


M i s c e l l a n e a

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The ‘Eastern’ Origins of ‘Western’ Philosophy: Against Eurocentricism

Abstract The article sets the signposts of a theft in history, as it charts the way the discipline of Philosophy has been narrated as a ‘western’ system of thought. We follow the global sources of Philosophy and establish how better knowledge and education can develop, once the myths of the past are overcome.

Keywords philosophy, eurocentricism, racism, global history, Kant, Avicenna

Ideas are never really confined to one locus. This article takes this seemingly common-sensical statement and turns it into a contribution to a larger intellectual agenda which is systematic and strategic, as it is rooted in a joint effort by critical scholars to demonstrate how ideas travel. In particular, the idea that Philosophy—or indeed other disciplines—are not global in their constitution continues to be a widespread fallacy. In fact, it is an urgent matter to address this untruth, as it continues to be taught as ‘scientific’ at prestigious university departments until the present day.¹

Against this obstinate Eurocentrism, the present article demonstrates connections in a concrete and explicit manner, as it shows how so called ‘western’ philosophy, in particular in its renaissance and enlightenment manifestation, is located in the ideas of philosophers in the ‘East’ and here in particular the ‘*al-ḥik-*

¹ See Davis (2017).



ma' tradition of the classical philosophers (e.g. Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd [Averroes], Farabi), which developed in the Arab/Persian/Muslim realm and which in turn is imbued with Indian, Hellenic, ancient Roman, North African, and Zoroastrian traditions among other rhizomes of global thought. In this way, the present article takes advantage of recent strides in the social sciences. In this critical scholarship, there has emerged an emphasis on an integrative reading of world history in general and the production of systems of knowledge such as academic disciplines in particular.² My emphasis on philosophy as global thought serves as a contribution to that debate.

1 Philosophy as Global Thought

Despite the institutionalised efforts to cleanse the western archives from any impingement of the 'other' during the European enlightenment and in many ways thereafter, there have emerged in the last decades intellectual movements that are reversing this 'theft of history'.³ A wide range of critical theories and practice, from Post-Colonialism and Post-Structuralism to Global History, Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies are reclaiming a seemingly lost intellectual mosaic that is spread out on a global canvas.⁴ Understood as a globalised system of thought, philosophy, as the root discipline of the Humanities/social sciences and as an intellectual practice (and not so much as a structured discipline to be studied at the University), lends itself to such a 'decolonial' endeavour perfectly, because philosophy simulates the possibility of freedom. It is in this way that a global rooting of philosophy suggests an impulse that is essentially breaking any Eurocentric shackles.⁵ If a philosopher's task is synonymous with the love for truth and aversion to falsehood as the 12th century Hispanic-Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd professed,⁶ then philosophy chimes with our innate quest for betterment of the human condition, at least when philosophy is forcefully freed from the scourge of conformity and self-censorship which is prevalent, even in contemporary academia.⁷ Ibn Rushd followed a dotted line of philosophical thought from Oriental-Greece to Occidental-Persia and the Mediterranean. This article traces such loose intellectual itineraries and relocates them at the same time, not in order to create another hierarchy of knowledge or to recentre philosophy around a particular period of time or 'eastern' geography. Rather, we are trying to demonstrate that philosophy carries a global heritage that has been denied by

² See among other Hobson (2004).

³ The phrase is Goody's (2007).

⁴ See the contributions in Stone and Mohaghegh (2017).

⁵ On the emancipatory promise of art and philosophy see Adorno (2013).

⁶ Averroes 1974: 72.

⁷ On the qualities of a philosopher see further Averroes (1974: 72–73).

privileged gatekeepers, in many ways until today.

There is a second factor why philosophy qualifies as global thought that escapes geographical confinement in the 'west' or anywhere else for that matter. As an intellectual pursuit, philosophy (much in the same way as art) is located in historically contingent constellations that defy simple definitions. Of course, there have been efforts to 'define' philosophy. The etymology of the term binds it back to ancient 'Greece', itself a hybrid conglomerate of inter-cultural influences—*philein sophia*, or 'philosophia' meaning lover of wisdom. However, unless one continues to argue that it was only in ancient Athens or during the European enlightenment that such love of wisdom was systematically expressed and taught, it is very difficult to hold on to the notion that western Philosophy is Philosophy and exclusively so.

