

An Apologia for a Cross-Cultural or Cosmopolitan Anthology of Ancient Philosophy

As an exercise in historical revisionism, applied especially to the confluence and contention of non-Western philosophical influences on what is typically rehearsed as the “canon” of ancient Western philosophy, this collection of contemporaneous but non-western readings aims to supplement our provincial or otherwise culturally blinkered reading of the history of ancient philosophy. At its most extreme, one could quip – as Whitehead quipped – that Western philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. But when it comes to exploring the pre-Socratic philosophers, our readings are narrowed to the Milesians, through fragments, and subsequent commentaries, with vague allusions to Plato’s interest in Pythagoras. Ancient philosophy did not, however, spring full-grown from the head of Plato (nor emerge miraculously with Socrates or even the canonical pre-Socratics).

The ancient Mediterranean was bustling with cosmopolitan influences, or periods of intellectual and spiritual exchange, times that pre-date the Persian influence prior to the Peloponnesian Wars, prior to Socrates and his philosophical or religious contemporaries during the Axial Age¹: e.g., Confucius and Laozi in China, the Buddha in India, the proliferation of the Vedas, Mahavira the Jainist, the exile and return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, in the time of Cyrus, and – allegedly – Zarathustra in Persia.² This collection of readings is meant to supplement what might be

¹ Prior to the Axial Age, roughly the period traditionally associated with the pre-Socratics, we might very well adopt Plutarch’s adage: “Beyond this there is nothing but prodigies and fictions, the only inhabitants are the poets and inventors of fables; there is no credit, or certainty any farther”; but while this may be true of ancient Greek philosophy, it is less true of non-Western philosophical or religious predecessors. Sticking to Plutarch’s metaphor, which begins with the analogy of ancient maps, which at the outer margins one reads notes to the effect that “beyond this lies nothing but the sandy deserts full of wild beasts, unapproachable bogs, Scythian ice, or a frozen sea,” we do seem to comparatively better footing in the periods preceding the Axial age in Egypt, Persia, India and China.

² “Fundamental ideas,” wrote Jaspers, “rose everywhere in the Axial Age” (1951: 135); “If there is an axis in history, we must find it empirically in profane history, as a set of circumstances significant for all men, including Christians. It must carry conviction for Westerner, Asiatics, and all men, without the support of any particular content of faith, and thus provide all men with a common historical frame of reference. The spiritual process which took place between 800 and 200 B.C.E. seems to constitute such an axis. It was then that the man with whom we live today came into being. Let us designate this period as the “axial age.” Extraordinary events are crowded into this period. In China lived Confucius and Lao Tse, all the trends in Chinese philosophy arose... In India it was the age of the Upanishads and

considered to be the “traditional (western) canon of ancient philosophy” within the Axial age from the pre-Socratics, which typically includes Thales and Empedocles, Parmenides and Heraclitus, Anaximander and Anaxagoras, Democritus, perhaps Pythagoras, and then funneling forward to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And certainly, these philosophers are central to the story of ancient philosophy, especially as appropriated by Christianity and canonically codified within the medieval world. But if we follow instead Peter Kingsley’s reading of ancient philosophy, and his way of tracing things back to the non-Western roots of Western civilization, a strategy that he shares with Bernal, though they go about it differently, then the traditional canon of ancient philosophy will seem *relatively provincial* in scope and geographical imagination.

An alternative cross-cultural canon of ancient philosophy would ideally reach back at least as far as the Maxims of Ptahhotep (ca. 2414-2375 BC) and then trace the history of inter-cultural influences that shaped philosophical discourse within the ancient world; less ideally, but as a step in the right direction, it would seem helpful to have a cross-cultural canon for the period covering the Axial age.

Though attempts have been made to teaching Ancient philosophy in a more multi-cultural manner, these efforts are exceptions that prove the rule (see JTPSch, 2003, especially 686 ff.).³ Ultimately, these approaches are

of Buddha; as in China, all philosophical trends, including skepticism and materialism, sophistry and nihilism, were developed. In Iran Zarathustra put forward his challenging conception of the cosmic process as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine prophets arose: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah; Greece produced Homer, the philosophers Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, the tragic poets, Thucydides and Archimedes. All the vast development of which these names are a mere intimation took place in those few centuries, independently and almost simultaneously in China, India and the West” (ibid.).

