

**Symposium:  
How Are Histories of  
Non-Western Philosophies  
Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?**

*Abstract*

The view that philosophy is a uniquely and essentially European endeavor rooted in ancient Greece became dominant in Europe only in the late eighteenth century, eclipsing several centuries during which Europeans had denied this proposition. Advocates of intercultural philosophy aim to integrate Western and non-Western philosophical histories and traditions in hopes of better addressing the crucial questions facing global humankind. A Native American standpoint charges this project with being exploitative, and disrespectful.

*Keywords*

Eurocentrism, history of philosophy, intercultural philosophy, Native American philosophy, integration, Bernasconi, Hountondji, Norton-Smith, Wimmer.

## How Are Histories of Non-Western Philosophies Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?

Philosophy is, whatever else can be addressed by the term, an academic field established worldwide. But this is in fact true for only one of many philosophical traditions which humankind has produced in different regions of the world, namely the occidental. If one is talking or writing – be it in academia or in popular media – about questions of ethics, for example, quoting solely occidental terminology, texts, and authors, commonly one does not feel the need to call the outcome *western* or *occidental* ethics – although is this exactly what she or he does. The outcome will simply be termed *Ethics*, without further specification. On the other hand, if somebody in approaching ethical issues alludes only to terms stemming from, say, African, Chinese, or Islamic etc. lore, that is: from non-occidental traditions, the outcome is inevitably qualified as being *African*, *Chinese*, or *Islamic* etc. ethics. The same holds true of other fields of philosophy, and surprisingly enough even of the History of Philosophy. It seems to somehow sound *normal* to treat occidental philosophy under the heading of *Philosophy*, while other traditions, even if treated in detail, need to be subsumed under *World Philosophies*. Although a regional-cultural marker seems unnecessary, actually redundant for some people, in the first case, it seems definitely necessary, at least to be expected, in the other cases.

Even if assumed to be *normal*, such linguistic behavior is certainly not *natural*. It does not reflect the differentiated past – and present – of philosophical thinking of humankind. Nor is it normal going even by the history of occidental thought. It is rather a relatively modern development in occidental self-understanding, which has proved to be dominant in the general process of globalization, a process which seems to possess many features of occidental culture.

Some of the points mentioned above require a critical examination from the perspective of an emerging world-culture which may be expected not to be a merely globalized form of occidental culture but

something new; one emerging by various factors out of different pasts. One of these factors will be philosophy, but then it will not rely on one culturally-homogenous history, which is conceived as being the one and only universal history of thought. It, rather, will have to look out for and integrate diverse developments of thinking, differing in many and constitutive aspects.

And there is yet another point. To a surprising extent, subjects and questions from the history of philosophy play a role in academic philosophy – generally and worldwide – and this holds good for any philosophical school (with some exceptions regarding Analytic Philosophy). In fact, even systematic discussions including those within systematically oriented schools such as phenomenology are influenced by this development. To interpret and to comment on texts of – other – philosophers counts in and of itself as a philosophical activity. This is neither necessarily so, nor has this been the case always. It is also not self-evident in every historical stage of philosophy everywhere in the world. In its common academic practice in western countries, the interest in (occidental) philosophy's history is also connected to the hegemonialization of occidental philosophy in modern times, and therefore is somehow contingent. In this regard, it already seems to be a tiny revolution if texts and thinkers from philosophy's past in different regions of the world are considered to be relevant. Asking for other voices from the world history of philosophical thinking is one characteristic of interculturally oriented philosophy. However, *intercultural philosophy* simply is *philosophy*, albeit oriented – and not necessarily ›occidented‹ – in a global perspective.

Therefore, we ought to shorten the question of this paper a little bit: Are the histories of non-western philosophies *relevant to philosophizing*? Put this way, the answer will simply be ›no,‹ if we agree with a ›normal‹ understanding of the general term philosophy as sketched above. The answer, though, will definitely be ›yes,‹ if we act on the assumption that philosophy is to be understood in a culturally generic way. Philosophy in an intercultural orientation – ›intercultural philosophy‹ – may open the mind to elaborate new paths in this direction, but its goal can only be to supersede the specifying adjective. Historiography of philosophy in such an orientation will have to criticize the mono-cultural traits and concepts of past and present; it will have to do that both theoretically, by analyzing the assumptions driving selections, interpretations and dispositions, and practically, by searching and reconstructing philosophical reflections on a truly

worldwide scale. Finally, it shall have to ask for alternative ways to teach history of philosophy (of humankind).

The historiography of philosophy has gained its prominence and developed its standing as a literary genre in modern times in Europe. For a very long period of time in most of its different approaches, it produced a simple equation – history of philosophy was history of occidental philosophy, and vice versa. No one from non-occidental regions had made use of reason the way philosophy does, as Hans-Georg Gadamer still told us in 1993: »[T]he concept of philosophy is not yet applicable to the great answers to humanity's great questions which have been given by the highly sophisticated cultures of East Asia and India – as these questions have been asked by philosophy in Europe again and again« (Gadamer 1993: 68)<sup>1</sup>. There was nothing like ›philosophy in the strict sense‹ outside the Occident. That was general opinion, but not from the very beginnings of philosophical historiography in Europe.

Only at the end of the eighteenth century in general histories of philosophy has been established one correct answer to questions regarding the origin, place, age, and founder of philosophy for the whole of humankind.<sup>2</sup> The right answer to such questions became true for generations to come – philosophy was Greek not just by its name but by its very essence. Thales of Miletus from the sixth century BCE was its originator. There were no uncertainties any more in the said questions for a long period of time for students everywhere in the world. When being asked about the origin of philosophy, there was one true answer. Consequently, history of philosophy became the history of a process leading from Thales unto the present.

Of course, Aristotle had stated the same long before. But now this statement had been reestablished after lengthy discussions, ex-

<sup>1</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all the translations are mine. »Es ist im Grunde völlige Willkür, ob wir das Gespräch eines chinesischen Weisen mit seinem Schüler Philosophie nennen oder Religion oder Dichtung.« The same is claimed for Indian traditions. Further, [der] »Begriff der Philosophie [ist] noch nicht auf die großen Antworten anwendbar, die die Hochkulturen Ostasiens und Indiens auf die Menschheitsfragen, wie sie in Europa durch die Philosophie immer wieder gefragt werden, gegeben haben« (Gadamer 1993: 68).

<sup>2</sup> There still is an explicit discussion of the point made by Dieterich Tiedemann in 1791, but he also decisively marks the new standard view: philosophy starts with Thales and other Pre-Socratics and there is no evidence for any origins elsewhere. For most of later authors, argumentative statements concerning this standard of selection even seemed needless. Cf. Tiedemann (1791).

cluding rival traditions one after another. It is worth remembering that during the early centuries of book printing in Europe, when the historiography of philosophy was growing into a literary genre of its own, not only the biblical Chaldeans and Babylonians, Egyptians and Hebrews were regularly featured in these accounts, but Indians, Scythians and Celts as well. During the seventeenth century, information from China and Japan widened the field. These ›barbarian‹ traditions of philosophy had been rated equal or even above the Greek by some authors<sup>3</sup>. However, very rarely did any of these traditions show up in books on the general history of philosophy after 1800. In his lectures in the eighteen-twenties, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel extensively dealt with Chinese and Indian thinking to show that ›oriental‹ wisdom was truly only a preliminary stage to philosophy proper. In spite of detailed research and many translations during the century of colonization, the mainstream around 1900 was convinced: There is no such thing as philosophy in the strict sense except in its Greek and occidental form. Non-western ›philosophies‹ were literally given their asylum in separate wards of the academy, if at all.

Even comparative or cross-cultural studies, thriving fields since the beginning of the twentieth century, did not alter the situation of academic philosophy too much. These studies concentrated mainly on comparisons between *East* and *West* – and on *comparisons*. Consequently, other regions like the Islamic World, Africa south of the Sahara, Latin America etc. were left out of focus. Secondly, mainstream philosophy could continue its disputes without risking to be seriously interrupted by non-western voices. One did not have to know about non-western views or theories concerning whatever issue, when writing a philosophical thesis about this issue. Such at least was my situation as a young researcher in the 1970s, and I guess it was not so different from students in other parts of the world. I was expected to know about discourses concerning my research field in some leading European languages – except Spanish and Russian among others – non-western discourses were definitely deemed irrelevant. Moreover, I would had to go to special places or to some department of regional specialization (as, e.g., Indology or perhaps Sinology) in order to learn about non-western philosophies. A ›normal‹ department of philosophy did not deal with these fields. If things may have changed somewhat since then in Europe, this is due more to

political and societal developments than to needs felt from within academic philosophy itself. It may not be so easy today to overtly declare that there is no such thing as Chinese or African philosophy. And yet, it is not too difficult to organize conferences, to edit books, and to practice curricula in the field of philosophy, as if there were no such things.