If philosophy is synonymous with the love for wisdom, then there is evidence for such pursuit in every civilisation that existed before Plato and Aristotle's contributions, for instance in the 'ganjis' of the Achaemenid empire (founded 550 BC) in 'Persia', literally 'treasuries' or spaces for books pertaining to Zoroastrian religion and scientific knowledge for medical and administrative purposes that in turn informed the 'houses of wisdom' (*buyūt al-ḥikma*) immortalised in the 1001 nights depicting 8th century Baghdad. Confucius and Sun Tzu, the sages of philosophy in ancient 'China' philosophised over a hundred years before Plato. Pre-Buddhist thinkers and Hindu ascetics presented comparably sophisticated philosophical systems of thought that predated the ancient Greek philosophers. More recent discoveries aid and abet this global heritage, for instance in the 1990s when Peruvian researchers unearthed archaeological sites of the Norte Chico civilisation along the Peruvian coast whose truncated monuments, pyramids and complex governance systems suggest a dense philosophical heritage that dates back to the third millennium BC, the earliest known in the 'western' hemisphere. In fact, the trajectory of complex ideas such as philosophy, their travel itinerary so to speak, escapes any artificial encampment. As such, philosophy does not have a singular origin and it shouldn't be taught as such. There is no text or object that could be consolidated as foundational despite stringent efforts in the 'western' canon to that end.

But even Eurocentric depictions which claim philosophy (and related concepts such as art and architecture) for the 'west' have failed to mute the critical promise that many philosophers believe in. The emergence of the aforementioned critical theories and their concomitant practices are contemporary manifestations of this rather more inclusive trend. Hence, the systematic effort to reduce philosophy to the 'west' and to gentrify its genealogy from the impact of the 'other' has failed, exactly because philosophy has to escape the mould of any locus (or locality) in order to exist. Whenever a limit is defined for philosophers, it is immediately overturned. Otherwise, philosophy as the love for truth, the pursuit of wisdom (*ḥikma*), an exercise in freedom of thought, would

be rather more concomitant to a tyranny of misinformation or the folly of ideological propaganda.⁸

My rather abstract introductory suggestions will become clearer and more specific in the next paragraphs when I will explore the nexus of philosophy and global thought with insights that are taken from several cultural loci. This is to show that the love for the truth, wisdom or freedom that philosophy simulates and calls for has been a universal sentiment and not merely ‘western’. Every philosophical tract is an interregnum, a suspension, an interruption and interference in the humdrum affairs of society. In this way philosophy continues to entice despite the vulgar commodification of the university and the publishing industry.⁹ Once philosophy ceases to provoke, it ceases to exist as an intellectual activity. We have not reached this point, exactly because the counter-argument is being written into our archives yielding a better science via novel forms of critique and negation. This decolonial dialectic has thrown a lifeline to the survival of philosophy as global thought. It is in this constructive interaction that we will demonstrate where philosophy is in the process of finding its true calling and hybrid ‘identity’.

2 Hybrid Knowledge versus Eurocentricism

The roots of Philosophy in global thought can be adequately explained by focusing on the way classical ‘Muslim’ philosophers who lived in Europe, North Africa and throughout Asia dealt with contentious subjects such as rationality and knowledge. The confines of this article do not allow me to give a full account of these issues of course. But I hope to sketch a forward-looking modality in classical ‘Muslim’ philosophy which I think inherently critical and inclusive.¹⁰ In the philosophy of polymaths such as Abu Nasr Farabi (870–950 CE) and Ibn Sina (Latin: Avicenna, 980–1037 CE), even in their poetry, life takes on a forward-looking modality adequate to this idea of the capacity for change which is always the pre-requisite for any critical theory based on reason. Their emphasis on learning and constant renewal created hope and possibility, an optimistic call for the betterment of the human existence which was at the heart of the European enlightenment, in particular in its Kantian iteration encapsulated in his notion of *Vernunft* (reason). In that vein, in his *‘uyūn al-ḥikma* Ibn Sina writes that *al-ḥikma*, (which he uses to mean the same as ‘philosophy’) is ‘the perfection of the human soul through conceptualisation [*taṣawwur*] of things and judgment [*taṣdīq*]

⁸ Some of these sections are based on Adib-Moghaddam (2017: 35–46).

