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Racism and Eurocentrism in Histories of Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper examines the fortunes of non-European philosophies in histories of philosophy written by European and American philosophers from the 17th century to the present day. It charts the shift from inclusive histories of philosophy, which included non-European philosophies, to exclusive histories of philosophy, which excluded and/or marginalized non-European philosophies, at the end of the 18th century. This shift was motivated by racial Eurocentrism, which cast a long shadow over histories of philosophy written during the 19th and 20th centuries. The paper also considers recent attempts to produce a more inclusive history of philosophy. By examining the history of the inclusion and exclusion of non-European philosophies in histories of philosophy, this paper seeks to challenge the assumption that philosophy began and has been practised exclusively by European or western thinkers.

Keywords

Racism, Eurocentrism, History of Philosophy, Non-Western Philosophy

1. Introduction

Pick out almost any book entitled “history of philosophy” published over the last two centuries and you’ll probably find a story that goes like this: philosophy began in ancient Greece about 2600 years ago, when Thales proposed water as the fundamental principle of nature, and was subsequently developed by other Greeks and later the Romans. For the past two millennia—the story goes—philosophy has been practised exclusively by other European thinkers, principally those from Germany, France, and Britain. The natural conclusion to draw is that anything worthy of the name “philosophy” appeared in Europe, more specifically, in a handful of western European countries.

But it was not always this way. In fact, in the late 16th century and much of the 17th century, histories of philosophy typically mentioned and discussed—sometimes at great length—a range of philosophies from outside of Europe, even if they predictably displayed a Eurocentric bias by devoting much more space to European philosophies than non-European. By the end of the 18th century, this had changed, with non-European philosophies either expunged from histories of philosophy altogether or discussed with the caveat that they were not genuinely philosophy. The aim of this paper is to chart the fortunes of non-European philosophies in histories of philosophy written by European (and then American philosophers) from the 17th century to the present day. As such, we seek to expand the account given in [Park \(2013\)](#), which focuses on histories of philosophy from the late 18th- to the middle of the 19th century. Section 2 will focus on four of what we shall term “inclusive histories of philosophy” (because they included non-European philosophies) from the late 17th century and much of the 18th century: one each from England, Italy, Germany, and France. Section 3 is concerned with the birth of what we shall call “exclusive histories of philosophy”, so-called because they excluded and/or marginalized non-European philosophies. As we shall see, this happened at the end of the 18th century and was motivated by racial Eurocentrism. Section 4 considers the long shadow cast by this racial Eurocentrism over histories of philosophy written during the 19th and 20th centuries, the majority of which have continued to exclude or marginalize non-European philosophies. The paper concludes with section 5, which briefly considers recent attempts to produce a more inclusive history of philosophy.

2. Inclusive Histories of Philosophy

We begin with the first English-language history of philosophy, published in 1656 and 1660 by Thomas Stanley. It consisted of thirteen separately-paginated books or parts divided across three large volumes and was entitled simply *The History of Philosophy*. Spanning almost 2000 pages, Stanley’s history focused exclusively on ancient Greek philosophy. However, in the preface to the first volume, he indicated that there was more to the story, claiming that Greek philosophy was in fact derived from “the East”:

Although some Grecians have challenged to their Nation the Original of Philosophy, yet the more learned of them have acknowledged it derived from the East. To omit the dark traditions of the Athenians concerning Musaeus, of the Thebanes concerning Linus, and of the Thracians about Orpheus, it is manifest that the original of the Greek Philosophy is to be deriv’d from Thales, who travelling into the East, first brought Natural learning, Geometry, and Astrology, thence into Greece... ([Stanley, 1656](#), preface [no. page number])

Those of his readers eager to know more about the eastern origins of philosophy had to wait until 1662, when Stanley published *A History of the Chaldaick Philosophy* ([Stanley, 1662](#)). Despite its title, this book presents various ancient

philosophies from the (middle) east, specifically those of the Chaldeans, the Persians, and the Sabeans, from which Stanley claimed Greek philosophy had developed. In outlining the doctrines of these peoples, he cast his net widely, discussing magic, divination, and astrology as well as the gods, the soul, and physics. The contents of *A History of the Chaldaick Philosophy* were finally appended to Stanley's *The History of Philosophy* in 1687, when the latter work was published in a second edition (Stanley, 1687). A third edition was published in 1701 and a fourth in 1743, both following the arrangement of the second edition, with Greek philosophy presented first and the various middle-eastern philosophies said to be the sources for the Greeks at the end (the same arrangement is found in an 18th-century Latin translation of Stanley's book, with the Chaldeans, Persians, and Sabeans relegated to the end of the third and final volume: Stanley (1711)).