Therefore, it might be useful to know what happened with the history of philosophy since it began as a discipline around 1700 and afterwards. The most illustrating part of disciplining its subject may be the discussion ultimately leading to the exclusion of Chinese philosophy. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the leading philosophers of those days, had published his views on China in 1697 in a tract entitled *Novissima Sinica*, relying mainly on information, translations, and interpretations of Confucian sources provided by Jesuit missionaries. The starting paragraphs of this text depict the complementary cultures of the East and the West of Eurasia. Both of them were considered to be on an equal standing in the sphere of technology. Leibniz argued that the West is superior in theoretical fields, like in mathematics and metaphysics, and of course by its religion based on true revelation. China, surprisingly, is said to be superior in practical philosophy: ›they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals.‹ Hence his proposal: China should ›send missionaries to us to teach us the purpose and use of natural theology, in the same way as we send missionaries to them to instruct them in revealed theology‹ (Leibniz 1994: 46).

There are impressive voices during the eighteenth century that shared these views on China, such as Christian Wolff and Voltaire to mention the most prominent ones. Still, at the end of the century, the satirical formula of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1985 [1796]), that there only are ›philosophants, no philosophers‹ in China, is more characteristic for the period when theories on racial conditions of intellectual faculties, which were relatively new in Lichtenberg's time, were elaborated to such a degree that finally ›the Chinese‹ could be described as being ›organically unable even to rise to the imagination of metaphysical thinking‹ as Houston Stewart Chamberlain puts it around 1900 (Chamberlain 1906: 707). Reason in its highly esteemed forms literally got ›whitewashed,‹ it finally could be expected to flourish in no other individuals than ›Aryans,‹ as a highly reputable Ger-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Baldwin (1547) (This book had ten editions until 1630); Bolduanus (1616).

man dictionary from the heydays of racial theory tells us: »Philosophy is the creation especially of the nordic-aryan mind« (Schondorff, and Schingitz 1943: 444). Nowadays, racial theory is banned from the historiography of philosophy, of course. Culturalism however remains, and provides sufficient reasons to treat »World Philosophies« separately from »Philosophy« in a general sense.

In this context it is worth remembering an almost forgotten way of explaining history of mankind by biblical premises, still prominent in the early Enlightenment. It was suitable to interpret some peoples' – the most ancient ones' – traditions as handing down primordial wisdom to later generations. A contemporary of Leibniz, William Whiston, the British geologist and archeologist had found an answer to the long-lasting riddle of Chinese chronics reaching back to or even beyond the Great Flood. Some of the calculations, he said, were erroneous, and Fuxi, the first of the mythological emperors of the Chinese, was no one else than Noah himself (Whiston 1696). The solution seemed plausible and relevant to many authors of that time. However, it subsequently became obsolete together with the degradation of antediluvian wisdom as such. Until then, the superiority of Chinese traditions in the fields of practical philosophy and political theory was explicable by their connection to the last of the antediluvian patriarchs. Johann Christoph Gottsched, a follower of Christian Wolff and one of the influential proponents of this thesis, repeated it until 1762 in seven editions of his *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit* (Gottsched 1983 [1734]. Further on it can be traced in general histories of philosophy until the days of Hegel's lectures. Later on, the biblical story of humanity ceded away and was substituted by a story of immense and unimaginable epochs, and of evolutionary concepts. Interpretations of an integrative centrist form gave way to expansive centrist<sup>4</sup> ones: There was one culture which was not a culture among others, but the inculturated form of universal reason itself.<sup>5</sup>

I maintain, however, that there is no history of philosophy in a

general sense without the histories of all philosophies. Therefore, the historiography of philosophy ought to direct its interest to all sources of philosophical thinking, from whatever region, in whatever medium, and language it may come. This obviously cannot be achieved by any single individual for evident reasons. And it will not be achieved by individuals coming from one cultural background either, for reasons not so evident. But then it shall also be necessary to discuss new ways in periodization, classification, as well as interpretation of history.

It goes without saying that any periodization which has been deemed adequate for a single cultural tradition must not be suitable to other traditions. Easily this can be shown for the triple distinction of ancient, medieval, and modern epochs. This distinction still underwrites curricular as well as historiographical approaches in the field, although most historians would agree that it hardly makes sense for the occidental history where it has been invented. Nor would some equivalent of dynastic features seem adequate, as it had been practiced in Chinese historiography. A detailed proposal for periodization for »Global History of Philosophy« has been formulated by John C. Plott (1979)<sup>6</sup>. However, beside the fact that it does not include traditions outside Eurasia, this proposal does not appear plausible in every respect, the most persuading part of it concerning the beginnings in an »axial period« based on Karl Jaspers. To my knowledge, the most developed alternative to region-bound periodization is the Marxist historiography of philosophy. A truly internationalist and global research has been carried out in this perspective and is worth being reconsidered in the future.

Secondly, there is the problem of classification, of finding descriptive terminology for what is to be described. Ideally, the historian of philosophy ought to have distinct terms to denote theories or traditions in an unambiguous way at his/her disposal. In practice, the situation in the historiography of philosophy in this respect seems

<sup>4</sup> For different types of centrism, see Wimmer (2007a).

<sup>5</sup> In 1936 Husserl (1970: 16) asked whether »European humanity bears within itself an absolute idea« (»trägt eine absolute Idee in sich«), »rather than being merely an empirical anthropological type like »China« or »India.« (ist nicht nur »ein anthropologischer Typus wie »China« oder »Indien.«). His criterion was a »universal philosophy.« Only if »Europe« produces more than just a »type« of humanity, »it could be decided whether the spectacle of the Europeanization of all other civilizations bears witness to

the rule of an absolute meaning, one which is proper to the sense, rather than to a historical non-sense, of the world.«

<sup>6</sup> Starting from the »Pre-Axial Age«, philosophies evolve throughout Eurasia during the »Axial Age« (750–250 BCE), followed by the »Han-Hellenistic-Bactrian Period« (250 BCE–325 CE); »Patristic-Sutra Period« (325–800); »Period of Scholasticism« (800–1350); »Period of Encounters (1350–1850); concluding finally with »Period of Total Encounter« (1850 ss.). There are parallel developments claimed in all of Eurasia for any of these periods.

to be quite *naturwüchsig*, naturally grown – there are personalized denotations (as, e.g. *Aristotelian* or *Marxist philosophy*); others refer to languages or peoples, even continents (*Chinese* or *African philosophy*) or religions (*Christian* or *Buddhist philosophy*); there are denotations like *Daoism* or *Lebensphilosophie*, *Analytic* or *Existentialist Philosophy* etc.; finally there are denotations like *materialism* or *idealism*, *empiricism* or *rationalism* and the like.

Here again, classifying terminologies stemming from only one of the philosophical traditions of the past will not do the job. Nor will sheer multiplicity be the answer. To me it seems that some sort of terminology starting from very general terms (like *material* and *immaterial*) applicable in ontological, epistemological, and ethical contexts,<sup>7</sup> ought to be elaborated.

Thirdly, there is the question of hermeneutics, that is, of adequate interpretation of very different ways of thinking, expressed in seemingly or actually mutually untranslatable terminologies. Here again, it is the challenge of intercultural philosophy to work out new ways of mutual interpretations, avoiding both ›total identity‹ and ›radical difference‹ by an »analogous hermeneutics,« as Ram A. Mall puts it, searching for »homeomorphic equivalents« in Raimon Panikkar's words (Mall 2000: 15–17; Panikkar 2000: n.p.).

Ultimately, the history of philosophy, of western as well as non-western philosophies, will be judged as per its aptitude to contribute to crucial questions of global humankind.

–Franz Martin Wimmer, Emeritus,  
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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed, though formal, proposal, see Wimmer (1990).

## The Kantian Canon: Response to Wimmer

I fundamentally agree with Professor Wimmer's proposition that the histories of non-Western philosophies are relevant not only to intercultural understanding but also to philosophizing. Indeed it could be otherwise only once – *per impossibile* – all cultural difference had been abolished. I also maintain that the widespread reduction of the history of philosophy to the history of Western philosophy is an obstacle to intercultural understanding and I agree with him that it was only during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that so-called Western philosophy as an academic discipline decisively claimed for itself a hegemonic role. Scholars like Giovanni Santinello (1993, 2011), Ulrich Johannes Schneider (1999), and, most recently, Peter Park (2013) have shown that the origin of philosophy was located in Greece only at the end of the eighteenth century. Earlier in the century the ideas of the Chaldeans, Babylonians, Egyptians, Hebrews, Persians, Indians, Phoenicians, Celts, and so on were included in histories of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Even more significantly for our purposes Jacob Brucker in 1744 included under the title »Exotic Philosophy« a discussion of the so-called Malabars (primarily the Tamils), the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Canadians (or Native Americans).<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Brucker was not especially sympathetic to either the so-called »barbarian« or the exotic philosophies that he described, but they were not excluded by him from the outset as they largely were by the end of the eighteenth century. The philosophical canon that was established then largely remains in place today with relatively few changes. Literature departments here revised the literary canon; historians of art reflect changes in taste; but the philosophical canon is set in stone and it serves as the rock to which contemporary philoso-

<sup>1</sup> Brucker (1742); [Boureau-Deslandes] (1742); Samuel Formey (1760); [Adelung] (1786); Eberhard (1788).

