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THE IDEA OF A GLOBAL HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY*

Abstract
In this paper I assume, by definition, that philosophers are arguing, first and foremost concerning their own validity claims, but now and then also concerning claims or presuppositions presented by other thinkers, and also concerning validity claims raised by scientists and scholars in different fields, or concerning political ideologies or religious claims, or concerning major events and challenges in societies. Hence, a history of philosophy should be situated and argumentative: both socio-historically situated, and argumentative, taking various validity claims seriously. Hence, we could learn something *from* these thinkers, and not merely *about* them. Moreover, for a global history of philosophy, in our time, it should be brought up to our present situation, epistemically and otherwise. If so, the idea of a global history of philosophy, conceived in this way, tends to become a history of global modernization – certainly, each time with its short-comings and special selections.

Keywords:
philosophy, history of philosophy, a global history of philosophy, situated and argumentative, a history of global modernization

It is a great honor to participate in the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of my friend and colleague Andrzej Kaniowski, whom I met in Dubrovnik, several decades ago, and ever since we have kept contact, also on a personal level, meeting each other on various occasions, both in Poland and Norway. All along I have been impressed and thrilled by his philosophical and deeply human commitment and concern – in his writings, in conversations and discussions, both professionally and personally, and also on the organizational level – as a true intellectual, in a world

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in crisis. The paper I present in this *Festschrift* is the result of 50 years work, on my part. I started to teach history of philosophy (at the University of Bergen) in the fall of 1962, and the first version of what gradually became a textbook in the history of philosophy, was first published in 1970 – in other words, this year, in 2020, it is 50 years ago – a textbook for students, conceived in a self-critical modernization-theoretical perspective.

I hereby wish the *Jubilar* all the best for the years ahead – in gratitude for all those years of friendship and collaboration.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The title of my paper is "the idea of a global history of philosophy". Hence, there are three terms to consider: "*Philosophy*," "*History* of Philosophy," and "a *Global* History of Philosophy." I shall briefly explain how I understand these terms, one by one, and thereby, how I conceive the idea of a global history of philosophy. On this background, I shall state a few *principles* for writing such a history of philosophy, followed by some remarks on my *experiences* in trying to do so. Consequently, this is the structure of this paper:

First my comments on the three terms, "*philosophy*," "*history* of philosophy," and "a *global* history of philosophy," and then a few comments on *principles* and *experiences*.

"Philosophy"

The term "philosophy" is used in different ways, often quite widely, about all kinds of "world views" or "life views". Here I shall delimit the definition to those who raise some *epistemic claims*, some validity claims, to the extent that they operate with some degree of a "*give and take*" of arguments, of reasons of some kind. Not only "give", also "take", being in principle open for counter-arguments. That is, for reasons of various kinds, as to what makes sense, as to what is reasonable, right, or true.[1]

[1] In so far, validity claims in philosophy are different from truth claims of the empirical sciences. Briefly stated, in our time, validity claims in philosophy are typically concerned with conceptual clarification and adequacy and with constitutive and self-reflexive preconditions – for instance, by "interpretation and preciseness" (cf. Næss, 2005) or by conceptual clarification by working with examples (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953) and by self-referential reflections or presuppositional analyses (as in Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas).

Worldviews based purely on tradition, or on dogmatic claims, blind for possible counter-arguments, are not conceived as "philosophy", according to this definition.

"History of Philosophy"

There are two questions.

First: What did former thinkers say or write? Be it Thales, seen as the first among ancient Greek philosophers, known for us largely by the writings of later thinkers. Or Confucius. Or Hegel. What did they actually say or write, word by word, and what did they mean, with their utterances? Hence, both textual studies and hermeneutic interpretations are required. We could say: this is the realm of the "history of ideas."

Next: Does it make sense, is it true, or right, what they were saying or writing? Here we take validity-claims (epistemic claims) seriously. For instance: Hegel said so and so, but does it make sense? Is it true, or right? Is it reasonable and relevant, in some sense? If so, we may learn *from* these thinkers, not merely learn *about* them. Learn about valuable insights and interesting points, but also about what could be conceived as interesting misconceptions; for instance, the Cartesian soul-body dualism, which is often seen as a philosophically interesting "mistake". Hence, according to this notion of *philosophy*, taking epistemic claims of former thinkers seriously, this is the main approach to the idea of a "*history* of philosophy," in this paper.

