

What Are “Historiographies of Philosophy” Historiographies Of?

Problems of reconceptualizing the history of philosophy in a global perspective

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ABSTRACT | This paper focuses on the obstacles to establishing a more global perspective in the historiography of philosophy and in academic philosophy as a whole. I argue that in order to reconceptualize its historiography, it is essential to reflect on the concept of philosophy itself and the related linguistic problems, and thus on the question of what can be included in a redefined historiography as “philosophy” in the first place. I attempt to take a middle position between Eurocentric mainstream arguments for an exclusively Western-oriented academic philosophy and approaches that seek to situate philosophy outside the West as well. In order to gain a sustainable understanding of the term “philosophy,” my paper proposes a twofold approach: first, a linguistic argumentation informed by ordinary language usage; and second, a historical argumentation based on intellectual history and the evolution of the term in the context of academic philosophy. I urge caution regarding the use of “philosophy” to refer to non-Western thought due to the potential anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism of this attribution and argue for other approaches to reconceptualize the historiography of philosophy in a sustainable way.

KEYWORDS | Global Philosophy; Eurocentrism; Ordinary Language Philosophy; Intellectual History; Epistemic Violence

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1 Introduction

Projects of reconstructing or reconceptualizing historiographies of philosophy on a global scale face three main obstacles in general.¹ Firstly, there is the problematic scope of the Eurocentric historiography of academic philosophy which paradigmatically excludes non-Western thought.

Secondly, there is the special status with which academic philosophy has awarded itself or which it at least implicitly claims for itself among other academic disciplines: contrary to other disciplines (in the humanities), it is assumed that philosophy is not as much (if at all) historically contingent. Philosophy claims generally to speak *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, from a standpoint of eternity – and therefore as not needing addenda from non-Western or other marginalized sources (see Kirloskar-Steinbach et al. 2012, 13–14).

And thirdly, there is the problematic concept of “philosophy” itself and the resulting issues for conceptualizing historiographies of it on a global (or any) scale: the question of what can or should be called “philosophy,” and what will consequently be included in its historiography. It is these questions that this paper will focus on.

These three interconnected obstacles always have to be dealt with, one way or another, if the aim is to enable new ways of looking at the history of philosophy. This is in no way to suggest that they are actually easy to overcome in everyday academic practice with its embeddedness in Eurocentric structures and concepts. However, the first two problems are perfectly tangible given the overwhelming evidence of the Eurocentric, Orientalist, often racist, chauvinist, straightforwardly misogynist, or otherwise extremely one-sided construction of philosophy as an academic discipline and its related historiographies (as shown e.g. by Park 2013; Bernasconi 1997, 2017; Chakrabarti and Weber 2016; Gassmann et al. 2018; Connolly 2015). Likewise, the dubious, self-imposed special status of philosophy rests on a one-sided, ahistorical conception of philosophy which strips the discipline of most of its historical and contextual situatedness. Alternate historiographical reconstructions of “philosophy” can therefore help to establish a forceful counter-narrative to the alleged special status of European/Western philosophy, namely by pointing out its historical entanglements with non-Western thought or by integrating the historiography of philosophy into more general and global-historical contexts.

¹ Most of this paper is based on my doctoral dissertation (Scheidl, Forthcoming).

2 The Crucial Third Obstacle

It is precisely through the *awareness* of the first two obstacles that a decisive step has already been taken towards overcoming these problems, at least to the extent that they can be dealt with in a more enlightened and sustainable (and thus “philosophical”) way.² Although heightened awareness of the third obstacle will eventually be the key to dealing with it as well, this awareness itself is much harder to obtain and to sustain, which is why this problem seems to be the most difficult to overcome. The meaning of the term “philosophy” poses a number of methodological, epistemological, and linguistic challenges, including: What are those “historiographies of philosophy” that aspire to be global *historiographies of* exactly? In other words, in *what ways* and to *what extent* can *what forms* of non-Western thought be classified as “philosophy” and be distinguished from other phenomena? Dealing with these questions ultimately constitutes the crucial core of doing philosophy in a global perspective; accordingly, it is the key to conceptualizing a reconfigured historiography of philosophy.

These questions have obviously been addressed by many scholars and from a multitude of perspectives.³ In the end, this field may seem rather binary to the observer, as the various answers emphasize either that “philosophy” is an exclusively Western enterprise or that “philosophy” can indeed also be found in other parts of the world and must be recognized as such. Both of these “classical” answers, tending either toward Eurocentrism or global-philosophical orientations, unfortunately often fail to enter fruitfully into conversation with one another. In this sense, standard arguments against the quest for a more globally oriented (historiography of) philosophy, often implicitly building on Hegel’s beliefs, tend to meet the problems of the one-sided orientation of academic philosophy with self-confident indifference: they assert simply that philosophy is a purely Western thing, building on its two and a half millennia of already known history from its alleged origins in ancient Greece.⁴ Since any suggestion that philosophy might also have existed in Asia, Africa, or the Americas is ultimately considered irrelevant to “real philosophy,” a fruitful conversation is hardly possible. The position of many comparative or intercultural philosophers, however, seems to be equally barren. Many scholars assume, with a similar combination of rigidity and the conviction

² In the vast field of global philosophy, see for example the outstanding accounts of Elberfeld (2017b) and Steineck and Weber (2018).