<sup>2</sup> Brucker (1744).

phy clings as it tries to retain a certain purity against what are seen as ›external‹ challenges.

If we are to expand and indeed overthrow the inherited canon in the name of intercultural understanding, we need to understand how this narrow canon was established and why it has been maintained with largely the same content and within the same parameters. Until we have answers to those two questions, appeals to change it are likely to be as effective as shouting into the wind. The task is a big one and I can here point only to a few factors. The first factor to be considered is religion. The study of the ideas governing societies outside of Europe did not cease with their exclusion from philosophy. As Professor Wimmer says, »non-Western ›philosophies‹ were literally given their asylum in separate wards of the academy, if at all« (Wimmer 2015a: 128). They were frequently transferred into the study of religion and from the perspective of Christianity could be dismissed as paganism and thus false.<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant could rely on the Christians of his day to assent to the proposition that there can be only one religion, albeit »several kinds of faiths.«<sup>4</sup>

The tendency to exclude non-Western philosophy was further assisted by the secularization of academic philosophy in much of the West. It was no longer the case that Christianity was the only religion admitted into. Given that non-Western philosophies had already been consigned to the status of religions, the secularization of philosophy served to reinforce their exclusion. To be sure, attempts to tell the history of philosophy without reference to religion tend to lapse into a kind of incoherence. One often sees this clearly in histories of ethics. The history of ethics is taught almost always as if Christianity had made only a slight contribution to the philosophical idea of ethics, if any, even though it was only in the context of Christianity that ethics became an autonomous philosophical discipline in its own right.<sup>5</sup> What seems to matter to writers on ethics today is to establish a continuity between the questions that especially Aristotle and Kant were asking in spite of the fact that Kant was the heir of Christian experi-

ences of the will, conscience, intention that were entirely foreign to the Greeks. Given how reluctant many Western philosophers are to acknowledge a positive Christian contribution to our ethical understanding, it is perhaps not surprising that they refuse to acknowledge the contributions of so-called non-Western philosophies, dismissing them as non-philosophical because religious. Confucius was introduced as a contributor to philosophical ethics before Confucianism was dismissed from philosophy and given a role in the history of religions. Today the West, especially Europe, tends to think of itself as tolerant and largely secular, but the prevalence of Islamophobia shatters that self-image. The contribution of Arabic philosophy even to a narrowly constituted Western philosophy is still not acknowledged, still less more contemporary Islamic perspectives.

It should be understood that during the period from 1780 to 1830 when the history of philosophy was being rewritten for reasons I explain below, the philosophy of history was growing increasingly preeminent and this amounts to a second contributing factor. Here Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel played a decisive role: one can clearly see parallels between the way he excluded India from the history of philosophy ›proper‹ and the way it also lay outside the philosophy of history ›proper‹ when he responded to Friedrich Schlegel's attempt to include Indian philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this history was established on a teleological model whereby its meaning lay entirely in its end and not in its individual moments, following a model established by Kant in his ›Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent.‹ The philosophy of history, which was almost always in the nineteenth and early twentieth century tied to a narrative of Western triumphalism, may have sunk into obscurity, but aspects of the narrative survive. It is shocking to see the extent to which ideas of progressive development have survived the genocide of the twentieth century and academic philosophers are far from being immune from it, if that is not to give too much credit to their relentless pursuit of what is fashionable.

Finally, we need to look at the role that racism has played in the construction of philosophy as Western and its continuing reaffirmation of itself as Western though its insistence on a racist canon. The place of Christoph Meiners of Göttingen in this regard has already been demonstrated by Peter Park and there is no need to repeat it here

<sup>3</sup> See Bernasconi (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Kant (1914: 155, 107–108) [in the English translation 1996a: 178, 140]. See also Kant (1968a: 367) [in the English translation 1996b: 336].

<sup>5</sup> Wieland (1981). Today the idea that Judaism is central to the history of moral philosophy is presented as if it was eccentric, but in the sixteenth and seventeenth century this was not thought of as strange, even though it led to the claim that Pythagoras was a Jew. See Schneewind (1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Bernasconi (2003a).

(Park 2013: 76–82). I have argued elsewhere that John Locke, Kant, and Hegel were racist and in ways that went significantly beyond that demonstrated by many of their contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> It is telling how easily philosophers today still happily ignore that. More telling still is the way that the history of political philosophy within modernity is taught according to an agenda set in the nineteenth century among a class of people who confused freedom with establishing the priority of property rights. That may have been the most important issue to them, but the great issue of the period 1750 to 1865 (and in some parts of the world later even to today) was slavery, the property that some claimed over other human beings whom they were happy to baptize but not liberate. Not only is the debate over slavery almost always ignored by historians of philosophy, many specialists are either ignorant or largely indifferent on the question of what these philosophers on whom they specialize had to say on the issue. We are told that Kant, the defender of the enslavement of Africans, is not the real Kant, but the fact that this aspect of his thought is ignored or disregarded seems only because it hurts his reputation and thus damages the privilege Kantian philosophy claims for itself.<sup>8</sup> This is just another way in which those in the West combine to draw the wagons together to form a circle, the circular fortification that maintains the philosophical canon in its present shape. But until Western philosophy is prepared to confront its own historical contribution to the prevalence of racism in the West it is not open to an honest dialogue.

I have looked back at this history in order to demonstrate the degree to which the West's dismissal of non-Western philosophy is rooted in its deep-seated self-conception of itself as at the vanguard of history. But I also wanted to explain why I believe it would be naïve to assume that it is simply ignorance that sustains this view. The challenge that representatives of the dominant culture must prepare themselves for as they enter into dialogue with representatives of those cultures it has oppressed is that the former have to face the shock of seeing themselves for the first time as they have been seen.<sup>9</sup> The bravado that the representatives of the West show in the political arena, when they enter into conversations where the power of money and armaments rule, does not seem to pass over into honesty about

the historical sources of its power, which can be traced back to the Atlantic slave trade and colonial genocide. Some academic philosophers seem to be equally insecure when it comes to asking the question of why certain ideas have won out in the battle of ideas.

But is this enough to explain how non-Western philosophies came to be excluded? When I review the various factors I have identified as determinative – whether they concern religion, history, or race – Kant's role seems to have been decisive. Kant seems to have shown very little interest in the history of philosophy or even in history conceived more generally, compared with his philosophical contemporaries elsewhere, but he was concerned with his own place within that history. He bristled at any suggestion that he was not deeply original. It seems that it was in part to establish his place that the impetus to present the history of philosophy as a narrative in which subsequent philosophers displace their predecessors by the power of their arguments was the way his followers promoted his importance. But his followers, in their attempt to establish the uniqueness of his contribution, insisted on telling the history of philosophy in such a way that the history culminated in him (Park 2013: 20–21). What did not lead in that same direction could be discarded. From this point on the history of philosophy became in a new and more exaggerated way not about the challenge of the past or about alternative ways of thinking. The history of philosophy came to be written from the present with the aim to legitimate the present state of philosophy. This way of thinking of philosophy established it as a narrow tradition and in the name of reason philosophy paradoxically constituted itself as a narrative shaped largely by its exclusions.<sup>10</sup> On this model, one cannot understand any philosopher without repeating the dialogue that philosopher entered into with (unfortunately usually) *his* predecessors. From this perspective academic philosophy begins to look like a cult that repeatedly reaffirms its identity and cannot see outside itself because what lies outside has been established as on principle irrelevant to the ongoing conversation.

It might seem paradoxical that Kant has proved to be such a strong obstacle along the path to intercultural understanding, given the way people like to appeal to his notion of cosmopolitanism to legitimate everything from lifting restrictions on immigration to moving beyond racism and nationalism. However, this seems to

<sup>7</sup> Bernasconi (2011a, 2002, 1998, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Bernasconi (2003b, 2011b).

<sup>9</sup> See Sartre (1948: ix–xii).