During the decades between the third and fourth editions of Stanley's book, there appeared elsewhere in Europe other histories of philosophy that featured a wider range of non-European philosophies than Stanley had recognized. One such is *Historiae philosophiae synopsis* [Synopsis of the History of Philosophy] written in Latin by the Italian Giambattista Capasso. Near the beginning, Capasso (1728: p. 6) states that "almost all historians agree that philosophy began with the barbarians", understood in the original sense of the term as referring to any peoples or cultures who weren't Greek. However, Capasso (1728: p. 174) proceeds to trace the roots of philosophy back even further, claiming that "the barbarians had it [philosophy] from the Hebrews, the Greeks from the barbarians, and finally the Latins from the Greeks", treating philosophy as if it were a torch or baton being passed on from one group to the next. In line with this account, Capasso (1728: p. 7) charts the development of philosophy by dividing it into four general periods. The first, its origins, begins with Adam, who is classed as a philosopher because his sin did not deprive him of his knowledge of God, only God's grace and love. After Adam, Capasso treats of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Solomon. The second period covers "Barbaric philosophy and its sects" under which he includes the Hebrews, Chaldeans, Persians, Sabeans, Indians, Chinese (especially Confucius), the Phoenicians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Libyans, Scythians, Thracians, and Gauls, in many cases subdividing these people into different sects. The third and fourth periods are, respectively, ancient Greek philosophy and "more recent philosophers", under which he groups together ancient Roman, medieval, and modern philosophers all the way up to Descartes (along with some of the more notable Cartesians). Among the "more recent philosophers", Capasso includes a handful of medieval thinkers from outside Europe, offering brief treatments of Avicenna (Capasso, 1728: pp. 291-292), Averroes (Capasso, 1728: pp. 292-293), and then "the remaining Arabs" (Capasso, 1728: pp. 293-294), in which he briefly namechecks various Jewish and Islamic philosophers, such as al-Ghazali, Abraham ben Isaac of Narbonne, and Maimonides. In all, Capasso devotes about 15% of his book to outlining various non-European philosophies.

Capasso's treatment was mirrored in one of the earliest histories of philosophy to appear in Germany, the posthumously-published *Compendium historiae philosophiae* [Compendium of the History of Philosophy] of Johann Franz Buddeus that appeared in 1731. Like Capasso, Buddeus (1731: p. 25) begins his history with "the philosophy of the Hebrews", identifying Adam as its ultimate progenitor, "for although he lost a large part of human wisdom [in the fall], it is very probable that he retained some fragments and remnants of it". After Adam, Buddeus discusses the wisdom of later patriarchs such as Noah, Jacob, and Moses, eventually culminating in the teachings of the Cabbala. The second stage of philosophy's history begins with "the philosophy of the gentiles, especially the barbarians" (Buddeus, 1731: p. 37), under which he groups the ancient Chaldeans, Persians, Phoenicians, Sabeans, Indians, Muslims, and Africans. About the last, Buddeus (1731: p. 64) writes: "In Africa, besides the Egyptians, the Libyans, and the Ethiopians, they are said to have been unacquainted with philosophy. But there are a few obscure and uncertain things that have become known to us about it" (these "obscure and uncertain things" turn out to be merely ancient reports of gymnosophists and astronomical learning in Ethiopia). The third stage of philosophy's history is Greek philosophy, followed by medieval philosophy (in which Buddeus mentions a number of Islamic philosophers, but says little about their teachings). The final stage is "more recent philosophy" (Buddeus, 1731: p. 363), which curiously ends not with any European philosopher but with an ancient Chinese one: Confucius. Buddeus appears to have included Confucius because of the great interest in him in Europe that followed the publication in 1687 of *Confucius Sinarum philosophus, sive scientia Sinensis latine exposita* [Confucius, philosopher of China, or Chinese knowledge expounded in Latin] (Intorcetta, Herdtrick, de Rougemont, & Couplet, 1687).

Our last example of an "inclusive" history of philosophy is the 3-volume French-language history of philosophy—*Histoire critique de la philosophie* [Critical History of Philosophy]—published in 1737 by André-François Boureau-Deslandes. More than a third of the first volume is devoted to non-European philosophy, including that of the Ethiopians, Egyptians, Libyans, Arabs, and the Chinese, all of which was developed before the Greeks. No surprise, then, to find Boureau-Deslandes (1737, I: p. 2) stating that philosophy "was born...with the world", and that "nearly all the nations of the world have had philosophers" (Bureau-Deslandes, 1737, I: p. 3). Volume 3 also includes two chapters on "new systems of philosophy invented by the Arabs, and the Scholastics", in which Boureau-Deslandes (1737, III: p. 228) outlines parts of the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Mohammed. Although Boureau-Deslandes (1737, III: pp. 228-269) makes the occasional reference to medieval Islamic philosophers Al-Farabi and Averroes, he either did not read or did not have access to their work, instead drawing his information from a range of European writings about the histories of the Arabs and the Levant.

There are, to be sure, serious deficiencies in each of these histories of philosophy, especially as relates to their treatment of philosophies outside of Europe,

in no small part due to the authors' imperfect knowledge of non-European cultures and their beliefs. Yet in spite of this impediment, each of the authors explicitly acknowledged philosophy outside of Europe, and indeed originating outside of Europe. In this, the four authors we have considered in this section were typical of their age: other 18th-century historians of philosophy likewise devoted a fair amount of space in their work to non-European philosophies that predated the Greeks as well as to medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy. But by the end of the 18th century, this had started to change.

3. The Birth of Exclusive Histories of Philosophy

Key to this change was Immanuel Kant and his followers, who sought to rewrite the history of philosophy as the gradual unfolding of Kant's critical philosophy, treating it as the goal towards which all earlier philosophy had been slowly fumbling all along. To achieve this, they drew upon Kant's own works to establish narrow criteria for what counted as philosophy. To get a sense of the radical change this involved, consider the following:

At the start of the 18th century, Christian **Thomasius** (1702: p. 58) defined philosophy as "an intellectual attitude that through the light of reason examines God, creatures, and the natural and moral actions of men, and inquires into their causes for the advantage of the human race". Several decades later, **Jakob Brucker** (1742: p. 7) defined philosophy as "the love or study of wisdom" and explained that "wisdom is the solid knowledge of those things, whether divine or human, which contribute to the true happiness of men". Brucker's definition recalls—and is likely based upon—Cicero's classic definition of philosophy as "the love of wisdom", wisdom being "the knowledge of things human and divine and of the causes by which those things are controlled" (**Cicero**, 1928: p. 173). In any case, both Thomasius and Brucker present philosophy as first and foremost a practical discipline (or better: a theoretical discipline with practical import). Others saw philosophy in sweeping terms as covering virtually all intellectual and practical pursuits. **Boureau-Deslandes** (1737, I: p. ii), for example, refused to offer a definition of philosophy (cautioning "do not expect to find philosophy defined here"), as its subject matter was too broad:

Almost everything is subject to its [philosophy's] judicious laws in the Republic of Letters: everything comes under its empire, even that which seems should least come under it...Among the ancients, it embraced their theology, their religion, the origins of their history, part of their jurisprudence and their morality. Among the moderns, it includes all the exact and natural sciences, the object of which is not to flatter the imagination with pleasing expressions, but to nourish the mind, to fortify it with solid knowledge.

The definitions of Thomasius, Brucker, and Deslandes are clearly inclusive in nature, enabling some or even all non-European philosophies to qualify as philosophy. By contrast, Kantian philosophers defined philosophy much more narrowly. For example, Karl Leonhard **Reinhold** (1791: p. 13+20-21) defined phi-

philosophy as the “science of the determinate interrelation of things, independent of experience” and the history of philosophy as “the portrayed quintessence of the changes that the science of the necessary interrelation of things has undergone from their origin down to our times”. And [Johann Gottlieb Gerhard Buhle \(1796-1804, I: p. 1\)](#) began his 8-volume *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie und einer kritischen Literatur derselben* [Textbook of the History of Philosophy and a Critical Literature of the Same] by stating that “Philosophy is the science of the nature of human mind in and for itself, and of its primal relation to objects outside itself. The history of philosophy is a pragmatic account of the most important attempts made by the finest minds of ancient and modern times to bring about this science”. Such definitions were indebted to—and clearly served the interests of—Kant’s critical philosophy, treating it as encapsulating the true essence of philosophy. They also acted as a filter, sifting out any doctrines or systems of thought that could not be seen as a stage in the unfolding of Kantianism, as non-European thought invariably could not. So at a stroke, these new definitions of philosophy ensured that all non-European thought would no longer qualify as philosophical, making philosophy an exclusively European enterprise. Accordingly, when Kantians began writing their own histories of philosophy at the end of the 1790s, they found no place for any doctrines or systems that originated outside of Europe. One of the earliest examples of this was Dieterich Tiedemann, who at the start of his 6-volume *Geist der spekulativen Philosophie von Thales bis Sokrates* [The Spirit of Speculative Philosophy from Thales to Socrates] of 1791-1797 took up the question of whether philosophy could be found outside Europe. His answer was resoundingly negative: the doctrines of the Chaldeans, Persians, Indians, and Egyptians did not derive from concepts or from experience and were lacking in proof, being based either on fictions or religious ideas. As such, they did not qualify as philosophy, leading [Tiedemann \(1791-1797, I: p. xix\)](#) to conclude that “we have no right to speak of the philosophy of these peoples, or to include such doctrines in a history of philosophy”. Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann took a simpler approach, simply ignoring non-European thought altogether and asserting that the history of philosophy began with the ancient Greeks. The opening lines of his 11-volume *Geschichte der Philosophie* [*History of Philosophy*] (1798-1819) are these:

The Greek nation is unique in history. None has received so little from others, communicated so much to others, none has had such a great influence—outlasting their political existence—on the intellectual development of almost all civilized nations and on the course of scientific culture. Even if the Greeks are not an original people who, from their own inner strength, began their education isolated and independent of others, they still possess originality in that, after the basis of their culture had been laid perhaps by foreign influence, they gave it a distinct character and orientation ([Tennemann, 1798-1819, I: p. 3](#)).

[Park \(2013: p. 23\)](#) notes that Kant privately approved of these attempts to re-

write the history of philosophy, having done something similar himself when sketching out philosophy's history in his logic lectures of the 1780s. In these lectures, Kant (1992: p. 261, cf. p. 340, pp. 539-540) claimed that the Greeks were the originators of philosophy and dismissed the systems of other cultures as either not philosophical at all or like "child's play" in comparison with the Greeks. As Park (2013: pp. ix-x) has noted, such thinking dovetailed perfectly with the racist ideology Kant spouted in his anthropological writings. According to Kant, the human species was divided into four distinct races, of descending levels of ability and worth: 1) whites, who possess all the talents and motivating forces, 2) Asians, who are educable but not in the abstract concepts required for philosophy, 3) Africans, who are educable but only as servants, and 4) native Americans, who are not educable at all (Kant, 2007: pp. 59-61, 84-97, 145-159, 195-218; Kant, 2012: pp. 439-679). If we follow through the logic of Kant's account we are led to the conclusion that philosophizing is and could be the preserve of white Europeans alone; no surprise, then, that he should think philosophy had arisen in Europe and nowhere else.