⁹ See Adorno’s classic *The Culture Industry* (2001).

¹⁰ I am using quotation marks for ‘Muslim’ because the classical philosophers under scrutiny here did neither live an orthodox, religious life, nor did their ideas have particularly Islamic connotations. At the same time, they self-identified as ‘Muslim’.

of theoretical and practical realities to the measure of human ability.¹¹ Learned individuals are encouraged to follow a path of finding this supreme knowledge, not least in order to transcend the humdrum affairs of their everyday reality and to attain a higher form of contentment and happiness.

Ibn Sina went on in his later writings to distinguish between Peripatetic philosophy and what he called 'Oriental philosophy' (*al-ḥikma al-mašriqiyya*) which was not based on ratiocination alone, but also engaged with revealed knowledge (it also set the stage for the influential treatises of Sohrawardi, and here especially his *Kitāb ḥikmat al-ʾiṣrāq*). There is a particularly striking poem by Ibn Sina about the fate of the human soul, which exemplifies this emphasis on congruence between rational analysis and metaphysical opportunity that was central to the canons of these classical philosophers:

Until when the hour of its homeward flight draws near,
And 'tis time for it to return to its ampler sphere,
It carols with joy, for the veil is raised, and it spies
Such things as cannot be witnessed by waking eyes.
On a lofty height doth it warble its songs of praise
(for even the lowliest being doth knowledge raise).
And so it returneth, aware of all hidden things
In the universe, while no stain to its garment clings.¹²

The ultimate object here is the perfection of the intellectual faculties of the individual, who does not carry an exclusive identity. There is no realm of knowledge that is exclusive to Muslims or any other religion/nation in the writings of Ibn Sina; no discernible schematic dichotomy that permeates his narratives. Ibn Sina searches for a supreme truth, not a supreme civilisation or race. He and many of his contemporaries managed to write their poetry and philosophy without the emergence of a discourse that would legitimate subjugation of the 'other', without a hysterical call for arms. In this sense their concept of 'reason' was not identitarian. Rather the contrary, their writings called for freedom of thought through the pursuit of knowledge, primarily in the form of philosophy.

This emphasis on reason and rationality as a pursuit of knowledge that can be achieved by everyone who is sufficiently disciplined and qualified, can be discerned with equal force from the writings of Ibn Rushd (Latin: Averroes, 1126–1198). This Hispanic-Muslim genius took on the assertion of Plato, that the 'Greeks' are superior to other peoples in their ability to receive wisdom, by relocating wisdom to individuals in his own homeland Andalusia and today's Egypt, Syria and Iraq. In Ibn Rushd too, then, we find hybridity. Like Ibn Sina before him, Ibn Rushd did

¹¹ Ibn Sina (1954: 16).

¹² Quoted in Walzer (1962: 26).

not claim that only ‘Muslims’ can be philosophers or attain wisdom. Ibn Rushd explicitly affirmed the various loci of philosophical knowledge known to him. Such worldly consciousness may explain why systematic racism as a science taught at universities never really emerged in (Western) Asia (and Africa and Latin America), and why it became a typically European abomination during modernity and the concomitant enlightenment. It was in modern Europe, in other words, where the Platonic emphasis on the superiority of the ‘Greeks’ was hijacked and turned into a racist mandate to rule over the ‘barbarian other’ thus invented.¹³ Quite suddenly, Muslim (and Jewish) philosophy was cleansed from the archives as none of the standard philosophy books taught in the newly established, highly restrictive modern universities acknowledged previous forms of philosophy or denigrated them as ‘backward’, even ‘barbarian’. Thus, standard histories of the discipline such as Jean Félix Nourrisson’s *Tableau des progrès de la pensée humaine depuis Thalès jusqu’à Hegel* (*Account of the Progress of Human Thought from Thales to Hegel*) (1858, 6th ed. 1886) or Albert Stöckl’s *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (*Handbook of the History of Philosophy*) (1870), did not even mention Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Maimonides or any other Muslim or Jewish philosophers.¹⁴

