



PAUL MASSON-OURSSEL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Alimardon Mustafayev

Lecturer

Department of Social Sciences

National Pedagogical University of Uzbekistan

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: Paul Masson-Oursel was a pioneering figure in early comparative philosophy whose interdisciplinary education in philosophy, Oriental studies, psychology, sociology and anthropology allowed him to formulate a novel approach to philosophical inquiry. He insisted that no single philosophical tradition “can put itself forward as co-extensive with the human mind,” and that every tradition – however different – must be studied comparatively as historical material. Oursel’s comparative method treats philosophical ideas as “materials as real as any other data” found in beliefs and written traditions, and emphasizes the positive insights gained by relating ideas to their cultural contexts rather than isolating them.

POL MASSON-URSELNING FALSAFIY ANTROPOLOGIYA VA FALSAFIY KOMPARATIVISTIKAGA QO‘SHGAN HISSASI

Alimardon Mustafayev

O‘qituvchi

Ijtimoiy fanlar kafedrası,

O‘zbekiston milliy pedagogika universiteti

Toshkent, O‘zbekiston

MAQOLA HAQIDA

Kalit so‘zlar: falsafiy antropologiya, falsafiy komparativistika, Sharq-G‘arb an‘analari, insonparvarlik, madaniyatlararo muloqot.

Annotatsiya: Pol Masson-Ursel dastlabki qiyosiy falsafaning kashshofi bo‘lib, uning falsafa, sharqshunoslik, psixologiya, sotsiologiya va antropologiya bo‘yicha fanlararo ta‘limi unga falsafiy tadqiqotlarga yangi yondashuvni shakllantirish imkonini

berdi. Uning ta'kidlashicha, hech bir falsafiy an'ana "o'zini inson ongi bilan birgalikda kengaytira olmaydi" va har bir an'ana - qanchalik farq qilmasin – tarixiy material sifatida qiyosiy o'rganilishi kerak. Masson-Urselning qiyosiy usuli falsafiy g'oyalarni e'tiqodlar va yozma an'analarda uchraydigan "boshqa har qanday ma'lumotlar kabi haqiqiy materiallar" sifatida ko'rib chiqadi va g'oyalarni alohida emas, balki ularning madaniy konteksti bilan bog'lash orqali olingan ijobiy tushunchalarni ta'kidlaydi.

ВКЛАД ПОЛЯ МАССОНА-УРСЕЛЯ В ФИЛОСОФСКОЮ АНТРОПОЛОГИЮ И ФИЛОСОФСКОЮ КОМПАРАТИВИСТИКУ

Алимардон Мустафаев

Преподаватель

Кафедра социальных наук,

Национальный педагогический университет Узбекистана

Ташкент, Узбекистан

О СТАТЬЕ

Ключевые слова: философская антропология, философская компаративистика, традиции Востока и Запада, гуманизм, межкультурный диалог.

Аннотация: Пол Массон-Урсель был пионером ранней сравнительной философии, чье междисциплинарное образование в области философии, востоковедения, психологии, социологии и антропологии позволило ему сформулировать новый подход к философским исследованиям. Он настаивал на том, что ни одна философская традиция “не может претендовать на то, чтобы быть столь же обширной, как человеческий разум”, и что каждая традиция, какой бы отличной она ни была, должна изучаться сравнительно как исторический материал. Сравнительный метод Урселя рассматривает философские идеи как “материалы, столь же реальные, как и любые другие данные”, содержащиеся в верованиях и письменных традициях, и подчеркивает позитивные идеи, полученные путем соотнесения идей с их культурным контекстом, а не их изоляции.