A notable variation of this idea was soon developed by Friedrich August Carus in his *Ideen zur Geschichte der Philosophie* [Ideas on the History of Philosophy] (Carus, 1809), namely that the Greeks possessed an innate "creative genius" not shared by other peoples, which is why philosophy flowered there and not elsewhere (or in one of Carus' formulations, the Greeks had "a cooler spirit of inquiry" than those from the Orient, whose "fervid imagination" unsuited them to philosophical investigation) (Carus, 1809: p. 162). Those expecting Carus to support his claim with rigorous argument or evidence are likely to be disappointed. His paean to the Greeks begins by acknowledging that his knowledge of non-European philosophy was severely limited but assuming anyway that in philosophy the Greeks led the way: "It is amazing how...in their philosophical investigations they alone were able to trail blaze" (Carus, 1809: p. 162). The reason for this, he then avers without evidence, was "the natural activity, vivacity, and inquisitiveness of the [Greek] nation, its imagination, naive sentiment, [and] sense of beauty" (Carus, 1809: p. 163). These innate gifts were allowed to flourish because of the nation's political freedom, the Greeks also having the good fortune to have neighbours who had left the field of philosophy wide open for them so that "they could more easily distinguish themselves by the novelty of their assertions and observations" (Carus, 1809: p. 163). Without denying that the Greeks may have absorbed some ideas from other nations, Carus (1809: p. 164) insisted that the Greeks were "creative geniuses" who "gave back to the Asians and Africans with abundant interest the meagre knowledge received from them". As we shall see, Carus' unevidenced claim that the ancient Greeks were naturally blessed with an innate genius or philosophical spirit was to become uncritically accepted by so many philosophers that it became a trope in the majority of histories of philosophy written throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

To get a sense of how radical Carus' notion of Greek innate genius was, com-

pare it with the assessment of **Edmond Pourchot** (1700, I: pp. v-vi) from a century before, in his *Institutio philosophica* [Philosophical Instruction]:

we should assign a received philosophy not to the Greeks alone, but likewise to those men distinguished by natural talent and knowledge of natural things, men who are first called *wise* then *philosophers*. Thus interpreters and teachers of the truth have existed in other nations: *rabbis* among the Hebrews, *Chaldeans* among the Babylonians and Assyrians, *magi* among the Persians, *Brahmans* or *gymnosophists* among the Indians, and indeed, there have been supporters of the human disciplines and liberal arts even in the distant shores of the East, in *China*, where *Confucius* is especially celebrated and for that reason is called a *Chinese philosopher*.

Similar statements can be found in histories of philosophy across the 17th and 18th centuries. However, Kantians and their ilk quickly endorsed Carus' idea that the Greeks alone had an innate creative genius. A case in point is Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann. As we have seen, in 1798 Tennemann had claimed that philosophy began with the Greeks without attributing to them any special talents or genius. But in 1812, at the start of a shorter history of philosophy, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie für den akademischen Unterricht* [Outline of the History of Philosophy for Academic Teaching], he demonstrated how fully he had absorbed and endorsed Carus' idea of innate Greek genius, calling it a "philosophical spirit". **Tennemann** (1812: pp. 8-9) there claims:

Although we find traces of philosophical thinking among all peoples, the general disposition has not developed among all peoples to the same degree and philosophizing has not been elevated to the status of science. In general, nature seems to make the mental cultivation of one people the means of cultivating others, and to bestow originality in philosophizing only on a few. Consequently, not all peoples have an equal claim to a place in the history of philosophy. The first place can be given only to those in whom the philosophical spirit has really awakened...The Greek people are the ones who created an era in the history of philosophy through [their] originality...Accordingly, we first find a truly philosophical spirit among the Greeks...

Tennemann clearly found Carus' idea of Greek genius convenient for buttressing the belief he had already reached on Kantian grounds, namely that true philosophy began with the Greeks (for more on the history and development of the myth of the "Greek miracle", see **Heit** (2007), though note that he traces the idea back to Tennemann without mentioning Carus).

Carus himself did not share the Kantian view that generations of philosophers had been slowly fumbling towards Kant's own philosophy, nor did many authors of histories of philosophy in the 19th century. Nevertheless, numerous authors did adopt many of the principles Kant and his followers had used to rewrite philosophy's history. Hence, from the early 19th century onwards, it became widely

accepted as fact that philosophy was Greek in origin, that it had been conjured into existence by an innate genius found in no other peoples, and that the ideas or systems of non-Europeans, however interesting they may be in their own right, did not qualify as true philosophy. All of these tropes are found in the lectures on the history of philosophy Hegel delivered between 1805 and 1831. In the earlier versions of these lectures, Hegel dismissed “oriental” thinking brusquely, deeming it a preliminary matter and insisting that it did not merit a place in the history of philosophy proper (see [Park, 2013: pp. 116-117](#)). In later versions of his lectures, he devoted much more space to the orient and its thought, but still treated it as preliminary to the history of philosophy and still insisted that it was not authentic philosophy:

What comes to our attention first in history is the Oriental world. No philosophy in the proper sense, however, can be found there...[T]he Oriental domain is on the whole to be excluded from the history of philosophy... Philosophy proper first emerges in the West...In the West we are on the proper soil of philosophy ([Hegel, 2009: pp. 89+91](#)).

[Hegel \(2009: p. 87\)](#) also insisted, as had Tiedemann and other Kantians, that for a system of thought to qualify as true philosophy it had to be independent of religion. That did not stop him from including a brief (four-page) discussion of “Arabic philosophy”, i.e. medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, though he was dismissive of its worth:

We cannot say that Arabic philosophy involves its own proper principle and stage in the development of philosophy. In the main the Arabs took up and translated Aristotle’s logical writings in particular. But they also translated his *Metaphysics*, among other works, and devoted numerous commentaries to it. Some of these commentaries were also translated into Latin and printed, and they are still extant, but nothing much is to be gained from them ([Hegel, 1990: p. 36](#)).

