

Review of Medard Boss' A Psychiatrist Discovers India - A Review by James B. Klee

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This is a delightful and yet profound book by the Swiss psychiatrist Medard Boss. It is well written, with fascinating insights at a variety of levels and in many dimensions. It is both a travelogue of two trips to India, Ceylon, and Indonesia in 1956 and 1958 and an introduction to the advaita philosophy which the 9th Century sage Shankara helped bring to full power. It is told essentially as an "intellectual" adventure in the responsible first-person singular and in the form of dialogues with the various gurus, rishis, and saints, and the just plain great men and women he somehow met in his journeys about South Asia. For this, he deserves one's deepest respect. The advertised gurus that are easiest to meet and who have the largest (numerical) following do not inspire much confidence in the would-be Western disciple and the true gurus are too self-effacing to be easily reached by those who otherwise would sincerely respond to their wisdom. R. K. Narayan's waggish, *The Guide*, or David Rubin's delightful satire, *Cassio and the Life Divine*, are too typical of the "spiritual situation" one first encounters. My first "guru" recommended coincidentally both by strangers on a train and a friend, turned out to be in the "hair oil" business. Rub some in for further enlightenment. Well, it might work too on a plastic hippie, but I did not have the patience to pursue it further.

In a way, Boss' essay is a further testament to the essential non-difference between East and West. But whereas in the East the great philosophers are permitted to have simultaneous existence with the rest of their culture - to stand aside, comment, yet be a part of it, ours have been - except on rare occasion - relegated to "history." By this, I mean those great individuals who transcend their culture in the East and are still retained within it as for example are additional layers of the onion. Thus, they extend the range of effectiveness of the culture - the range of the distribution of human potentialities. In the West, although this can and does happen, the usual case is to treat such an individual as an "exceptional" person - someone basically not relevant to the practical affairs of the nation-culture or nation-church, and who remains excluded as an isolate, excommunicated (Spinoza), or madman (Nietzsche) until the needs of the moment change sufficiently to

allow his re-inclusion or reintroduction in the now safely encapsulated guise of historical "father," "hero," and "genius." Witness the re-inclusion of sexuality as a "new" discovery or "creation" by the West in the last half century, to be used essentially as gimmick "object" or "law" rather than part of the range of human thought to be considered at all times. In a sense, the West (and China) invents "history" in order to avoid learning the range and significance of human experience. And in failing to learn from history, as Santayana has said, each nation is forced to repeat it over and over again. Cyclicism is hence more Western than we realize.

Perhaps not surprisingly, India has done little with "history" as such, as any Western historian is only too woefully aware in attempting to deal with the history of India. Rather, it has developed simultaneously in a multi-faceted way so as to embrace-exhibit an enormous range of human potentialities, not the least of which was the complex static-ness of the caste system that gave everything and everyone its place. As Boss points out for Ajanta cave carvings and paintings and as can be seen in the notorious temple carvings of the more recent Khajuraho and Konarak complexes, nothing is left out. While we have usually excluded sex, they had it in all its forms (except one), much to the embarrassment of most "modern" Indians. Oddly, the one aspect of sexuality left out is the presence of pregnancy - of infant and child, which we have with Madonna and Child in plenitude. They thus seem to want to hide from rebirth and/or history. We hide sex in history as we revel in the second chance (re)birth seems to offer us through the symbol of the Christ child. So they are not completely without "exclusiveness" and we do include at least the "safely dead."

The greater range of philosophy of the Indian sub-continent forces an entirely different point of departure. Where we have successive systems which seem to zero in on some revealed absolute truth, they have chosen to embrace all truths at once. One truth at a time to them seems but a form of Maya, of the 10,000 things, of illusion - especially if held to the exclusion of any other truth. Where we get into a bind of true or false, right or wrong - the syllogistic paradigm - they see truth as multi-faceted and are not bothered by contradiction. Indeed, when a devotee of Durga (often shown with 12 arms) says on the one hand and then on the other he still has eleven "other" hands to refer to.