³ For more on multiculturalism in philosophy, see e.g., Ofelia Schutte, “Overcoming Ethnocentrism in the Philosophy Classroom”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 8 (1985), 137-44; Phyllis Woloshin, “Text Selection and Moral Obligation”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 8 (1985), 221-27 ; John Immerwahr, “Incorporating Gender Issues in Modern Philosophy Courses”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 13 (1990), 241-52; John Immerwahr & Michael Burke, “Race and the Modern Philosophy Course”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 16 (1993), 21-34; Olufemi Taiwo, “On Diversifying the Philosophy Curriculum”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 16 (1993), 287-99; Valerie Broin, “Integrating Critical Analysis: Philosophy with Multicultural and Gender Focus”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 16 (1993), 301-14; Kayley Vernallis, “Pearls of Wisdom: An Exercise in Promoting Multicultural Understanding and Philosophical Engagement”, *Teaching Philosophy*, 23 (2000), 43-51.

dismissed as ideologically-driven rather than true to the facts; and the assumption here, for most, is that there is inadequate archeological evidence – nor reliable genetic nor convincing inter-textual proof – to support this revisionist thesis, namely, *that ancient philosophy during the Axial age emerged from a sustained cross-cultural philosophical dialogue between distinct but inter-linked civilizations across hundreds of miles and years.* But as it turns out, there is both archeological evidence and DNA testing that lends credibility to what might be otherwise viewed as a speculative exercise in comparative philosophy, where one simply facilitates thematic similarities between contemporaneous but otherwise – so we assume – altogether isolated cultural traditions, each arising independently from outside influence, each emerging as it were from within their own respective pre-Axial age philosophical or religious traditions. According to this older version of the history of ancient philosophy, *de facto* if not also *de jure*, it must be mere coincidence that otherwise diverse cultures across the world experienced, “independently and almost simultaneously” (1951: 135), or from on high, which is what Jaspers seems to have been suggesting, enjoyed an extraordinary flowering of philosophical as well as religious speculation across vast geographical regions during the Axial age (i.e., 800 – 200 BCE). From another point of view, one might say that a span of 600 years is too broad to be helpful; but it might also make sense to interpose the four cycles of historical described by Vico – from barbarism and the age of the gods to the age of heroes and subsequently of men, at which point we revert to barbarism and the cycle is repeated – into the Axial age. To others, all of this is speculative history; what it lacks is any basis in fact.

In view of recent studies of mummies and artifacts discovered along the Silk Road, specifically along the route traveling around the Taklamakan Desert in the Xinjiang Uighur region in China, there seems to be incontrovertible evidence that this region was once the habitat of Europoid peoples (Thurbron, NYRB, 05/12/2011). Aside from the evidence provided by DNA, the uncovered mummies and artifacts reveal a “rich, multicultural, yet recognizably inter-linked civilizations across hundreds of miles and years” (17). By 500 BCE, the already well-worn Silk Road trade routes in the Xinjiang region advanced deep into the eastern realms of the Persian Empire and from Persia into the Mediterranean if not also – as the DNA evidence seems to suggest – into Europe. Although one might survey this evidence with an eye toward establishing Western origins and influence, either Scythian or Hellenic, at least as early as the 5th c. BCE, it could be viewed also as indirect evidence that there exists the distinct possibility that the routes for trade and commerce along the Silk Road were sufficiently efficient to account for some cross-cultural philosophical or religious discourse during the Axial age. But

I also think that there is inter-textual evidence to support the revisionist thesis: Aristoxenus, for example, makes clear reference to a meeting between Pythagoras and Zoroaster (Elem. Harm. 90.12-92.25; see also Kingsley 1990: 248 ff, especially 251.).

Prior to the so-called "reflexive turn" (see Schofield, Cambridge Companion, 56 ff.), which roughly marks an uneven transition from cosmological concerns to questions of self-examination, or from the pre-Socratic speculation to Socratic inquiry, a period which Vico might mark off as the transition from the age of heroes to the era of mere mortals, ancient philosophers - even ancient western philosophers - were often considered to be ritual specialists, "deeply spiritual persons," as Kingsley describes them, with the power to return from the underworld. But that should not disqualify those same religious experts from the status of ancient philosophers or at least important influences on the early direction of ancient philosophical thought. In Empedocles, e.g., the four elements correspond to mythological gods. As late as Plotinus, in the 3rd c. CE, the *Enneads* were read as a guide or assist initiates through the various stages of contemplative transcendence; they suggest, it seems, at least on the surface, a form of meditation not unlike many practiced even today within various strands of Buddhism. According to Kingsley, the Sufis trace their heritage - prior to the arrival of the Prophet - back to Empedocles. As ancient natural philosophers, dabbling, to borrow Meletus' description of Socrates, in things below the earth and above the heavens, the lines begin to blur between history and legend; Pythagoras was said to have a golden thigh, after all, and there seems to be historical evidence that some of these ancient philosophers were able to perform miraculous feats and manipulate the elements or read the stars and travel into the underworld. At the very least, these blurred lines should give one pause as a student of ancient philosophy. This collection of readings might be viewed as the an apocryphal canon of Ancient philosophy.