³ For globally oriented ones see for example the works by Steineck and Weber (2018), Gassmann et al. (2018), Elberfeld (2017a, 2017b), and Wimmer (2004).

⁴ It is worth noting, though, that most of these contemporary views are not intended to be disparaging towards non-Western thought *per se* (unlike historical instances as in Kant, Hegel, or Hume), but they tend to remain unaware of the problem or are indifferent towards it.

of scholarly righteousness, that certain schools of thought – for example, from India, Japan, or the African context – are or even must be “philosophy” as a matter of course, and consequently that philosophy was conceived several times independently in different parts of the world.⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that there is a complex and varied discourse in the field of global philosophy with a high awareness for the diversity of the term “philosophy” throughout history, an “open outcome” – in the sense that “philosophy” might turn out to be a term better not used for non-Western thought – seems hardly possible and runs the risk of being accused of an Eurocentric, chauvinist, and/or racist attitude.⁶ Accordingly, no fruitful conversation seems possible in the face of this powerful paradigm either.

3 The Position of This Paper

The core purpose of this paper, therefore, is to take more of a middle position that allows and invites actual dialogue by appreciating the search for global perspectives in philosophy, while at the same time refuting a number of routinely made claims about “philosophy” outside the Western canon and about the corresponding needs for reform of most historiographical accounts of the discipline. Naturally, a short paper like this cannot take all aspects of the discourse sufficiently into account. Therefore, I will focus mainly on certain linguistic aspects, that is, on the question of what “philosophy” means, and how to use it and what for – questions which are central to assessing the adequacy of historiographical accounts of “philosophy” and the potential need for corrections. Thus, I explicitly do *not* argue ontologically, as most approaches in the field at least implicitly do, in terms of reflections on what philosophy *is* or what kind of thinking can be *identified* as philosophy. In fact, I suspect that ontological approaches of this kind to the subject matter are an essential, if not constitutive, part of the problem itself. Apart from historical considerations I argue primarily in terms of the philosophy of language, focusing not on the *being* of philosophy, but rather on the subtleties, preconditions, and concomitants of *naming* something “philosophy.”⁷

The relationship between the conceptualization and historiography of philos-

⁵ For accounts that argue for “philosophy” outside Europe, see for example the works by Mall (1995), Kimmerle (2002), Wimmer (2004), Elberfeld (2017a; 2017b), and Steineck and Weber (2018).

⁶ For exceptions in the field that urge caution in applying “philosophy” to non-Western thought, see for example Gassmann (2016, 196–199, 128–132), Obert (2009), and Scheidl (Forthcoming).

⁷ Without being able to cover these aspects in this paper, one would, in a language-sensitive approach like the one that I propose, be further urged to consider various word classes, such as whether there is a difference in the attribution of the noun or adjective, e.g. whether “non-Western philosophies” or “non-Western philosophical traditions” are to be included in these new historiographies.

ophy is, in a sense, similar to an academic version of the chicken-and-egg problem. It illustrates the intricacies of rewriting history on the basis of a highly connotative concept with very different uses and an epistemologically complex situation: what is perceived as the history of “philosophy” will strongly influence or even determine what is generally and personally understood to be “philosophy,” while assumptions about “philosophy” will undoubtedly influence the understanding of what constitutes the history of “philosophy.”

4 An Ordinary Language Approach to Meaning

All in all, it is truly “infuriatingly difficult,” as James Maffie (2014, 6) aptly puts it, to define what philosophy is and what “philosophical” means in this sense. Mainstream philosophy prescribes the meaning by alternatively referring to the origin of the word in Greek antiquity and the subsequent traditions building themselves upon it, or in accordance with the academic tradition since the late 18th century, or according to the special focuses of particular branches of philosophy. On the contrary, globally oriented philosophers argue that “philosophy” could not be reduced to its alleged Greek origins nor to the subsequent Eurocentric appropriation of the term, but that it has to refer to something more general that could, at least potentially, be found worldwide. In the German *Interkulturelle Philosophie* (Intercultural Philosophy), for example, it is extensively argued for understanding “philosophy” as a generic concept or an umbrella term under which, similar to the case of “religion” or “literature,” worldwide phenomena could be subsumed (see e.g. Wimmer 2004, 30–35; Mall 1995, 8–12; Mall 2000, 52–59).⁸

Both the Eurocentric approach and the attribution of “philosophy” to non-Western thought have valid points, and both are problem-generating. Their insights and their shortcomings, I argue, are closely linked to the core linguistic question and the different historical stages of the use of “philosophy” in ordinary as well as in academic language. It holds true that “philosophy” refers to a particular Western academic discipline, to which sources from outside of a certain “Graecoroman-Abrahamic” spectrum have hardly had any connection and influence after antiquity, particularly since the late 18th century.⁹ They are thus hardly represented in the historiography of this discipline, and it would seem rather odd to integrate forms of thought (e.g. from Japan or Mesoamerica) that had no part

⁸ Views like these are also problematic with respect to other presumably generic terms; regarding “religion” see the example of Japan (Josephson 2012).

