My Intellectual Journey Towards an Intercultural History of Philosophy

GEORGIOS STEIRIS
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece (gsteiris@philosophy.uoa.gr)

The canon in the history of philosophy, as has been crystallized, needs revision with an emphasis on intercultural studies. Especially the view of self-contained cultures and communities, since antiquity up to the fifteenth century, forms an ahistorical construct, which is already being attacked and is in no position to offer anything fruitful to research. Within our complicated globalized environment, historians of philosophy ought to give priority to, and lay emphasis on, comparative study and "interculturality." A comparative history of philosophy aims to the understanding of the presuppositions of the act of philosophizing.

Key words: philosophy; comparative and intercultural dialogue; Eurasian history of philosophy

I was born and grew up in a small village near the sea, in south Greece, called Kiveri, in the 1970s. Kiveri is situated on the side of a hill that looks at the Mediterranean Sea. The region is full of orange, lemon, olive, and apricot trees. Everything is full of the sky's and sea's blue, as well as the green tones of the plants; their fragrance overwhelms the air. The beauty of the landscape is such that the majority of the inhabitants prefer to stay there for their whole lives.

Opportunities for intellectual cultivation, though, were scarce as I was growing up. Our school had a small lending library, which I absorbed within two years or so. We had access to just two TV channels, which were broadcasting after 17:00, while newspapers could not reach Kiveri. I had, nevertheless, a strong desire to read everything. With my pocket money I would buy every single volume of an encyclopedia, and so I started enhancing my knowledge.

My contact with philosophy started when I was in primary school. Next to my home, there lived an elderly couple whose son was teaching physics at the Aristotelian University of Salonica. In one of his visits in Kiveri, he showed me a coin. On its one side, there was Democritus' image. Democritus was a seminal Greek philosopher of the fifth century BCE who supported the atomic theory, according to which everything is composed of atoms. He asked me if I recognized him, and I answered that he was an ancient physicist. He looked down on me, and said that he was a philosopher, not a physicist! This discussion led me to my encyclopedia, where I tried to find out more about philosophy and the philosophers. I discovered the pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and many others. In fact, the philosopher who made the strongest impression upon me at the time was Xenophanes, the pre-Socratic of the fifth century BCE. I was amazed by his teaching on monotheism and the anthropomorphism of gods.

Motivated by this first contact with philosophy, I decided to buy a philosophy book when finishing primary school. Without asking for advice from any teacher, I bought and read the *History of Ancient Greek Philosophy* by Yannis Kordatos, who was a Marxist (although I could not discern then what a Marxist reading of the history of philosophy would imply). I became excited with this book, because I came to understand how deep the facts about our everyday life can be, and how important the manner of their explanation is. However, the author's difficult writing style, together with his fanaticism, made me refrain from engaging with Marxist history of ideas.

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This early aversion to Marxism caused me difficulties in my high school years. In the 1980s the socialist government of Greece gave a distinctive leftist outlook to the subjects pertaining to arts and humanities that we were taught in school. Additionally, the majority of teachers were socialists and communists. My early contact with a Marxist reading of philosophy and teenage reactionary reflexes drove me to quite a few confrontations with my teachers. In order to be able to stand up to these challenges in class, I searched for new readings. Therefore, I came across the first original philosophy book I ever read: Rousseau's *Social Contract*. I think I bought it because it was the only philosophical book I could find in the nearby town's bookshop. In this way, I started reading original philosophical texts. Although it is ironic, philosophical texts were not included in Greek secondary education when I was a student.

With regard to my further development within the world of ideas, I was assisted by Costas Chasapis, a mathematician who was giving me private lessons as preparation for the exams that would lead to my entry to university. He had great interest in the Christian Patristic literature, and in our discussions, I realized that the Patristic texts of early Christianity were not simply doctrinal texts, and that they can form the basis for many thought-provoking discussions. Costas proved to be a source of inspiration to me.

