**Racism, Chauvinism and Prejudice in the History of Philosophy**

Open up almost any book on the history of philosophy published over the last 150 years and you’ll likely find much the same story: philosophy arose out of the blue in ancient Greece about 2600 years ago, when Thales theorized that water was the fundamental principle of nature, and was then developed by the Greeks and later the Romans. For the last 2000 years, the story goes, philosophy has been cultivated by other European thinkers, most notably those from Germany, France, and Britain, with American thinkers also contributing over the last two centuries. The clear implication is that anything worthy of the name philosophy occurred in the west, more particularly, in western Europe and America.

But it was not always this way. The first English-language history of philosophy, published in 1687 by Thomas Stanley, presented various ancient philosophies from the east, including those of the Chaldeans, Persians, and Sabeans, from which Stanley claimed Greek philosophy had developed. A French-language history of philosophy published in 1728 by André-François Deslandes contained more than a hundred pages of non-European philosophy, including that of the Ethiopians, Egyptians, Libyans, Arabs, and the Chinese, all of which was developed before the Greeks. Deslandes also included a long chapter on medieval Islamic philosophy. In a similar vein, other 18th century histories of philosophy devoted a great deal of space to ancient philosophies that predated the Greeks and to medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy. But by the end of the 18th century, this had started to change.

At the heart of this change was one of the central figures of European philosophy, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant’s disciples sought to rewrite the history of philosophy as the gradual unfolding of Kant’s own critical philosophy, treating that as the goal towards which all previous philosophy had been headed all along. To achieve this, they established criteria for what counted as philosophy, drawn from Kant’s own works. At a stroke, these criteria ensured that virtually all non-western thought would no longer qualify as philosophical, making philosophy an exclusively European enterprise. Accordingly, some Kantians began to strip non-western systems from their histories of philosophy, most notably Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann in his 11-volume *History of Philosophy* (1798-1819). Those that continued to include non-western thought typically did so only in order to show that it did not qualify as true philosophy.

Kant himself privately approved of these attempts to rewrite the history of philosophy. He had in fact done something similar himself when sketching out philosophy’s history as part of his logic lectures in the 1780s. In these lectures he identified the Greeks as 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 Peter K. J. Park has shown in his *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy* (a book that has not been reviewed by any history of philosophy journal), this dovetailed perfectly with the racist ideology Kant had developed 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, which have all the talents and motivating forces, (2) Asians, which are educable but not in the abstract concepts required for philosophy, (3) Africans, which can be educated but only as servants, and (4) native Americans, which are not educable at all. On this account, only white Europeans would be capable of philosophizing, making it unsurprising that philosophy would arise in Europe and nowhere else. A variation of this idea was soon developed by Friedrich August Carus in his *Ideas on the History of Philosophy* (1809), namely that the Greeks possessed an innate “creative genius” not shared by other peoples, which is why philosophy flowered there and not elsewhere.

Although later authors of histories of philosophy did not share the Kantian view that generations of philosophers had been slowly fumbling towards his own philosophy, they did adopt many of the principles Kant and his disciples had used when writing philosophy’s history. Hence, it quickly became accepted truth that philosophy was Greek in origin, that it developed through an innate genius that no other peoples possessed, and that whatever ideas were found outside of the west did not qualify as true philosophy at all. All of these tropes are found in Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy, delivered between 1805 and 1831. In the earlier versions of his lectures, Hegel treated “oriental” thinking brusquely as a preliminary matter, insisting that it did not merit a place in the history of philosophy proper. 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, insisting – like some Kantians before him – that for a system of thought to qualify as true philosophy it had to be independent of religion.

While some have argued that Hegel’s dismissal of non-European thought was influenced by the sort of xenophobia common in the 19th century, Park has claimed that Hegel was motivated by a racial theory not unlike that of Kant, which explains why he restricted philosophy to the (white) “Germanic” peoples, understood as those from western Europe. While the prejudices of some 19th and 20th century authors of histories of philosophy can only be established after painstaking analysis, such as that undertaken by Park, other authors wore their prejudices on their sleeves. Take, for example, the oft-repeated claim that (white) Greeks had an innate creative genius. The racist undertones of this claim were finally made explicit in 1882, when Jules-Emile Alaux claimed in his *History of Philosophy* that “some races are more capable of philosophy than others, just as there are races more capable of poetry or art.” The western cultural superiority complex also reared its head from time to time. Hence, in his 1939 *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, Joseph Burgess 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!