Introduction. Paul Masson-Oursel (1882–1956) was a French orientalist and philosopher renowned as one of the earliest advocates of comparative philosophy, applying his expertise in Indian and Eastern traditions to broaden the scope of philosophical inquiry beyond Europe. He served as Director of Studies in Indian Religions at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris

from 1927 to 1953, gaining recognition for his extensive writings on Indian thought both in academic and non-academic circles. Masson-Oursel's Sorbonne doctoral thesis "La philosophie comparée" (1923) was among the first works to consciously formulate a methodology for comparing philosophical traditions. Influenced by his mentors (such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl) and by Auguste Comte's positivism, Masson-Oursel sought to elevate the study of philosophy to a "scientific" (positive) level through systematic cross-cultural comparison. In a seminal 1911 essay, he argued that the subject matter and method of philosophy must become comparative, by analogy with comparative approaches in fields like anatomy or linguistics.

Masson-Oursel contended that genuine philosophical understanding requires examining multiple intellectual traditions in parallel. He famously insisted that "philosophy cannot achieve positivity so long as its investigations are restricted to the thought of our own civilization" [3;33] and that "no one philosophy has the right to put itself forward as co-extensive with the human mind" [3;35]. In other words, no single regional or historical philosophy can claim a monopoly on truth or reason – a clear call to widen the philosophical canon beyond the Graeco-European lineage. Accordingly, Masson-Oursel introduced the comparative method in philosophy as a way to attain objectivity via relativity, using analogy as the guiding principle for cross-cultural understanding. Comparative philosophy, in his view, would establish "positive" knowledge by analyzing how different civilizations respond to analogous fundamental questions, rather than merely cataloguing exotic ideas. He described analogy as the core of this method, "reasoning in accordance with what in mathematics is called a proportion", which allows one to compare philosophical systems as varying responses to similar human problems [3;36]. At the same time, he acknowledged practical limits on the scope of comparison: although comparative philosophy ought to be universal in aspiration, for the present it should focus on those cultures "already dowered with a history," i.e. with recorded intellectual traditions that can be reliably studied [3;34]. By initially restricting attention to civilizations with extensive written philosophies (such as classical India, China, and the West), Masson-Oursel believed scholars could build a solid methodological foundation for comparison before later extending it to all human thought.

Literature Review. Scholars have observed that Masson-Oursel's reputation, while significant, has often been eclipsed by later figures. Although he is acknowledged as the author who first used the term *philosophie comparée*, major surveys of comparative philosophy frequently omit his work or mention it only in passing. Léo Bernard (2021) notes that Oursel's *La philosophie comparée* was long undervalued, even though it was awarded by the Académie des Sciences morales et politiques [7;188]. By the 21st century Bernard and others have explicitly called Oursel the "father of the term" (*le père du terme*) – yet they also observe that

subsequent scholars (e.g. Brajendranath Seal, Charles Moore) were often regarded as more central to comparative philosophy [7;191]. Oursel's program, in Bernard's account, was sometimes misunderstood by mid-century commentators as "lacking ambition," likely because they missed the unconventional and syncretic aspects of his approach [7;194].

Methods. In this article, the author uses a set of different methods of historical and philosophical research. Thus, the hermeneutic method was used to analyze the works and primary sources. The comparative method provided a comparison of Masson-Oursel's ideas with the Eastern philosophical tradition. The historical and philosophical analysis was aimed at identifying the main vectors of the evolution of Masson-Oursel's views and their place in philosophical comparative studies. Using a systematic approach made it possible to identify key aspects of Masson-Oursel's philosophy.

Analysis and Results. Masson-Oursel also critiqued the prevailing scholarly approach in his own field of Indology. By the 1940s, he grew dissatisfied with the philologically oriented study of Indian texts that dominated Western Indology. In a 1943 article titled "L'Indianisme français contemporain," he argued that academic Indologists were too focused on linguistic and textual details and failed to seek the deeper philosophical and religious significance of Indian thought. Scholars, he urged, should "seek a meaning, a religious value, in those old texts, which are nearly all religious" [4;59] rather than treating them as mere linguistic artifacts. Masson-Oursel had little patience for narrow specialists or uncritical admirers: there was, in his words, "no room for 'specialists with bounded horizons'" or for "naïve enthusiasts" among those studying India [4;58]. He called for a more balanced approach combining rigorous analysis with broad synthesis. Specifically, Masson-Oursel advocated producing "monographs which combine history and geography on every aspect and period of Indianness" – comprehensive studies that situate Indian philosophies in their full cultural and historical contexts – as well as encouraging "the joint work of the Pandits and the Europeans" in research [4;62]. Here, "pandits" refers to indigenous scholars of the Indian tradition; Masson-Oursel believed collaboration between Western academics and learned practitioners of the native tradition was essential for truly understanding Indian philosophy. This call for East-West scholarly partnership and a more holistic study of Indian intellectual history shows Masson-Oursel's commitment to overcoming the Eurocentric and overly textual tendencies of classical Indology. His critical attitude toward the limitations of Indology was shared by some of his contemporaries and was remarkably forward-looking, anticipating later movements to integrate insider perspectives into the study of non-Western philosophies. Indeed, Masson-Oursel's reforms align with what one recent scholar describes as his interest in "indigenous perspectives" on Eastern traditions [1;205].

