

ON THE ORIGIN AND DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY

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The definition of philosophy is not agreed upon by academics who call themselves philosophers, and the dispute has consequences in terms of hiring and firing, acceptance of articles for publication, and even friendships, animosities and interdepartmental politics. Rather than attempt to settle the problem by attempting one more definition of the etymology of the word philosophy, ("love of wisdom" has always been my starting point, but it is not the *whole* story), I want to share some historical information in order to back a plea for tolerance and the broadest domain for the realm.

I want to point out the vast variety of opinions which have been held about what philosophy is, where it originated, and what its scope is. The first problem one faces is: to whom should one listen? Can a philosopher trust a historian to tell him about his own discipline? Should one take only the word of philosophers? But this only bring us back to the original problem: we cannot tell who is or is not a philosopher unless we already know what philosophy is. For instance, an academic (I almost said "philosopher") who is concerned with linguistic analysis or logical positivism may not consider Hegel a philosopher, so how does one know how to select "philosophers" to inquire of unless one has already answered one's question by selecting the domain of philosophy? One possible approach is to seek the *origin* of philosophy.

I will select a sampling of works which have entitled themselves "histories of philosophy" and which discuss the definition, origin and scope of philosophy in general. There can be no attempt at completeness in a mere article, so my criteria of selection will be diversity of opinion.

With regard to the scope of philosophy, if we investigate the various and diverse histories of philosophy, written in this Century alone, which purport to account for the *whole* history of philosophy, we find that the Anglo-American historians tend to suppose that the "whole" history of philosophy consists of the record of ancient Greek, Roman, and Medieval thinkers, and then, since the Renaissance, the Western European and English philosophers. A notable exception is the work of B. A. G. Fuller¹ which included American philosophy (Northern and Southern) and the recent tradition of Neo-Scholasticism. The Christian historians, such as Mascia,² Thonnard,³ Gates,⁴ and Copleston,⁵ write, to varying degrees, from their particular religious positions. On the other hand, G. F. Alexandrov,⁶ writes from the Marxist point of view, and furthermore, being Russian, portrays Russian philosophy (ignored in the West) as equal in stature with Western European philosophy. Julián Marias,⁷ a Spaniard and disciple of Ortega y Gasset,

comprehends the history of philosophy from a particular Spanish and Ortegian viewpoint. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan,⁸ a Neo-Hindu Indian philosopher, with a background in both Eastern and Western philosophy, interprets all philosophy and religion to be reaching toward the teachings of Vedanta; and therefore his history of philosophy is an attempt to portray world philosophy as a unity, probably flowing from India. Karl Jaspers,⁹ from a particular existentialist point of view, understands all great philosophers to be ahistorical contemporaries, the particular "facts" he chooses are the essential doctrines of the "great thinkers," including not only Plato and Kant, but such Eastern thinkers as Shankara and Chu Hsi, and such "paradigmatic individuals" not normally included in histories of philosophy as Jesus and Buddha.

These cultural, religious, political, national, and philosophical biases should *surprise* no one; yet there are those who speak as if there could be only one "true" and "objective" history of philosophy. All of these histories might be true and objective with respect to the facts, yet they must be understood to be only partial and incomplete and from a particular viewpoint, and to that extent, subjective. Every history is *necessarily* subjective insofar as it is necessarily limited, and insofar as it must depart from some particular philosophical position which determines its principles of selection and ordering.

What one believes the origin or scope of philosophy to be depends upon his presupposition about what philosophy is; but there is a circularity here, for the definition of philosophy in part depends upon its origin and scope. We will see how these are interdependent if we look at the variety of views about philosophy's origin.

Presuming the minimal criterion that a history of philosophy is a systematic account which seeks origins and traces the development of a tradition of philosophical problems (and even this is criterion may be too narrow), there are good grounds for pinpointing "Book A" in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), brief as it is, as the first known history of philosophy. Earlier works, such as those of Plato, did attribute doctrines to predecessors, but not in the systematic way which generally counts as "history." Nor can we find earlier works outside of the Greek tradition. The Indians have not been generally concerned with history. But it is of note that the Chinese began writing histories of philosophy shortly after the time of Aristotle, and continued to develop historiography even during the long period when only doxographies were being written in the West.

