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Intersections: Western Thought, Indian Philosophy

In his 1870 lecture series devoted to "the science of religion," Max Müller issued a powerful and now well-traveled dictum, "He who knows one, knows none." Müller was highlighting the importance of comparison as a basic intellectual operation, but he also wanted to make a broader point: we fail to comprehend our own cultural, religious, or philosophical perspective if we have not adequately compared it with others. In *Crossing Horizons: World, Self, and Language in Indian and Western Thought*, Shlomo Biderman acts on this sentiment with intriguing results. Biderman's book explores the complexity of Indian thought, and, at the same time, it reveals the value of cross-cultural comparison in unearthing the conceptual foundations of Western philosophy.

Biderman's theoretical approach is a down-to-earth version of hermeneutics, with its insistence that truth arises out of dialogical engagement, leading, it is hoped, to a fusion of interpretive horizons. Cross-cultural interchange often dislodges prejudices, and for those few who continue to ignore or look down upon India's philosophical tradition, *Crossing Horizons* is a loud shot across the bow. But Biderman also argues that interpretive dialogue is about firming up *genuine* differences and distinctions, which is vital to the understanding of both self and other. And so, writing as a philosopher rooted in the Western tradition, he affirms that investigation of Indian thought-forms "will enable us not only to understand Indian civilization but also, and mainly, to understand our own" (p. 8).

In chapter 1, Biderman launches his thesis: until the modern age, the Western tradition has been guided by "the presupposition of transcendence" (p. 18); in contrast, this presupposition has been absent in Indian thought. Biderman substantiates his argument by turning to the Greeks. In Plato's "Theory of Forms," for example, we find a privileging of "the outward over the inward, exteriority over interiority, the universal over the particular, the transcendent over the immanent, and structure over content" (p. 18). Meanwhile, ancient Judaism insisted on "God's exteriority, His outwardness, His being different, the total 'Other"' (p. 24). According to Biderman's analysis, these assumptions had a dramatic impact on the ground rules of later Western speculation.

In contrast, India presents us with an "absence of the presupposition of transcendence from the conceptual framework of religious and metaphysical discourse" (p. 54). The Vedic seers stood well beyond the realm of the gods, and in the late Vedic period, Upaniṣadic sages looked inward and identified ultimate reality with the self. Later generations of gods were very much of this world, complying with the ritual acts of humans and imprinting particular sites in the landscape with their presence. All of these moves, Biderman claims, were untenable within the Western mainstream. In fact, in India we find an "inverse transcendence," wherein humanity takes priority over the God/gods, a position reserved in the West for "theism's staunchest critics" (pp. 71-72).

The second chapter of *Crossing Horizons* is devoted to language. Biderman argues that "the presupposition of transcendence" disrupted any early Western attempt to discern truth by means of introspection. Of course, ancient Greeks, Jews, and Christians often celebrated the inward turn, but only, Biderman insists, to find a pathway back to the transcendent realm (e.g., the Forms, or God). With specific regard to language, suspicion about the interior played an essential role in the correspondence theory of truth. The world, like God, was seen as transcendent in its essential nature, so truth could only arise when our concepts and propositions corresponded to the world as it really is. This scheme presents a challenge to language, which must re-present a world that is ontologically distinct. For the most part, as the pri-

mordial Babel story illustrates, language was thought to founder on "the impassable barrier imposed upon it by the reality that it unsuccessfully tried to represent" (p. 79).

In Biderman's analysis, India posits a different, perhaps more optimistic theory: stemming from the Vedic precedent, language was never conceived as a dim copy of an external reality. In fact, the Vedic hymns emanated "from an internal process of connection, from the deep relation between existence and interiority" among the ancient seers (p. 96). In contrast with the correspondence theory of truth, language had an independent status; it was truth-bearing because of its association with the interior of the subject and its own internal coherence, not because of some tenuous link with transcendent objects.