Masson-Oursel's comparative and inclusive attitude extended beyond the confines of academia. Unusually for a scholar of his era, he did not hesitate to engage with non-academic and even esoteric intellectual circles in order to broaden the discourse on philosophy and religion. For example, in 1929 he contributed an article on "the role of magic in Hindu speculation" to *Ur*, an Italian esoteric journal edited by the occult thinker Julius Evola. Later, in March 1946, he published a piece titled "Similarity between physics and psychology in Indian philosophy" in the French spiritualist periodical *Spiritualité*, directed by Robert Linssen (a disciple of J. Krishnamurti). The presence of a respected academic orientalist in such venues was surprising to many of his peers, yet Masson-Oursel evidently felt that these spiritually engaged outlets could further his mission of understanding Eastern thought from within its own worldview. By writing for audiences outside the strictly scholarly community, he sought to bridge the gap between academic research and the broader, non-Western intellectual currents of his time. This willingness to publish in non-traditional forums underscores Masson-Oursel's conviction that insightful commentary on Eastern philosophies need not be confined to the Western academy – a stance consistent with his broader comparative project. As Léo Bernard observes, Masson-Oursel shared with several "non-hegemonic" intellectual currents a critical stance toward orthodox Indology and an openness to alternative sources of wisdom, displaying "high aspirations" in seeking deeper truths across cultural boundaries. His openness to collaboration and communication with practitioners of Eastern traditions and esoteric thinkers alike reflects a genuinely cosmopolitan approach to knowledge. In effect, Masson-Oursel tried to stand both inside and outside the academy – maintaining scholarly rigor, yet remaining receptive to spiritual insights and indigenous scholarship beyond the usual academic purview [1;191].

Paul Masson-Oursel pioneered a comparative approach that emphasizes context and analogy. He insisted that any philosophical "fact" be considered only in relation to its surrounding milieu or context, rather than in isolation. In his view, meaningful comparisons arise not between isolated ideas but between contextually situated facts – "the comparability of two facts is a function of the comparability of their contexts" [1;2]. This analogical method was intended to yield objective, scientific insights into philosophy. From as early as 1911, Masson-Oursel outlined this method by analogy with comparative anatomy and psychology, proposing a *philosophie comparée* that could elevate philosophical inquiry to a more positive science [2;545]. By systematically comparing ideas across different traditions, he aimed to secure a more solid empirical basis for philosophical generalizations, free from the biases of any single-school standpoint [1;3].

Masson-Oursel's comparative philosophy explicitly bridged Eastern and Western thought. He argued that philosophy cannot achieve genuine positivity so long as it remains confined to the concepts of one civilization alone [1;33]. No single regional philosophy, not even the Western canon, "has the right to put itself forward as co-extensive with the human mind," he maintained, and even the most modest non-Western philosophies hold evidential value for understanding truth [1;35]. Accordingly, Masson-Oursel compared philosophical systems from Europe, India, and China on equal footing, applying his method of analogies to reveal deep correspondences. This cross-cultural orientation positioned him as a facilitator of East–West dialogue. Notably, contemporaries like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan – an Indian philosopher and later statesman – similarly saw the importance of engaging Eastern philosophical perspectives within a comparative framework, and exercised considerable influence in the nascent field of comparative philosophy [7;203]. Masson-Oursel's work in this vein helped lay groundwork for constructive dialogue between Asian and Western philosophical traditions, underscoring that true philosophy must be comparative rather than parochial in scope [6;6].

