find out to what extent he was right.” It is this distillation of truth and clarification of misconception which marks the philosopher’s job in Halbfass’ eyes.

The above remarks are not meant to express disagreement with Clayton. Clayton too suggests that one should read Halbfass’ remarks as implying not that objectifying studies are unnecessary for proper philosophizing, but that philosophy entails something more. What this “something more” may be depends on one’s understanding of philosophy. According to Clayton, it consists in moving “beyond showing *that* such and such views are held in a variety of cultural traditions to showing *how* at least some that is found there can inform the way that we do philosophy.” Analytical, continental and sceptic philosophers would strongly disagree on what the aims of philosophy are, but they all embark on a philosophical enquiry with philosophical questions in mind that are rooted, or also rooted, in the present, and they necessarily go beyond the mere faithful description of the text they are referring to.

Halbfass’ work did not have an impact on analytical philosophers. In fact, beyond some sporadic remarks he did not seriously attempt to engage with analytical philosophy. His work as a whole is not taken into consideration by analytical philosophers, albeit unjustly so. Philosophers like B.K. Matilal or Roy Perrett do not seem to have any use for Halbfass’ writings. Even Claus Oetke, with whom Halbfass engaged in direct debate, does not seem to understand what Halbfass wants to express by his criticism. On the other hand, it is also quite possible that Halbfass did not understand what Oetke’s aims were. In his essay in the present volume, Oetke states that Halbfass did not even understand the purpose of his study: “I see

no basis for the assertion [by Halbfass] that the investigations in Oetke 1993 are certainly apt to further an understanding of Buddhist logic to an essential degree” (p. 572). Halbfass’s work, Oetke says, “exhibit[s] a crucial lack of reflection” (p. 571 below). On the whole, the two scholars seem to inhabit different philosophical planets. But perhaps it would have been too much to expect Halbfass to pierce the analytical armour. Even Matilal, who spiced all his dishes to suit the analytical palate, remained by and large – in spite of notable exceptions such as Dummett, to whom *Perception* is dedicated – isolated even from his philosopher colleagues at Oxford.

Another area in which Halbfass’ ideas failed to some extent to make an appropriate impact is, to my surprise, intercultural philosophy. If Ram Adhar Mall’s paper below can be considered exemplary, intercultural philosophy seems to develop in a direction that is quite opposite to Halbfass’ approach. In spite of the subtitle of Mall’s contribution (“Wilhelm Halbfass – a Stroke of Luck between Philosophy and Indology”), “the project” of intercultural philosophy seems to follow a path that Halbfass would presumably have considered not only impossible, but also undesirable. Intercultural philosophy is supposed to be neither European nor non-European (§5.1); it is supposed to be “placeless” (“ortlos”). Further, intercultural philosophy is supposed to follow like a shadow all cultural imprints of the single *philosophia perennis* and prevent them from becoming absolute (§5.2). (I imagine Halbfass would ask if there is really a single *philosophia perennis* or if this intercultural philosophy is like the proverbial night where all the cats are black.) Intercultural philosophy proceeds without privileging any conceptual system (“Begriffssystem”) and aims at conceptual concordance, quite contrary to Halbfass’ method and purpose. The universality of philosophical rationality manifests itself in various philosophical traditions, but transcends them. Intercultural philosophy aims at a conception of philosophy which makes audible (“macht hörbar”) the unique feature of the *philosophia perennis* that is omnipresent in many races, cultures and languages. It pleads for unity without uniformity (“Einheit ohne Einheitlichkeit”), and treats the different philosophies not as radically different, but as “signposts towards the true philosophy” (“Wegweiser zur wahren Philosophie”). Mall’s manifesto may not be typical for all intercultural philosophers; in any case, it is difficult to imagine Halbfass associating himself with such a project of intercultural philosophy.

But perhaps the most saddening disappointment about Halbfass’ work is that it remains a singular event. As far as I can see, nobody is presently attempting to continue or expand on his work. *India and Europe* did not hit an open nerve like Said’s *Orientalism*, which for all its intellectual and scholarly shortcomings really transformed large areas of the humanities. Halbfass did not establish a tradition of his own; even his graduate students, some of which contributed to this volume, did not follow in his footsteps. Although a truly magnificent achievement, *India and Europe* did not initiate an intellectual movement which would alter and reshape the study of Indian philosophy, possibly because it lacked an obvious political dimension. Perhaps it is too subtle and at the same time too imposing in its learnedness, and its ideal of a philosophizing that is grounded in an “immediate” knowledge (a rather problematic concept) of both Indian and European sources too demanding, so that only very few feel they can rise to the task. And maybe the time is not yet ripe. In any case, from the present point of view, Halbfass remains a unique phenomenon, a bright comet that crossed our horizon once, and that may not be seen again for a long time.

