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A Comparative History
of
World Philosophy

From the Upanishads to Kant



Ben-Ami Scharfstein

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To my teachers and students

He who asks questions cannot avoid the answers.

—Cameroonian proverb

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Preface



Because I hope that newcomers to the history of philosophy will be among the readers of this book, I have taken care to explain whatever I think they need to know. The book begins with the reasons for studying philosophy comparatively and with the difficulties raised by such study, and it ends with a view of philosophy that is personal but that rests on all of the preceding discussion. The philosophers dealt with represent certain attitudes, schools, and traditions, but they are remembered most interestingly and accurately as individuals. So even though I have had to omit a great deal and make schematic summaries, I have in each instance tried to suggest the philosopher's style, density, and order of thought. In its later chapters the book tends to grow more difficult and elaborate, like the philosophies it deals with; but the early chapters prepare for the later ones, and, whatever the difficulty, I have always written as simply and clearly as I can.

To avoid making a long book forbiddingly longer, I have limited not only the number of philosophers dealt with but also the range of thought by which each of them is represented. Plato, for example, is limited to his theory of Ideas and Kant (except in the later discussion) to his *Critique of Pure Reason*. In keeping with the needs of a particular comparison, I have sometimes drawn a broad sketch and sometimes entered into details. When it has seemed natural, I have shared my own views with the reader—there is no good reason to pretend that I am a neutral, disembodied voice. But however I judge each philosopher's thought, I have committed myself to expound it with a minimum of bias.

My interpretations of individual philosophers are not meant to be new in any basic sense, and they are bound, as I have implied, by the old ideal of accuracy. Disproportions in the number of pages allotted to different

philosophers are not a measure of the importance I ascribe to them but of the varying need for clarification. If the quality of my accounts is uneven, this is at least to some extent a reflection of the unevenness of the literature on which I have depended. But though I have depended so much on others, for my part and, I hope, the reader's, what lies ahead is a genuine quest.

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