In chapter 3, Biderman focuses on the question of the self by drawing out the contrast between Renee Descartes's and Upaniṣadic notions. The move to Descartes makes sense: one might be willing to accept Biderman's characterization of the "presupposition of transcendence" in the West to this point, but didn't modernity change the rules of the game? Indeed, "introspection turns out to be the Archimedean point of the new certainty that [Descartes] originates" because it reveals foundational knowledge of the thinking self. Transcendence reasserts itself, however, in Descartes's retrieval of God, which is necessary to preserve the stability of knowledge. The inward turn of Descartes, which seems so radical, actually leads back to the old presupposition; in fact, according to Biderman, the Cartesian enterprise presumes the "ontological precedence" of the transcendent realm from the beginning (p. 137).

In contrast, we find a very different picture in the pages of the *Upaniṣads*. At first glance, we might notice interesting similarities with Descartes, but Biderman argues that the Upaniṣadic account has very different assumptions and aims. In the famous creation story found in *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-4, for example, all sentient beings emanate from *ātman* ("self"), and unlike Descartes, "this expansive motion is not dependent on any prior assumptions (not even implied ones) regarding the ontological precedence of the external over the internal or the objective over the subjective" (p. 149). This Upaniṣadic self is therefore free to engage in unlimited "internalization" and "complete reflexivity" that results in unfettered creativity (p. 168).

Chapter 4 reverses field and compares two figures who harbored radically skeptical views about the self: Franz Kafka (following Immanuel Kant's philosophical precedent) and Buddhist philosopher Nagārjuna. Biderman first summarizes Kant's "Copernican revolution" in philosophy and charts its impact on the Western "presupposition of transcendence." On the theoretical side of his philosophy, Kant foreclosed the realm of transcendent objects of knowledge (God, forms, monads, etc.), leaving only content-less noumena. If transcendence, "that presence of the other," remains an assumption in Kantian thought, it is "shrunken down to a hollow remnant called the thing-in-itself" (p. 183). A similar move occurs in Kant's consideration of subjectivity. Following Descartes, Kant asserted the indispensability of a transcendental ego, which bestows continuity on our experience, but this "I think," this "subject=X," is purely formal and empty. It is at the center of experience, but it is also "unreachable in itself." In the depths of subjectivity, we now find an unfathomable yet unavoidable abyss, a situation that Biderman calls "Kafkaesque" (p. 186).

So, in Biderman's view, Kant emptied out the transcendence of the world and God, and Kafka followed suit: dead, spectral authorities haunt so many of his tales, and while the world offers much in the way of phenomenal experience, Kafka made it blisteringly clear that there is no ultimate meaning behind it–or if there is such meaning, it remains entirely inaccessible. The "Kafkaesque" subject also extends Kant's insights. Interpreting the unfinished short story "The Burrow" (1931), Biderman argues that Kafka crystallized the way "the self gradually begins to recede from the West's cultural horizon" after Kant (p. 203).

The next Indian counterpoint in *Crossing Horizons* is Nāgārjuna, the great Mah-āyāna Buddhist philosopher. In general, as Biderman notes, the Buddha attempted to dispel the delusion of stable metaphysical concepts like the self, and Nāgārjuna radicalized his analysis. In response to Buddhists who asserted that some foundational reality stood behind our mental constructions (e.g., "aggregates," "atoms," "dharmas," etc.), Nāgārjuna rejected any such theory. But he went even further. Through his use of reductio-style arguments, he showed that all linguistic claims are ultimately empty of intrinsic meaning because they fail to match up with "extralinguistic reality," and that includes, paradoxically enough, his own claims, which constitute mere pragmatic, "performative" warning signs (pp. 217-218). This self-reflexive skepticism resembles Kafka's, but of course the contrast is clear: Kafka's "emptiness" is permeated by disillusionment because it reflects the breakdown of the framework of transcendence in the West; Nāgārjuna's "emptiness" is associated with liberation, perhaps because there was no Indian reliance on transcendence in the first place.

In the final chapter of his book, Biderman examines Western and Indian forms of Idealism, with special attention to George Berkeley and Buddhist thinker Vasubandhu. In contrast with John Locke's empiricism, which suggests that ideas are "intermediaries between us and the things 'out there"' (p. 244), Berkeley argued that "there are only ideas" (p. 245), hence his famous motto, *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived). Of course, this doctrine leads to any number of problems, which Berkeley resolved, following Descartes, with an inward turn that ultimately rediscovered God, an infinite mind that "'knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view"' (p. 254). To this extent, despite his radically subjective turn, Berkeley maintained traditional assumptions.

