Towards Cosmopolitan Philosophy

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1. Introduction

We call ourselves a rational, or even a wise (*sapiens*) species. Our ancestors learned that we live on a planet; and, having continued the research traditions of astronomy, physics and chemistry, we suppose with good reason that our current cosmological theories nearly adequately describe the universe's nature and structure. Over generations, the fruit of humanity's creativity has formed its own world: a cultural cosmos within the physical one. This *kosmos noetos* consists of works of art, institutions, problems, theories, numbers, etc. To claim that it has cosmic significance is not far-fetched. A program supported by UNESCO, which involves natural objects and artifacts chosen to represent world cultural heritage, entails that we are aware of our achievements' lasting worth. Local appearances thus receive an intercultural status.

We are social and political animals (cf. Aristotle's definition: *zoon politikon*), who depend upon each other for survival. We are born to families and communities, and we pursue our individual and group interests through both cooperation and conflict. Nations, states and cultures are mere continuations of this tendency of individuals to join together. Today, civilizations are becoming increasingly unified. We live amid shared global systems characteristic to economics, technology, legislation, education, art and research. Whether to consider this unification a sign of humanity's progress is debatable. "Progress" may itself prove to be a chimerical ideal. Nevertheless, we always try to improve our institutions, and we evaluate our achievements by comparing them to those of past generations.

Philosophy has arisen from the need to give a rational account of the world and of humanity's place within it. It was the urge to comprehend that gave birth to systematic research. Philosophy, like science, had its background in religious myths and cults. Its texts were written in the language (Chinese, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit) in which poets had conceived their legends, and philosophy shared the human predicament with religion. Philosophical speculation emerged in three main cultural traditions, within which further diversifications occurred. However, the direction that philosophy took was from local to national, international, intercultural and cosmopolitan.

First in this paper, this process will be traced. Next let us address the challenges posed by modern cosmopolitanism to philosophy, which, rather than being threatening, provide new opportunities. From its beginning, philosophy has had to justify its genuine nature, due to its special position between the claims of specializing research and of myth. Philosophical discourse has differed both from that of science and that of religion. The former difference is due to history's importance in systematic philosophical research. The latter difference consists in the confessional nature of religious belief. Since discussion of discourse requires discussion of language and languages, this paper will give a suggestion, in the spirit of Leibniz, about how to account for the idea of a single, all-embracing language and the plurality of natural languages. Final remarks will address the question of intercultural constants in philosophy.

2. From Polis to Cosmopolis

Speculation on the nature of reality and on humanity's grasp of the world began to flourish more than 2500 years ago in Greece, India and China. Thales, Buddha and Lao Tzu, who appear to have mutually independently formulated these problems, initiated three main traditions of thought. Customarily, these traditions are divided into Eastern and Western philosophy, which connects the Indian and Chinese currents and leaves the Greek inheritance on its own. However, Indian and Western philosophies are connected linguistically, which puts the Chinese one into its own class. Ernst von Aster (1980, p. 24 f) comments that the ideograms of Chinese script are abstract concepts as well as concrete optical pictures. Indian philosophy, in turn, may be distinguished from the other two traditions by virtue of its strong commitment to religion. Its goal is salvation rather than rational understanding of the world. (Cf. likewise von Aster 1980, p. 9 and 22).

East and West have never been completely separated. Merchant routes, which promoted commerce of ideas as well as material goods, connected these cultural spheres. One need not assume that the early Greek, Indian and Chinese thinkers had influenced each other, in order to maintain that philosophical thought had transcended its geographical boundaries. This process may be examined in two ways: externally or internally. An external inquiry would concern the three traditions' backgrounds and presumable mutual influences from 500 BC to, say, 200 BC. Background questions concern historical, social, political, religious, literary, economical and technological developments. An internal inquiry would concern how and why search for wisdom for its own sake became possible and flourished in ancient China, India and Greece.

Let us review some common characteristics of these three philosophical traditions' beginnings. These civilizations had developed to a point at which mythology and worship were complemented by rather independent speculation on the character of cosmos and humanity's position within it. Taming the cosmic powers requires an account of their character, which in turn requires conceptualization; therefore, questions began to abound. Customary answers ceased to satisfy curiosity, and questions arose concerning their reliability and adequacy. This tension between doctrine and questions may have led to a new form of religion or a renewed religion (cf. Siddhartha Gautama and Buddhism). It may also have led to questioning of the use of idols (cf. Xenophanes' attack on the Olympian gods and on the anthropomorphic imagery in various cults). Likewise, inherited social and political institutions were questioned, and suggestions were made about organizing them in ways that would be more compatible with human nature (cf. *tao* and *te*, as well as the educational reform by Confucius).

Therefore, thought became liberated, and from the very beginning was cosmopolitan – not only in the sense that it concerned the starry cosmos and sought to stretch the cosmic order to human affairs, but also in the sense that it encouraged shared inquiry. Such inquiry ignores national, cultural, political or linguistic boundaries. It also

bridges chronological distances; for instance, one may take part in a Socratic dialogue by reading its dramatization in Plato.