⁹ Notable influences on Greek antiquity from outside the Greco-Roman sphere came, among others, from Egypt or India. For my coinage as “Graecoroman-Abrahamic,” see Scheidl (Forthcoming).

in the actual history of the discipline. And it holds true just the same that non-Western forms of thought are not *per se* inferior to academic philosophy, that there are several links and historical connections to Western philosophy (that are often neglected), and that non-Western forms of thought are commonly as well as historically often also referred to as “philosophy” or “philosophies,” particularly in English. It would seem equally odd, accordingly, not to represent them in historiographies of philosophy/philosophies of which the Western academic discipline would then only be one part.

If both of these approaches hold true to a certain degree, this already says a lot about the diverse and connotative uses of the term “philosophy,” particularly regarding the differences in academic jargon and in common speech. For a reconceptualized approach to the discipline of philosophy, I argue that this distinction is of great importance due to the historical developments in the past 250 years, and that we need to consider the developed academic understanding of “philosophy,” as well as a more ordinary language approach to the meaning of “philosophy.” The latter would be based on the convictions of Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP), which can be traced back to Wittgenstein’s proposition “Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache” (2009, PI §43).¹⁰ Hence, instead of prescribing the meaning of certain words and phrases to deal with philosophical problems, in order to deduct a word’s meaning OLP focuses on how a term is used in ordinary language, that is, on the common, non-specific, more “natural” (as in not at all or not overly reflected) use of language in daily speech.¹¹ Since the question of what “philosophy” means is usually referred to as a philosophical problem itself, it seems only fitting to apply the insights of OLP here as well.

The use of “philosophy” and related words in ordinary language is quite diverse: “Philosophy” is often understood as a particular form of intellectual or mental activity, in Richard King’s (1999) phrasing, an “exercise of systematic reflection” or even a “systematic and rigorous exercise of rationality” (2). It can also denote more general forms of knowledge production and life practices. For example, the term “philosophical” can mean “contemplative” or “withdrawn,” but it is also used to refer to the fact that something is difficult to understand or very demanding, or that it has a fundamental claim, or that someone thinks very thoroughly. The word can also be used critically: “too philosophical” can mean that something is overly speculative, long-winded, or simply incomprehensible. Someone’s “philos-

¹⁰ In English: “[T]he meaning of a word is its use in the language.” (Ibid.) On OLP itself, see for example Baz (2012), who also provides several very compelling refutations of some of the objections to OLP.

¹¹ I am not aware of any instance (other than my own) where OLP is applied to an analysis of the term “philosophy” itself (see Scheidl, Forthcoming). For example Gassmann et al. (2018), however, briefly refer to and argue with Wittgenstein’s remark itself (8f.).

ophy” designates their attitude towards life, a credo or reflected upon approach to the world, a considered opinion, and, accordingly, is often used in the plural form “philosophies” to refer to certain teachings or systems of thought.¹² As King (1999) puts it: “In this sense one can talk of the philosophy of the United Nations, the philosophy of corporate management or the philosophy of my late grandfather (‘never turn down a free drink’)” (2).¹³ In ordinary language, following the Merriam-Webster and Cambridge Dictionary, “to philosophize” can be understood along the lines of “to think about something,” “to contemplate,” “to muse,” but not necessarily in a particularly profound way, and is therefore sometimes also used in a disapproving manner. A “philosopher” is accordingly considered to be some sort of scholar or thinker, a very educated or a very wise person, or someone who is looking for knowledge or wisdom. All in all, it would be indefensible to want to limit this range of human characteristics and behaviors to the West.

5 Historical Aspects and Language Usage

To additionally consider the diverging historical uses of a word goes beyond the usual scope of OLP: the term “philosophy” was coined in an Eurocentric fashion only towards the end of the 18th century, which makes it necessary to understand the context of that time from which this use of language is derived. Clearly, the usage in ordinary language mirrors and conserves the permissive scholarly and ordinary use of the word before the 18th century. As many authors have shown, “philosophy” was, up until then, widely used in reference to all kinds of thought, Western and non-Western (such as Chinese, Celtic, or Egyptian philosophy). Importantly, it was used as *occulta philosophia* even for forms of thought that concerned themselves with reading the stars, naturopathic medicine, the kabbalah, magic, and so on – subjects that today would be deemed esoteric and only of interest to culture-historical studies (see for example Elberfeld 2017b; Scheidl, Forthcoming). As Kurt Flasch (2003) wittily remarks, under Emperor Diocletian even mining engineers were described as *philosophi*, just as there had been many different meanings of “philosophy” in late antiquity (e.g. for grammar, military knowledge, poetics) (64–65). Early contacts with Japan and China spoke of *philosophia* there, and Chinese thought was greatly appreciated by Leibnitz, Wolff, and Hume (see Steineck and Lange 2018, 462–463; Gassmann et al. 2018, 20–22; van Norden 2017, 19–21; Nelson 2017). That is not to say that the respective forms of non-Western thought were represented adequately, but that they were equally referred to as

¹² Schlaeger (1989) criticizes understandings like this as “trivializing.”