If truth is not "out there" objectively; or dialectically inside, subjectively to be "validated" against some absolute "out there"; or if truth is some ultimate "beginning" - then one is forced to turn all ideas inside out and start over again. The absolutes of the West become

relative to the East and what the West held relative becomes almost absolute in the East. Indeed, the question almost disappears to the Eastern philosopher. Boss captures this in a most wonderful fashion in his visits with his Banaras scholar-guru:

All Indian philosophical systems claim only to be stages on the way to knowledge of the truth, or to be teachings which reveal different aspects of the truth. The truth, they say, is in any case too great for any single human being or any single philosophical approach to be able to see all at once and in its entirety. (p. 120)

He finds confirmation of Gabriel Marcel's thesis in Being and Having that knowledge is:

Not a conceptual taking possession of, a getting-hold-of, a will-to-have the truth – but a letting-oneself-be-filled-with-it, a hearkening to it, a merging in it, is taught by India's best thinkers as the proper way to know the truth. A millennial experience has led them to the insight that unmediated and liberating knowledge of the deepest ground-nature of all phenomena is bestowed only on him who meditates in a spirit of awe and reverence, while the truth about that which really is always vanishes before the graspings of any kind of investigation that is disrespectful, utilitarian, covetous, and calculating. . . . Even our language bears eloquent witness to this fundamental spiritual approach. The Hindi language, as you know, has neither the words nor the grammatical structures enabling it, in the Western sense, to speak of a 'having' and 'possessing' of 'something.' (p. 121)

And not only is knowledge not had, neither it nor we are made:

Where did you get the idea that you and your world are made at all? This, after all, would have to be decided before one inquires into the special 'constitution' of man. The notion that man and his world have been made – along with that of a corresponding maker – strikes Indian thought, since its time of greatest flourishing, as an inadmissible anthropomorphism: a humanization of Being, in imitation of the attitude of those people who believe everything depends on their endeavors, actions, and commands. Western man is presumably such a Homo Faber – in an especially exaggerated sense of the word – and fancies the entire world would fall apart unless he constantly did something to save it, unless he held it together and repeatedly reassembled it. Therefore, he cannot help imagining that for the emergence of everything, himself included, there would always be required the act of constructing and a constructor.

(p. 116)

A large part of the dialogue with the Banaras scholar-guru involves a linguistic analysis of Sanskrit terms and usage that is tremendously illuminating in clarifying and avoiding traps we are so prone to. Validation, a word I find little use of except in a very special technological context, is also dismissed:

From this viewpoint, there can be no inner-psychic representations of things, neither true ones - correctly corresponding to the so-called external objects, nor false ones - not assimilated to the external world. There can be no question at all of more or less correspondent and assimilated psychic representations which, as products of a subjective mind, would lead a special existence within an ego - a consciousness or a psyche, and which always would fundamentally be sundered from a reality out there that is, in the last analysis, unknowable. However, if what we call our perceiving is in reality the immediate coming-forth and coming-to-shine of things in the luminating sphere which is man himself, then the more or less disclosed truth and the so-called reality are one and the same thing. At the same time, this means that all so-called epistemological problems, from the very outset, simply evaporate! (p. 137)

And, on our vaunted monotheism:

All serious Indian thinkers whose philosophy is fully developed therefore insist that the assumption of a personal God as the ground of being and creator of the universe is already a sign of the first stage in the obscuring and restricting of that maximal vision which immediately perceives the great illumination of 'Brahman' and which permits knowledge of the truth - the truth that transcends even God, in no way annihilates him, but comprises him. Just think of how inchoate and vague the nature and the essential constitution of the personal aspect of the personal God has to be left in all these creeds. Is it not more appropriate to renounce all definitions of ultimate reality and to meet it with a reverential silence? (p. 140)

Then follows a Kantian discussion of causality, and a Goethe-like discussion of color experience (I refrain deliberately from the use of the word perception that automatically resets the subject-object dichotomy). This chapter, the longest in the book, is one of the best introductions and brief capturings of spirit and essence of advaita philosophy, especially those aspects most relevant to a humanistic psychology, of which I am aware. It alone makes this an enormously valuable addition to our understanding, not just of several exceptional Indians but of man.