<sup>10</sup> Bernasconi (1997).



amount to a major rewriting of what he meant when in his essay on the idea of a universal history with cosmopolitan intent he stipulated that Europe will »probably someday give laws to all the others« (Kant 1968: 29–30).<sup>11</sup> The privilege accorded to Europe was paramount and was in marked contrast with the approach of Johann Gottfried Herder, whom Kant specifically attacked.<sup>12</sup> I have recently attempted to show in detail how Kant in his *Physical Geography* in his concern to turn the ›Hottentots‹ into objects of study (and even amusement) excluded the efforts of his contemporaries to understand them and above all efface the judgments that the ›Hottentots‹ had issued against the European that they had encountered.<sup>13</sup> That attitude remains largely in place. As Professor Wimmer says, it is not as easy as it once was to deny the existence of Chinese and African philosophy, but their contributions are still often ignored, especially when their approaches diverge from those dominant in the West. I have tried here to identify some of the forces that brought this about and to show how deeply entrenched the canon from Thales to the present is especially if we recognize that its core is the canon from Thales to Kant.

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<sup>11</sup> Kant (2007a: 119).

<sup>12</sup> Kant (1968b: 43–66); Kant (2007b: 124–142).

<sup>13</sup> Bernasconi (2015).

## Franz Wimmer's Statement: A Comment

This statement is remarkable. Franz Martin Wimmer tries to develop a non-Eurocentric way of philosophizing. He questions therefore the usual tendency to particularize non-Western systems of thought. The need generally felt in the academia to qualify such systems as being for instance ›African,‹ ›Chinese,‹ or ›Islamic‹ while Western philosophy is viewed as philosophy simply without any geographical specification or ›regional-cultural marker‹ clearly expresses the assumption that anything born and grown outside the West is particular while intellectual traditions developed in the West have a universal value.

Franz Wimmer observes however that this kind of Eurocentrism is recent. The idea that philosophy is Greek in its essence (and not just because of the etymology of the word) and dates back to Thales of Miletus in the sixth century BCE was established at the end of the eighteenth century after lengthy discussions. Prior to this, intellectual traditions from other parts of the world were rated equal and even sometimes superior to the Greek one. Wimmer engages therefore in a fruitful history of the history of philosophy which results in putting into perspective the Eurocentric stance prevailing nowadays. To him, a good historiography of philosophy today should integrate the histories of all philosophies worldwide.

While I fully agree with Wimmer, I wish nevertheless to add a few comments.

### 1 Eurocentrism

First, African scholars trained in Western philosophy have often been shocked by the same kind of Eurocentrism rightly denounced by Wimmer. The late Marcién Towa (1931–2014) for instance began his short but strong booklet, the *Essay on Philosophical Problems In Today's*

*Africa*, by recalling Hegel's divagations on the ›dark continent‹ which he thought had not yet entered universal History.<sup>1</sup> Amady Aly Dieng (1932–2015), a brilliant economist and philosopher from Senegal, expressed the same view in his *Hegel, Marx, Engels and the Problems of Black Africa* (Dieng 1978). I remember having a strong discussion when I was fellow of ›Ecole normale supérieure‹ in Paris in the 1960s with some of my French colleagues during a seminar led by Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), on a booklet by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), *Was ist das – die Philosophie?* where the German philosopher stated among other things that philosophy is Greek in its essence and not just because of the etymological origin of the word, that philosophy speaks Greek, and therefore, phrases like ›European‹ or ›Western philosophy‹ amount to a mere tautology (Heidegger 122008). I just could not understand the logic behind such a statement. To me, the fact that a cultural form appears in a geographical area is just an accident, and it is pure sophistry to convert this accident into essence or to imagine behind this accident some sort of historical necessity.

There is more. While reading Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) Vienna lecture on *The Crisis of European Humanity and Transcendental Philosophy*, I was struck by his bad joke about the Papuan (Husserl 1970). To show how important philosophy is to the spiritual heritage of Europe and how it contributes to European identity, he mentions incidentally: just as man is as Aristotle puts it a rational animal, and in this sense, *even the Papuan is a man*, philosophical reason on the other hand is specific to the European humanity. I assume, by the way, that neither a single Papuan was present nor did anyone feel any degree of solidarity with the Papuans.

The writer and political activist from Martinique, Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), in his short but powerful *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), made fun of all kinds of ideological statements about the so-called duty of Europe to civilize Africa. In this context, he criticizes the theory of ›primitive mentality‹ formulated by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939) and his followers. These people, he says, seem to be unaware of the very first sentence of the *Discourse on the Method* by René Descartes (1596–1650), a statement which can be considered as a charter of universalism: ›Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed‹ (Descartes 1909–1914).

<sup>1</sup> Towa (1971). Towa deceased in July 2014 at the age of 83. A book of homage has just been published some weeks ago in Germany. See Mabe (2015).

Kwasi Wiredu (1931–) makes similar remarks on David Hume (1711–1766) and Karl Marx (1818–1883). Indeed, many Western writers and philosophers among the most innovative and politically progressive, many of those legitimately considered by their African readers as the most inspiring, happen also to prove occasionally Eurocentric and even sometimes racist in their formulations. Wiredu writes therefore:

Neither Hume, nor Marx, displayed much respect for the black man, so whatever partiality the African philosopher may develop for these thinkers must rest mostly on considerations of the truth of their philosophical thought (1980: 49).

Hume for instance was able to write in his *Essays*:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilised nation of that complexion, nor ever any individual, eminent either in action or speculation [...] In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly (1987: 208, Footnote 10).

Quoting this statement, the Ghanaian philosopher comments: ›Considerable maturity is required in the African to be able to contemplate impartially Hume's disrespect for Negroes and his philosophical insights, deploring the former and acknowledging and assimilating the latter‹ (Wiredu 1980: 49, Footnote 13).

Such nonsensical statements have been made by many others including Denis Diderot (1713–1784) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who count among the most respectable and respected thinkers from the West. The late Emmanuel C. Eze (1963–2007), a Nigerian-American philosopher, published an impressive anthology of these writings under the title: *Race and the Enlightenment* (1997). He was certainly right to take up Wiredu's suggestion and reproach these authors for being racist. My suggestion however is this: before any value judgment, we should ask first which kind of audience these authors were addressing.

## 2 Choosing One's Audience

However scientific, objective or rational a discourse claims to be, it is always directly or indirectly shaped by its potential audience. As a

matter of fact none of these authors suspected that they could be read some day by the ›Negroes‹ of Africa or the ›Papuan‹ of New Guinea. They felt free therefore to talk about them without fearing to be contradicted. A discourse is partly determined in its content by the actual configuration of the discussion circle in which it is performed and by the frontiers, both visible and invisible, of this circle. What I say depends on *whom I am **not** talking to* as well as *whom I am addressing*. Such exclusions are usually made spontaneously without questioning their legitimacy. This problem, it should be observed, goes far beyond the writings by philosophers. Scientific discourse in all disciplines has also been developing so far within the *Western circle of interlocution*. This limitation may have impacted, at least indirectly, on the identification and formulation of problems as well as the way they are solved. Moreover there is a domain where the impact is always direct: the social sciences, because the very matter of discourse here is human society itself.

In an excellent report written for the Gulbenkian Foundation and published as *Open the Social Sciences* (1996), Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–) and his colleagues drew attention to the considerable increase of the number of professional social scientists throughout the world after World War II. Among other consequences, this expansion produced a deep restructuring of the social sciences and a complete renewal of scholarly issues and themes. I assume that neither Hume nor Kant would feel free today in this new context to write about the Black people in the same way. Nor would Husserl paternalistically dare to concede to a student, or former student of the University, of Papua New Guinea that »even the Papuan is a human.«

### 3 Historicizing Non-Western Philosophies

The most important however is this: while Wimmer's demand is basically right, saying that a universal history of thought should include the histories of non-Western as well as Western philosophies, it should be noted that the very idea of non-Western histories of thought is quite new. For instance African systems of thought used to be viewed as something stable and permanent, a creed universally shared by all Africans or by such and such an African community and which is part of their identity. Such is the case of the »Bantu philosophy« constructed by Father Placide Tempels (1906–1977), the »philosophy of being of the Bantu people of Rwanda« defined by Alexis Kagame (1912–1989), or the »moral philosophy of the Wolof« advocated by Assane Sylla.<sup>2</sup> Such is the case of the »mind of Africa« described by William Abraham or the »African systems of thought« discussed by Meyer Fortes, Germaine Dieterlen and others, and more recently by Ivan Karp.<sup>3</sup> The study of such systems has been labeled by Marcien Towa and myself as »ethno-philosophy« as opposed to philosophy proper.<sup>4</sup> Both of us used the term in a derogatory sense but it should be noted that the initial meaning was quite positive. Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) for instance claimed to be doing ethno-philosophy in his PhD dissertation written at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>5</sup>

Many readers were shocked therefore by the very first sentence of my 1970 article which became the first chapter of *African Philosophy, Myth and Reality*: »By ›African philosophy‹ I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves« (1983: viii).