¹³ King himself does not refer to OLP nor does he share the views I express in this paper.

philosophy and treated as such: they were read and interpreted if available, and defended as well as criticized. This shows, in short, that there was a historical use of the term “philosophy” which varies greatly from today’s academic uses and which denoted a much greater range of signifieds.

As Peter Park (2013) points out, a swift and forceful change took place in the second half of the 18th century when non-Western thinkers were systematically excluded from philosophy by historiographers of that time. The philosophies of Kant and Hegel finished the job, so to speak, and by the 1820s, as Park demonstrates, the business of philosophy proper had become an entirely Western one. To speak from a linguistic-philosophical view, the use of language changed, at least at an academic level, and “philosophy” became not just a marker or sign of particularly advanced, civilized thinking; in accordance with the mindset of the ongoing European Expansion, it also became limited to the “West.” Around the same time, the modern discipline of philosophy evolved, and following the Eurocentric view on the special status of “philosophy,” other academic disciplines emerged in the course of the 19th and also 20th century, under whose authority many forms of knowledge (that were previously considered “philosophy”) were delegated. Natural philosophy (Darwin still considered himself to be a “natural philosopher”) became what is now referred to as “natural sciences,” and the “philosophies” of China, India, or Mesoamerica became the field of the corresponding disciplines such as Sinology, that were thereupon solely in charge of dealing with “philosophical” content of non-Western origin.

All three obstacles I named in the beginning are rooted, for the most part, in this historical development. In light of this and the broad use of “philosophy” in ordinary language, it seems quite natural to argue against this narrowing of the meaning of the term, and for an integration of previously rejected thought into contemporary academic philosophy and the historiography of philosophy, now understood broadly and more generically. Comparative, intercultural, and similar approaches to philosophy are effectively attempting to tie in, so to speak, with the historical usage of the word prior to the 18th century. For a dialogical solution, it seems rather helpful to focus on the *motivations* of those philosophers who argue for an expanded understanding of the concept of “philosophy.” In my assessment, although this of course runs the risk of oversimplifying or unduly psychologizing matters, the drive in certain academic circles to establish non-Western forms of thought as “philosophy” results, at least implicitly, from this historically evolved denial of the status “philosophy” – a concept which represents, after all, as Maffie (2014) puts it aptly, “the pinnacle of humanity’s intellectual and rational achievement” (6). To *not* regard something as “philosophy,” then, means to maintain a certain devaluation. In this sense, the explicit labelling as “philosophy” in the

academic-philosophical context serves to counteract the lasting degradation of non-Western thought that occurred during the Eurocentric transformation of (academic) philosophy. In terms of these views, however, it is not necessarily a matter of attribution or of labelling something as “philosophy,” in the sense of something added or ascribed from the outside, but rather a matter of linguistically exposing the hitherto ignored, more ontological fact that something has always been “philosophy.”

However, while I also argue that academic philosophy would do well – precisely out of its own self-interest – to engage more with non-Western thought, to reflect thoroughly on its Eurocentric structural development in the past, and to broaden its horizons in a global perspective, I consider attempts to integrate non-Western traditions directly as “philosophy” to be counterproductive in the long run. This view results from at least three underlying factors (that will be addressed below): with these forms of integration, one would, firstly, impose the term “philosophy” on non-Western thought and counteract the latter’s distinct originality (that is, tearing it from its diversity of tradition-dependent contexts and having to measure the then integrated thought against the standards of academic philosophy), thus reproduce a form of “anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism.” Secondly, one would reproduce the special status of “philosophy” (and thereby also Eurocentrism) by deeming it so important that it needs to be awarded to non-Western thought in order for the latter to be of equal value (resulting from the historical devaluation by denial of this status). And thirdly, one would ignore the actual historical developments of academic philosophy and run the risk of ideologically rewriting history in accordance with post-modern tastes.

6 Using “Philosophy” as a “Generic Term” and the Issue of Anti-Eurocentric Eurocentrism

In this sense, I consider the understanding of “philosophy” as a generic term to be eminently unsuitable for academic use. My argument is not easy to follow, particularly in an English-speaking context, precisely *because* of the wide, highly connotative, and equally versatile ordinary language usage of the word “philosophy,” denoting certain properties and phenomena that are often only vaguely connected to or relevant for academic philosophy. And it is precisely this distinction between the historically evolved usage within the academic discipline and ordinary language usage that needs to be considered more, since it cannot simply be retroactively overcome, neither by reference to the historical usages nor by reference to the many aspects that “philosophy” denotes in everyday usage. Just using

the same word, understood as some sort of generic term, neither constitutes relevance – both as far as everyday phenomena and non-Western forms of thought are concerned – nor does it help integration. Moreover, tremendous pressure is inevitably exerted: “philosophy” in an academic context, even in its seemingly descriptive application to non-Western phenomena, takes those texts, thinkers, and traditions out of their original context. It pre-structures or reshapes them, and reinterprets them using the “measuring rod” (Gassmann et al. 2018, 8–10) of the Western, academic tradition (which incorporates many different approaches, yet which is easily distinguishable qua academic discipline from other phenomena).