Now, one way of writing a history of philosophy is that of presenting a chronological series of famous philosophers, one after the other. Fair enough! However, in so doing we miss an essential point, namely, that *when philosophers argue, they tend to refer to other philosophers; they tend to discuss with each other*. Surely, not always, but sometimes. For instance: Anaximander and Anaximenes refer to Thales. Heraclitus and Parmenides problematize, in two opposite directions, the presuppositions of these three thinkers, and Empedocles and Anaxagoras try to mediate between the two, before Democritus responds with his theory of unchangeable invisible atoms and empty space. Moreover, since these early Greek philosophers could not agree, the Sophists (Thrasymachus, Gorgias, Protagoras) became skeptical, which again trigged reactions from Plato, defending a notion of universal truth, which again was modified by Aristotle.

Likewise, after the empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) and rationalists (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), Kant defended his transcendental philosophy as a better solution to basic epistemic questions, a position which

Hegel tried to situate historically, which again triggered reactions, in different directions, by Marx and Kierkegaard. In short, in addition to seeing each thinker alone, according to his or her own approach and presuppositions, it is also worthwhile looking at references and argumentations *between* various thinkers. In some cases, as among the early Greek thinkers, we may even talk about learning processes, in terms of a trying-out of different positions and thereby a conceptual development.

Moreover, *philosophers also relate to epistemic claims raised by the various sciences and humanities.* For instance, in the aftermath of the new mathematically formulated, experimental natural sciences (in the Renaissance), and in a certain opposition to Aristotelian lifeworld-based conceptions, philosophers like Descartes promoted the mechanistic worldview, and a dichotomy between body and soul (*res extensa* and *res cogitans*). Moreover, philosophers like Locke promoted a representational notion of experience and knowledge (*tabula rasa*), whereas philosophers like Francis Bacon argued for the usefulness of the new sciences (cp. the saying: *scientia est potentia*). Later, there were also influences from humanities, like history and hermeneutics (Vico and Hegel), or from Darwin and biology, or Freud and psychology. Recently, not least from neuroscience and brain research. Thus, Kant's fourth question, "*Was ist der Mensch*?" ("What is a human being?"), cannot be dealt with purely philosophically, not even conceptually (Skirbekk, 2017: 47–68).

However, it is worth seeing that the argumentative interaction between philosophy and the various sciences and humanities goes *both ways*. For example, neuroscience challenges philosophy, e.g. as to the notion of human freedom; but philosophy also challenges neuroscience, as to its presuppositions as a human activity raising validity claims for their own utterances. In short, both challenged by and criticism of – in both directions.

Moreover, *philosophers relate to, and respond to, various challenges and events in human history.* In so far, philosophical thinking is *"situated", socio-historically.* For instance, both Confucius and Plato reacted against what they saw as deep crises in their own society – Confucius in China around 500 BC, Plato in Greece somewhat later. Interestingly, both reacted by proposing an educational system that should promote wisdom and virtues. Good and just actions, by inner motivation, that was their common goal. Right actions proscribed and regulated by law was seen as the second best, since law was seen as an external force, not as an internal motivation. But later, in the dialogue *The Laws*, Plato modified his position, emphasizing that, in our imperfect world, laws are needed, whereas Confucians, confronted with an opposite school of thought, the Legalists (as during the Qin dynasty), defended the normative priority of a virtuous life.

Today, we have the ongoing discussion as to the optimal relationship between legal regulations on the one hand and settlement of

disputes or social anomalies by discursive counseling or lifeworld traditions, on the other.[2]

Another example: consider the reactions among philosophers after World War II, a North-American thinker like Richard Rorty could allow himself to refer to his own background as a North-American, without an attempt to justify his main position with universally valid arguments (which he would have conceived as illusions anyway), whereas German post-war thinkers, like Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, who personally had experienced the civilizational brake-down during the Nazi regime, struggled seriously with the question as to how we could possibly justify some universally valid norms and principles. Evidently, socio-historical events, like crises and wars, do matter, also for philosophers.

This means, all in all, that a history of philosophy has to look at the socio-historical "situatedness" of various thinkers and schools of thought. The socio-historical context matters – as a background to better understand their concern, and hence to understand their questions and the way they argue.

Moreover, *philosophers also relate to epistemic claims inherent in political ideologies, or in religious and cultural convictions.* This is well known, not least in political philosophy, as to the interplay with political thinkers in various liberal or conservative traditions, or in popular movements of various kinds, from labor movements to women's movements, civil rights movements and environmental movements, not to forget Marxist and socialist thinkers, as well as those of a libertarian and neoliberalist blend.

