

Introduction to the Special Theme on Hegel in Intercultural and Critical Perspective

Karl Jaspers remarked at the beginning of his 1949 work *The Origin and Goal of History*, written in response to the shadows of Hegel’s teleological conception of history and the devastation of the Second World War and the Holocaust, that for Hegel: “All history goes toward and comes from Christ. The appearance of the Son of God is the axis of world history” (Jaspers 2014, 1). Jaspers contested the interpretation of world history through exclusively Christian terms, as well as their secularized forms within the Eurocentrism that came to dominate Western philosophy, which could not be appropriately applied to the various non-Christian peoples of the globe. The philosophy of history had to become global by extending it to the concrete historicity and diversity of non-Western lifeworlds and discourses that called for being interpreted according to their own sense and their own forms of communication and reflection. Jaspers rediscovered a human universality in the historical hypothesis of an “axial age” and, more fundamentally, in the constitutive communicative character of human existence. Nonetheless, his critics have contended that there is a lingering Hegelianism and Eurocentrism in his account of historical structures and processes that continue to privilege—if more subtly in the guise of universality—a Western understanding of rationality and individual freedom.¹

More sweeping decolonial and multicultural analyses have criticized and polemicized against Hegel’s thinking as a primary moment in the history of the Eurocentrism of academic philosophy and the codification—if not the invention—of Eurocentric prejudices that are characteristic of the theorizing and disciplinary practices of modern Western philosophy.² These deeply seated biases, which still powerfully shape contemporary academic philosophy and marginalize diverse non-Western discourses, exclude non-Western intellectual discourses from the genuine philosophical realm of argumentation, conceptualization, and reason, locating them prior to the origins of philosophical reflection in ancient Greece. Philosophy is identified with one self-unfolding lineage, characterized by specific issues and concerns, extending from its classical Greek origins to Western modernity. Hegel’s political theological

¹ I trace the legacy of Hegel’s philosophy of history and the potential and limits of intercultural philosophy in Jaspers in Nelson 2017, 13–41.

² On the issue of Eurocentrism and racism in Hegel and Western philosophy, compare Bernasconi (2000), Bernasconi (1998), Bernasconi (2017), Park (2013) and Teshale (2011).

historical theodicy proceeds from the Oriental despotism in which only “one is free” to the modern West in which alone (despite Western colonial expansion and slavery) “all are free.”³

Despite such legitimate criticisms of Hegel’s conception of historical development, which have a long history before and after Jaspers’ 1949 discussion, Hegel’s interpretation of history, construed as the realization of a sense of freedom and justice that has been unique to the West has its defenders; one notable recent example is Terry Pinkard (2017). He proposes a reconstruction of Hegel’s conception of justice as individual freedom based on the development of modernity as a new form of sociality with new senses of individual subjectivity. It arguably does not adequately address the problems of colonialism and racism associated with Western modernity and Hegel’s portrayal of it, or his apparent hostility to Chinese and other “non-Western” philosophical discourses.⁴

Nonetheless, there are a number of indications that Hegel’s role is more complex than is often portrayed. Hegel is indeed a significant figure in the history of comparative and intercultural philosophy, as he (more extensively than his contemporaries) grappled with Chinese and Indian sources in detail and at length even as he sought to prioritize the historical development of European spirit. As with Friedrich Ast in the 1807 *Grundriss einer Geschichte der Philosophie*—whose categorization of world philosophies as forms of ideal and real philosophy Hegel adopted—Hegel philosophically interpreted non-European forms of thought, discourses that other contemporary histories of philosophy did not consider to be objects of philosophical reflection.

Due to Hegel’s critical relation to Chinese and other non-Western philosophical discourses, there has been little consideration of reflective conjunctions between Hegel’s thought and world philosophies. One potential avenue of inquiry is the role of negativity in logic and dialectical thinking. Another was pursued in the previous century by Zhang Junmai 張君勱, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, and other New Confucian philosophers, who confronted Hegel’s ethical and social-political thought with Confucian philosophy. The recent Western reception of Confucianism has predominantly focused on virtue-ethical and communitarian interpretations. Yet, Hegel is an intriguing modern Western thinker from a Confucian perspective in that he elucidated the dialectic of interpersonal recognition (*Anerkennung*) and the constitutive role of the “most substantial bonds” of the family and community in ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) along with the categories of civil society and the constitutional state

³ On the development of the idea of “Oriental Despotism” in reaction to and after Leibniz that culminates in Hegel’s account of freedom in his philosophy of history, see Nelson 2017.

⁴ One example is Hegel’s assessment of Chinese thinking as non-conceptual and imagistic. See my discussion of the shift between Leibniz and Hegel on this issue in Nelson 2011.

valued in political liberalism.

The articles gathered in this special issue of *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* (FPC) are in part based on a conference that occurred on March 31 and April 1, 2017 at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. I am thankful to my university and the editors of FPC, in particular Jacki Liu, for their encouragement and support. The eight contributions endeavor in their own ways to address Hegel from a plurality of intercultural and critical perspectives to arrive at a more complex understanding of his thought and its contemporary hermeneutical situation and relevance.

The first part of this issue offers critical analyses of significant aspects of Hegel's philosophy and its historical legacy. In the first essay, Mario Wenning insightfully examines questions concerning recognition and tragedy in Hegel's reflections on ethical life. In the second paper, Hans-Georg Moeller reflects on the mediation and tension between memory and necessity in the context of a close reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Nahum Brown writes in the third contribution on the relation of being and nothing, suggesting an apophatic explanation by considering how being *is* nothing in the beginning of the *Science of Logic*. In the fourth article, Emilia Angelova skillfully elucidates in the eighth article the question of Hegel's phenomenology in the context of its interpretation in the works of Jean-Luc Nancy.

The contributions in the second part of this special issue concern Hegel's historical relations with Chinese philosophy and culture as well as the intercultural and comparative significance of Hegel's thought with respect to East Asia. In the fifth paper, Jean-Yves Heurtebise analyzes racial thinking and categories in Kant and Hegel and their influence on the French philosopher and sinologist Victor Cousin (1792–1867), tracing the formation and role of racialism, culturalism, historicism, and their tensions with aspirations to universalism in the development of modern European perceptions of Chinese culture. In the sixth article, Kwok Kui Wong carefully investigates the interpretation of nothingness and the reception of the *Daodejing* 道德經 attributed to the mysterious figure Laozi 老子 in Hegel and Schelling. Gregory S. Moss turns in the seventh contribution to Hegel and twentieth-century Japanese philosophy, addressing the problematic of the nothing and annihilating the nothing and the “self-overcoming” of nihilism in Hegel and the Kyōto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 (1900–90). In the final discussion concerning Hegel and East Asia, Tung Tin Wong considers a significant moment in Hegel's Chinese reception in the turmoil of the 1930s and 1940s, examining the interpretation of Hegel and German Idealism in the works on historical change and social reform of the philosopher He Lin 贺麟 (1902–92) and the *Zhanguo ce Pai* 戰國策派 (School of the *Strategies of the Warring States*).

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