This reshaping is, qua conceptual categorization, to a certain extent generally unavoidable and can also become problematic for other presumably generic terms (such as “religion,” “novel,” “emperor”). But in this case, it remains particularly striking because the generic application of “philosophy” is supposed precisely to prevent a one-sided, Eurocentric determination of the concept as well as the epistemic violence of denying forms of thought recognition as philosophy. At the same time, quite in the sense of a well-meaning Procrustean bed, the attribution “philosophy” itself also represents a form of epistemic violence because it necessarily involves a reshaping and appropriation.

It should be noted that, for example, in pre-modern Japan or China, there was not even a corresponding term for “philosophy,” and content, which could now be identified as “philosophical,” was embedded in conceptually and structurally quite different contexts. For example, when *tetsugaku* was finally introduced as a neologism in the 1870s, it was agreed upon in Japan itself that what it was taken to refer to had not been present in premodern Japan; consequently, it became common practice not to refer to the thought of Dōgen, Shinran, and many others as “*tetsugaku*/philosophy” (see Steineck et al. 2014; Steineck and Lange 2018; Maraldo 2004; Gassmann et al. 2018). In this regard, some scholars argue that these decisions had merely been misunderstandings due to a one-sided understanding of “philosophy” (e.g. Steineck et al. 2014; Maraldo 2004). This likely did play a certain role, just as the question of timing and the subsequent consolidation of the understanding of “philosophy” as something imported did.¹⁴ And yet, when more knowledge about the diversity of philosophy became available, these original determinations were not corrected either.¹⁵ And this, I argue, is not a bad thing at all, since *with* the label “philosophy,” the consideration of the specific original contexts, the entanglements and disentanglements of forms of pre-modern

¹⁴ For the question of timing, see Gassmann et al. (2018, 21); and for the understanding as “imported,” see Heisig et al. (2011, 3).

¹⁵ Furthermore, arguing that Japanese Meiji-era intellectuals “just didn’t get it right” runs the risk of paternalistically overriding their assessment.

Japanese and other non-Western thought would only be possible to a limited extent.¹⁶ If the aim is to let non-Western thought be heard as something in its own right, this is best done without the influencing categorization “philosophy,” an inevitably Western shaped “measuring rod” based on academic philosophy. This is inevitable, after all, since *some* conceptual understanding of philosophy must be established in order to be able to determine which forms of thought might be eligible to be labelled as such, and accordingly which might be incorporated into the historiography of philosophy (see Schmidt 2011, 254–259; Wimmer 2004, 25). Such a conceptual understanding, I argue, is never possible without reference to Western, academic philosophy and its lasting influence on the term.

But what about forms of self-determination, one might ask, when numerous thinkers from non-Western contexts refer to their “own” traditions as “philosophy,” as is the case with Maori thought, African oral traditions, and pre-modern Japanese sources? In my view, this fact does not change the situation. On the one hand, forms of self-determination are not exempt from critical analysis, especially in the context of philosophy itself. On the other hand, my argumentation still holds in that the use of “philosophy” in ordinary language – as a fancy synonym for profound thought, life practice, critical reflection, etc. – is unproblematic in a non-academic context. In an academic context, however, it becomes highly problematic and involuntarily reproduces Eurocentrism, since these forms of thought are still torn out of their original contexts and *original* self-determinations. Therefore, although non-Western traditions are supposed to be valorized qua “philosophy,” this endeavor remains always bound to the Eurocentric past in which the “lack” of philosophy was understood as devaluation. Thus, wanting to integrate something into philosophy and its historiography always runs the risk of also being an expression of the reproduction of Eurocentric prejudices, of the idea that thought with the special status “philosophy” is of more value than something without it, preserving the importance that precisely the Eurocentric history of academic philosophy has given to this term in the first place.

7 The Problem of Conceptual Pre-understanding and Ambiguity

References to Wittgenstein’s family resemblance argument (2009, PI §65–71) are often used in globally oriented writings to demonstrate that there are forms of non-Western thought that are so similar to Western forms of “philosophy” (though not all of them similar in the same regard) that they exhibit family resemblances and can thus be categorized as belonging to the same family (see for example

¹⁶ For a similar argumentation, see Obert (2009, 314–315).

Connolly 2015, 19–22; Ma and van Brakel 2016, 93–119; Mall 2000). While this seems to be a promising approach in order to counter the institutionalized, Eurocentric stereotypes that currently prevail in academic philosophy, I contend that there seems to be some confusion about the family name, and subsequently, about the topic of that historiography. (Academic) philosophy can indeed be categorized as a member of various global families. However, I argue that “philosophy” cannot function as the global family name, but rather something truly generic such as “profound thought,” “intellectual thought,” or the like. Since profound thought is nothing exclusively Western, members of that family would come from all over the world and would also be included in its historiography – but *not* in the historiography of philosophy. That would be like including the history of chess in a historiography of the game of dice simply because they both represent a form of “game.” All in all, even if one argues with family resemblances, analogies, and so forth, the academic use of “philosophy” for non-Western thought remains tricky at best: it always presupposes a conceptual pre-understanding which builds heavily on the history of this word in the West as the starting point for cognition and recognition alike.¹⁷