Surely there's nothing passé in the wish to become a better reader. But what does it mean to become a better reader when it comes to philosophical texts? Though it may seem belated, at least to those who have already followed the dialectical somersaults of literary criticism in recent years, I think that most philosophers - or historians of philosophy, assuming a clear distinction between the two can be drawn - have been slow to accept, with the interesting exception of Rorty, the path taken by Harold Bloom: it's the triumph of literature over philosophy. Rorty is willing to follow Bloom because they share a liberal vision about where we should be headed politically. For Bloom, poor readers read with an ideological agenda, one that blinkers our imagination and receptivity to the text understood as an inter-textual

artifact. A necessary but perhaps insufficient condition of good reading is a mind free of “cant.” But Bloom also shows that good reading includes an appreciation for precursor texts, its t(r)opological history, especially those predecessor texts which animated an ‘anxiety of influence’ for the author of the primary text in question. Bloom is opposed to retaining the canon on moral grounds, as conservatives do (e.g., Allen Bloom, William Bennett), but also opposed to reading according to an ideological template (e.g., Marxism, Freudianism, Feminism, Afro-centrism or Moral Conservatism). Following Bloom for a philosophical moment:

Scholars who urge us to find the source of our own morality and our politics in Plato, or in Isaiah, are out of touch with the social reality in which we live. If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe that we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all.

In some sense, our standard reading of the history of western philosophy constitutes a sustained series of ideological or otherwise over-determined readings of precursor texts that were themselves defensive and thus ideological appropriations of earlier philosophical texts or schools of thought.⁴ Poor reading can be the result of over-determining (by imposing an ideological bias) or under-determining (by ignoring the influence of the predecessors) our encounter with the text(s) in question. But to accept the “Western Canon,” as Bloom reads it, is to read subversive writers within an inter-literary tradition from Dante through Tolstoy or Dostoevsky as well as Shakespeare and Milton or Spenser and Wordsworth. As a dynamic criterion of canonicity, Bloom suggests that we attend to the *unheimlich*, Heidegger’s now nearly hackneyed term alluding to the psychic ambivalence that arises between a strange if not alienating dissonance and a resonant or cozy familiarity. (An alternative set of readings would arise were one to adopt the established

⁴ The editors of the *Routledge History of Philosophy* volumes claim that “[t]he history of philosophy, as its name implies, represents a union of two very different disciplines, each of which imposes severe constraints upon the other. As an exercise in the history of ideas, it demands that one acquire a ‘period eye’: a thorough understanding of how the thinkers whom it studies viewed the problems which they sought to resolve, the conceptual frameworks in which they addressed these issues, their assumptions and objectives, their blind spots and miscues.” I agree, though I think the “period eye” should include more remote cross-cultural influences for the “problems which they sought to resolve” as well as the non-western “conceptual frameworks” or “assumptions and objectives” at work in the ancient world more broadly construed. Even if the period eye can be adjusted, the other concern is with the geographical reach of philosophical discourse in, say, the 6th century BCE. This is one way of addressing our own blind spots and miscues as historians of ancient philosophy.

canon within the philosophical tradition in question; granted, canons are formed for different purposes, and for different portions of the population, but it should be possible to adopt - tentatively - the canon as presently taught within undergraduate courses in ancient philosophy within, e.g., China, Persia, Israel, Africa and India.)

What would happen if one were to explore the non-Western Canon of philosophical literature, or sustained oral traditions, matching the chief figures of the Western Canon of Ancient Philosophy, and adopting tentatively the thematic criterion, or set of criteria advised by Bloom, namely, the *unheimlich* or the sublime, with fifty non-Western - or pre-Western - philosophers during the Axial Age (in China, India, Persia, Judea, and Africa)? By studying these non-Western ancient philosophers, by exploring the confluence and contention of influence that shaped ancient philosophy, we come to better appreciation also - again Kingsley - what's distinctive or unique to the western canon of ancient philosophy. It would also facilitate what might be called comparative philosophy. For those who have eyes to see, or who have the materials before them, there should appear resonances in themes as well as methods.