While some have argued that Hegel’s disregard for non-European thought was influenced by the sort of xenophobia common in 19th century Europe, [Park](#) has claimed that Hegel was motivated by a racial theory similar to Kant’s, which explains why he restricted philosophy to the Greeks and “Germanic” peoples (understood as those from central and western Europe), such as he does here:

In the West we are on the proper soil of philosophy, and here we now have two major epochs or two major configurations that confront us. One epoch is Greek philosophy and the other is Germanic philosophy, or philosophy within Christendom as related to the Germanic nations, since Italy, Spain, France, England, and others, have received a new shape through the Germanic nations ([Hegel, 1990: p. 91](#)).

As [Park \(2013: p. 130\)](#) puts it, Hegel’s history of philosophy seeks to show that “the agents of philosophy are Whites”.

4. The Long Shadow: The Persistence of Exclusive Histories of Philosophy over the Last Two Centuries

There is no doubt that Kant and Hegel were highly influential philosophers, but like most philosophers, the strongest impression their philosophical ideas made on others was felt during their lifetimes and in the years immediately following their death. This impression was felt less and less by successive generations. Yet in terms of influence, their restriction of true philosophy to the borders of Europe outlasted any of their philosophical ideas, casting a long shadow over the discipline of philosophy and especially over those in the 19th and 20th centuries who sought to write their own histories of philosophy.

To better understand this, let's return to the claim that philosophy began (indeed, could only have began) with the Greeks, on account of their innate creative genius or philosophical spirit. As already noted, this claim was uncritically accepted by a great many European philosophers as if somehow obviously true, and often used to justify beginning a history of philosophy with the Greeks. One such was Johann Eduard Erdmann (1805-1892). At the beginning of his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* [Outline of the History of Philosophy], after dismissing the “confused semi-religious and semi-physical doctrines of ancient Persians and Egyptians”, he insists that there is no basis to speak of a pre-Hellenic philosophy. Instead, Erdmann (1866, I: p. 11) explains that “it is the Greek ear that first hears γνῶθι σεαυτόν [know thyself]”, and motivated by this desire to understand the nature of the human mind that occurred in no other peoples, “the history of philosophy begins with the philosophy of the Greeks”. Erdmann's language suggests this to be a simple and uncontroversial historical fact, and he certainly felt no need to dwell upon it or mount a defence of it. In this he was not alone: it is a truism throughout the ages that untruths repeated often enough become facts, at least to those not minded to question them or investigate their source, and few in 19th century Europe were minded to question or investigate the idea that the Greeks alone were imbued with a philosophical spirit.

The racist undertones of this idea were occasionally made more explicit than one might suspect from reading Erdmann. For example, in a lengthy essay surveying the history of philosophy, Frederick Denison Maurice (1845: p. 570) left no doubt he believed the Greeks had a superior mind, referring not just to “Greek genius” but also “European wisdom”, contrasting this with the “pride and luxury of Asia” peopled by those of a “vivacious and volatile temper”. In a similar vein, Friedrich Ueberweg (1863-1866, I: p. 13), in his oft-printed textbook, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* [Outline of the History of Philosophy], insisted that the Greeks alone combined the strength and courage found in those of northern Europe with the capacity for higher culture found in the East. Even more explicit was Albert Stöckl (1870, I: p. 12), who in his *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* [Handbook of the History of Philosophy] insisted that “the Oriental, with his tendency to idle quietism, did not possess that mobility

and energy of mind which is required for the creation of real philosophical systems. In contrast, this mobility and energy of mind is found in the richest measure among the Greeks, and that is why they became the creators and founders of real philosophy”. And more explicit still, in his *Histoire de la philosophie* [History of Philosophy], Jules-Emile Alaux (1882: p. 10) conceded that philosophy is found among many peoples, but insisted that it is not found equally because “some races are more capable of philosophy than others, just as there are races more capable of poetry or art”. Nor was the racial Eurocentrism confined to philosophers: even natural scientists like Georges Cuvier (1817: pp. 94-96) insisted that Caucasians were naturally (perhaps exclusively) suited to philosophy compared to other races, writing:

The Caucasian [race]...is distinguished by the beauty of the oval which forms the head; and it is this [race] which has given rise to the most civilized peoples, to those who most generally dominated the others...It is this great and respectable branch of the Caucasian race [sc. the Indian, German, and Pelasgic branch], which has carried philosophy, the sciences and the arts the furthest, and which has been their depository for thirty centuries.

Such thinking quickly became convention, more on the strength of repetition than quality of argument, and in so doing it overthrew the idea that philosophy may have originated outside of Europe, despite this being, as we have seen, a commonly accepted view among European philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Another argument often used to establish the idea that philosophy was a singular and autonomous achievement of the Greeks—already encountered in Erdmann (above)—was that Greek speculation was based on a free, independent, application of reason, whereas that of other cultures was not, because reason in those cultures was choked by the fog of myths or religion and so unable to operate unfettered. This argument, which has its roots in Tiedemann’s insistence—amplified by Hegel—that true philosophy had to be independent of religion, was often tightly bound up with paeans to innate Greek genius, but it was sometimes separated out enough as to serve as an independent argument in its own right. For example, Eduard Zeller (1876: pp. 108-109) in his *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung* [The Philosophy of the Greeks in Their Historical Development], argued that while speculation in the east was “cultivated almost exclusively by priests, developed entirely out of religion, on which its direction and content constantly depended”, the Greeks employed “sufficient freedom of thought to turn not to religious tradition but to things themselves to find out the truth about the nature of things”. In a similar vein, Samuel Henry Butcher (1891: p. 3), in his oft-reprinted *Some Aspects of the Greek Genius*, contrasted the Greeks’ engagement in “a free play of intellect and imagination” (note the Kantian phrasing here) with the clipping of reason’s wings elsewhere:

The Eastern nations, speaking generally, had loved to move in a region of

twilight, content with that half-knowledge which stimulates the religious sense. They had thought it impious to draw aside the veil which hides God from man. They had shrunk in holy awe from the study of causes, from inquiries into origin, from explaining the perplexed ways of the universe. Ignorance had been the sacred duty of the layman (Butcher, 1891: p. 2).