According to Fung Yu-Lan,¹⁰ the first Chinese doxographer of the "hundred schools" was Ssu-Ma T'an (d. 110 B.C.) father of Ssu-Ma Ch'ien (145 - ca. 86 B.C.), who in his *Shih Chi*, or *Historical Records*, quotes an essay by his father titled "On the Essential Ideas of the Six Schools." A later work on the same subject, by Liu Hsin (ca. 46 B. C. -

23 A.D.), goes a bit beyond mere doxography, for it not only classifies the "hundred schools" into ten main categories, but attempts to trace the historical *origins* of the schools systematically. The origin of Taoism was traced to the official historians; the origin of the *Yin-Yang* school was traced to official astronomers; the origin of the Legalist school was traced to the Ministry of Justice; the School of Names was supposed to have originated among the Guardians of Temple, and so forth. It was not long before this theory was refuted, but this historical work was carried on as a strong tradition in China. What is of note here is that a similar development of the writing of the history of philosophy took place in China at nearly the same time as it began in Greece.

Then we will begin with Aristotle's work as the earliest history of philosophy of which we have record. That work, understanding philosophy to be "love of wisdom," posits Wisdom to be a concern with the most basic principles and causes of things. The first philosopher so concerned, according to Aristotle, was Thales, who believed the first principle of things to be water. The *arche* of philosophy, which begins in wonder, is traced to the particular wonderings of the Pre-Socratic Greeks about the most general and first principles of things.

Clement of Alexandria (D. 216)¹¹ rejected the viewpoint of the Greeks and claimed that "true philosophy" is knowledge of Christ. Christians, Jews, and Mohammedans all made philosophy the handmaiden of theology throughout the Middle Ages, for the *arche* of philosophy could only reside in God. In such a vein, the Mohammedan sceptic, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406),¹² saw philosophy to be the degeneration of true religion which occurs with the development of sedentary civilizations. The origin of philosophy is, in Ibn Khaldun's orthodox Ash'arite point of view, a "seduction" of men, caused by God: men were lead astray, by God (since everything is immediately caused by God), into the corruption of the cities and the confusion of philosophy.

Juan Luis Vives (1492-1540)¹³ understood philosophy to be the greatest gift of the immortal gods, and to have originated with the Hebrew prophets. Vives conceived the history of philosophy to be the gradual chipping away of errors, which would eventually lead to the unveiling of truth. The viewpoint of Vives was combined with the historical schema of St. Augustine's *City of God*, and amended by such Renaissance historians of philosophy as George Horn (ca. 1655)¹⁴ to make the history of philosophy a continual decline until, not Christ or the end of the Roman Empire, but the Renaissance, at which time philosophy began its upward progress toward the ultimate Revelation of Truth. That was the viewpoint held by the most prominent historians of philosophy until the time of Kant.

A less prominent historian of philosophy (perhaps because he was denounced as a Socinian heretic), Gerardis Joanis Vossius (1577-1649),¹⁵

claimed that philosophy originated with neither the Greeks nor the Hebrews, but rather in the traditions of the Zoroastrians, Druids, Egyptians, and other such ancient cultures; but his position was not in accord with the dominant religious and cultural views of his times. More influential was the work of Johann Jacob Brucker (1696-1770)¹⁶ who, sharing Vives' conception of the history of philosophy as the process which will take account of all past errors and arrive at truth, traced the origin of philosophy to Moses. Andre François Boreau Deslandes (1690-1757),¹⁷ understanding the history of philosophy more broadly to be "the march of the human mind" (*esprit*) and the moral history of the "human heart," traced philosophy back farther, to Noah. And Appiano Buonafede (pseud. Agatopisto Cromaziano, 1716-1793)¹⁸ took the dictum of Malebranche, that nothing could be known to philosophy which could not have been known to Adam, to the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*, that Adam was the first, and greatest, philosopher: he had complete knowledge, named the animals (correctly), etc; and philosophy has been on the decline ever since.