Underlying Masson-Oursel's method is an anthropological outlook on human thought. His comparative philosophy treated diverse world philosophies as empirical data about the human mind, reflecting how different cultures grapple with fundamental questions. He stressed that philosophy should not take "Man in himself" as an isolated abstraction, but rather the different types of humanity or reason as its subject of study – the more divergent those types, the more we can learn from their confrontation [1;34]. This approach parallels the comparative study of societies in anthropology: just as ethnographers find value in every culture's worldview, Masson-Oursel regarded each philosophical tradition as revealing a facet of humanity's intellectual experience. By examining radically varied modes of thinking (ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, "civilized" and "non-civilized"), he sought to uncover both the diversity and the common patterns of human reasoning. In this way, Masson-Oursel's project amounted to a kind of philosophical anthropology, leveraging cross-cultural comparison to shed light on the universal and variable elements of human thought. His training with figures like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss likely reinforced this inclination to interpret philosophies in their cultural context, as part of a broader study of humankind's mental life [7;188]. Masson-Oursel thus approached philosophical systems much as an anthropologist might approach beliefs and practices – as "materials as real as any other data" that can be grasped historically and scientifically [1;11].

Masson-Oursel's comparative enterprise was guided by a humanistic vision. He believed that expanding our philosophical perspective to include all cultures would enrich our

understanding of the human condition. Comparative philosophy, he asserted, could even counter the arid specialization of scholarly history by restoring attention to the human meaning of events and ideas. In studying religions, for example, Masson-Oursel saw the comparative method as a way to “compensate for the effect of desiccation for which erudite history is commonly reproached” – a dry academic history that too often “loses sight of the human sense of events, institutions, customs and ideas” [1;195]. By comparing philosophical doctrines from different civilizations, we isolate a solid core of human experience that dogmatic approaches might overlook. Masson-Oursel was convinced that understanding the diverse ways humanity has approached life’s great problems is not only intellectually enlightening but also pragmatically valuable. “We are of the conviction that to better understand the diverse ways in which these problems have been posed by humankind is the first condition for addressing them positively; it may sometimes even provide us with a means of solving them” [7;191], he wrote, highlighting the practical human benefits of cross-cultural philosophical insight. In essence, Masson-Oursel’s work reflects a profound intellectual humanism: it seeks a universal perspective on truth by respecting the plurality of human thought. His famous maxim that “true philosophy is comparative philosophy” encapsulates this ethos, affirming that only through dialogue among all of humanity’s philosophies can we approach a truly inclusive and positive understanding of wisdom [6;7].

Conclusion. Mason Oursel’s legacy is that of a bridge-builder between traditions and disciplines. As Bernard (2021) observes, he was “inside and outside the academy”: at once an insider trained in French scholarship and an outsider drawn to Eastern mysticism and occultism. This duality enabled him to transcend parochial views. His comparative philosophy insisted that authentic knowledge of humanity emerges only when we compare thought in context – a lesson echoed by later advocates of cross-cultural study. His philosophical anthropology prefigures contemporary interests in the universals of human nature by showing how comparative method can reveal those universals empirically. And his humanistic outlook anticipated a vision of philosophy as a means to reconcile cultures. In the wider debate on comparative philosophy, Oursel’s work serves as an early model of what a truly comparative and human-centered philosophy might be.

In conclusion, Oursel’s contributions remain relevant today. As universities and philosophers increasingly recognize the need to globalize the curriculum, Oursel’s writings offer a systematic justification and method for that enterprise. He reminds us that our intellectual horizons expand when we treat all traditions as part of a single human story. Future scholarship on comparative philosophy can benefit from revisiting Oursel’s anthropological insights – both

to appreciate his historical role, and to draw inspiration for philosophy that truly crosses cultural boundaries..

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