Whereas the idea of innate Greek genius did not, in itself, offer a good basis for excluding Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Sabeans, Egyptians and Ethiopians from a history of philosophy, the argument that the thought of such peoples was quasi-mythological or quasi-theological did. Indeed, that argument, by itself, enabled European philosophers to erect a hard border around their discipline, a border that in practice would keep out virtually every thought or system from outside Europe. And in that it was supremely successful: over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Chinese, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Sabeans, Egyptians and Ethiopians appeared less and less often in histories of philosophy, and on the occasions they did appear the discussion was typically prefaced by the disclaimer that their thought did not qualify as true philosophy. The belief that philosophy began with white peoples thus became entrenched, and it remains so today despite coming under the occasional challenge (see for example James, 1954; Bernal, 1987, 1991, 2006; Flegel, 2018).

The hard border around philosophy separating it from religion has, of course, been vigorously policed by many European and western philosophers for almost two hundred years, albeit not without enormous hypocrisy, given that a good proportion of the philosophy formed inside Europe over the last two millennia was produced no more independently of religion than that found outside it. Yet the former was rarely excluded from histories of philosophy in the systematic way in which non-European ideas were, suggesting that what mattered when determining true philosophy wasn't so much whether it was produced independently of religion but whether it was produced independently of any religion except the Christianity of (white) Europe. To see this, note that if one were to use "independence from religion" as a filter to sift out true philosophy from what is not and thus determine what should and should not be included in a history of philosophy, then assuming one used it consistently one would sift out a large part of medieval European philosophy as well as medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, on the grounds that it was not produced independently of religion. That is, one would take something like the line of Albert Schwegler (1848: p. 4), who claimed in his *Geschichte der Philosophie im Umriß* [History of Philosophy in Outline] that as the whole of medieval philosophy was concerned with theological doctrines, he would not discuss any of it. But in this matter, Schwegler was the exception rather than the rule, and for the most part, in histories of philosophy written in the 19th and 20th centuries, medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy were sifted out disproportionately more than (white) medieval European philosophy.

Indeed, in the last two centuries, many of those who wrote a history of phi-

philosophy discussed only Christian thinkers in their treatment of medieval philosophy. Hence Jean Félix Nourrisson's *Tableau des progrès de la pensée humaine de Thales jusqu'à Hegel* [Account of the Progress of Human Thought from Thales to Hegel] (Nourrisson, 1886) made no mention of medieval Jewish or Islamic philosophy, nor did Archibald Alexander's *A Short History of Philosophy* (Alexander, 1907) or Ernest Cushman's *A Beginner's History of Philosophy* (Cushman, 1918-1920). Other authors opted to treat medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy cursorily, as Hegel had. Thus in *Histoire de la philosophie* [History of Philosophy] Alfred Fouillée (1875: p. 206) offered a one-page treatment of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, name-dropping Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides without going into any detail. William Sahakian (1968: p. 103) managed to do the same in just two short paragraphs of his *History of Philosophy*. And such a treatment was generous compared to what other authors were prepared to give. In *A Student's History of Philosophy*, Arthur Kenyon Rogers (1901: p. 225) devoted a single paragraph to medieval Islamic philosophy, which was more than Joseph Burgess (1939: p. 208), who devoted a whole two sentences to it in his *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*. Where lengthier treatments of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy were offered, the treatments tended to be dismissive; a typical example is Bertrand Russell's claim in *History of Western Philosophy* that "Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought" (Russell, 1945: p. 420). Another stratagem was to pick a single Jewish or Islamic philosopher as a token representative of an entire culture's philosophy. This was the approach taken by George Henry Lewes (1852, II: pp. 361-370) in his *A Biographical History of Philosophy*, in which he devoted 9 pages to al-Ghazali and discussed no other Islamic philosopher; l'Abbé Dagneaux (1898, pp. 197+485), on the other hand, chose Averroes as his token representative, mentioning him twice in his *Histoire de la philosophie* [History of Philosophy], both times in passing. Others, such as William Turner (1903: p. 317), opted to discuss medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy only because of its importance for understanding the development of (Christian) Scholastic thought, not for its own sake, an approach also taken by Frederick Copleston (1946-1975, II: pp. 186-187) in his 9-volume *A History of Philosophy*.

The upshot of both racial Eurocentrism and the haphazard (Eurocentrally-biased) application of the Kantian-inspired insistence that true philosophy be independent of religion is that, from the late 18th century until well into the 20th century, philosophy's past, as presented in various histories of philosophy, was quite literally whitewashed. Most non-European philosophies that used to form part of books on philosophy's history were increasingly excluded outright, while those that remained were often treated superficially or dismissively, or included only for their value in explaining the development of European ideas. Whether consciously or not, the picture that has been often painted in textbooks on the history of philosophy written in the 19th and 20th centuries is that philosophy is and has been an exclusively European concern, with any ideas and doctrines of

any value—and thus worthy of recording in a history of philosophy—developed by whites.