The rest of the book mostly concerns how he made his contacts with these teachers (he at all times protects their anonymity) which were truly miracles (compared to my brief

experiences in India), as he puts it. His all-too-brief encounters with the Buddhist culture of Ceylon are also of considerable interest. His interest in the folk drama of Indonesia, Ceylon, South India which he finds exemplary of the studies of puppet theatres by Kleist, his comments on musical forms, perspective in art of temple structure, and other aspects of India which became insights to him are also of considerable value. Perhaps as a Swiss, his greatest tribute came in the acknowledgement of the grandeur of the Himalayas.

There is also an excellent chapter devoted to a comparison of neuroses and psychoses to be found in Europe and India. For the psychoses he found no startling great differences. All forms are found in each area. Nor did the general lack of mental hospitals and facilities for therapy blind him to the presence of the problem in India:

In none of all these people, no matter how assiduously I searched and probed, could I discover one single human problem - one single impulse and mode of behavior, any kind of fantasy, dream phenomenon or neurotic fixation, or psychotic syndrome, which was fundamentally alien to me and which I could not have encountered in my psychiatric-psychoanalytic experiences with people in the West. (p. 50)

Elsewhere are some thoughtful comments on dreams (non-interpretative in nature). Especially challenging were his guru's remarks on dreamless sleep as one third of our existence, which our over-stimulated culture has neglected completely. Interesting were the suggestions concerning the early-on support for the infant and child which the Indian extended family system provides. But again he recognizes the dangers the over-supported youth faces as the young Indian moves into a world changing at a pace unprepared for by the Hindu culture. Perhaps here are some of the greatest problems facing the world today, East or West. At one point, he comments that the premature introduction of wisdom to a student is worse than lying. Indeed, the conclusions of Boss' book come essentially to this problem. We are a reformist meddling group of busybodies under compulsion to act, if only ritualistically and/or meaninglessly:

I had made friends with the family of an Indian philosophy professor, a very perceptive and learned man. He had felt a need to supplement his mastery of ancient Indian teachings with a knowledge of European psychology and psychotherapy. To employ his own words, he hoped that, thus equipped, he could render more individual assistance to patients than before. Therefore, he had come to Europe for two years and had successfully completed a course of study at a psychotherapeutic institute. Nevertheless, since his return to India he

himself had been complaining – and his family concurred – that he had been made much more unhappy by learning about Western psychotherapy. Whereas formerly he has accepted the vicissitudes of life, now every little trifle made him nervous, restless, and pessimistic. Now he always thought he had to do this or that at once, and he made everything worse with his haste. He had forgotten how to wait patiently, and had become harder and more loveless. . . . In India itself I met altogether eight European and American people who had entered upon one of the Indian ways of salvation. They were living either in a retreat in the mountains or had joined the ashram of a holy man and donned the Indian monk's or nun's garb along with the corresponding aesthetic discipline. With one exception, however, they had remained in the depths of their hearts self-willed, envious and intolerant Occidentals. They had merely inflated their very limited egos with Indian formulas of wisdom instead of with large bank accounts or other means to power. (p. 185-186)

He consequently offers no panacea rules, methods, hat tricks. This is no guidebook to the one and only guru. It offers no revolutionary formula in the cycle of rebirth. But like the expanded India, so strange to the West, it offers an invitation to the reader to the expansion of his own range and depth of consciousness. Rather than a great book as an "historical object," it is part of the illumination of the whole. Perhaps in Boss, the European man so longed for by Ortega is once again emerging. Strangely the Swiss – as Jung, Hesse (at least in his later years), and now Boss – are emerging and are taking lead. Perhaps, Dr. Boss, your mountains are bigger than you realized.

Boss, Medard. (1965). A Psychiatrist Discovers India (H. A. Frey, Trans.). London: Oswald Wolff.