

# Psychology: East and West

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December 6, 1977

Recently two books have been read to me that were items of considerable interest. One was the rereading of William James' [*The*] *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and the other was a small volume entitled *Foundations of Eastern and Western Psychology* edited by Swami Ajaya. I propose to produce a commentary with respect to these two works, but I shall not restrict myself to a mere review and evaluation of these works. I shall also develop thoughts that have arisen in connection with the hearing of the reading of them. I have previously, many years ago, dwelt with some concentration upon the work of William James, but I have been separated from this work for a good many years and the rereading of it brought out several thoughts that had not emerged formerly. The work on the *Foundations of Eastern and Western Psychology* brings out certain points of importance, of really major importance, in the thrust of interest with respect to Western and Eastern psychology which involves a contrast, a rather radical contrast, between the two.

William James was a psychologist. He was in fact the first outstanding American psychologist and wrote two volumes known as the *larger* and *smaller* psychological treatments, and these have been used as text books in the academies. He performed his work in the day before the work of Wundt took a predominate interest in our academic institutions and he was well before the time of the development of depth psychology particularly oriented to therapy in the psychological sense. There is the question, "What is the orientation of psychology?" Psychology today has taken a predominant position in current interest in that portion of the community which is reflective in substantial degree. There was a time when the primary orientation of reflective man was found in the field of philosophy, and still earlier in the field of religion. The question of what is the essential thrust of these three fields of interest is of first importance to us.

Religion, I would say, represents primarily a relationship between man and that which transcends man either in the ordinary phenomenal sense or in a truly transcendental sense. As primitive man faces the world, he finds himself possessed of certain capacities which can handle certain of the problems which come to him. He can deal with the primary problems of surviving by overcoming animals, and in gathering vegetable substance which are necessary for his life, and ultimately entering into certain agricultural processes on a primitive level. But he faces powers far too great for him to deal with them directly such as the power of pestilence, of storm, of earthquake, of volcano, and of death. These are greater potentials than his strength is able to deal with and the result is that he tends to view them as forces which need to be propitiated; and we have all of the steps taken by primitive man in order in order to try to propitiate these powers including various forms of sacrifice involving even human sacrifice. As man evolves, he gains a wider control of the forces in nature, although, not to this day has he ever gained complete control of them. Nonetheless, he has been enabled through the development of his science to gain some power of prediction, such as the prediction of storms and the present effort to predict earthquakes which in some cases has been

successful. And the same is true with volcanoes, and in the case of pestilences, he has been able to gain a degree of control by his knowledge of disease and ways of dealing with disease. But so far he has gained no mastery over death. There is, thus, something beyond us more powerful, greater, more powerful than we are, and greater than we are; and the religious attitude is one of attaining a relationship between man and that which is superior to man. Generally this which is regarded as superior to man is called by one of the names of the divine afflatus. He is called God, Allah, Brahman, and so on. And the religious relationship is conceived of as a relationship to this divine and superior Other.

Now, in its highest manifestations, this relationship involves a self-giving or a self-surrender by the individual human entity to this divine Other, which may be viewed as personal or as impersonal, but such that a relationship to this Other is possible. This Other, I call in abstract terms, the “transcendental component.” That it is a fact of experience, and that a relationship can be set up with respect to this Other is evident from the testimony of those who have achieved such a relationship. The religious motive, in the most general sense, may be defined as a setting up of a working relationship between the individual entity, which we call the human being here, and this divine Other. It generally involves a self-giving and a self-surrender to it.

Now, in contrast, psychology is concerned with the observable facts in the psychical sense that is connected with the religious process. I’m here speaking of psychology in the sense of a psychology of religion. There are certain psychical states into which the individual enters which can be observed that are connected with the experience of a self-giving to the divine Other and of something that is regarded as a communication with the divine Other. But what are the observable conditions that are associated with this experience? This is the field of psychology. Psychology is concerned with psychical fact as observed from outside. It is not the field of the actual immediate experience and its value. Religion is concerned with the value that’s immediately experienced; psychology with the observable facts.

Now, philosophy deals with another problem, that is, what is the meaning of these facts? What is the meaning of this experience? Its center of interest is understanding. One may delight in an immediate experience, but fail to understand it; and connected with that experience there may be observable psychical states, such as that of trance, which may be studied by the psychologist. The most complete state in which an individual may possibly arrive is that where he attains a knowledge of psychical facts, an understanding of the experience, and a participation, directly, in the religious experience itself; but mostly these three orientations are developed by different individuals.