In Greece, philosophy marched from polis to cosmopolis. It came from Miletos through other poleis to Athens and received its later synthesis in Alexandria, the new center of Greek culture. Philosophy left its seeds to Byzantium and Rome, growing cosmopolitan cities. In China, the province of Chou was the meeting place for Lao Tzu and Confucius, whose philosophies later dominated the whole empire. In India, Banaras was the place in which Buddha gave the first presentation of his ideas, which later spread to the whole India, and to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, Ceylon and Burma.

The original three languages of philosophy were supplemented in the late Antiquity, with the addition of Latin, and of Hebrew when the tradition of Jewish philosophy was initiated in Alexandria. Arabic philosophers gave their contribution during the Middle Ages. After Renaissance and Reformation, many national languages joined the philosophical discussion: Italian, Spanish, French, German, English, Danish, etc.

Centers of learning contributed to the development of philosophy. The era of universities began in the Middle Ages. Their predecessors had been the Greek philosopher schools, especially Plato's Academy in Athens, which had lasted about 900 years when it was closed in the year 529. The word *universitas* was fittingly chosen to refer to these institutes, the idea being that the curriculum is valid regardless of locality. Universal forms are instantiated in concrete buildings. It is no wonder that one of the main topics in medieval philosophy, the problem of universals and particulars, was inherited from the Academy. Today, the experts in this problem happen to be Australian philosophers.

After the Second World War, English gradually became the leading medium of expression of scientific and philosophical thought. It is about to achieve a status comparable to that of Latin in medieval, learned Europe. Intercultural exchanges in other languages, however, are neither excluded nor prohibited. Having one natural language as the main means of communication certainly has advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantage is the possibility of a common ground for intellectuals (and business people, athletes, etc.) around the world. Likewise, translations from English to some other language and from that language to English animate the language in question. However, the possible decrease in the use of other languages in international encounters may indeed be a disadvantage.

A recent addition to the cosmopolis of philosophy is the Internet. The letters *www,* as well as the linguistic content of the majority of messages, confirm the Internet's English-language dominance, which makes it relevant to the topics just discussed. The Internet has certainly sped up the exchange of ideas. How profoundly it has transformed philosophy, however, remains to be seen.

3. Philosophical Discourse

Philosophy emancipated itself from religion, and science from religion and philosophy. Philosophy shares many of its problems and concepts with religion as well as with science, but it lends itself to a special kind of discourse, within the confines of which problems, concepts, methods and theories receive their peculiar philosophical flavour. This feature is analogous to swing in jazz: it is either present or absent; and if absent, the music in question is not jazz. Discourse is an interchange of thoughts that manifests itself in speech and in writing and proceeds by successive, interdependent steps. Discourse can be classified according to its purpose.

Religious discourse is not, by nature, argumentative; argumentativeness is a characteristic shared by both philosophy and science. Theology, unlike religion, is argumentative – cf. the word *logos* in its root. But theology is not religion; rather, it is a conceptually organized theory of religion. Theological controversies are not, in themselves, religious controversies, though the participants' religious commitments could make them such. One branch of theology – philosophical theology – encourages a non-committed approach. (Compare, for instance, to Islamic and Catholic theologies.) Philosophical theology belongs to metaphysics and was traditionally known as *theologia rationalis*.

Religious discourse, by contrast, is based on worship and is expressed in ceremonies. Its purpose is not to justify the creed. Rather, revelation justifies the creed; it is repeated in scriptures, sacraments, songs, mysteries, pictures, and sermons. For believers, argument could neither support nor contest revelation, since revelation is sacred, and what is sacred is indefeasible. Therefore, in religion, discourse means confession, whereby believers acknowledge the sacred truths, and admit their sins. Religious discourse connects a world view to a moral order.

Philosophical discourse proceeds in a free space of thought possibilities. It does not claim to possess any self-evident truths; even the goal of certainty can be contested. The propositions considered to be revelations in religion are treated as assumptions in philosophy. Any seemingly settled disputes can be reopened; skepticism is allowed. The very concept of belief is approached in a different way than in religious contexts. Belief is not conceived as faith, but rather as a necessary though not sufficient condition of knowledge. Belief systems are fluid: we change our opinions according to available evidence or due to internal inconsistencies. Doxastic logic does not tell us which beliefs are true; all have their own controversies. Philosophical discourse proceeds wherever argumentation leads it. Science likewise proceeds through argumentation. Research problems arise from the given state of public knowledge. Methods consist of logic and of intersubjectively verifiable observation. Scientific reasoning is therefore a continuation of philosophical argumentation techniques, applied to the resolution of certain conceptual or empirical problems. Philosophy, in turn, has been influenced by scientific procedures and uses as examples certain cases of scientific problem-solving.