Beyond the huge controversy spurred by this unusual definition, an increasing number of scholars have been admitting ever since that African philosophy should not just be understood as a permanent system of thought; that it means first and foremost philosophy done by Africans. African philosophy is not just an implicit worldview consciously or unconsciously shared by all Africans; it lies first in the explicit discourse articulated by Africans, no matter if this articulation remains oral. African philosophy is equal to African philosophical literature, no matter if the concept of literature is enlarged in such a way as to include oral literature.

Only then does it become possible to conceive of a history of African philosophy. As a matter of fact, I do not know of any work attempting to write such a history that was published before 1970, i. e.

<sup>2</sup> Tempels (1945); Kagame (1956); Sylla (1978).

<sup>3</sup> Abraham (1962); Fortes, and Dieterlen (1966); Karp (1980).

<sup>4</sup> Hountondji (1970); Towa (1971).

<sup>5</sup> *Mind and Thought in Primitive Society: A Study in Ethno-Philosophy With Special Reference to the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa*. Nkrumah mentions this thesis in his autobiography. Cf. (Nkrumah 1957). The thesis itself remained however unfinished and was never defended before he left the USA in 1945 to London where he was invited to serve with George Padmore (1902–1959) as co-secretary of the third Pan-African Congress in Manchester. William E. Abraham graciously offered me a photocopy of the typescript at Stanford University in the early eighties.

before the first critique of ethno-philosophy. All available publications were written later, starting with the modest but excellent »Bibliography of African Thought« published by my Belgian colleague Alfons Smet in 1972 and the subsequent publications or prepublications by the same.<sup>6</sup> Writings by Théophile Obenga (1936–) from Congo-Brazzaville and Grégoire Biyogo from Gabon are even more recent.<sup>7</sup>

Africa however is just an example. Non-Western philosophies have long been conceived in terms of collective and permanent world-views. It could be argued of course that in the case of oral cultures as in traditional Africa, there was no alternative to this ethnographic concept of philosophy. The fact however is that even in old literate cultures like the Chinese, or the Indian, Western scholars used to apply the same ethnographic concept. This clearly shows that we have to do with some kind of prejudice.

On the other hand, it can be assumed that beyond the turbulent history of philosophical doctrines in a given culture, there is still something stable and permanent, something implicit and unformulated which orients and predetermines all explicit doctrines. This however is another story.<sup>8</sup>

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National Universities, Benin

<sup>6</sup> Smet (1972, 1974, 1975a, 1975, 1975–1977).

<sup>7</sup> Obenga (1990); Biyogo (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for instance Augé (1975).

## A Shawnee Reflection on Franz Wimmer's »How Are Histories of Non-Western Philosophies Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?«

kiwaakomelepwa! nitesitho Thomas Norton-Smith. saawanwa nilla no'ki ni m'soma peleawa. That is, I am Thomas Norton-Smith, Turkey clan Shawnee. I have been given the opportunity to comment on Professor Franz Wimmer's »How Are Histories of Non-Western Philosophies Relevant to Intercultural Philosophizing?« from an American Indian perspective (Wimmer 2015a). I speak for no one but myself, so any errors or misinterpretations are mine alone. I am full of mistakes.

I understand Prof. Wimmer's project to be twofold. First of all, he wants to criticize contemporary Western academic philosophy for its failure to recognize and appreciate non-Western philosophical traditions and their histories – and sometimes even its own history. Second, Prof. Wimmer seeks to promote an *intercultural philosophy*, a way of doing philosophy that is oriented in a global perspective as it integrates both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions and their histories so as »to contribute to crucial questions of global humankind« (*ibid*: 132). I welcome and respect his critique of contemporary academic philosophy; indeed, I could not agree more with his observation that, while racial theory is banned from the historiography of philosophy, »[c]ulturalism [...] remains, and provides sufficient reasons to treat ›World Philosophies‹ separately from ›Philosophy‹ in a general sense« (*ibid*: 130). However, from a Native perspective, to the extent that Prof. Wimmer envisions and promotes a globally oriented philosophy that »integrates diverse developments of thinking« (*ibid*: 126) – one emerging as an amalgam of Western and non-Western philosophical pasts and traditions – I could not disagree more.

First comes my praise for Prof. Wimmer's criticism of contemporary academic philosophy because of its disdain for non-Western philosophical traditions. Indeed, his account of the early twentieth century dismissal of Chinese philosophy on the grounds that the Chi-

nese were »organically unable even to rise to the imagination of metaphysical thinking« (Chamberlain 1906: 707, cited by Wimmer) sounds strikingly similar to ethnographer L. T. Hobhouse's observations about the lack of Western metaphysical distinctions in American Indian worldviews:

[...] primitive thought has not yet evolved those distinctions of substance and attribute, quality and relation, cause and effect, identity and difference, which are the common property of civilized thought. These categories which among us every child soon comes to distinguish in practice are for primitive thought interwoven in wild confusion [...] (1907: 20–21; cited in Gilmore 1919: 10).

In the same vein, I am especially fond of explorer, ethnographer, and grave robber J. W. Powell's dismissal of Native religious traditions:

The literature of North American ethnography is vast, and scattered through it is a great mass of facts pertaining to Indian theology – a mass of nonsense, a mass of incoherent folly [...] ethically a hideous monster of lies, but ethnographically a system of great interest – a system which beautifully reveals the mental condition of savagery (1877: 13).

Of course, Western academic philosophy's disdain for these non-Western traditions, as Prof. Wimmer observes, was (and continues to be) grounded in the belief that the Western conception of reason – as well as the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological distinctions following in its train – is somehow a privileged standard against which more »primitive« philosophical world views are to be analyzed and evaluated. »The use of non-Western logics and philosophical categories,« so the Western academy argues, »is evidence of philosophical unsophistication.« This view, however, is a pernicious Eurocentric philosophical bias, and I applaud Prof. Wimmer for exposing it.

Unfortunately, our agreement on this first point does not extend to the second, namely, Prof. Wimmer's call for and promotion of a globally oriented philosophy that integrates various aspects of Western and non-Western philosophical histories and traditions. As Indians are wont to do, I'll begin with a story, »Languages Confused on a Mountain,« recorded in 1908 from the Blackfoot oral tradition:

After the flood, Old Man mixed water with different colors. He whistled, and all the people came together. He gave one man a cup of one kind of water, saying, »You will be chief of these people here.« To another man he gave differently colored water, and so on. The Blackfoot, Piegan, and Blood

all received black water. Then he said to the people, »Talk,« and they all talked differently; but those who drank black water spoke the same. This happened on the highest mountain in the Montana Reservation [Chief Mountain?] (Wissler, and Duvall 1908: 19).

It is a misguided commonplace that Native stories like »Languages Confused on a Mountain« are explanatory, in this case, giving a rather simplistic – and implausible – explanation for why different peoples speak different languages. Rather, the purpose of such stories is not to give a Western styled explanation, but to convey traditional Native values. That is, Native stories are essentially *normative*. I understand the Blackfoot moral story about »confused« languages not to be a literal explanation for linguistic differences, but instead to teach that different nations *ought to* have different languages, since Old Man – the Creator – made it that way. And in so far as philosophical world views have linguistic foundations, different nations also have different philosophies. That's how it *ought to* be.

To the extent that Prof. Wimmer envisions and promotes a globally oriented philosophy *integrating* diverse Western and non-Western philosophical histories and traditions, my interpretation of the Blackfoot story challenges the wisdom – if not the morality – of his vision. I do not question the value of attempting to *compare* American Indian and other non-Western world views to Eurocentric philosophical traditions and histories – although Native world views were largely eradicated by the imposed »civilization« of Western colonial powers. Indeed, an appeal to a vanishing American Indian philosophical history is just another problematic aspect of Prof. Wimmer's proposal. Am I attributing to Wimmer (and like-minded intercultural philosophers) a romantic view of the »vanishing« American Indian? Am I claiming that intercultural philosophy represents yet another iteration of the colonial-imperialist project that seeks to incorporate native traditions and in so doing contributes to the vanishing of American Indian philosophies? Neither. I am arguing simply that to the extent that Wimmer wants to integrate Indian philosophical *history* into an intercultural philosophy, the proposal won't work – there's no »there« there, in large part because of colonialism. That said, a globally oriented philosophy has as little right to integrate Native knowledge as the Western tradition has to exploit it. The Old Man gave our language, history, and wisdom to us – not to the West, and certainly not to the world.