The same holds true as to the relationship between philosophy and various epistemic claims inherent in religious and cultural convictions. Surely, "religion" is an ambiguous term, and various aspects of what is usually seen as religious, such as rituals and religious feelings, might have little to do with epistemic claims. Nevertheless, in all the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – there are basic epistemic claims, e.g. related to the notion of the Godhead, often seen as merely good, omniscient, and almighty. Hence, confronted with major evils (like the tsunami in Lisbon in 1755), we have the "Problem of Evil", head on.[3] In this sense, religious validity claims are challenged by philosophy (and the sciences). On the other hand, according to Jürgen Habermas in his recent writings, "religion" (in its benign versions) may challenge secular

[2] For instance, Jürgen Habermas warning against a law-based "colonialization" of the lifeworld, in *Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981, while defending the rule of law, in *Between Facts and Norms* in 1992, and looking at religious rituals as a strengthening of moral motivation in modern societies, as in *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II* in 2012.

[3] For recent discussions, see e.g. Rohs (2013); the author, a Kantian theist, with extensive knowledge of the international debate, demonstrates convincingly how deep and extensive a rational criticism of this crucial theological dilemma can be.

thinkers, urging them to be open for inherent insights in these religions. Insofar, once again, challenge and criticism in both directions.[4]

To sum up, our *restrictive* definition of philosophy, emphasizing the importance of epistemic claims, leads toward a *broadened* conception of the history of philosophy, referring to epistemic claims and dominant ways of thinking in the various sciences and humanities as well as in politics and religions, and also to decisive socio-historical events and constellations, as a background for philosophical questions and concerns.

"A Global history of philosophy"

There are regional philosophical traditions, national and otherwise, and hence we may have "local" histories of philosophy. However, when epistemic questions are decisive for the definition of philosophy, any "local" philosophy will have to be judged as to whether it "makes sense," whether it has valid and interesting points, in short, whether we, living today, often in other cultural traditions, can *learn* something *from* these "local" thinkers, and not only learn something *about* them.[5]

Hence, "local" philosophical traditions, if they are philosophical according to our definition, are already "*global*", at least potentially, in the sense that they in principle are available for other open-minded philosophical thinkers. In short, any "local" *philosophy*, given our definition, has to be able to show its philosophical relevance in our contemporary world. This point becomes even more salient when we add that a history of philosophy should not end with thinkers like Kant or Hegel, but should go *all the way up to contemporary thinkers*. If so, we should ask ourselves whether there are common epistemic claims and challenges, and common normative challenges, in our contemporary world.

My answer to that question is affirmative: in our contemporary world, there are several common challenges, with relevance for our philosophical thinking, for instance related to the variety of sciences and humanities, new technologies, and ecological crises:

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[4] Cf. Habermas (2012) and (2019) emphasizing the importance of mutual learning processes, between religion and secular thinking.

[5] At the 24th World Congress for Philosophy in Beijing 2018 the motto was *Learning to be human*, and from the Chinese side Confucian thinkers were among the main topics, thus presupposing that "we", living today, also "we" who are not Chinese, could learn valuable insights from these "local" philosophical traditions. Moreover, this is exactly what Professor Yu Zhenhua (at East China Normal University, in Shanghai) is doing in his impressive comparative work on "tacit knowing" in the Chinese tradition and among contemporary thinkers like Michael Polanyi, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger; cf. Zhenhua (2012).

(i) With all the different sciences and humanities in a modern world, as we see them at full-scale modern universities, there are both instrumental and interpretive-communicative forms of rationality; and common to them all is argumentative reasoning, as during doctoral disputations, trying out better reasons against less good reasons, in free and open discussions, being open for counter-arguments;[6]

(ii) New technologies give rise to challenges and questions, also for philosophy;[7]

(iii) And there are eco-crises of various kinds, challenging for all of us, also for philosophers.[8]

In short, in our time there are common epistemic and practical challenges for contemporary philosophy. Insofar, we have numerous modern challenges (Cf. Skirbekk, 2019), within what rightly can be seen as a *common modernity*. However, at the same time, in different nations and regions there are different institutional developments and different historical experiences. Insofar, there are "*multiple modernities*" (Cf. Skirbekk, 2011).

PRINCIPLES

So far, these are my comments on the three terms: "*philosophy*", "*history* of philosophy", and "*global* history of philosophy." But what about the *principles* in trying to write such a history of philosophy, as defined about, and right into our contemporary world?

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[6] Hence, there are two pitfalls: (i) those who emphasize instrumental rationality, in terms of natural science and technology, and neglect interpretive and communicative rationality, as in the humanities – as we e.g. see it in the Middle East among the Jihadists, clever in using modern technology in warfare and communication, but with pre-modern worldviews and attitudes, but also in the Mid-West, with Star War and Creationism – all in all a fatal constellation that rightly could be described as "half-modern"; (ii) and those who dogmatically disregard and detest counter-arguments in matters of complexity and importance – also a fatal constellation, one that might rightly be described as "argumentophobic." – In these cases, philosophy, not least the philosophy of the sciences and the humanities, has a job to do.