However, when the time came for me to choose what course of university studies to pursue, I chose history, because it had better job prospects. Although my grades were high enough to enter law school, I consciously avoided it. Thus, I turned up studying history at the University of Crete, at Greece's southern tip. It was a new university, whose syllabus did not seem like that of the other Greek universities. It gave the students a wide freedom of choices, the modules had a research-oriented dimension, and the vast majority of the teachers had studied in and maintained contacts with Europe and the USA. An impressive and particularly important element was the library, which was and still is the richest and best-organized university library in Greece. Our professors did not propose just one handbook for exam preparations (something that, alas, still holds for many Greek universities). They preferred to give us a whole literature list, which taught us to search in the library on our own and use the list to read there.

My studies in the University of Crete confirmed that I had an inclination toward theory. Neither did I like research related to material evidence, nor did I feel at home when undertaking archival work. Attending courses related to ideas, I soon realized that I was attracted by the history of ideas, as well as aesthetics. More particularly, I was fascinated by Byzantium, the continuation of the Roman Empire in the east, and the medieval world. Therefore, it is no surprise that toward the last stages of my study there I was drawn to medieval aesthetics, dealing with the light in Christian churches and the icons.

Immediately after my military service, I began my PhD studies in philosophy at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. The theme of my PhD thesis, as it evolved throughout time, was "Niccolò Machiavelli on Ethics and Law." I would say I remained stable in my predilection of the period, but my interest had moved in the direction of practical philosophy, a topic that remains at the center of my research interests today. During my PhD studies I had to read a lot—an awful lot!—in order to cover the gaps I had from my undergraduate studies. Still, by now I was adamant about this being the field I wanted.

After the completion of my PhD, I was lucky enough to find my first job in academia quite quickly. 2003 was the inauguration year of a new university, the University of Peloponnese, located in the region in which I was born and grew up. Tens of young scholars who had earned their doctorate were given the chance to work (on the basis of temporary contracts) and enter this field. I am very happy to say that after almost twenty years, most of these scholars have distinguished careers in Greek universities, as well as worldwide. The University of Peloponnese (for reasons I never managed to comprehend) did not seek to keep them.

At the University of Peloponnese, I taught for four years in two different departments: History and Classics. The nature and orientation of the programs in which I worked brought me

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closer to the history of ideas and reinforced my orientation toward the history of philosophy, with an emphasis on the Middle Ages, both in Byzantium and western Europe.

In 2006, I was elected lecturer at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (having as a subject "The Philosophy of Middle Ages and of the Renaissance in Europe"). It was something quite unexpected, since the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is the oldest university of Greece, as well as of the southeastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. My transition from the University of Peloponnese to the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens was not at all an easy task, due to completely different circumstances and to family problems. At the University of Peloponnese, I used to teach classes with no more than 50 students. In Athens, I found myself giving open lectures to audiences of 300 people. Moreover, modules were taught in collaboration with other academics, something that made collaboration and the arrangement of teaching harder. On the other hand, I was in a big and historical university, with an esteemed tradition, and this offered many opportunities for my scholarly evolution.

I was allocated to the Department of "Philosophy, Pedagogy, Psychology," and this inadvertently gave a more interdisciplinary orientation to my research and teaching. Further, in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens my research started acquiring a more and more intense intercultural color. Being new to the department, sometimes I had to fill in the teaching needs that other, older colleagues turned down. Therefore, at some point I had to teach a course on "intercultural ethics." The preparation for this module brought me closer to the eastern Mediterranean and Asian civilizations. More specifically, I started systematically dealing with Arabic philosophy, which in any case formed the reception and creative evolution of ancient Greek philosophy. What is more, I came into contact with ancient Chinese philosophy, which impressed me a lot.

Around fifteen years ago, both fields formed almost a *terra incognita* for the Greek academic community. As far as Arabic philosophy is concerned, my research led me to systematically deal with the work of al-Farabi, that great philosopher of the tenth century. Since then, I have published a book in Greek on al-Farabi's practical philosophy and a number of papers (in Greek, English, and French) related to his philosophy. Additionally, I still teach Arabic philosophy both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. My aim is to show to the students that ancient Greek philosophy is not only connected with western civilization, but that it was fervently adopted by the Arabs, too, and through them it had a long journey from the borders of China to the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. It is an amazing fact that, while in the steppes of Khorasan, the young al-Farabi managed to acquire a first glimpse of philosophy, so that he could devote his life to it. Modern Greeks, who treat the east with reservation—through the lens of the Greek's cultural excellence—need to understand that cultural bonds with the wider Eurasian area are deep and stable. In order for this relation not to seem one-dimensional and be received as an enlightening enterprise—since modern Greeks tend to overemphasize the influence of their culture to others and undermine their cultural debts to Asian cultures—for the last couple of years my research has acquired another dimension: I study the reception of Arabic medieval philosophy by the Byzantine scholars from the thirteenth until and including the sixteenth century. My studies bring to the forefront various interesting conclusions as to how these two civilizations (medieval Greek and Arabic) interact, in spite of prejudices and various difficulties, concerning predominantly the lack of funding opportunities and the linguistic barrier.