The trend continued well into the 20th century.¹⁵ Stunted by this ignorance of the global canons of knowledge, even Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), was tempted to assume that ‘Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought. Men like Avicenna and Averroes are essentially commentators.’¹⁶ Apart from the fact that Russell conflates a supposedly ‘ethnic’ category such as ‘Arab’ with being ‘Muslim’, he relegates even Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who was born in southern Spain, out of the canon of ‘western’ philosophy, indeed out of Europe itself by deeming him ‘Arab’ and therefore ‘foreign’. Other contemporaries, such as Joseph Burgess, indulged in open mockery of these actively ‘othered’ systems of knowledge. In his *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* published in 1939, he claimed that the ‘Western spirit ... is inclined to regard this Nirvana business as a lot of twaddle, unbecoming a man of common sense and sound judgment.’¹⁷

Such attitudes did not develop in systematic terms in the ‘East’ or in the ‘Global South’. It was only during the European enlightenment and thereafter, when Philosophy and other disciplines were claimed exclusively by ‘white European man’ of a certain age and social class. The colonial period afforded them that luxury. Since then, this untruth of Philosophy as a particularly ‘western’ discipline has been mass-taught via a Eurocentric curriculum in the burgeoning mod-

¹³ See further Adib-Moghaddam (2008).

¹⁴ See further Strickland (2019).

¹⁵ See further Attar (2012).

¹⁶ Russell 2013: 346.

¹⁷ Burgess 1939: 17.

ern educational system.¹⁸ Consequently, there was no cadre of new philosophers emerging, which could appreciate a hybrid understanding of seeking knowledge, exactly because other philosophies were simply banished from the archives or categorised as 'unworthy' to study.

Conversely, all of the classical philosophers from the 'East' under scrutiny here, were hybrid in their thinking, which is why they could become polymaths, both poets and scientists, engaged in theology and mysticism, interested in philosophy and 'metaphysics' as much as in the empirical world. Exactly because of their multi-cultural approach, they did not advance a concrete concept of 'identity' steeped in a racialised narrative, that could signify a monologue within one race or that would organise their contemporaries within a militant, coherently formulated epistemology/ideology. Theirs was an emancipative philosophy almost entirely depleted of identity politics or a concrete and dichotomous notion of 'self' and 'other'. Hence their ideas qualify as 'global thought' and they should be read and studied as such. In the case of these cosmopolitan Hispanics, Indians, Arabs and Persians, the historical circumstances they were writing in, the presence of functioning hybrid polities, the absence of a concrete notion of 'racial identity', did not merit, or require them to write in a stridently ideological mode or to establish a racist syntax for governance on that basis.¹⁹

We have established that in terms of method, too, the classical 'Muslim' philosophers were not mono-cultural. They employed complex methods drawn from various knowledge systems: Zoroastrian, African, nomadic, Persian, Arab, Indian, Central Asian, Hellenic, Roman etc. Their epistemological diversity allowed them to study how truth conditions can be rationalised through the study of language, judgement, nature, syllogisms, deductions and inductions. *Falsafa* (philosophy) was considered to lead to the knowledge of all existing things qua existent (*'ašyā' al-mawğūda bi-mā hiya mawğūda*) and philosophy itself was deemed to be the art of arts and the science (*'ilm*) of sciences. What came surreptitiously into existence in the writings of these philosophers, in short, was nothing less than the renewal of philosophy as a critical practice, world-view *and* form of life. For Ibn Rushd, as indicated, these qualities of 'wisdom' should not be thought the prerogative and purview of one 'class of humans'.

This opinion would only be correct if there were but one class of humans disposed to the human perfections and especially to the theoretical ones. It seems that this is the opinion that Plato holds of the Greeks. However, even if we accept that they are the most disposed by nature to receive wisdom, we cannot disregard [the fact] that individuals like these—

¹⁸ See further Davis (2017: 115–118).