Prof. Wimmer's proposal that all philosophical histories and traditions should be integrated into a global, world historical philosophy – the value of which to be judged by its contribution to the problems of global humanity – reminds me of a current conversation of a different sort, another one in which indigenous people have been asked to contribute to global welfare. The Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), brought under the auspices of the Human Genome Organization (HUGO) in 1994, was charged with collecting, analyzing, and preserving the genetic material of indigenous peoples, just in case it might sometime be useful to humanity. (Hey, you just never know when the next global pandemic will come along, and your DNA will hold the secret of humanity's salvation.) Dubbed the »vampire project« by indigenous people, there is general resistance to HGDP among Native people and scholars, because the Old Man gave our DNA neither to the West nor to the world, but to us (Whitt 2009: 81–83).<sup>1</sup>

All that said, I wonder whether the kind of descriptive classificatory terminology and hermeneutical language Prof. Wimmer's intercultural historian of philosophy desires and requires – a way to interpret »seemingly or actually mutually untranslatable terminologies« (Wimmer 2015a: 132) reflecting radically different ways of thinking – is even possible. An intercultural philosophy could surely recognize critical Native ontological categories, e.g., the *animate* and *inanimate*, and perhaps even notice that these Native categories are not coextensive with »similar« Western categories. However, beyond such rudimentary observations, I doubt that the kind of thoroughgoing understanding of radically different philosophical historical traditions is achievable. Indeed, the very notion that American Indian philosophy has a *history* to be integrated into a global philosophical orientation seems literally »out of place.« Indigenous peoples are place and space oriented – not situated in history and time like folks in the Western tradition – so the call for Native people to contribute to a world historical philosophy itself reveals a Eurocentric misunderstanding of indigenous world views (Norton-Smith 2010: 120–122).

To be clear, I am not arguing that there should be *no* conversa-

tion between Indigenous philosophers, ourselves trying to recover our lost Native philosophical history and traditions, and the Western philosophical tradition – although, frankly, I know some Indian colleagues who hold and persuasively argue for that view. My position is, rather, that such a conversation must be grounded in *mutual respect* for each tradition, not the appropriation of elements of one tradition for use by – for *integration* into – the other. A story from the Menominee tradition, »The Indian and the Frogs,« teaches this to us:

Once an Indian had a revelation from the head of all the frogs and toads. In the early spring, when all the frogs and toads thaw out they sing and shout more noisily than at any other time of the year. This Indian made it a practice to listen to the frogs every spring when they first began, as he admired their songs, and wanted to learn something from them. He would stand near the puddles, marshes, and lakes to hear them better, and once when night came he lay right down to hear them.

In the morning, when he woke up, the frogs spoke to him, saying: »We are not all happy, but in very deep sadness. You seem to like our crying but this is our reason for weeping. In early spring, when we first thaw out and revive we wail for our dead, for lots of us don't wake up from our winter sleep. Now you will cry in your turn as we did!«

Sure enough, the next spring the Indian's wife and children all died, and the Indian died likewise, to pay for his curiosity to hear the multitude of frogs. So this Indian was taught what has been known ever since by all Indians that they must not go on purpose to listen to the cries of frogs in the early spring (Skinner and Satterlee 1915: 470).

This story baffles the Western ethicist. The Indian did not *intend* to *harm* the frogs and his action *resulted in no harm* to the frogs, so punishing him and his family is unjust. What is even more baffling from a Western philosophical perspective is that the Indian's actions could well be judged as *praiseworthy*. After all, isn't the acquisition of knowledge Western philosophy's principal goal? And yet, by appropriating the knowledge that belonged to the frogs without permission, the Indian ignored the fundamental Native moral duty to treat others with respect. The lesson the Indian learned about the frogs' song – not the one he had hoped to selfishly steal away – was that the respectful acquisition of knowledge is a gift, not a theft. The Indian took the knowledge, so he shared the frogs' sorrow and fate. He became brother to the frogs.

Like the Indian in the Menominee story, it seems to me that the intercultural philosopher »admires the songs« of other philosophical

<sup>1</sup> The Home page of the Human Genome Diversity Project is found under: <http://www.hgsc.org/hgdp/>, 2007. For a Native perspective, see the statement made by the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism ([http://www.ipcb.org/publications/briefing\\_papers/files/hgdp.html](http://www.ipcb.org/publications/briefing_papers/files/hgdp.html), 1995; both last accessed on 25 February 2015).

traditions, and »wants to learn something from them.« Now, that learning can either be a disrespectful appropriation and integration of knowledge that belongs to others – a theft – or it can be a mutually respectful exchange of gifts – a *mindful conversation*. In the case of American Indian philosophy, a *mindful conversation* means that conversants understand and respect that Native knowledge belongs to the People, is given as a gift, and there are some things that cannot be shared – let alone integrated into a global intercultural philosophy. The story teaches that there will be unfortunate consequences for the intercultural philosopher should she choose the former road to walk.

Rather than overemphasizing the negative, however, I would like to close by returning to my opening praise for Prof. Wimmer's call for the philosophical academy to welcome and respect Non-Western philosophical histories and traditions. Native people want their traditions respected, not usurped.

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## Reply

There seems to be a common agreement in the commentaries concerning the thesis that a Eurocentrist history of the philosophy of humankind ought to be overcome in some way or another. Since this does not mirror standard academic practices, most academic curricula, or prevalent politics of research in the field of philosophy in general, and it is not evident how exactly such historiography can be overcome, some more considerations might not be superfluous.

### 1 The Particularity of Philosophy's Historiography

To vary some sentences from the comments by Prof. Paulin Hountondji and Prof. Thomas Norton-Smith, a cultural-centrist understanding of the history of philosophy can be surmounted only when philosophers realize that every cultural-regional instance of philosophy – be it occidental or African, Chinese or Arabic and so forth – is »just an example« (Hountondji 2015: 144) of philosophy conceived of as something culturally generic. Any of these instances then by account of its very particularity ought to be brought to mutual »respectful exchange« (Norton-Smith 2015: 150) of the gifts of their thought. Historiography of philosophy ought to teach us about such examples. Students ought to be introduced to philosophy, not to just one cultural instance of it. The topic of the discussion here so far primarily is *history* of philosophy, it is not philosophy in a more comprehensive way. Still, to re-orientate historiography in the field, a different orientation of doing philosophy as such seems necessary. But let us start with history and the canon again.

We are far from ranking occidental philosophy to be *just an example*. In quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) in my introductory statement, I did omit a quite intriguing passage from the same text: »philosophy in whose name we are gathered here devel-

oped entirely in Europe,« Gadamer confirmed. Now, as Hountondji rightly stresses in his commentary, the audience a philosopher is addressing must not be neglected. In this case, taking the sentence as an empirical proposition, the speaker most probably was right. The question is, whether he intended – and was understood to express – nothing else other than an empirical statement. If the phrase, as I suspect it actually was intended, was not meant empirically, the proposition can be true or false regardless of what the speaker and his audience thinks. Let me try to describe the point briefly.

In German the phrase reads: »die Philosophie, in deren Namen wir hier versammelt sind, [ist] ganz und gar in Europa entstanden.« As it happens, German by its use of articles lets us easily ask about possibly different emphasizing. It obviously makes a decisive difference here whether we read »die Philosophie« or »die *Philosophie*.« To prove or disprove correctness according to the first reading (the equivalent in English might be: »philosophy in whose name *we* are gathered here«), a simple opinion poll would have done the job, and it probably would have been affirmed. However, it can be doubted whether such a result would have been sufficient to satisfy either the speaker or his audience – their empirical »we« would have had to accept »them,« others and »their« philosophy in exactly the same sense as is »ours,« and this was denied explicitly by Gadamer at least in regard to the traditions of China and India (cf. Wimmer 2015a: 127).

There is no marker of emphasis in the text, but the second reading in all likelihood was intended as well as understood. Talk was about »*philosophy* in whose name we are gathered here« which allegedly had developed entirely – and, I would like to infer, exclusively – in Europe. It cannot be tested as easily whether this is a true or an adequate understanding of what »philosophy« means or ought to mean. The claimed »tautology« of phrases like »Western philosophy« which had puzzled Hountondji when reading Gadamer's teacher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is not out of debate when the educated majority takes it for true, or is acting as if it were so. As I already said, in my understanding philosophy ought to be conceived of in a »culturally generic« way. One of the obstacles to this concept certainly is the culturally-bound, narrow canon »set in stone« as Prof. Robert Bernasconi puts it (Bernasconi 2015b: 133). Further historical analysis of its coming into being and of its effectiveness ought to show whether its historiographic bases are immune to critique.