It is ironic that non-European philosophies were being squeezed out of histories of philosophy at precisely the same time as more information about them started to become available in Europe. The publication of books on various non-European philosophies increased throughout the 19th century and accelerated dramatically in the 20th century, with a good many specialist works on Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and African philosophies becoming available. For example, in the mid-19th century alone there appeared, among others, Franz August Schmölders, *Essai sur les écoles philosophiques chez les Arabes* [Essay on the philosophical schools among the Arabs] (Schmölders, 1842), Guillaume Pauthier's *Esquisse d'une histoire de la philosophie chinoise* [Sketch of a history of Chinese philosophy] (Pauthier, 1844), Henry Thomas Colebrooke's *Essays on the Philosophy of the Hindoos* (Colebrooke, 1858), Louis Furet's "Manuel de Philosophie Japonaise" [Manual of Japanese Philosophy] (Furet, 1858), Salomon Munk's *Mélanges de philosophie Juive et Arabe* [Blends of Jewish and Arabic philosophy] (Munk, 1859), and Arthur de Gobineau's *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* [Religions and Philosophies in Central Asia] (de Gobineau, 1865). One of the interesting features of this explosion of books on non-European philosophies is who wrote them. The authors were not professional philosophers, but rather (following the above order): an orientalist, poet, mathematician, missionary, professor of Hebrew, and diplomat. So successfully had philosophers in Europe drawn the parameters of philosophy to exclude anything from outside Europe that they no longer felt the need to write about it themselves.

Yet the proliferation of books on non-European philosophies—and the attendant accumulation of so much evidence of philosophical activity outside Europe—didn't induce authors of philosophy's history to deviate from the Eurocentric narrative that had become embedded by Kant and Hegel. The occasional few who did discuss non-European philosophies in their histories generally stuck to the Kantian-Hegelian line by denying that these non-European philosophies qualified as philosophy at all. Take, for example, Victor Cousin's *Histoire générale de la philosophie: depuis les temps les plus anciens jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e siècle* [General History of Philosophy, From the Earliest Times to the End of the 18th Century]. Cousin (1863: pp. 36-98) begins his history with a chapter on "oriental philosophy", covering Egypt, Persia, China, Indian (Hinduism and Buddhism). To the question of whether the ideas of these peoples qualify as philosophical systems, Cousin (1863: p. 37) responds: "I do not hesitate to say no, at least in the current state of our knowledge of them". He elaborates: Egyptian thought—for all its genius—did not take on a "philosophical form" (Cousin, 1863: p. 38), while Chinese philosophy "is scarcely more than a collection of moral, political, administrative and even economic maxims": Confucius, he states, was a true sage but not a metaphysician, so "he does not belong to the family of great philosophers" (Cousin, 1863: p. 39). A similarly dismissive attitude was taken by Stöckl. Beginning his history with an exposition of the thought of eastern na-

tions, Stöckl (1870, I: p. 12) cautioned that “oriental philosophy...does not yet in itself fully present the essential characteristics of philosophy” and that it is in Greece that “we encounter the real birthplace of philosophy as distinct from religious teaching”. And in *A Handbook of the History of Philosophy for the Use of Students*, Ernest Belfort Bax (1886: p. 15) dismissed the thought of classical civilizations of Assyria, Babylonia, Palestine, China, India, and Egypt as “quasi-philosophies, or more properly theosophies”, and insisted that Hindu thought was “semi-philosophical” (Bax, 1886: p. 17).

On occasion, non-western philosophies could be excluded simply on the ground that they wouldn’t easily fit into the well-established narrative of European philosophy that began with Thales and then remained an exclusively European enterprise. Wilhelm Windelband (1892: p. 18n1) took this line in his *Geschichte der Philosophie* [History of Philosophy], insisting:

Even if it be conceded that the basics of moral philosophy among the Chinese rise above moralising, and especially [the basics] of logic among the Indians rise above incidental reflections on the formation of scientific concepts—which shall not be discussed here—they remain so remote from the internally-unified and self-contained course of European philosophy that a textbook has no occasion to enter into them.

Here, then, was a *logistical* reason for excluding non-European philosophies: the history of European philosophy had become so “internally-unified and self-contained” that even if one acknowledged non-European philosophies to be genuine philosophy there was nowhere for them to fit, at least without disrupting the tightly-knit, Eurocentrically-focused chronological narrative that by now had been refined and polished by numerous earlier historians of philosophy.

By the 1940s, the steady proliferation of books on non-European philosophies was starting to leave their mark on histories of philosophy, albeit not in the way one might expect. Faced with overwhelming evidence of philosophy outside Europe, the authors of these histories did not seek to include non-European philosophies in their works; in fact, they stuck rigidly to the Eurocentric narrative of philosophy starting in Greece and then being developed by other Europeans. However, some authors, such as Daniel O’Connor (1940), Bertrand Russell (1945), William Thomas Jones (1952), and Joseph Owens (1959), decided to title their books *History of Western Philosophy* rather than the more traditional *History of Philosophy*. In so doing, they tacitly acknowledged that there were philosophies outside of the west, even if they opted not to discuss them in their work. The stratagem continues to this day, at least with histories of (western) philosophy written in English; see for example Kenny (1998); Popkin (1999); Gottlieb (2001); Evans (2018).