In his book, William James deals almost wholly with religious experience as reported by individuals and not with religious institutions, dogma, or ethical rules. This is a natural selection since the thrust of his interest is the psychological side of religion. Furthermore, he deals almost wholly with the Christian form of religious experience. He has made only brief references to other forms of religious activity such as Moslemism, Vedanta, and Buddhism. However, in a sort of general survey preliminary to his preparation of his lectures, he sought that which is common to all religions, and he found only two elements that were uniformly present: first, a determination of a “wrongness” in

the world, and then an offering of a solution of that wrongness.<sup>1</sup> The definition of the wrongness was in different terms with different religious orientations, and the resolution was in different terms. I might here note the fact that we can distinguish three very different determinations as to the wrongness in the world. In the case of Buddhism, for example, the wrongness is found as a state of suffering in which man finds himself, and then, the Buddhist religious discipline provides a way which is believed to affect a correction of that state of suffering. Shankara, on the other hand, finds the wrongness in the world a state of ignorance, of *avidya*, and the cure is presented in a process of discipline, of self-orientation, which if it is maintained will lead to a state of *vidya*, or knowledge, that will thus correct the wrongness. In the case of the Christian orientation, we have the conception of an initial sin or wrong attitude of the will in man. It is maintained even that man is born in sin and that the overcoming of sin by a power greater than that in man is the only way of resolution. In a certain sense, we may say that the Christian conception of wrongness is found in a perverse will which man by his own power cannot overcome and that the overcoming of it can be affected only by a surrender to a higher power. There may be other ways in which the wrongness may be and may have been viewed, but this illustrates the point.

There is one important reason why William James' work was restricted to Christian religious experience and that is that when the object of study is religious experience, rather than religious institutions, the psychologist secures his material very largely through subjective autobiographical material. There is a significant body of such material to be found in the West in the Christian milieu. William James found that there was a great paucity of this kind of material among Oriental sources. It is as though the religious genius of the East blossomed forth with a discipline or a metaphysical philosophy without any revelation of the intimate psychological facts of his own experience. He gave what we would call an interpretation as the result of his experience, but did not reveal that intimate process through which he personally passed in acquiring the religious insight, whereas, Western man has been more willing to expose that part of himself for the review of the psychologist. Aurobindo, in a degree, is an exception to this rule, for in the published letters that he addressed to his *sadhakas*, there are some intimations of the actual experiences through which he passed, but this is not voluminous. On the whole, he comes forth like other Orientals with a finished statement and does not admit us into that intimate side of the experience in its raw immediacy. I can fully understand the reluctance of the introvert to give a revelation of the most intimate facts of his experience. The extravert may not feel this way since he may enjoy exhibiting himself, but not so the introvert.

Somewhere, Dr. Carl G. Jung has said that Eastern man tends to view as metaphysical that which Western man tends to view as psychological.<sup>2</sup> This statement has only a general validity as is made evident by the material presented in the *Foundations of Eastern and Western Psychology*. Quite clearly the material in this book is of a

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<sup>1</sup> William James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 508.

<sup>2</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxix-xxxiv. See the audio recording, "Perception, Conception, and Introception," part 1, for an extended quotation of this material.

psychological nature, and it is also true that much in Shankara and in Sri Aurobindo is also of a psychological nature. What seems to be the truth of the matter is that the method by which Eastern and Western man proceeds is different. The psychology of Eastern man seems to come forth fully developed from the insight of the *illuminati*; whereas, the psychology of Western man is more or less in the form of a laboratory approach. The fact is, we have a difference in approach to a psychological subject matter. The Western psychologist presents his material in such a form that the reader understands how it is derived and is enabled to give a critical review of the method employed; whereas, the Eastern psychology seems to come forth fully completed without there being any report of the raw material from which the writer produced his material. There is thus a difference of method. On the whole, we might say that Eastern man is more synthetic in his approach and Western man more analytic; however, this is only generally true. Thus, if one studies the work of Sri Shankaracharya, analysis is an important part of his methodology—particularly the analysis whereby one derives his identification with the *Atman* by stripping off all the sheaths that he may have falsely identified himself with. This process is analytic. It is the *neti neti* method. And, on the other hand, in Western psychology today, there is a widespread orientation to holistic psychology, a tendency to treat man as a whole rather than treating him in terms of departmentalizing him. But I would say that in broad terms the Eastern psychologist tends to be synthetic—integral, to use the term of Sri Aurobindo; whereas, in the West there is an emphasis of the analytic approach.

Right here we have a point of differentiation. Synthesis can be original. It can also be a process entered upon after analysis. In other words, first analyze the raw material which lies before man into its differentiated parts, and after having reduced these parts as far as possible to elements, then to reintegrate; in other words, a process of synthesis following analysis. There is a certain strength in this. We find it, for instance, represented in the calculus, which consists of two parts: first a differential calculus which carries analysis down to the ultimate element which is defined as smaller than any assigned quantity however small, and then followed by a process of integration which is the function of integral calculus; in other words, integration or synthetic unification after analysis. Which method is the better may be a matter of different opinion, but I think we may justly say that the emphasis of synthesis is characteristic of the Oriental thinking and that the emphasis of analysis is characteristic of Western thinking, on the whole, but not absolutely so.