In this context it remains astonishing that the first formulations

of an exclusively Greek origin of philosophy did not have much impact for quite a long time. First in this respect was the »*Discours sur la philosophie, où l'on fait en abrégé l'histoire de cette science*« authored by Pierre Coste (1668–1747), a young philologist, and published as an introductory chapter in a handbook of Cartesian philosophy in 1691. The text starts with a remark about the mainstream: »everyone agrees that philosophy came from the Orientals«<sup>1</sup>. But with this common understanding of philosophy's origin in the »orient,« there remains the quarrel about priority. Who were first, the Chaldaeans or the Egyptians (Coste does not allude to any other candidates)? This is to him an empty quarrel altogether, since there is nothing worth the name of philosophy with either of them – what is known from those »orientals« as »first philosophy was so unformed, that it hardly deserves the name. It could more rightly be called a *superstitious theology*.«<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, Coste begins his 43-paged survey on the history of philosophy with Thales and Pythagoras. The handbook reappeared in a Latin translation in 1705 for the international public, and the introductory history was reviewed by the first theorist of a renewed and »scientific« historiography of philosophy, Christoph August Heumann (1681–1764), in 1716<sup>3</sup>. This review mistakes the prominent Cartesian Pierre Sylvain Régis (1632–1707), the author of the handbook, to be the author of this introductory history as well, therefore erroneously praising the fact that here finally a philosopher dealt with philosophy's history, not another philologist<sup>4</sup>, as had been the case since generations. Thereby, truly »good and thorough« understanding of philosophy according to Heumann was to be expected, and he was happy to find in the text some of the principles of a scientific treatment of the historiography of philosophy which he previously had assumed to be his own findings: »e.g. that oriental philo-

<sup>1</sup> »Tout le monde tombe d'accord que la Philosophie est venue des Orientaux; mais les Orientaux ne s'accordoient point eux-mêmes sur les premiers inventeurs de cette Science« (Coste 1691: xxxiii). For the question of the authorship and interpretation of this text see Piaia (2010).

<sup>2</sup> »Cette première Philosophie étoit si informe, qu'à peine merite-t-elle ce nom. On pourroit l'appeler à plus juste titre *une Théologie superstitieuse*« (*ibid.*). Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> »Was die Philosophie der Morgenländischen Völker anlangt, so hält er dieselbe dieses schönen Namens nicht werth, sondern will, daß man sie lieber nennen soll Theologiam superstitione imbutam« (Heumann 1716: 1065).

<sup>4</sup> This same error is repeated in Braun (1973: 62–63).



sophers bear this name abusively, that Greeks were first to philosophize, that Pythagorean philosophy was miserable stuff, not worth of esteem«<sup>5</sup>.

Although Heumann's influence on historians of philosophy of the eighteenth century – especially on Johann Jakob Brucker (1696–1770) – is eminent, the next of so many histories of philosophy written during this century (overtly starting with Thales and the Greeks, and not feeling bound to describe »orientals« any more) was to appear exactly a hundred years after Coste.<sup>6</sup> Remarkably, this ancient-oriental-part seems to be indispensable in these historiographic accounts although most of what could be called »ancient oriental« thought – known since antiquity – relied only on secondary sources.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it can be observed that the descriptions of these so-called oriental philosophies gradually get shorter in most cases leading to the impression that some authors simply try to get rid of the issue or to warn their readers that these philosophies should not merit serious attention<sup>8</sup>.

The case is different with what I would call the »recent orientals«, namely traditions from Asia not known to authors in antiquity. In general histories of philosophy some of these »recent orientals« show up last and vanish first. Most interesting in this respect is the way Chinese philosophy has been treated. Only two in a sample of nine works before 1700 mention China<sup>9</sup>; during 1700 and 1750 only one among thirteen authors did *not* mention it<sup>10</sup>; in the wave of histories of philosophy between 1750 and 1800 eleven from a sample of twenty-two works at least mention Chinese philosophy<sup>11</sup> (together

with »ancient orientals«), while nine do not<sup>12</sup> (although »ancient orientals« are still there, somehow), and two of them – Tiedemann (1791), Tennemann (1798) – explicitly excluded any sort of »orientals.« The story continues in a slightly different way during the nineteenth century, and will have to do very much with the understanding of religion, with cultural imperialism, and increasingly with racist theory and racism, as Prof. Bernasconi rightly states. The process of these exclusions is part of the European identity discourse in the period of globalizing colonialism.

I cannot go into more details here, but I would like to sketch something like a *damnatio memoriae* with respect to things Chinese.

In 1697 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz published the *Novissima Sinica*, praising Confucian ethics and political theory, as I mentioned in my introductory statement (Wimmer 2015a: 129). In 1721, Christian Wolff delivered his *Oratio de Sinarum Philosophia Practica*<sup>13</sup> in the University of Halle, which provoked massive objections by pietist theologians and finally led to Wolff's expulsion from Prussian territory in 1723. Henrik Jaeger (2012: 156) summarizes the episode as follows: »In this lecture Wolff tried to show the complete inner conformity of his philosophy with the Confucian tradition. Chinese Philosophy appeared as a new legitimation for an ethics completely independent of any »revealed« or »natural religion.« One would think that such an episode, which provoked such a substantial debate, should have been mentioned by historians of philosophy, given the influence of Wolff in German enlightenment. However, Jaeger continues: »Wolff's Chinese background is rarely discussed in the field of the history of Enlightenment« (*ibid.*). The same is true for Leibniz.

Authoritative works on the history of philosophy from the late nineteenth century do not even mention the appreciation of Confucian philosophy by Leibniz or Wolff any more. This is the case e.g. in Friedrich Ueberweg's, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1863), in Wilhelm Windelband's *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1892) as well as in Karl Vorländer's *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1902). All these works have witnessed numerous editions and reprints till today. There is no hint to Leibniz' *Novissima Sinica* in any of these histories, as if this book never had been written. Concerning Wolff, one certainly is told by the authors that in 1723 he had

<sup>5</sup> »etliche principia [...], von welchen ich vorher glaubete, daß sie mir zu erst wären in den Sinn, oder doch in die Feder gekommen [...] z. E. daß die Orientalische *Philosophi abusive* also genennet würden; daß die Griechen zu allererst *philosophiret* hätten; daß die *Pythagorische Philosophie* elendes Zeug und keiner Hochachtung würdig sey [...]« (*ibid.*: 1096).

<sup>6</sup> Tiedemann (1791).

<sup>7</sup> Neither Egyptian nor Chaldaean scripts were deciphered; any reconstruction had to rely on Greek and Roman sources.

<sup>8</sup> One certainly gains this impression in the following works: Meiners (1786); Eberhard (1787); Buhle (1796). The latter is published after Tiedemann, and will be used extensively by Hegel.

<sup>9</sup> Hornius (1655); Burnet (1692).

<sup>10</sup> Kalckstein (1715). All of the more prominent authors of the time – like Buddeus, Deslandes, Brucker etc. – dealt with China.

<sup>11</sup> Amongst them are: Buonafede (1766); Gurlitt (1786); Gmeiner (1788).

<sup>12</sup> Like for example: Formey (1760); Batteux (1769); Adelung (1786); Meiners (1786).

<sup>13</sup> Wolff published the *Oratio* in 1726 with annotations.

to leave Halle and Prussia because of differences with »orthodox and pietists,« that the conflict produced an »enormous literature of pamphlets,« but one does not learn about its contents. The *Oratio* is never mentioned, neither as a publication nor the topic of it. In these publications, students are told that Leibniz and Wolff were the most famous philosophers of the period in Germany, and that they fought for rationality, for rationally grounded metaphysics and morals. Their engagement with Chinese philosophy is, however, not considered worthy of mention. To make things worse, a closer look will show that this sort of *damnatio memoriae* had already been practiced by authors during the eighteenth century after Brucker, and continued in the twentieth century.

So I fully agree with Bernasconi that we first of all ought to know how the (monocultural) canon was established. But then we must see that establishing another canon will only be possible by new orientations and interactions in philosophy worldwide, by conversations »grounded in mutual respect for each tradition« as Norton-Smith (2015: 149) says where philosophers are ready to acknowledge and assimilate (Hountondji 2015: 141) ideas from different cultural traditions because they are »inspiring« in their own respective contexts. I try to describe such interactions with the notion of *polylogues*.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 The Need for Polylogues

Let me start a sketch of it with a personal experience which comes to my mind because of Norton-Smith's warning against »preserving [...] material of indigenous peoples, just in case it might sometime be useful to humanity« (Norton-Smith 2015: 148). Around 1985, I started a project to learn about philosophy in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For this purpose, I sent letters to colleagues in these regions requesting them to answer four questions. These were:

- a) What do you consider to be good reasons to deal with the history of philosophy in an intercultural perspective? Which criteria do you suggest for an evaluation of different approaches in this field?
- b) Which possibilities do you envisage which can solve problems of »translating« philosophical core concepts from the context of non-

<sup>14</sup> cf. Wimmer (2007a).