Biderman pairs this early modern European thinker with Vasubandhu, the fourth-century CE proponent of Yogācāra Buddhism. Like Berkeley, Vasubandhu rejected realist conceptions, and in response he articulated a cittamātra ("mind only") position. In no case can we be sure that an external reality corresponds to our perceptions; instead, "the only thing we can know for sure is that our perceptions contain mental images," and so we are wise "to deduct 'reality' from our perceptual experience" (p. 261). This view is similar to Berkeley's, though the point of departure is, once again, plain to see: "Berkeley's notion of God was not a viable option for [Vasubandhu]" (p. 265).

Crossing Horizons concludes with an intriguing *mélange*: George Orwell's *1984* (1949), which displays the nightmarish side of idealism; Arthur Schopenhauer, who hovered on the edge of Western transcendence and Indian immanentism; T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), which espouses the distinctly Indian suggestion (only recently discovered in the West) that "knowing reality is knowing oneself" (p. 308); and finally Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) and Federico Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On* (1933), which dramatize the creative "aestheticization of reality" that the Indian tradition articulated from its earliest moments (p. 310). Biderman implies that Western thought has only just caught up to some very ancient insights in the Indian tradition. These modern revelations have often been accompanied by nightmares, because they have arisen out of the traumatic breakdown of long-held intellectual commitments, but Biderman also seems to suggest that these ruptures open possibilities for a newly reconfigured concept of human subjectivity in the West.

As this summary indicates, there is no shortage of provocative insights in *Crossing Horizons*, and Biderman's "conversational style" is intended to engage his reader directly (p. 11). On that count, the book is highly successful, and so, in the spirit of dialogue, I turn to analysis and critique.

Given the content of this volume, it is not surprising that Biderman is at times pugnacious about "generalizations." In reading the book, one has the temptation–over and over again–to write "Yes, maybe, but what about … ?" in the margins. Of course, the author has a ready response: generalization, he admits, "traverses much cultural terrain," and as a result, "exceptions abound at its extremities." Exceptions do not invalidate the rule, however. In fact, if we worry about them too much, they become "obscuring clouds" that "obfuscate the broader picture" and cover over the essential truths lying beneath (p. 24).

What counts as obfuscation in Biderman's book often proves surprising. He proclaims, for example, that his characterizations "cannot be reduced to anything one believes in" (p. 27); the cultural presuppositions he explores do not "necessarily manifest [themselves] in the beliefs and practices of the believer's everyday life" (p. 26). Instead, he is interested in "certain thought patterns, a way of understanding, a mode of expression" (p. 27). And so, immanence in "the West," to cite one example, arises as a "feeling" that often overwhelms transcendence in practice, but transcendence persists as the conceptual underpinning (p. 48). Similarly, anthropomorphic imagery of God is merely a way of representing divine "behavior and actions," but it does not compromise the more fundamental property (transcendence) (p. 29). Biderman's favorite metaphor for making these kinds of distinctions is examination of the skeleton as opposed to the flesh; his gaze, his analysis, is the "X-ray."

This approach requires constant management of an essence that both underlies and overrides "exceptions" at the "extremities." In *Crossing Horizons*, Biderman's grand comparative thesis requires two civilization-wide narratives–and many supposedly minor characters must be written out of them. In the West, these voices include "the Jewish midrashic, kabbalistic, and Hasidic literature," "the mystical speculations of Meister Eckhart and certain forms of Sufism" (p. 45), "the theological and mystical dimension of Western religious phenomenology" taken in its entirety (p. 48), and "the Stoics of ancient Greece or Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy" (p. 49). Biderman's strategy for contending with these rather substantial divergences can be vexing. As he suggests, when an "intrepid … [Western] mystic excels himself, and attempts to bridge the gap between transcendence

and immanence," the mystic's effort presupposes the gap: transcendence is the premise of such unorthodox endeavors (p. 49). To put it another way, "understanding of immanence [e.g., Baruch Spinoza's] is conscious of what it is rebelling against and aware of the conceptual underpinning that it challenges" (p. 50). In a quasi-Hegelian fashion, alternative visions always presuppose the master narrative that they react against, which consigns them to the interpretive margins. This reconstruction of cultural essences bespeaks a conservative and perhaps pessimistic view: while cultures do evolve and differentiate, they are restrained by "gravitational forces" that draw them back "to a center of attraction" "in a compulsive manner" (p. 86). Once a presupposition (like transcendence) has been laid down, there's virtually no escaping it.