It was not until the German historians of philosophy, under the influence of Leibniz, and later of Kant, redefined philosophy as rational thought based on reasons (*Grunde*), and later more narrowly as Reason's investigation of itself, that philosophy was considered, once again, to have originated in Greece. Tiedemann,¹⁹ Buhle,²⁰ Tennemann,²¹ Socher,²² Carus,²³ Degerando,²⁴ and others writing at the turn of the 19th Century, because of their *philosophical* position as to the nature of philosophy, understood that philosophy to have begun with the Greeks. This view persisted into the 20th Century, as presented in such influential works as those of Hegel,²⁵ Ueberwed,²⁶ Weber,²⁷ Lewes,²⁸ and Windelband.²⁹

During the 20th Century, that narrower 19th Century view has prevailed among those whom we might call the "mainstream" historians of philosophy, who have dominated the field by the weight of their prestige. But that mainstream view is being attacked from all sides by those who would broaden the history of philosophy to include traditions, Eastern and Western, which have generally remained outside the "mainstream."

Albert Avey,³⁰ presuming philosophy to include the quest for basic principles of morality and the meaning of life, has traced the origin of philosophy back to the Egyptian Book of the Dead (3500 B.C.) as the earliest extant written record of man's interest in those problems. He traces man's inquiry about the origins of man and the universe to Babylonian tablets written in 2400 B.C. (but he continues to ignore China and India).

We have already mentioned the position of Karl Jaspers, who traces the origin of philosophy to the great "paradigmatic individuals": Buddha, Confucius, Socrates and Jesus. But even his categories fail to account for the Vedas and Upanishads of India, which cannot be traced to any great individual known in recorded history.

We ought to pay more attention to the evidence presented by M. A. K. Azad in Radhakrishnan's history of philosophy (cited above). If we presume that philosophy is the quest for the meaning of life and for understanding of the nature of the universe, pursued by systematic speculation beyond the bounds of religious dogma, we find that, whereas philosophy can be traced back to 585 B.C. in Greece, although earlier pages in that story which link Greek philosophy to Egyptian and Iranian influences appear to be lost, new information allows us to trace the origin of philosophy back even farther in India. The Sixth Century B.C. was the period of the culmination of a long development of nonreligious answers to the riddles of the universe in Buddhism and Jainism, which specifically repudiated the religious Vedas and formulated their answers without reference to God and according to a rational method. The Upanishads, rational systems of speculation even though also religious mysticism, can be traced back to the Eighth Century B.C. or earlier. Furthermore, there is a great deal of evidence of Indian influence on Greek philosophy (such as the fact that Pyrrho, the founder of Skepticism, was in Alexander's army in India); and that evidence needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

But it is possible to reach even farther back to discover the *arche* of philosophy. Vincent Vycinas,³¹ a disciple of Heidegger, conceives of philosophy as "concealed myth." The history of philosophy is seen to begin with the breakdown of myth. It is the history of man's increasing estrangement from *physics-as-logos*, from Mother Earth, from the gods, who no longer exist, but to whom man must return. The history of philosophy began when man began distinguishing *physics* (Non-being) from *logos* (Being), and thereby began his estrangement from the original unity with Nature. Vycinas believes that there is a reversal in the present (since Heidegger), and that philosophy is once again disclosed as concealed myth; man becomes aware, in this last stage of philosophy, of the absence of the gods. Philosophy will fall away as man returns to the gods, and it is man's awareness of the true *archē* of philosophy, in myth, which will make that return possible.

We can see from this diversity that philosophy has been and is considered to be many things: reason's investigation of itself, the progress of the human heart in its moral development, the eternal truths of God, discourse about the most basic things without reference to God, concealed myth, and more recently with the Wittgensteinians (one of the many positions I did not cover), a disease, which is its own best cure.

Philosophy has been all of these things. Bertrand Russell points out that philosophy has been the mother of the sciences,³² and John Herman Randall goes further: the great mother of the sciences has been a fickle woman of the world's oldest profession, serving the Gods in her youth, Morality among the Romans, then Theology during the Middle Ages, and most

recently Science. She is constantly finding new employment, and I might add, has a lover in Politics now. She is a woman of easy virtue whose career is an adventure, and who quickly tires of her children when they show signs of independence.³³

Russell ends his description of philosophy with the claim that we must not cut off the head of the goose which lays golden eggs, nor limit her fruitful wanderings. And as Russell pleads for tolerance of free inquiry, so I plea for tolerance of differences about the nature of philosophy, even though such violently held differences have been part of her stormy history.