¹⁹ Of course, the violence exercised over the Muslim worlds during the colonial period changed all that and it was then when 'Islamism' was born. See further Adib-Moghaddam (2008).

i.e. those disposed to wisdom—are frequently to be found. You find this in the land of the Greeks and its vicinity, such as this land of ours, namely Andalus, and Syria and Iraq and Egypt, albeit this existed more frequently in the land of the Greeks.²⁰

Before Ibn Rushd set out this rather more inclusive ‘history of wisdom’ (and by extension philosophy), Farabi traversed and falsified similar Platonic boundaries in a related debate about ‘origins’. From the perspective of this Persianate-Muslim thinker, the lineage of philosophy can be traced from the Chaldeans to Iraq and to Egypt and thereafter to the Greeks from whom the Syrians and finally the Arabs retrieved it.²¹ In addition, Maimonides, the Hispanic-Jewish contemporary of Ibn Rushd, deemed the Persians, Syrians and Greeks ‘the most learned and expert of the nations’.²²

It has been established in the scholarly literature on the subject matter, that all of this happened in close dialogue with the Aristotelian and Platonic tradition and ancient philosophy described as ‘Greek’ in general. But even until today, certainly in the standard disciplinary engagement with philosophy, there is no systematic effort to theorise philosophy as global thought, as an amalgamation of the innate quest of a select number of humans dotted around world history to seek reasoned knowledge. In too many schools and universities all over the world, pupils and students are still educated into believing either a nationalised narrative or a religious one. Both tend to express a hegemony of knowledge that is both untrue and laden with various forms of misogyny and racism, exactly because such forms of political and social discourses are by definition exclusionary.²³

3 Muslim Secularism and the European ‘Twaddle’ about God

The aforementioned Burgess articulated a general cliché about the classical philosophers that is still regurgitated today. Burgess was certainly also under the influence of the German giant of idealist thought George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) who relegated ‘Muslims’ to an infantile stage of history because of their supposed ‘God complex’. In a similar vein, Burgess wrote that, ‘Occidental thought ... is impatient with philosophies that hint of other-worldliness because it wishes to keep its feet firmly planted on solid, scientifically supported ground.’²⁴ Therefore, according to Burgess, Europeans could afford to ignore the ‘East’. In this way, ‘western’ thought was rendered scientific, whereas the rest of the world was declared ‘superstitious’.

²⁰ Averroes 1974: 13.

²¹ Averroes 1974: 13.

²² Averroes 1974: 13.

²³ See further Babbitt and Campbell (1999).

²⁴ Burgess 1939: 17.

But patience is required for the truth to come to the fore and certainly for good scholarship to be archived for future generations. It is true that for the classical philosophers of the so called 'Muslim enlightenment', in many ways up until Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), reality is not exhausted by explaining what offers itself to immediate knowledge and perception. The understanding of the surrounding world must also include an aspect of future potentiality, a 'utopia' wherein the discrepancy between the present and the future opens up. This is why in the philosophy of Farabi and especially in Ibn Sina's intricate *Daneshnameh-ye Alai* ("Treatise on Knowledge"), philosophy takes on a forward-looking modality adequate to this idea of the capacity for change as indicated. In Ibn Sina's view: the contingent existent (*mumkin al-wuġūd*) is always relative to the necessary being (*wāġib al-wuġūd*).²⁵ Within such a dialectic, one is alerted to know the present in order to bridge the gap between the ontology surrounding us and the transcendental promise which is relegated to God, without, however, forcing a total causality upon this process. If Burgess would have cared to dig deeper into the true history of philosophy, he would have been forced to acknowledge, that the world Ibn Sina conceptualised is essentially 'secular', exactly because God is placed in another realm of existence, not out of political expediency, but out of acknowledgement that total knowledge can never be attained, thus creating the impulse for continuous betterment of the human condition in the here and now.

Furthermore, in all of that which happened eight centuries before Nietzsche proclaimed the 'death of God', we fail to see a fundamental, ontological, hermeneutical or epistemological boundary to the ideas of the most prominent enlightenment thinkers. The idea of Descartes that reason is the chief source of human knowledge and that God is displaced to what can be experienced by the senses, is comparable to Ibn Sina's view that human kind is in charge of its destiny, as God occupies another realm which is by definition unattainable.

Equally, John Locke's (1632–1704) view that the chief source of knowledge is the ability to observe and experience our surroundings, and that religious dogma is therefore superfluous, is concomitant with the argument of Farabi articulated in his *Enumeration of the Sciences*, that relegates religious knowledge to theology (*fiqh*) and jurisprudence (*kalām*) identifying philosophy as the master discipline enveloping every other knowledge system, even the Islamic law itself.²⁶ In fact, Ibn Rushd went even further. The ideal ruler, in clear lenience to Plato, would be a philosopher a 'king, lawgiver, and so also is Imam, since *imām* in Arabic means one who is followed in his actions. He who is followed in these actions by which he is a philosopher, is an Imam in the absolute sense.²⁷ Hence, Philosophy rules supreme, even as a form of governance in the happiest of cities, conceptualised

²⁵ See further Nasr and Aminrazavi (1999: 196 ff.).