Here we might well detect a tight connection between the supposed "compulsiveness" of cultural essences (e.g., "Indian" and "Western") and that of the scholar's own insistence on his thesis. In responding to Biderman's book, we need to unravel this connection and scrutinize its generalizations with care, for as our author himself suggests in his comments on Kafka's *oeuvre*, "[o]ne should … avoid succumbing to the enticing urge to generalize … as if the commentator were an omnipotent God that can, at will, marry content to form and weave it all into one faultless fabric" (p. 187).

The problems to which this "enticing urge" gives rise are often apparent in *Crossing Horizons*. In his treatment of the biblical conception of divinity, for example, Biderman reminds us that in the Bible, God must remain unbridgeably distant, and yet "man and God must connect" (p. 36). There is nothing more desirous (and obligatory) than turning towards God, but every revelation is a danger, because it potentially breaches God's transcendence and opens the door to idolatry. In drawing out this point, however, Biderman overreaches. The presupposition of transcendence apparently "explains the hostility encountered by any attempt to eradicate or reduce the gap between the absolute and the human" (p. 42) within ancient Judaism–and within premodern Western civilization in general. But "*any* attempt"?

In this context, Biderman ponders a rather telling question: "Perhaps the tablets of stone, the Tables of the Covenant, are themselves a form of idolatry?" (p. 45). If his characterization of the biblical worldview is correct, then, indeed, it seems that all forms of revelation represent a breach of divine transcendence. A word that is conspicuously missing from this account, however, is "covenant." Covenant relies on God's initial, exterior call, but it then focuses on two distinct agents who, in a sense, transcend each other while upholding a structured relationship. To this extent, covenant is a form of "reduc[ing] the gap between the absolute and the human" that is not traditionally thought to be idolatrous. Perhaps Biderman has in fact uncovered an inconvenient truth for Western monotheisms in light of their obsession with transcendence: all revelation, all relation with God, has always been idolatry. But we might consider another possibility: covenant disputes the premise of his argument. Perhaps "the West" is not quite as compulsive about transcendence as Biderman proposes, even in the midst of its biblical foundations. It might be just as plausible–if not more so–to suggest that the "skeletal framework" that grounds the monotheisms of the West is in fact a "presupposition of covenantal (or lawful) relation."

Covenant suggests a more nuanced conception of transcendence, and along the same lines, Biderman's treatment of the Christian intellectual vision is not adequate. Christian thought appears here and there in *Crossing Horizons*, but the central and most challenging issue–the mediation of transcendence and immanence that is at the core of Christian thought–remains unexamined. Biderman would perhaps tell us that the Christ event is premised on transcendence (there is no God-man-Son without there being a transcendent God the Father, and the risen Christ clearly transcends this world). Or, less charitably, Christian belief is indeed a form of idolatry.

But these arguments fail to satisfy, as does Biderman's treatment of important Christian themes. Biderman downplays the premodern Christian urge to inspect the interior in figures like Paul and Augustine, for example, because, he argues, it was ultimately about charting a course back to the transcendent God. He also makes the related claim that the "radical Indian idea" of internalizing ritual "without a doubt, sounds strange to Western ears" (p. 99). Whatever we might say about their abiding belief in a distant Father God, this "idea" certainly did not sound strange to Matthew and Luke, when they reported on Jesus's injunction to internalize the dictates of the Torah (e.g., Mt. 5.21-22, 27-28). And it was hardly foreign to Paul, who recommended circumcision of the heart. These examples reflect a complex vision of transcendence and immanence, a mediation of self, other human, and divine other–it would be interesting to see Biderman attempt to fit the Christian notion of "spirit" within his thesis. In broader terms, powerful notions in both the Jewish and Christian traditions suggest that "the presupposition of transcendence" has often been renegotiated, and, as a result, it has become much less of a singular, inevitable constraint–if it was ever firmly established

in the first place.