NOTES

1. B. A. G. Fuller and Sterling M. McMurrin, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Holt, 1957).
2. Carmin Mascia, *A History of Philosophy* (Paterson N.J., St. Anthony Guild Press, 1957).
3. Francois Joseph Thonnard, *A Short History of Philosophy* trans. Edward A. Maziarz (N. Y.: Desclee, 1956).
4. John F. Gates, *Adventures in the History of Philosophy: An Introduction from a Christian Viewpoint* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Zondervan, 1961).
5. Frederick C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1960); orig. 1946.
6. G.F. Alexandrov, *A History of Western European Philosophy* trans. Hugh McLean, Jr. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Inst. of International Studies, 1949); orig. Moscow, 1946.
7. Julian (Aguilera) Marias, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Appelbaum and Strowbridge (N. Y.: Dover, 1967).
8. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957).
9. Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers* (N.Y.: Harcourt, 1952).
10. Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (N.Y.: Free Press, 1966), Ch. 3.
11. Clement of Alexandria, "The Exhortation to the Greeks," *Clement of Alexandria*, trans. Butterworth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969); orig. ca. 3rd C.
12. Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muquaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (N. Y.: Pantheon, 1958); orig. 14th C.
13. Juan Luis Vives, "Orígenes, Escuelas, y Loores de la Filosofía," *Obras Completas*, trans. (Latin to Spanish) Riber (Madrid: Aguilar, 1947); orig. 1518.
14. Georgii Hornii, *Historiae Philosophicae libri septem . . .* (Ludigni Batavorum: Jonannem Elsevirium, 1655); orig. 1645?
15. Berardis Joanis Vossius, *De Philosophia et Philosophorum Sectis* (Hagae Committis: Adrianum Vlacq, 1657-8).
16. Johann Jaco Brucker, *The History of Philosophy*, trans. Enfield (Dublin, 1792); orig. 1744.
17. A. F. B. Deslandes, *Histoire Critique de la Philosophie* (Amsterdam: Changuion, 1737).
18. Appiano Buonafede, *Della Istoria e Della Indole di Ogni Filosofia . . .* (Milano: Societa tipographica de classici italiani, 1837); orig. 1789.
19. Dietrich Tiedemann, *Geist der Speculativen Philosophie*, (Marburg: Akademischen Buchhandlung, 1791).

20. Johann Gottlieb Buhle, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie un einer kritischer Literatur derselben* (Goettingen, 1797).

21. Arthur Johnson, *A Manual of the History of Philosophy, translated from the German of Tennemann* (Oxford: Talboys 1832); orig. 1789.

22. Joseph Socher, *Grundriss der geschichte der Philosophischen Systeme von der Griechen bis auf Kant* (Muenchen: Lentner 1802).

23. Friedrich August Carus, "Ideen zur Geschichte der Philosophie," *Nachgelassene Werke* (Leipzig, 1809).

24. Joseph Marie Degèrando, *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie* (Paris, 1822); orig. 1804.

25. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans Haldane and Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1896); Orig. 1836. Notice that, contrary to the suppositions of many contemporary philosophers, Hegel did not originate the history of philosophy as a discipline.

26. Friedrich Ueberweg, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Morris, (N.Y.: Scribners, 1903); orig. 1866.

27. Alfred Weber, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Thilley (N. Y.: Scribners, 1901); orig. 1872.

28. George Henry Lewes, *The History of Philosophy* (London: Longman and Green, 1867); orig. 1845.

29. Wilhelm Windelband, *A History of Philosophy*, trans. Tufts (N. Y.: Harper Torchbook, 1958); orig. 1892.

30. Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy 3500 B.C. to the Present* (N. Y.: Barnes and Moble, 1961).

31. Vincent Vycinas, *Greatness and Philosophy: An Inquiry into Western Thought* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966).

32. Bertrand Russell, *Wisdom of the West* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959).

33. John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Career of Philosophy from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment* (N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1962), p. 4 ff.