It is worth noting that when histories of philosophy began to be written by American philosophers, they tended to use the same tropes, repeat the same narratives, and display the same prejudices as those written by Europeans. We have already mentioned the histories by Rogers (1901) and Cushman (1918-1920). To

these we could add Frank Thilly's *A History of Philosophy*, which repeats the well-worn trope about true philosophy being an exclusively western enterprise:

A universal history of philosophy would include the philosophies of all peoples. Not all peoples, however, have produced real systems of thought, and the speculations of only a few can be said to have had a history. Many do not rise beyond the mythological stage. Even the theories of Oriental peoples, the Hindus, Egyptians, Chinese, consist, in the main, of mythological and ethical doctrines, and are not thoroughgoing systems of thought: they are shot through with poetry and faith. We shall, therefore, limit ourselves to the study of Western countries, and begin with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, on whose culture our own civilization, in part, rests (Thilly, 1914: p. 8).

A similar line was taken by Clement Webb (1915: pp. 10-11), who wrote in his *A History of Philosophy*: "It is doubtful whether a philosophy properly so called, that is a systematic inquiry into the true nature of the world, set on foot merely for the sake of knowing the truth about it, can be shown to have originated anywhere independently of the ancient Greeks". Aside from brief mentions of Averroes and Maimonides totalling less than a page (see Webb, 1915: pp. 119+122), Webb's history focuses exclusively on European philosophers. And Paul J. Glenn (1929: p. 34), in his *History of Philosophy: A Text Book for Undergraduates*, which ran through no fewer than 21 editions between 1929 and 1963, drew on the trope of innate Greek genius, insisting that "[t]he Greek mind was strikingly original and the development of Greek thought owes little to Oriental influence", and that therefore true philosophy begins with the Greeks because "the native talent and disposition of the Greeks favored sustained philosophical inquiry into the nature of things". While Glenn (1929: pp. 213-218) did include a brief discussion of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy, he did not find any originality in either, implicitly inviting the reader to draw the conclusion that philosophical innovation was the preserve of white Europeans. But one should not get the impression that American authors of histories of philosophy were content merely to repeat the prejudices of their European counterparts, for on occasion they could innovate in displays of western cultural superiority complex. For evidence, one need only look at *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* by Joseph Burgess (1939: p. 17), who concluded a very brief survey of Indian philosophy with the claim that "the Western spirit...is inclined to regard this Nirvana business as a lot of twaddle, unbecoming a man of common sense and sound judgment". And this in a student textbook!

5. Conclusion

The centuries-old idea that philosophy is and/or has been an exclusively European (or western) enterprise becomes ever more ludicrous with each new book on Indian, Chinese, African, Jewish, and Islamic etc. philosophies, although it is

unfortunate that, on account of the tight policing around the borders of philosophy, the authors of some of these works still feel the need to make a case that their contents qualify as true philosophy, for example, Perrett (2016: pp. 2-7). In recent years we have been fortunate enough to have books on Shona, Akan, Aztec, Maori, ancient Mayan, Latin American philosophies etc. (see Mungwini, 2017; Gyekye, 1995; Maffie, 2014; Stewart, 2020; McLeod, 2018; Nuccetelli, 2020). What these books tell us is not simply that philosophy is and long has been a global enterprise, it is also one that, in its global entirety, does not fit into a neat, well-packaged, internally-unified, chronological narrative as 18th and 19th-century Kantian and Hegelian philosophers supposed (and numerous other historians of philosophy after them). Cognizant of this, in recent years various attempts have been made to write a more inclusive history of philosophy, with authors such as Smart (1999), Baggini (2018), and Grayling (2019) seeking to showcase various philosophies of the world alongside those from Europe and the west. As welcome a development as this is, the shift to greater inclusivity does not mean that Eurocentrism has entirely lost its grip over the authors of such works. Indeed, just as the 18th-century authors of inclusive histories of philosophy were hindered by their imperfect knowledge of non-western philosophies, so too are some of their modern counterparts. Baggini (2018: pp. xiii-xxi), for example, concedes that he is no expert in any non-western philosophy and thus much of the information he provides about the philosophies of China, Japan, India etc. comes not from primary sources but from his correspondence or interviews with those who are experts. His handling of non-western philosophies is therefore less sure-footed than that of western ones. And just as 18th-century authors of inclusive histories of philosophy were apt to devote much more space to European philosophies, so too are some of their modern counterparts. Grayling (2019), for example, does little to undo centuries of excluding and marginalizing non-western philosophies: the first 500 pages of his book are devoted to a standard Greek → Roman → European history of philosophy followed by around 60 pages which treat—in the barest of outlines—Indian, Chinese, Arabic-Persian, and African philosophies. Relegating the brief treatments of these non-European philosophies to what amounts to an appendix to a longer and much fuller treatment of European philosophy not only smacks of tokenism but also suggests that the non-European philosophies are in some way secondary or of lesser importance, hence the relatively little space devoted to them. It should be noted that Smart (1999) does not suffer from either of these vices. Nor, indeed, does the ongoing podcast series “history of philosophy without any gaps” by Adamson (2010-) that, when complete, will be the closest we have got to a true history of philosophy in all of its forms across the globe.

These positive developments should not blind us to the fact that Eurocentrism or Western-centrism remains a prominent force in European and western philosophy. While the waning of its influence is to be welcomed, it is doubtful that it will disappear altogether in the foreseeable future. Given that histories of philosophy are often used as textbooks to instruct the next generation of philoso-

phers, the quicker the authors of these histories abandon Eurocentrism, the better. Having explored the extent of the racism and Eurocentrism that have dominated and blighted the majority of western attempts over the last two centuries to write a history of philosophy, we should note that, to the best of our knowledge, a full-blown history of philosophy has yet to be attempted by a non-western philosopher. Though given that western philosophers have spent the last two centuries telling the rest of the world that true philosophy is not to be found there, this should not be surprising.

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