Biderman's treatment of modern philosophy assumes acceptance of his premise as he explores both the staying power of the "presupposition of transcendence" and the traumas that were unleashed when it broke down. As I have suggested above, we have reason to believe that this presupposition was already compromised by the time that Descartes came onto the scene. Biderman is quite right, however, to argue that something dramatic happened in modern thought–and it surely revolved around subjectivity. That Descartes circles back around to God in the *Meditations* (1641) is not surprising, but whether the cogito or a transcendent God has "ontological precedence" (p. 136) is a matter of considerable debate. In keeping with his thesis, Biderman of course argues that it is God, though he recognizes that the Cartesian subject opens up the distinct possibility of abandoning divinity, so it is difficult to discern his answer.

More importantly, however, Biderman correctly indicates that Descartes paired a "primary, independent, separated" self in the sense of "an individual person," "limited merely by the boundaries of his thought" (p. 129), with a "'philosophical' subjectivity" that was "impersonal" and purely formal (p. 132). Here we discern the seeds of an alternate explanation for the rupture of modern thought: an inexpressible X, or "impersonal objectivity," as Biderman calls it, appears "at the very core of subjectivity" (p. 138). This core was, we might suggest, always with "the West," but it was by and large covered over by positive dialectical transactions of transcendence and immanence. This dialectical conception is a more accommodating way of characterizing the abiding influence of Western monotheisms than what we find outlined in *Crossing Horizons*.

Turning now to the Indian tradition, we should recall Biderman's overarching strategy. Serious, engaged inquiry, he argues, is essential to dislodging dangerous prejudices about other cultures, but cross-cultural comparison is also vital to understanding one's own. Comparison with the religious and philosophical traditions of India brings "the presupposition of transcendence" in the West into sharp relief, because in India this presupposition is conspicuous in its absence.

To explore this side of argument, we begin with the understanding of divinity in India, which contrasts significantly with the traditional Western conception. The ancient Vedic gods were encircled by greater forces, such as cosmic order, ritual activity, and the scriptures themselves, Biderman argues. In fact, in contrast with "the West," the Vedic scheme is characterized by "inverse transcendence" because human beings took precedence over the gods. With regard to later devotional theisms, Biderman admits that Hindus "delight in recounting Śiva's omnipotence, or wax about Kṛṣṇa's allure, or ruminate on the metaphysical aspects of that divine impersonal principle that they refer to as *Brahman*," but transcendence "rarely occupies a key position in the conceptual framework of Indian culture" (p. 52).

This claim would come as a surprise to many interpreters of the Hindu tradition–not to mention its adherents. Going back to the Vedic worldview, it seems clear that "transcendence" was a foundational principle, but–to put the matter simply–it was identified with something besides God/the gods. For example, the Vedas certainly manifest themselves in the interior of the sage or priest, but the source of their authority is their eternal, objective, and transcendent nature, as Biderman himself suggests in his chapter on language. Once again, we should be analyzing dialectical systems of transcendence and immanence, rather than insisting that a culture is reducible to one of these concepts or the other.

We could readily cite instances from later Hindu devotional movements that support this suggestion. One of the most obvious and well known is Kṛṣṇa's "theophany" in chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Here the warrior Arjuna requests that Kṛṣṇa, his trusted friend and advisor, reveal himself in his true, divine form. Kṛṣṇa complies, and the warrior is overwhelmed by a vision of an entirely outward, exterior, universal, and objective god–a transcendent god.

Examples of this kind are pervasive in the Hindu tradition–but Biderman would want to argue that these visions of transcendence do not reflect the essence of the tradition: episodes like this are merely the devotional flesh of lived religion, covering over the conceptual skeleton. Instead, the monistic concept of divinity is the real foundation; the *Gītā* is most distinctively "Indian" when it portrays the interiorization of ultimate reality. Indeed, the center of gravity in Biderman's account revolves around the assimilation of ultimate reality, subjectivity, and insight that is often articulated in the Upaniṣadic corpus. In this picture, subjectivity trumps any form of transcendent divinity; advanced practitioners take precedence over the gods when they retreat into the interior and find the ultimate, non-dual truth.