Within this context, I am trying to set up a research group that will move toward a new direction. I have already collected a fair amount of material regarding the activity of Jewish philosophers in the wider region of Greece in the end of the Byzantine era and in the post-Byzantine one. It is an undeniable fact, made conspicuous and verified by the primary sources and the relevant literature, that Jewish and Arabic philosophy was cultivated in the Jewish communities in Greece, and that it was disseminated among the Greek-speaking Christian inhabitants of those regions. Thus, I estimate that the time has come for a systematic study of this research topic, so that the history of philosophy in the eastern Mediterranean during the end of the Middle Ages and

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the Early Modern period be enriched. My default position is that both the reception of Arabic philosophy in the Byzantine world and the study of the dissemination of Jewish philosophy in Greek cultural spaces form part and parcel of the history of European philosophy. According to my research findings so far, Byzantine intellectuals' contact with Arabic philosophy took place through the work of medieval Latin scholastic philosophers. What is more, the Jewish philosophers who originated from the Jewish communities of Greece, or were active there, interacted with important philosophical figures of Renaissance Europe, and mediated the introduction of Renaissance philosophy and science in the Greek-speaking east. The Greek-speaking population at times was not so prone to incorporate knowledge coming from western Europe and was mainly focused on ancient Greek texts.

My cooperation with an esteemed colleague, Dr. Vasileios Syros (senior lecturer at the University of Jyvaskyla, Finland), has contributed a lot to the intercultural direction of my research. His studies on political philosophy and theory in the Eurasian area are innovative. We are now in a position to understand that there was a Eurasian continuum, ranging from the Himalayas region to the coasts of Ireland, including North Africa; after all, in the period of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages ideas used to travel much faster and farther away than the majority of scholars still believe. Civilizations such as the Indian and the Persian, that of the Mughal and the Safavids, the Arabic, the Jewish, the Byzantine, the western Latin, the Iberian, the Armenian, and others had intense interactions and were used as vehicles for the dissemination of ideas from the east to the west and reversely. Not only do goods, armies, and individuals travel, but manuscripts, ideas, and experiences commute with them too. The view of a world organized in delineated boxes, where each culture is allegedly independent and minimally receptive to influence, is quite ahistorical. Although we think that philosophical ideas mainly travel via texts, since one can single them out more easily, we have to accept the reality that, first and foremost, they travel through humans. Tracking down oral teachings is evidently more difficult and needs more attention in research, but cannot and should not be ignored. The fact that we do not yet possess methodological tools needed to deal with oral ways of knowledge transmission in the history of philosophy must not lead us to deny that they existed. Particularly in the case of the transmission of philosophical ideas, broadly speaking, from one culture to another, oral transmission is easier and faster than translation, even if inaccurate. At the same time, we have to admit that vast numbers of written sources remain unknown and have been lost in the course of time.

In this puzzle, Chinese philosophy has its part, too. For around fifteen years, I have been dealing with Chinese philosophy in terms of teaching and research. The Philosophy Department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens is the only one in Greece in which Chinese philosophy is taught as an independent module, both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. When in 2010 I proposed the realization of these modules, my suggestion was met with extended hesitation and opposition. The counterarguments were based on ethnocentrism. In particular, in today's Greece the position that philosophy is the exclusive outcome of Greek culture has still many adherents. According to such a view, when people talk about the historical journey of philosophy, they mean the ways that ancient Greek philosophy was received and utilized by various peoples and civilizations. In other words, they argue that, first of all others, the Greeks—and only the Greeks—developed philosophy. Other peoples of antiquity might have developed some bodies of knowledge, but not philosophy. From this ethnocentric perspective, ancient Greek philosophy is characterized by dialogue and doubting. Such a Hegelian-inspired thesis implies that in other ancient civilizations the paradigm of the wise teacher cannot be disputed, and that the students are obliged to accept and disseminate their teacher's doctrines. Hence, there is no searching or subversion, dialogue and dispute, i.e., philosophy's DNA. Such an approach has always struck me as inconclusive, since those who put forward such theories have trouble explaining to me why then they accept the inclusion of dogmatic schools, like that of Pythagoras, in the canon of the history of philosophy. Further, Confucius' texts, which correspond to the pre-Socratic period of ancient Greek philosophy, were written dialogically much earlier than the first