European cultures into the context of contemporary, primarily European-angloamerican philosophy?

c) What institutional, political, traditional particularities are constitutive for philosophical research in your cultural context in the present?

d) Wherein do you see the contributions of traditional philosophies of your cultural context to the concepts of world and man in present time, and how can these contributions be made fruitful in face of the coming into being of a global culture?

This then led to a book (in German) simply titled *Four Questions Concerning Philosophy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* which had some merit since there was very little information available in German language on similar subjects.<sup>15</sup> But I later went on to think that my questions, although novel when they were formulated, had some serious flaws.

– They were partly naive as it is the case for the first question. One can hardly expect an evaluation of something that does not exist. Historiography of philosophy in a global intercultural perspective virtually did not exist in those days in any noteworthy sense except under Marxist premises.

– The second question may not have been as naive, but it is irksome in the sense that it clearly asked for a one-way-process. There was no allusion to the inverse need – in every dialogue – of translating and interpreting mutually.<sup>16</sup>

– The third question was one-sided again. Therefore, I am not so happy with my questions from 1985 anymore, with one exception, namely the last one, concerning the possible fruitfulness of thoughts from whatever cultural tradition for philosophy in a globalized world, regardless of the language or form in which they are expressed. I still think that there is a need of working on ways to do philosophy in an intercultural perspective, where a different canon – together with critical analysis of exclusive centrism – is but a necessary, not a sufficient condition. Nor is mere comparison sufficient. What is needed are all-sided dialogues, i. e. polylogues on philosophical issues.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> cf. Wimmer (1988).

<sup>16</sup> Among others, Wiredu's (1997) project of decolonizing philosophical concepts should have warned me, but unfortunately it was not known to me at the time.

<sup>17</sup> The following paragraphs are abbreviated and slightly altered from Wimmer (2007b).

I propose not to talk about ›dialogues‹ but about *polylogues*, considering that any question discussed by philosophers coming from different cultural backgrounds and traditions, ought to be argued by conceptual means and from the viewpoints of *many*, virtually from the viewpoints of *all relevant* philosophical traditions<sup>18</sup>. The first question then will be: *What can be expected to be the subjects and the purposes of intercultural polylogues in philosophy?*

In many cases, mutual interest between philosophers who come from different cultural backgrounds, shall lead them to explain to each other the different concepts and theories, and the meaning of what had been said in the teachings and texts of one's tradition. Without going into more details, I consider this process to be the aim of ›comparative philosophy‹ with the purpose of understanding culturally different philosophies. As such, it is not yet what intercultural philosophical polylogues should aim at.

The issue of intercultural dialogues or polylogues in philosophy is not only mutual understanding. It rather is mutual criticism, mutual enlightening, by activating all the different traditions of thought with their respective concepts and insights, their methods of argumentation, etc. So what would be the issues concerned? Theoretically, every philosophical question or concept or theory can be the subject of intercultural polylogues. Practically, however, those subjects, which are controversial from the point of view of the leading traditions of culturally different groups, will be discussed in an intercultural orientation.

At this point one has to formulate two more questions: *Does philosophy intrinsically need such intercultural polylogues?* Moreover: *Are they possible?* I want to answer the first of these questions with a hypothesis: Philosophy as such – be it occidental, Indian, Chinese, African or from any other cultural background – is confronted with a dilemma, the *dilemma of culturality*. By this I mean something very simple: Philosophy as such aims at universally acceptable,

<sup>18</sup> The simple reason for the term ›polylogue‹ lies in the fact that (a) the association with ›dialogue‹ very often seems to be that there be (only) *two parties* involved – though the Greek »διά« simply means ›between‹ or ›inter‹ and does not imply any number – and that (b) there are conceptual and methodological differences between dialogues where *only* two parties are involved compared to others where *more than two* are. Without developing my claim, I can merely state furthermore – that it is a fact that *in most cases* where there are cultural differences relevant to philosophy, there will be *more than two cultural traditions* concerned.

universally intelligible insights, propositions, and theories. This is one side of the dilemma. The other side: No philosopher and no philosophical tradition have any means to show and to express what they think other than symbolic systems developed within particular cultures and worldviews. Most philosophical thought is expressed in a language – not to forget: in one of many human languages which differ, among other things, in their ability to formulate abstract ideas – and there is no such thing as one language of reason.

Every single language used to express philosophical thought can transport hidden presuppositions that may make plausible something which would be highly implausible or even impossible to formulate in some other language(s). Every language or symbolic system in general has certain particularities which might be a virtue or a vice with respect to philosophy – and it is not only language that needs to be mentioned here: religious or cultural backgrounds play a role as well.

This dilemma of culturality is the main reason which makes me think that there is an *intrinsic need* for intercultural polylogues in philosophy. Without the trial of intercultural verification one simply cannot be certain about one's particularities. Therefore, the alternatives to intercultural polylogues in philosophy are only two forms of cultural centrism: either *separative centrism* (avoiding the claim to universality, aiming only at something which is ›true‹ or ›valid‹ for ›us,‹ i.e. for a particular human community) – or *expansive/integrative centrism* (claiming universality of one's own position and not taking into any account others' positions, as far as these differ from the own position). The outcome will be relativism in the first, mere propaganda and persuasion in the second case.

Now let us consider the next question, already mentioned before: *Are intercultural polylogues in philosophy possible at all?* In controversial matters, stemming from different traditions, we do not know whether one or none of the parties is right, that is whether a postulate would have been universally intelligible or valid, before a dialogue or polylogue has taken place.

A theoretically pure model of polylogue would imply that every party is ready to give up its own *convictions* – except for very few basic principles of logic without which no argumentation would be possible at all – *if and only if* there are stronger arguments given for one of the others' position. Since there are no other exertions of influence other than convincing arguments – not persuading nor manipulating –, no one is ready to give up his or her convictions for any

other reason. It is however not likely that such a disposition is normally to be expected in real life – not among philosophers, even less among people strongly bound to religious, political, or deep-rooted cultural thinking habits.

The first consequence of this observation with respect to intercultural polylogues in philosophy will be that no such thing can be expected from encounters of representatives of any provenience. It is not trivial to underscore the following: Philosophical dialogues and polylogues are *not* between cultures, nor between political units, nor between religions (which would ask for representatives of religions, of states, or of culturally defined communities, all of them relying on or bound to defend some extra-theoretical interests), but between human beings trying to argue for or against propositions or theories on purely theoretical grounds.

Still, this remains a theoretical consideration in itself. It is quite unlikely that discussions between philosophers, whose thought is rooted in culturally different philosophical traditions, ever take place under conditions of complete equality in any non-theoretical matter.

Therefore, we should ask for practically feasible consequences. There might be *practices* in academic philosophy tending towards intercultural polylogues, as it could be taken as a practical rule to look for the discussion of an issue under consideration in at least one culturally rooted philosophical tradition different from one's own. For westerners that would mean not to close their lists of authorities at the borders of the ›occidental‹ lore. Such opening and curiosity quite often will provide unexpected thoughts and insights – and it is possible thanks to translations and the global nets of intercommunication of our globalizing world.

One last question remains: *What can be expected from intercultural philosophical polylogues?* These are two questions: *What can the rest of humankind expect when philosophers activate intercultural dialogues and/or polylogues in their disciplines?* And second: *What can be expected for philosophy itself from such dialogues and polylogues?*

The answer to the first version of the question is not very easy. We certainly ought to distinguish between consequences for other academic disciplines, and such consequences as might be relevant to extra-academic fields.

Academic philosophy would ›globalize‹ in such a perspective at least in the way that it would become natural for philosophers to

know the basics of more than their own regional tradition. This, after the impact of colonialism, might not be easy for non-westerners, just as it will be a difficult task for westerners, although in a different way. However, parallel interest within other disciplines – as, e.g., in linguistics, psychology, history, social theory and others – might not only help, but bring about interesting questions and viewpoints for a globalizing society, as we would learn about the different concepts of other regional traditions.

Furthermore, dialogical and polylogical habits in the field of philosophy could even have an impact on fields other than the academic and scientific one. Such habits and practices could contribute to avoiding common presuppositions of superiority-inferiority of ›cultures,‹ ›ways of life,‹ etc., even in politics. Just one example: it is my personal experience that in political discussions about the goals and the means of what formerly has been called ›developmental policy,‹ and now is labeled ›developmental co-operation‹ the concrete ways justifying the ›co-‹ often are very unclear and searched for elsewhere. If philosophers were trained in truly *inter-cultural* encounters in their own field, I do not doubt that they would be asked by others about their respective experiences.

The answer to the second version of the question above can be very short: *By intercultural dialogues and polylogues philosophers may come closer to what they aim to by profession, i. e. to true universality.*

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