The Upaniṣadic, Vedānta breakdown of dualities, however, is itself a problem for Biderman's argument. At times Biderman equivocates around his characterization of the immanent, interior subject. To make his comparison with "the West" stick, however, he most often seems

to identify Indian concepts of subjectivity with individual human beings. Hence, Western selves were dominated by transcendent reality outside of themselves, and Indian individuals got free reign to explore, imagine, and create from the interior. But we should be very clear: the realm of Upaniṣadic subjectivity is much more expansive than the personal human sphere, and in fact the subject attains liberating insight when it becomes homologous with the objective, or, we might even say, with the transcendent (e.g., "*ātman* is *Brahman*," "I am *Brahman*," etc.). In the Upaniṣads, the personal or individual self is not the source of ultimate truth–the individual must meet up with impersonal subjectivity, which is another way of saying that it must have an objective, transcendent side. How is this different, we might wonder, from the Platonic or Augustinian forms of introspection, which lead to a reality well beyond the self?

The dialectic between subject/object, outward/inward, and immanent/transcendent is an essential presupposition to even the most introspective of Upaniṣadic texts. Contra Biderman's reading of *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.1-4, for example, which suggests that "self-identity is ascertained here without it needing a specific object (and not even the conceptual differentiation between an external object and an internal subject)" (p. 161), it is impossible to avoid these determinations in the act of self-recognition. "Here I am" is the first thing that the lonely first man says: the subject identifies an outward place from which to speak and then makes of itself an object; the *ātman* then fearfully recognizes his aloneness and begets other beings to fill the emptiness. Is not this initial outward void a version of "transcendence", conceived as a bare externality and objectivity? Even in this highly subjective account of creation, it is difficult to say that we find no "prior assumptions (not even implied ones) regarding the ontological precedence of the external over the internal or the objective over the subjective" (p. 149).

This line of critique arises from a very basic observation about Indian intellectual foundations: dualism was as much of a presupposition as monism. The Sāṃkhya philosophical school, for example, can trace its origins into the depths of the Vedas, and while it deemphasized God/gods (at least in its classical form), it was founded on a strict dualism between two substances: *puruṣa* (conscious, passive self) and *prakṛti* (unconscious, active nature). Building on imagery from the Vedic literature, Sāṃkhya starts with the premise that *puruṣa* is radically distinct from dormant *prakṛti*, and it sees transcendence of *prakṛti* as the path to liberation. When these notions combine with theism in the highly influential Yoga school of philosophy, the conclusion becomes unavoidable: a strong presupposition towards transcendence is in fact present in the Indian philosophical tradition. This presupposition is potent in the Yoga *Sūtras* of Patañjali: his *Iśvara* (Lord) is so radically isolated and distant that it is difficult to imagine how he could have had a hand in creation.

The prominence of dualism in the Indian tradition relates to another fraught issue in *Crossing Horizons*: the status of external reality, and the capacity of language to represent it. Biderman argues that the correspondence theory of truth is distinctive to the Western tradition, and he proposes that it owes a great deal to a religio-philosophical frame that gave precedence to transcendent realities (God and the world). In India, this theory plays a "minor role" because of the rare appearance of "the realist assumption according to which perceived reality is completely independent of our perception of it" (p. 100). In fact, realist perspectives of this kind abound in the Indian philosophical tradition. While Vedāntins and some Buddhists rejected realism and maintained skepticism about the capacity of language (and these are examples that Biderman focuses on), basic forms of observation, both internal and external, played an essential role in Indian thought, often with the assumption that the objects of our experience have some kind of independent standing. This impulse is persistent in the tradition. In their later formalization of the accepted sources of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), for example, all schools of Indian philosophy accepted the authority of perception. While there were complex debates about this concept, many of these schools (including Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, early forms of Buddhism, etc.) started with the basic understanding that truthful discourse arose from the proper matching of propositions with objects met with in experience–i.e., they espoused, at one time or another, a form of realist foundationalism. Of course, the process of judgment was most often thought to be mediated by other intellectual structures, much as we find in Western tradition, but the broader point is very clear: both realisms and correspondence theories of language were relatively common in the history of Indian thought.