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Greek attempts of writing philosophy in dialogical form. What is more, Mengzi's book contains lively philosophical dialogues in which the participants discuss a philosophical problem, such as human nature. There is no agreement, and everyone challenges the others' arguments, trying to persuade them about the correctness of their own beliefs. It might be that the philosophical language and the quality of arguments are alien to the western reader, but there is no question that this is philosophy, in whatever respect one is looking at it. After all, we should bear in mind that the Chinese, like the Hindu (Medhatithi Gautama, Vaisheshika school, Naiyāyikas), developed the discipline of logic, i.e., the heart of philosophy.

Today, these modules are well rooted in the curriculum of the Philosophy Department (NKUA) and their audience is continually growing. In the two last years I had the privilege to cooperate in teaching with professors from the Beijing International Studies University and the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, something that also helped me in the further development of the module on Sinic Studies in the NKUA. My own research in the field of Chinese philosophy concentrates primarily on the comparative approach of the political philosophy of Han Fei, as well as the relation between ethics and aesthetics in the Confucian tradition.

I am convinced that the canon of the history of philosophy, as has been crystallized after the Age of Enlightenment, needs revision with an emphasis on intercultural studies. Especially the view of self-contained cultures and communities, since antiquity up to the fifteenth century, forms an ahistorical construct, which is already being attacked and is in no position to offer anything fruitful to research. Within our complicated globalized environment, historians of philosophy ought to give priority to and lay emphasis on comparative study and "interculturality." Even if historical, social, and religious factors have their impact on the journey of philosophy in the course of time, there is a "phenomenology of philosophy," i.e., certain principles that characterize every philosophical enterprise regardless of geographical coordinates. Namely, we should admit that philosophy is multi-faced and consists in the thorough survey of views concerning questions on humanity and cosmos. In other words, philosophy, in all cultures and eras, is a conscious experience that refers to things, notions, events, and their meanings. A comparative and intercultural history of philosophy aims to understand the presuppositions of the very act of philosophizing. Understanding the relations between the west and other traditions is of paramount importance for getting into the heart of philosophical thinking.

Georgios Steiris is currently Associate Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He has previously taught at the University of Peloponnese, the Hellenic Open University, the Hellenic Studies Paideia Program (UConn), and as a Visiting Professor at Jyvaskyla University. Furthermore, he has served as Secretary General of the Greek Philosophical Society (2015–2016). In 2015, he was awarded the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University Gold Jubilee Medal for his work on Arabic philosophy. His areas of specialization are medieval and Renaissance philosophy.

Recent Publications include: *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, ed. S. Mitralexis, G. Steiris, M. Podbielski, S. Lalla (Eugene OR: Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock, 2017); "Seeking Maximus the Confessor's Philosophical Sources: Maximus the Confessor and al-Fārābī on Representation and Imagination," in *Maximus the Confessor as a European Philosopher*, ed. S. Mitralexis, G. Steiris, M. Podbielski, S. Lalla (Eugene OR: Cascade Books/Wipf and Stock, 2017), 316–31; "Pletho, Scholarios and the Arabic philosophy," in *Never the Twain Shall Meet: Latins and Greeks Learning from Each Other in Byzantium*, ed. D. Searby (Byzantinisches Archiv Series Philosophica 2, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2017), 309–34; "Al-Fārābi on the Role of Philosophy of History in the History of Civilization," in *Christian and Islamic Philosophies of Time*, ed. S. Mitralexis and M. Podbielski (Wilmington DE: Vernon Press 2018), 135–44; "Pico della Mirandola and the Presocratics," *Proceedings of the XXIII World Philosophy Congress, Renaissance and*

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