And this, I fear, is an essential problem for reconceptualizing the history of philosophy globally, like in Rolf Elberfeld’s project “Histories of Philosophy in a Global Perspective” (University of Hildesheim, n.d.). By means of the plural “histories,” Elberfeld and many others aim to present a more comprehensive historiographical account, in part by compiling histories of philosophy in various languages, assuming “philosophy” to be a fitting term to refer to non-European thought independent of academic philosophy. While this does sound appealing, it is nonetheless problematic in that the label “philosophy” is used to subsume everything that once was or that could be referred to as “philosophy,” since this would render the term so broad that it would be difficult to distinguish. As I established, at the level of ordinary language, it is as easy as it is suitable to speak of “philosophy” also in terms of many forms of thought outside the intellectual Western hemisphere, let alone of many forms of reasoning within the West that are usually not counted as “philosophy” in academia anymore. Hence, it would be possible to represent all that in a “historiography of philosophy,” which would then be more or less synonymous with a very extensive “history of human thought.” Such an equation is not uncommon in English, as for example in Heisig et al.’s *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (2011), an excellent and quite thorough account of the various schools of thought and theory in Japan from the Asuka era to present day Japan, all

¹⁷ For a masterful analysis of comparing, including the problems of analogies, see the works by Weber (2013, 2014).

of which are referred to as “philosophy.”¹⁸ But the use of such an equation leads back to the problem of distinguishing criteria from those kinds of human thought and life practices which, even with a permissive use of the term, would not be called “philosophy.” Due to the vast ambiguity of the term “philosophy,” it is not obvious where to draw a line as to what should be considered part of the history of philosophy and what should not, and it would remain rather arbitrary up to a point to decide what should be called “philosophy.”

The core problem, which also shapes the issue of historiography, is thus the multiple allocations of the concept of philosophy. Precisely because the ordinary language use of “philosophy” offers a wide range of meanings, I argue that it is important, at least on a scholarly level, to not equate these different forms of use, but rather to specify and differentiate the various levels of meaning: “philosophy” is not necessarily the same as “philosophy.” To understand philosophy on an academic level today as broadly as in the past would ignore the fact that many subjects that were once considered “philosophy” (natural sciences, astrology, religious studies, mathematics, etc.) have since differentiated into clearly delineated disciplines and now have a different relationship to “philosophy.” Thus, in order to lay the foundations for a more globally oriented future academic philosophy, there would thus be a need for a reconceptualized historiography of philosophy that distinguishes whether one takes the broad usability of the word as a measure, thereby having to integrate a great deal of intellectual history, or whether one takes the narrower use of the academic discipline in particular as decisive, which is what I advocate.

8 The Grid of Intellectual Life

Apart from the consideration of the historical development of different academic areas and the shape of the field of academic philosophy today, I argue that the choice of what belongs in a reconceptualized historiography depends on the actual frameworks of intellectual communities and other entanglements in which the thinkers in question stood. I understand this mostly in the sociological terms of Randall Collins' (1998) account of the ways in which intellectual work is organized and functions around the world, describing the history of philosophies as building on concrete interactions between “intellectual groups, master-pupil-chains, and contemporaneous rivalries” (7).¹⁹ While Collins' arguments have a

¹⁸ For their reflections on using “philosophy,” see Heisig et al. (2011, 17–23), for my further analysis of their arguments see Scheidl (Forthcoming).

¹⁹ Collins uses “philosophies” in a broad sense.

slightly different context, they are nonetheless valuable for understanding both the genesis of academia as well as the contextuality of intellectual life. Intellectual groupings and networks, intergenerational connections (such as master-student chains), and processes of exchange in rivalries and conflicts form a crucial role in the emergence of philosophy as a discipline.

The decisive point in a global perspective is: sources that were not or could not be part of these structures and networks – that is, which were not received in any form – could not be part of what emerged from them, namely academic philosophy. If, for example, Dōgen is now categorized as a philosopher, this is meaningful in the sense of ordinary language, for example, as a synonym for “profound thinker” or “wise man.” At the same time, this is also a subsequent reframing in (post)modern approaches; since he was not part of what was understood as “philosophy” at the time, he was not received and accordingly had little to do with the entanglements that make up the constitutive grid of philosophy as a modern, academic discipline.²⁰ The crucial point is, however, that *not* calling Dōgen’s thought “philosophy” is neither a demotion nor a malevolent discrimination: without the veil of Eurocentrism, there is ultimately no obstacle to receiving him in the current philosophical debate, that is, to letting him become part of what is now “philosophy” and what will be the history of philosophy in the future. Collins’ description of intellectual networks in this sense provides the key for a change in a global perspective: through the reception of relevant non-Western thought in contemporary academic philosophy, the former becomes part of those existing “networks” and can thereby help to transform them further and to build new ones. This is, therefore, less a matter of history and historiography than it is of contemporary philosophizing.