An outstanding advantage of Western departmentalization is that it leads to great clarity of definition so that a specialist may know the details of a narrow field very clearly, but a corresponding disadvantage is found in that the relating of the truths discovered in a narrow field to the whole becomes very difficult. Specialists in certain domains speak a language which specialists in other domains do not understand, and the body of knowledge is so great that no one mind can comprehend the whole; and this has led to the development of what Norbert Wiener called cybernetic teams which consist of groups of specialists with some general knowledge of other specialists working together on problems which no one individual could comprehend. On the other hand, the synthetic thinking that is found in the Orient may lead to inadequate clarity of definition. We may illustrate this by the writing of Sri Aurobindo in his *Life Divine*. Here we have an example of a high order of synthetic, or integral, thinking, but it results in enormously long sentences in which statements are so modified and conditioned that at the close of

the statement one does not have a clear and trenchant comprehension of what has been said. There is a lack of sharpness of determination though there is broadness of inclusion. Integral organization is a necessary achievement if our knowledge is to be complete and effective, but clarity of meaning is also essential if we are to understand clearly and sharply. The problem that lies before us would be how to combine trenchancy in definition with broad comprehension.

As we look at man and his environment from the standpoint of relative consciousness, he seems to stand as a center of consciousness having certain subjective characteristics and surrounded by a *somewhat* which is divided into two parts: one part we will call the physical, using the term in the broad sense employed by Aristotle, and by the metaphysical. The physical part consists not only of the special discipline known as physics, but of all the other objective disciplines such as chemistry, geology, astronomy, sociology, and the rest. Then there is the metaphysical domain which transcends the mundane order and is the particular field of the religious orientation. Western man in dealing with this whole tends to treat it in departments. Thus there are those who specialize in the various sciences of the environment, those who specialize in the philosophic discussion of metaphysical subject matter, and those who specialize in the human entity considered as a biological entity and as a psychological entity. Yet somehow we feel that there is a whole here which embraces all of this multiplicity. Now, with Western man there is the problem, as I have stated, of drawing together all of these various departments or compartments. Oriental man tends to approach this problem more synthetically.

When Dr. Jung said that Eastern man tends to treat as metaphysical that which Western man treats as psychological, he was only partly correct, and I will illustrate this in the case of the presentation by Sri Aurobindo. This presentation is in this form: that there is two domains of the *subconscious* below the relative consciousness of man; then, second, that behind the relative consciousness of man there are three subliminal zones, namely, the *subtle physical*, the *subtle vital*, and the *subtle mental*; that above the relative consciousness of man there is the *overmind*,<sup>3</sup> above this the *illuminative* mind; and above that *intuition* on its own level; and still above that the *overmind*, which is the governing principle of the cosmos; then above that, in the upper hemisphere, there is the *supermind*; then *ananda*; then *chit*; and finally *sat*. Now, here we have a statement which in part is a kind of psychology, but it is also in part a kind of metaphysics, and in as much as there is both a subtle physical and a gross physical, there is a kind of physics. It's all treated as one synthetic whole. There's psychology here; there is physics here; and there is metaphysics.

The writer of the first essay in the book entitled *Foundations of Eastern and Western Psychology* differentiates between the psychology of the West and the East by saying that Western psychology is materialistic and Eastern psychology idealistic. What seems to be meant by this, as indicated by the discussion, is that Western psychology tends to be reductive and Eastern psychology oriented to the end or goal of the total process in the psychological development of man. This presentation is one which so largely develops a favorable position for Eastern psychology that I could hardly be

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<sup>3</sup> Wolff apparently meant to say "*higher mind*."

critical of that position. I am wholeheartedly sympathetic with it. But I have reservations as to the terminology and as to the exclusive identification of the West with the reductive position. Dr. Jung has recognized that much of psychology is reductive in its treatment, but he also recognizes the fact that there is determination by orientation to an end.

In the first essay found in the *Foundations of Eastern and Western Psychology*, it is stated that Eastern psychology is idealistic while Western psychology is materialistic. It is further shown that the meaning intended here is that Western psychology tends to be reductive by which is meant that the different stages of psychological development are to be understood by the physical source or foundation; whereas, in the idealistic view, the various stages of development are to be understood in terms of the end, or objective, or goal to which they point. To illustrate this, we might return to the figure of the caterpillar and the butterfly. Reductive psychology would interpret the butterfly by an analysis of the caterpillar; whereas, idealistic orientation in psychology would say that the meaning of the caterpillar was to be found in the understanding of what the butterfly was. Here all of the stages of development are to be viewed as reaching toward an end, an objective; whereas, the reductive point of view would say that an understanding of the causal—physical causal base would give us the full meaning of anything that ultimately eventuated. I agree that so far as I know the two psychologies, in a broad sense this statement is valid, and from my point of view the picture of Western psychology thus reduced is so crude and debased that I am completely oriented to the Eastern point of view and could hardly be critical of it. However, it is, I should say, an overstatement. Dr. Jung has recognized that psychological process may be correctly interpreted often by orientation to the end intended rather than to the causal base from which it came in an objective material sense. However, I would say that the general thrust of this differentiation is fundamentally valid.