It would not be difficult to continue with "exceptions" that "abound at [the] extremities" (p. 24) of *Crossing Horizons*, but to be fair, Biderman never claims to offer a comprehensive treatment of either Western or Indian thought. As we have seen, he is fully cognizant that generalizations require sacrifices, but he urges us not to lose the forest for the trees. Of course both the West and India have many divergent religious and philosophical strands; however, each tradition also has its own con-

sistent, foundational identity, which we clarify and differentiate through the art of cross-cultural comparison.

The comparative impulse in *Crossing Horizons* is admirable, and the pairings it contains often prove fascinating. But the constant, looming presence of Biderman's grand thesis often threatens to compromise his book's highpoints, as does his practice of writing off rather significant exceptions. To recognize that major strands of thinking in Western contexts fail to adhere to "the presupposition of transcendence," or that transcendence was a premise within important branches of the Indian tradition, does not obscure and obfuscate some essential truth with needless worries, as Biderman seems to argue. Instead, it disputes his thesis with contrary evidence and demands a more nuanced treatment of the subject matter. If we can identify significant examples within the Indian tradition that temper Biderman's comparisons with "Western" concepts of God, self, world, and language, and we can simultaneously find significant exceptions to the rule of transcendence in the West, then just exactly how far has the overarching comparison taken us? Would so much be lost if the generalizations about "the West" and "India" were left aside, leaving the individual, comparative case studies to do their work, with conclusions limited to what the data can bear?

Urging this more targeted form of analysis is a straightforward matter of getting the texts, schools, and thinkers that populate these two traditions right, but there is also a bigger picture. As recent critical perspectives on Orientalism have shown, the representation of non-Western cultures has a long history with some disturbing political and social implications. In his opening, Biderman acknowledges this form of critique by suggesting that anyone who approaches India from the outside has "autobiographical demon[s]," "personal motivations," and "hidden agendas" that have the potential to corrupt the investigation (p. 2). Surely he is right, but this way of accounting for distorted representation of the Indian tradition is far too limited. It suggests that misunderstandings have been (and continue to be) the product of idiosyncratic, individual factors and not features of larger patterns or products of cultural forces. "[P]ersonal motivations" and "hidden agendas" need to be linked with broader discourses of representation if we are to clear the ground of cross-cultural interpretation.

Biderman is aware of this point; the privileged narrative of Western philosophy, which he resists, is itself part of a discourse that has been aligned against the very kind of comparative work he wishes to perform. But counter-assertion of India's integrity, particularly within the framework of broad generalizations that are ultimately designed to serve Western self-understanding, is not without its own genealogy, and its own danger. It has long been a common move of both Romantic devotees and hard-nosed colonizers to align the essence of the "Indian mind" with the suppressed elements in the Western tradition (e.g., mystery cults, Neo-Platonism, kabbalah, Spinozism, etc.). Also, Western intellectuals have consistently isolated Upanishadic, Vedāntin monism as the essential teaching of India, with a number of accompanying associations: India has often been represented as a land of dreamy, anti-realist imagination. Finally, the association between European pessimism and Buddhism is long-standing gesture that has further intertwined India with very Western debates and obsessions. These strands have woven together in a rather worn-out tale that has often framed interpretive encounter with India: "the West" has finally ended up in the same places that Indian thinking ventured long time ago, but this late realization is yet poisoned by lingering narrowness and dogmatism. If only India could set us straight! If only we could hear its pure, essential voice! For over two centuries, this hermeneutical frame has drawn Indian texts, religion, and thought-forms into a curious mix of Romantic enthusiasm and broken-hearted disillusionment in the face of modernity's disasters.

Does *Crossing Horizons* contribute to this story? It has its moments: consulting the growing body of contemporary scholarship on the historical reception of India in the West might well have raised warning flags for Biderman, leading to further refinement in his analysis. But in its intriguing details this book does rise above the old stories–and in its bold comparativism: Biderman acts on Müller's dictum, "He who knows one, knows none" with great energy and vision, calling to account our lingering biases and parochialisms.

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