Take Plotinus as a case in point: The standard way of doing the history of philosophy, and we can consider O'Brien representative of the species, we approach Plotinus by way of Plato. "It is quite possible," thought O'Brien, "to ease one's entry into the complexities of Plotinus' mystical doctrine and arrive at a true assessment of it if one initially lays hold of certain of the basic doctrines he seems to have taken over from his predecessors." But when O'Brien suggests that we familiarize ourselves with "these basic doctrines first, then what Plotinus did with them," he narrows the range of these "basic doctrines" to Plato and Aristotle. Perhaps it is possible to adopt the historical approach, which O'Brien considers to be "indispensable," but broaden the range even slightly for what counts as the "basic doctrines that [Plotinus] seems to have taken over from his predecessors. But in Alexandria, in 270 AD, Plato was but one of the many influences contributing to Plotinus' ethics or metaphysics or cosmology or theological meditations. Plotinus was familiar with the philosophical currents in Persia, India, the East, the lower Nile, Judaism, Hermeticism, the Italian and Roman thought, and others. Rather than reading Plotinus as a variation on Plato, we should really read him with an eye turned toward the confluence and contention of non-Hellenistic influences. Plotinus explicitly draws on Heraclitus and Parmenides as well as Anaxagoras and Empedocles, in addition to an array of standard teachings from Plato (in the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and - less explicitly - the *Republic*) and Aristotle (especially *On the Soul*, but also the *Metaphysics* and the *Ethics*); the teachings of the Stoics are also considered to be influential doctrines.

But at least implicitly, *prima facie*, Plotinus is also acknowledging indebtedness to other prominent philosophical traditions. Given the intended audience of the *Enneads*, for Plotinus, or at least his editor, it is not surprising that he should pay deference to the Hellenistic influences and doctrines. But Plotinus, the philosopher as opposed to the author of the *Enneads*, was influenced by other currents of philosophical and religious thought. But even if one were to attempt to trace everything back, for example, to Aristotle, as a truncated version of the historical method, that familiarizing oneself with some of Aristotle's doctrines will help ease one's way into Plotinus, it is worth more than a footnote to acknowledge that Aristotle's doctrine was itself influenced not only by Plato but also Persian thought, at least at the time of his tutelage of Alexander the Great, then Prince Alexander, son of Philip of Macedon. The point illustrated by this particular case, of gaining access to Plotinus' thought through an examination of the basic doctrines of his predecessors, is that the root system that nourished the seedlings of ancient western philosophy is broader and deeper and more tangled or otherwise interwoven than we normally acknowledge. If we retain the historicist method, or at least O'Brien's initial version of the method, it is necessary to supplement our reading of the canonical with the non-canonical readings that influenced the direction of ancient as well as medieval philosophy.⁵

The historical method is flawed, of course, not necessarily in principle but at least in practice. We're fallible, to the extreme, and display of proclivity to misread or otherwise over-determine our respective interpretations of the philosophical predecessors. There are unfortunately, no mitochondria traces in the bone marrow of a philosophical idea, some way of tracing an idea back to its inception, the way that we can now trace our DNA back to a specific origin and then examine or map the variations that occurred over the course of the host's migration to other regions and climates. But surely there is something to be gained by reading a particular philosopher within the context of the ideas that they would have considered

⁵ At an earlier stage in this process, I explained to several friends - including a philosopher and a historian, but both of them doing the history of ideas - my fledgling plan for designing a cross-cultural reader of ancient philosophy. As an illustration of its value for the history of philosophy, I trotted out this Plotinus example. The philosopher and the historian seemed to agree that someone would need to care deeply about getting Plotinus right if the revisionist corrective consisted in gaining competence if not expertise in canonical literature and philosophy from a wide array of non-western ancient philosophical or religious traditions. That's true, certainly, but it may at least serve as a regulative ideal for assessing increasingly responsible scholarship and progressive teaching objectives.

to have been shared intellectual territory, such that the reader thickens his or her reading of a predecessor.

