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THREE ZEROS A Comparative Philosophy of Voids

ARCHIE J. BAHM

"Zero" here means, not a number, but "void" or "complete absence." "Three zeros" refers to three kinds of complete ontological negations typically emphasized in the three great civilizations; Western, Indian and Chinese.¹ The three are: absence of being, absence of difference, and absence of exclusion.

In the West, "zero being" is nonentity. "Being is; non-being is not."²

In India, being is, and cannot not be. Nirguna Brahman is pure being. As pure, it is void of everything else. Thus it is void of distinctions or difference. Its "zero" is zero difference.

In China, being is, and cannot not be. But being (*tao*) is permeated with distinctions (*yang* and *yin*). But its distinctions are never completely distinct. *Yang* and *yin* are mutually immanent in such a way that each embodies the other at least somewhat. *Yang* and *yin* never completely exclude each other. Opposition that is completely exclusive does not exist. But also complete opposition of opposition cannot be.

These three conceptions of ultimate ontological negations involve three different conceptions of logical negation: exclusive negation, negation of all negation, and negation of exclusion.

Western logicians have emphasized contradictory opposition: "X is either *a* or *not-a* but not both." *A* and *not-a* have nothing in common. They are divided by an "excluded middle." "Nothing is both *a* and *not-a*."³

Indian logicians have emphasized negation of all negation: "X is neither *a*, nor *not-a*, nor both *a* and *not-a*, nor neither *a* nor *not-a*."⁴ Not only is all negation absent from Nirguna Brahman, according to Advaita Vedanta, but Nirguna Brahman is also non-different (*a-dva-ita*) from *maya*, all emanated or incarnated existence. Furthermore, absence of difference is claimed by Sunyavada, where Sunya, Void, is non-different from Suchness, existence as ordinarily experienced.

Chinese logicians emphasize negation of exclusion: "X is both

a and *not-a*," or both *yang* and *yin*. They do not exclude opposition. "In fact, all distinctions naturally appear as opposites; opposites get their meaning from each other and find their completion only through each other." "The tendency toward opposition is ever-present." "Every positive factor involves its opposite factor."^{5,6}

Comparing the three conceptions of absence with each other, we can observe that:

The Western conception of absence is absence of being, not absence of distinction or absence of exclusion.

The Indian conception of absence is absence of difference, including absence of exclusion, not absence of being.

The Chinese conception of absence is absence of exclusion, not absence of being or absence of difference.

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NOTES

1. This article is a footnote to my *Comparative Philosophy: Western, Indian and Chinese Philosophies Compared* (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1977).

2. Parmenides, *On Nature*.

3. Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica*. Vol. I, *Second Edition*, p. 217 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1925).

4. See P. T. Raju, "The Principle of Four-Cornered Negation in Indian Philosophy," *Review of Metaphysics*, 7, No. 4 (June, 1954): 694-713. See also A. J. Bahm, "Does Seven-Fold Predication Equal Four-Cornered Negation Reversed?" *Philosophy East and West*, 30, No. 2 (Oct. 1957-Jan. 1958): 127-130. For additional examples, see Dharendra Sharma, *The Negative Dialectics of India* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1970).

5. A. J. Bahm, *Tao Teh King by Lao Tzu*, pp. 12, 15, 18. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1938).

6. The Chinese conception of negation as negation of exclusion may be illustrated by the concept of *wu wei*, often translated into English as "inaction" or "non-action." But it means both action and non-action, since it means "action without effort" [Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 375. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).] as when a thing's nature is self-active, neither acting on or being acted upon by anything else.