The problems of re-categorization are easily masked by the strong inclinations to do justice to those excluded forms of thought that were refused the status of “philosophy” in the past. The categorization as “philosophy” as a countermeasure to Eurocentric discriminations is well-intended, but ultimately misguided, since it does not represent the phenomena in question in their contextuality and interconnections. Dōgen is part of the history of Buddhism, Japanese thought, etc., but should only be seen as a part of “philosophy” insofar as he began to be read and received by philosophers, and not just as a profound, fundamental, and philosophically relevant thinker alone. Otherwise, it would be very one-sided to inte-

²⁰ While I do not have space here to address the issue of concepts similar to “philosophy,” such as Panikkar’s “homeomorphic equivalencies” in the sense of “functional equivalencies,” it should be evident that even if there had been a corresponding concept for “philosophy” in pre-modern Japan, this would still not make Dōgen’s thought part of “philosophy” in the strict sense of my reasoning (see Scheidl, Forthcoming).

grate him because of his non-Western origin, but not also advanced thinkers from the West. In other words, if we integrate Dōgen as a sophisticated thinker, don't we also have to see corresponding Christian theologians, theoretical physicists, self-reflective historians, conceptually working psychologists, systematic literary scholars, and many more as “philosophers” and thus as part of the history of philosophy? Where then would the boundary be, if there were one at all, between philosophy and theory, between philosophy and other disciplines, etc.? Including all of them would in a certain sense recur to an original understanding of “philosophy,” which, as the mother of all science, would then also be some sort of harbor in which all of her descendants ultimately still linger. But if in this sense almost anything in the history of thought were “philosophy,” and thus part of the history of philosophy, it would also have to find adequate entry into its historiography. And such a historiography of philosophy as more or less synonymous with the historiography of science or human thought *per se* would be a strikingly counter-productive account in my view, since it would make fundamental differentiations more difficult, and would ultimately be too extensive to be meaningful at all as a historiography of (academic) philosophy in the narrower sense.

9 Ways of Integration

The decisive point, however, is that such a broad *conceptual* integration isn't even necessary to enable the actual integration of certain non-Western contents into academic philosophy. Even if one were to argue that philosophy has no limits in its scope (other than, for instance, biology with its scope on the scientific study of life) and can concern itself with literally anything, my argument still holds: even when we accept that philosophy deals with everything, this does not require everything to be “philosophy.” From the fact that something is philosophically interesting or relevant it therefore does not follow that it needs to be categorized as “philosophy,” or that it should be included in the historiography of philosophy.

This argument is directed both against the attribution of “philosophy” to non-Western forms of thought and against the Eurocentric exclusion of non-Western thought from academic philosophy. Especially if philosophy concerns itself with basically everything, it is indefensible to exclude Buddhist texts or Indian systems of thought from it solely by virtue of their provenance.²¹ Clearly, such an exclusion is unfounded and mostly rooted in past differentiations that live on in the shape of academic institutions and mostly implicit stereotypes about the status

²¹ There might, however, be other aspects than their origins that would not deem them very interesting for philosophical inquiry.

of non-Western thought. However, in contemporary philosophy, it is common to regard, say, the results of scientific experiments, psychological statistics, or non-academic content like a novel, a movie, or a certain experience of nature, and so on. Likewise, both the history and the content of Buddhist thought, for example, can be relevant to academic philosophy without the need to declare any of it to be “philosophy,” or to include it in the histories of philosophy (unless of course it was actually received).

Regarding a reconceptualization of the history of philosophy, there is accordingly a tremendous difference between thought from outside the Western frame and one from within it. While it is eminently sensible, for example, to examine more closely what women and other marginalized groups have historically done in philosophy (or other fields), and how their part in the intellectual networks and academic grid of the West has so far often not been sufficiently recognized, global demands for integration lead to new distortions. As I argued earlier, something that was not part of the structures on which philosophy is built cannot retroactively become part of them; in fact, this could in itself be regarded as a “Eurocentric” or paternalistic gesture which assumes that the respective “others” want to be integrated into “philosophy” and its historiography. (Historiographical) integration can be achieved insofar as something hitherto insufficiently considered (such as past connections) is “uncovered” when the veils of Eurocentrism, misogyny, chauvinism, etc. are lifted, allowing for a more accurate representation of the actual grid of the history of academic philosophy and subsequent conceptualizations. Integration can also be achieved on the basis of a certain scholarly relevance in the present, which is undoubtedly the case for many elements from non-Western contexts, not least because of the fundamental nature of philosophical questions, which in principle can also be found outside the narrow provenance of Graecoroman-Abrahamic academic philosophy.

Such openness for integration also results from the fundamental demand that philosophy places on itself. At the same time, the readiness to integrate must not be confused with a guarantee or moral right to integration and an implicit, museum-like protection – the philosophical claim to scrutinize and examine closely remains after all. The willingness to integrate should never supersede aspects of quality and competence. This means that, in the classical liberal understanding of competition, we are dealing with a competition of ideas and thinkers that is ongoing and in which non-Western thought is increasingly included – which, just like Western thought, is analyzed, criticized and, if necessary, also refuted or rejected (for instance, if it fails to convince in terms of quality). This argument also invites to see (and to historiographically depict) past competitions and intellectual fights, and thus to open the global philosophical field for the idea that certain exclusions

may not be founded so much in Eurocentrism, but in a lack of quality, originality, or relevance to philosophical endeavors.