In an effort to become a better reader of ancient philosophy, it's necessary to "clear one's mind of cant," of course, as Bloom and Rorty advise us, but the problem is compounded because the cant is built into the very texture of the texts in question; perhaps the only corrective at this point is to balance our previously privileged texts with previously neglected influences; perhaps it is even possible to adopt Bloom's definition for what qualifies for canonization - the *unheimlich* or sublime combined with its historical influence on subsequent texts or philosophical traditions - but extend our reading of the canon to "non-western" but nevertheless influential precursor texts. For those who have eyes to see, i.e., for those familiar with precursor texts in various traditions, western philosophy was influenced significantly by non-western philosophical traditions. For those with eyes to see the historical indebtedness, the myths employed throughout Plato's writings are subtle appropriations of ancient philosophical teachings in Persia, Asia, India, Judea, and Africa. (To some, this is hopelessly broad, for others it will be viewed as irresponsibly narrow in its representation of 'non-western' ancient philosophy.) For those blind to those philosophical precursors, the intermittent myths seem entertaining but somehow superfluous. But the myth represents a form of thought, or a principle, one that the myth was meant to illustrate; we sometimes hold tight to the illustration but lose track of the philosophical principle inherent in the allegory or metaphor or myth.

I do think that it's possible to adopt Bernal's general thesis in *BLACK ATHENA*, supplement it with philosophical scholarship that confirms his thesis apropos of the Afroasiatic roots of western civilization, e.g., Peter Kingsley, and then provide an introductory array of canonical texts from non-western philosophical traditions. This is not a history of philosophy, certainly, since that neglects extra-textual influences on the shape of philosophical thought, but rather an occasion for revisioning the canon of western philosophy. In this "multi-cultural" reader of ancient philosophy, I have selected 60 "non-western" ancient philosophers, all of whom - as argued elsewhere - were directly or indirectly influential on the shape or direction of what typically counts as the canon of western philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus. (It makes sense also, for the sake of cross-canonical comparisons, to include representative selections from 10 philosophers from the western canon.) The cross-pollination blew in all directions, and competing philosophical systems were both borrowers and lenders. There is, however, conspicuous anecdotal information, not all of it through Herodotus, about cross-cultural philosophical encounters. Plato refers to Zoroaster in *Alchibiades II*, of course, but it is also said - in Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*

II.3 - that Socrates once met a philosopher from India on the way to the agora in Athens. (It is suggested that the Hindu philosopher laughed at Socrates for lack of understanding (see Jaeger, *Aristotle*, 165-6)). At the very least, it seems plausible that there was an exchange of philosophical ideas coursing along the ancient Silk Road between Asia and Persia. For various reasons, 19th century scholarship tried to discredit what Festugière described as '*le mirage oriental*' (i.e., a propensity for tracing everything back to oriental wisdom); instead, says Kingsley, those historians contributed to '*le mirage grec*' (Kingsley 1994, 5). There are additional layers of complexity when seeking to understand the historical background to Platonism or Zoroastrianism or Pythagoreanism, including the secret purposes often animating the historical accounts rendered by various philosophical schools. As a case in point, Aristoxenus' detailed depiction of Pythagoras as beholden to Zoroastrianism was part of a *sub rosa* strategy of privileging Aristotle to Plato. (And Plotinus' reading of Plato is intended to rescue Plato from those who claimed a false gnosis.) "[W]hile duly acknowledging the 'inventiveness' of biographical tradition," recent scholars have increasingly "adopted a more open-minded attitude to the possibility that Pythagoras did actually travel to Egypt" (Kingsley 1994, "From Pythagoras to the *turba philosophorum*: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition"). And Heraclitus describes Pythagoras as someone who practiced, to a fault, (cross-cultural) *historia* - i.e., which in Ionic Greek carries the connotation of inquiries or "investigations carried out through visiting distant places and peoples" (Kingsley, 1994; Diels and W. Kranz, 1951; W. Berkert, 1972).

This set of supplemental readings is not intended to replace the canon of ancient western philosophy, since it is undeniable that ancient Hellenic thought was influential not only in shaping subsequent western philosophy but also the direction of non-western philosophical speculation, but merely to broaden the scope of our scholarship and clear imaginative space for cross-cultural discourse. It remains, of course, because of the relative narrowness of selected readings, and the exclusion of texts and traditions that extend to literary traditions not included in this anthology, a blinkered exposure to ancient philosophy during the Axial age; but it is less blinkered than the more prominent approach, which strikes me as a step in the right direction.

Cosmopolitan, Multi-Cultural, Revisionist Readings in Ancient Philosophy.

Introduction: The Axial Age of Philosophy.

- 1. Ancient Chinese Philosophy:**
 - Introduction.
 - Selected readings.
- 2. Ancient Persian and Arabic Philosophy:**
- 3. The Philosophy of Ancient India:**
- 4. Ancient African Philosophy:**
- 5. Ancient Hebraic Philosophy:**
- 6. Ancient Greek Philosophy:**

Conclusion: On the Confluence and Contention of Influence.