Scientific research, which proceeds from problems to solutions and from solutions to new problems, leaves solved problems behind it as settled issues. Philosophy, on the other hand, may return to its past questions. For example, the problem of universals was re-introduced in the form of foundational questions of philosophy of mathematics. This problem has also motivated the recent ontological theory of abstract particulars. In science, by contrast, solutions are final. For instance, once the concept of phlogiston in chemistry was rejected, it was never re-examined. Philosophical discourse carries the history of the whole discipline within it, whereas the scientific discourse relegates its background to history of science or to philosophy of science.

4. Reflection on Language

In philosophy, attention has long been given to language and signs as the basis of all types of discourse. The British empiricists and Kant had focused mainly on the (mental) faculties of sensation, perception and thought as conditions of knowledge; their approach required complementation with reflection about language. Furthermore, Sinologic and Indologic scholarship made the classical Eastern philosophers' texts accessible and raised problems of translation and commentary, as well as of analysis and even possible adoption of certain concepts. (For example, the words *tao* and *nirvana* have been borrowed into Western philosophical vocabulary.)

E. R. Hughes, a reader in Chinese philosophy and religion in Oxford University, presents some principles of translation that, according to him, are "mere precautionary common sense" (1971, p. xxxvii). A translator must assume that the author had something clear enough to say; expose and correct the ideas of the author; suppose that the author did speak sense and not nonsense; be sensitive to nuances of meaning in the author's ideas; avoid anachronisms; and give full justice to the meanings given by different schools to special terms, paying attention to the difference between a term's common and technical uses (*ibid.*). Strictly speaking "the key concepts of a long-established society's language do not quite fit any term in the other language" (p. xxxviii). A full understanding would require the "study of the whole culture" (*ibid.*). These principles can be seen as those of intelligibility in general.

Sentences of natural (or conversational, ordinary) language can be translated not only to another natural language (for instance from Chinese to English) but also to logical formalism. The purpose of this decomposition into simpler constituents is to grasp common, perhaps even universal logical or grammatical features in the immense variety of actual expressions. Two conceptions of language result: a formal and a material. The former relates to uninterpreted formulae, the latter concerns interpretations (cf. Reichenbach 1947, p. 164 ff). Logical analysis of language aims to (adequately) present all ordinary language sentences symbolically. According to F. v. Kutschera (1975, p. 261) there is much to do, before such an analysis would be possible.

Leibniz expressed even greater ambitions in his essay *De arte combinatoria,* which he published at the age of twenty in 1666. His desideratum is a calculus whose aim was to enable any given language community to translate from any other language. It would contain both heuristics and justification: "ars inveniedi et jurdicandi" (1992, p. 42). It was intended to resolve both moral and metaphysical problems, to prove all rules of logic, and to settle disputes. Moreover, the conclusiveness of any arguments would be shown: "cognosci possit an argumentationes quaedam sint in forma bonae" (*ibid.*, p. 56). Leibniz's model for this calculus is the language of arithmetic.

Today, 340 years after the publication of Leibniz' article, we are facing the same disputes on various issues, as was the case in his time. Although English dominates the scene, we do not have a universal, transparent or rational language by which we could overcome natural languages' logical deficiencies. It may well be the case that the idea of *calculus ratiocinator* will remain for ever unrealized. However, symbolic logic has developed greatly, and courses on critical thinking and argumentation flourish. We can expose weaknesses in discourse and make piecemeal analyses of recalcitrant problems. The successor of Leibniz's mechanical calculator – which he indeed managed to build and which worked – is the computer; its calculating capacity is enormous. Besides logic and mathematics, we have at our disposal various programming languages, all of which can be used to enhance reasoning and to evaluate arguments.

The expressive possibilities of natural languages benefit us. Each one of them is a source of thoughts that would have remained unthought and unwritten, had not there existed that very language. They are reflective in their inbuilt capacity to mix object language and meta-language. Only by means of natural language can we proceed in the logical clarification of language.

5. Invariable Factors

One may wonder what actually makes the Western and Eastern philosophical heritages *the* philosophy – i.e., the shared world philosophy. Congresses and other mutual contacts, translations, books and the Internet help to maintain and strengthen that very discourse that is to be characterized as philosophy. Certain intercultural constants carry philosophy forward. These are the peculiarly structured problems, arguments and theories that tradition has established and education and research nurture. Likewise, logic, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics are the invariant branches that characterize philosophy everywhere. Certain issues are of lasting significance. To these belong correct thinking, conditions of knowledge and understanding, the structure of the universe and human rights.

The last-mentioned issue is especially important in respect to the establishment of a new social, political and legal order in the world. For instance, the Haag International War Crimes Tribunal is a sign of that. We have been able to chart the cosmos, clarify the chemical constitution of the stars and the atomic composition of matter. We have traced our origin and decoded the genetic information of life. Why should we accept violation of our dignity, and yield to dictators when they deny their citizens the basic rights, including access to information concerning what is said of human rights in the Internet? Why should we accept fundamentalists' intolerance and blind hatred of humanity?

References

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