[7] Not least for political philosophy, for instance as to changes in the public sphere and thus in politics, or as to changes on the job market, with socio-political implications, and also for the very notion of a human being, challenged by technology-based "transhumanism." Cf. e.g. Ray Kurzweil (2005) on "singularity."

[8] Surely, there are various ecological challenges: climate change, pollution, unsustainable consumption and population growth, and scarce resources, water included, all of it made worse by "fragile states" and pre-modern traditions – hence, numerous challenges, also for philosophers.

Two points: (i) epistemic claims should be taken seriously, and (ii) socio-historical events and constellations should be considered, as background for the questions that are raised. That is, a history of philosophy should at the same time be conceived as *argumentative and situated*.

But how? My suggestion, briefly stated: *do not start with the answers!* Rather, focus on these four points, one after the other: (i) first, comments on the *background*, to make sense to *questions* and *concerns*. That it matters!;[9] (ii) then, comments on the *reasons* that are given (or could have been given), internally, within the philosopher's own perspective, and maybe also externally, related to other philosophers or other agents with relevant epistemic claims; (iii) and then, the "*answer*" – the position, theory, learning (*Lehre*), which is held and defended by the philosopher; (iv) finally, comments on implications of this specific way of thinking – what it implies, one way or the other.

Moreover, there are well known problems of how to choose and select among the various relevant and interesting thinkers and ways of thinking. Also, the choice of approach – how to write and for whom? In these cases, whatever the choice might be, it should be clearly stated in the preface.

EXPERIENCES

In trying to write such a global history of philosophy, as a co-author, and at the same time being a teacher, using this kind of text with this kind of approach, and thereby receiving valuable reactions from students as well as from colleagues and translators, in so doing one learns to appreciate the various forms of collaboration and the various practical and professional experiences. I may summarize my own experiences in three points:[10]

[9] That it matters for these thinkers, and thereby, maybe, also for the reader. In short, basic philosophical questions cannot always be adequately grasped by the semantic utterance alone. In many cases some knowledge of the socio-historical context is required. Moreover, an adequate insight into the "background" may also imply an awareness of the underlying conceptual "horizon" in the sense of Martin Heidegger or Charles Taylor.

[10] A book written in Norwegian. First edition, 1970, with the title "Introduction to Political Theory" (*Innføring i politisk teori*); in 1972 with the title "Political Philosophy" (*Politisk filosofi*); since 1980 with the title "History of Philosophy" (*Filosofihistorie*). Since 1987 with Professor Nils Gilje as co-author. The 9th Norwegian edition in 2007, in collaboration with Anne Granberg, Cathrine Holst, and Rasmus Slaattelid. English version in 2001, with the title "A History of Western Thought." Revised Chinese edition in 2016. Available in 18 languages. Further info, cp my homepage at UiB, http://www.uib.no/personer/Gunnar.Skirbekk# look at Show CV, seek "Notes in retrospect to my Chinese friends," pp. 29–45

It is advisable to have a *broad approach* – philosophically, as to different ancient traditions, such as Greek, Indian, Chinese, but also trying to do justice to different national traditions, such as French, British, and German,[11] and with regard to different schools of thought, not least in contemporary philosophy. Broad also in an extended sense, with references to epistemic claims and challenges in various sciences (and humanities) and ideologies – thus with reference to the historical development of various sciences and of various kinds of political thinking. Finally, broad in the sense that decisive socio-historical events and constellations are referred to, as a background for questions and concerns. Moreover, it is advisable to try to go the whole way, right into main trends in modern philosophy, even if it has to be selective and sketchy.

Finally, when ending up with contemporary thinkers and ways of thinking, it is advisable to take contemporary epistemic standards, standards for good work, into account. The same holds true for contemporary challenges, both related to modern sciences and humanities and other forms of reason and rationality, and related to main events and challenges in the modern world, with the intricate interplay of institutional, cultural, and ecological factors.

So, where do we end? Starting with a *restrictive* definition of "philosophy," we end up with a *broad* history of philosophy, a *global* history of philosophy, that rightly can be seen as *a history of global modernization*, with its focus on the development of various forms for reason and rationality and their historical and institutional "situatedness" – both as common trends and as multiple modernities. Hence, all in all, it is a matter of self-understanding.

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(A Chinese translation of these "Notes" is published in the Chinese version of *Multiple Modernites*, in 2013).

[11] Bluntly stated: in France, philosophy tends to be French, in Germany German, in England English. So maybe it is useful to write this kind of book from the perspective of one of the smaller European countries, whose citizens are used to trade with everybody and to change language and cultural horizon in crossing borders. Interestingly, English reviewers were astonished to find so many (for them) unknown German thinkers in our book, whereas French reviewers wondered why not more French philosophers were included. Apparently, national perspectives still prevail.

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