Most authors of histories of philosophy did not go to these extremes, and usually just avoided mentioning non-western thought at all. The handful that did mention it tended to follow Hegel in including it only to show that it was not proper philosophy, and followed him in insisting that true philosophy had to be independent of religion, a test they claim was failed by the systems of the ancient Egyptians, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Sabeans, Ethiopians etc. By requiring that true philosophy be distinct from religion, many authors of philosophy’s history managed to exclude from their histories not just various ancient non-western philosophies but also medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy as well. The most extreme example of this was Albert Schwegler, who claimed in his *Handbook of the History of Philosophy* (1848) that as the whole of medieval philosophy was concerned with theological doctrines, he would not discuss any of it.

While other authors of philosophy’s history did not take the drastic step of writing off medieval philosophy in its entirety, some opted to discuss only medieval Christian philosophy. Hence Jean Félix Nourrisson’s *Account of the Progress of Human Thought from Thales to Hegel* (1858) made no mention of medieval Jewish or Islamic philosophy, nor did Albert Stöckl’s *Handbook of the History of Philosophy* (1870). British and American authors soon followed suit, either ignoring medieval Jewish or Islamic philosophy altogether, like Archibald Alexander in his *A Short History of Philosophy* (1907) and Ernest Cushmann in his *A Beginner’s History of Philosophy* (1918-1920), or treating it cursorily. Thus in *A Student’s History of Philosophy* (1901), Arthur Kenyon Rogers devoted a single paragraph to medieval Islamic philosophy, which was more than Joseph Burgess, who devoted a whole two sentences to it in his *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* (1939). Other treatments were simply dismissive, most notably Bertrand Russell’s claim in *History of Western Philosophy* (1945) that “Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought.” Other authors opted to discuss Jewish and Islamic philosophy only because of its importance for understanding the development of (Christian) Scholastic thought, not for its own sake.

The upshot of all this is that, from the late 18th century until well into the 20th century, philosophy’s past, as presented in various histories of philosophy, has quite literally been whitewashed. Most non-western philosophies that used to form part of books on philosophy’s history have increasingly been excluded outright, while those that remained have often been treated superficially or dismissively, or included only for their value in explaining the development of western ideas. Whether consciously or not, the picture that is often painted in textbooks on the history of philosophy is that philosophy has been an exclusively western 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-western philosophies were squeezed out of histories of philosophy at precisely the same time as more information about them became available in the west. The publication of books on various non-western 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. Yet the accumulation of so much evidence of philosophical activity outside the west did not induce authors of philosophy’s history to change the contents of their works – they stuck rigidly to the Eurocentric narrative outlined at the start of this essay – but merely the titles: from the 1930s onwards, authors of these works started to call their books *History of Western Philosophy* rather than *History of Philosophy*, the moniker that had been traditionally used before that. By indicating that they were writing histories of *western* philosophy, these authors were at least tacitly acknowledging that there were philosophies outside of the west, even if they opted not to discuss them in their work.

Over the last decade or so, there have been many calls for western philosophy to abandon its entrenched insularity, most stridently in Bryan Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017), and historians of philosophy are starting to heed these calls. While we still do not have a true history of philosophy in all of its forms, Peter Adamson’s ambitious multi-volume *A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* series (Oxford University Press, 2014-) has made a positive start in addressing this gap, though the project remains ongoing and the series is still far from complete. To that we may now add Julian Baggini’s *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy* (2018), which offers an entertaining (if not entirely impartial) journey through some of the world’s various philosophies. Non-western philosophies are apparently to be featured in A. C. Grayling’s forthcoming *The History of Philosophy* (2019) too. It will take a great deal of sustained effort to undo centuries of excluding and marginalizing non-western philosophies, but there are at least signs that we might finally be on the right path.