10 Reconceptualizing the History of Philosophy

The historical course of academic philosophy has deprived it of a considerable amount of possibilities for its inner development: much nonsense in philosophy (and other disciplines) would not have been written, indeed could not have been written, had there been more global orientation. Regrettable as it is, the fact of Eurocentrism cannot be changed retroactively or retrospectively; historiography can do no more than trace these paths of the past and place them in appropriate conceptual or paradigmatic frameworks. If forms of non-Western thought are to be received in academic philosophy, which I strongly advocate for, the study of history is particularly suitable insofar as it is a matter of becoming aware of Eurocentric structures or mechanisms and their after-effects. Heightened awareness is essentially helpful in overcoming all three interconnected obstacles I addressed in this paper: Eurocentrism in academic philosophy and its standard historiographies; the self-awarded special status of “philosophy” as a marker of presumably substantial thought, speaking *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the problematic concept of “philosophy” itself, i.e., the question of what can or should be called “philosophy,” and what accordingly must be considered historiographically.

Seen in this light, reconceptualizing the history of philosophy is first and foremost about historiographically working out what was once excluded from philosophy (and how), and also about taking seriously the *actual* interconnections and entanglements of academic philosophy to the non-Western diversity of intellectual history. Hence, a central part of the endeavor to get a more accurate view of the history of philosophy is also to point out the reception of non-Western thought that actually did take place and that was inspiring or influential to Western, academic philosophical thought, as it is famously the case with Leibnitz or Schopenhauer, but also with Husserl, Heidegger, or Buber (see Nelson 2017). Most of the hitherto prevailing historiographies of philosophy are only inadequately able to depict the actual history of academic philosophy, not only for downplaying the actual entanglements, but also for not sufficiently depicting the mechanisms of exclusion of (among others) non-Western thought, the development of Eurocentric structures, and the narrowing of the term “philosophy” after a previously varied, not to say colourful, conceptual history. Since this is in many respects a constitutive part of the development of the modern discipline of philosophy, Eurocentrism also requires a correspondingly appropriate representation in his-

toriographical accounts.

Regarding its alleged special status, I argue for seeing the history of philosophy as a field of historical scholarship that cannot be thought of independently of other historical developments, such as the European expansion, civilizing missions, colonial policy, and many other economic, social, or religious contexts.²² In a reconceptualized historiography of philosophy, there needs to be an increased emphasis on the entanglements with non-philosophical accounts of history, as well as the increased integration of the history of philosophy into other historiographies, including but not limited to a global perspective. This, too, works against the philosophical self-understanding of the special status of philosophy, for by focusing only on historiographies of *philosophy*, one can tend to reproduce the Eurocentric special status of philosophy as something mostly unentangled in historical developments in general. In a similar sense, to overcome a certain “philosophy-centrism,” as well as the problems of the conceptually overburdened term “philosophy,” one could opt to fixate less on the entire complex of “philosophy” in order to focus on historiographies of a “lower level” in this sense, namely of components of academic philosophy. Thus, global historiographies of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, (philosophical) anthropology, etc. could emerge. Of course, the same problems of conceptual transfer and of non-existent networks that I discussed may arise, but it would possibly be easier and less complex to deal with them, since less consideration would have to be given to the academic discipline and its peculiarities in its entirety. For these subcategories are more about something that could be understood as universally occurring with humans (e.g. considerations about morality, cognition, the meaning of life, reality, and the first reasons) without the compulsion to contain all of this in a unit as “philosophy” (and potentially seeing other forms of thought as deficient “philosophy” due to the lack of certain subcategories).

Only when and insofar as there was an actual historical, philosophical engagement with or any form of reception of non-Western thought did the latter become “ex positivo” an entangled part of philosophy in the narrower, academic sense and thus must be considered historiographically. As I have shown, while attributing “philosophy” or using this term very widely for non-Western thought is well-meaning, it is ultimately more problematic than beneficial. However, a sustainable reconceptualization can be achieved precisely by pointing out the histories of and reasons for exclusion (as well as the historical changes in the use of language). In this sense, Eurocentrism will always be a necessary part of the history of phi-

²² On the global-historical relevance of environmental, economic, or other accidental factors, see for instance Marks (2015).

losophy, as it has been a formative factor for the academic discipline. But that which was once excluded is not in itself and in its own right part of the history of philosophy: it is precisely the absences, the emerging voids, the disentanglements which are part of the history of philosophy and which themselves have a central value for both the historiographical and contemporarily systematic philosophical discourse. This is in itself an intriguing field of research that should not be underestimated or valued less than an examination of actual entanglements.

What is needed is therefore both a historiography of entanglements and disentanglements in academic philosophy and beyond. The history of academic philosophy is but one part of global intellectual history, next to many varieties of human thought and life practices that do stand in their own right. They don't need to be labelled off as “philosophy,” but can be discovered by philosophers to enrich or even transform their contemporary philosophizing (and vice versa). What is needed in the end is not just a reconceptualized historiography of philosophy that clearly points out the Eurocentric character of academic philosophy, but furthermore a reconceptualized historiography of human thought. A wholesome approach to a globalized historiography of philosophy is therefore necessarily an interdisciplinary one that does not only take its strength from its interdisciplinarity, but also realizes the ultimate interdisciplinarity of philosophy itself.

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