²⁶ See further Mahdi (2001).

²⁷ Averroes 1974: 72.

by Ibn Rushd as the democratic arche-type: 'This city is the one of which most of the multitude hold that it is the city to be admired, for every man asserts on the basis of unexamined opinion that he deserves to be free.'²⁸

Finally, in the late 18th century, it could be argued that Immanuel Kant forcefully denied that even theological knowledge is possible, because it is only our surrounding reality in terms of time, space, causation and substance that can be experienced, conceptualised and therefore systematically ordered. Everything that goes beyond this reality, i.e. the 'other-worldly' can't be grasped, neither through theology nor 'meta-physics'. However, even before his *Critique of Pure Reason* and its more secular musings, Kant framed the concept of 'God' in terms of the *allgenugsam*, the single all-sufficient being. This seems very comparable to the *wāğib al-wuğūd* idea of Ibn Sina, the first cause upon which the physical world rests. The idea of Kant that the perfection of the physical universe surrounding us is 'an undeniable proof of their (i.e., all physical things) common first origin, which must be an all-sufficient highest mind in which the natures of things were designed in accordance with unified purposes',²⁹ is a clear nod to the first cause that Ibn Sina's theory rested upon about seven centuries before Kant. We think it is clear that they are at least comparable, even if we could only sketch this point in this short perusal, in order to support our argument that this engagement with the 'other-worldly' binds 'East' and 'West' together in a tango with God.

The world of the philosopher and poet Omar Khayyam (1048–1123), one of the most prominent students of Ibn Sina, is a good place to unravel further the contribution of the idea of God to secular/Muslim philosophy and to invite the reader to a global understanding of philosophy. The world-view of Khayyam can be called 'critical' and secular because of the libertarian momentum that his concept of God elicits. To his mind, God was the necessary being or *mumtani' al-wuğūd* in Arabic (Ibn Sina termed God *wāğib al-wuğūd* as indicated). By necessity human beings were relative to this other-worldly constant, this *allgenugsam*, exactly in the same way as Kant imagined at a later stage in world history.

Other concepts such as 'freedom'—hijacked from global thought and claimed to be 'western' only—are equally central to the ideas of Khayyam. In the world portrayed in his poetry, living a free life is immanent to existence because in relation to God, reality is thought to be socially engineered. In the absence of the godly ordained, perfected order, individuals are at liberty to live their lives in pursuit of freedom and happiness. For Khayyam the absence of the necessary being or the *allgenugsam* in Kantian terms, continuously entices the relative being, that is the individual in his/her pursuit of such perfection.

In Khayyam's world there is doubt exactly because in relation to the other-worldly realm, which remains unattainable, this world we are living in is dis-

²⁸ Averroes 1974: 111.

²⁹ Quoted in Pasternack and Fugate (2021).

orderly, intransigently complex and not comprehensible in its entirety, prompting us to seek more knowledge in pursuit of human betterment. 'Whenever it is said that such and such an attribute has a necessary existence in such and such a thing', Khayyam asserted,

what is meant is that it exists in the mind and the intellect, *and not in reality*. Similarly, whenever it is said that the existence of such and such an attribute is dependent upon the existence of some other attribute, what is meant is *existence in mind and the intellect*.³⁰

Khayyam reveals himself here as an early 'postmodernist'. He was convinced that our surrounding world is constructed because the realm of actual reality belongs to God. In other words, in his philosophy Khayyam alerted us to the fact that relative to God, the socially engineered world surrounding us can be entirely invented, despite of the ultimate truth escaping humanity. Khayyam expressed the momentum thus ensued in his famous quatrains:

Since neither truth nor certitude is at hand
Do not waste life in doubt for a fairy land
O let us not refuse the goblet of wine
For sober or drunk in ignorance we stand.³¹

All of this secularity may explain why Khayyam lived the life of a rebel, intoxicated by wine and his love for poetry. Khayyam expressed his alien reality, thus giving the lie to notions of religion (including Islam) as a total system immune from the grim impact of historical events. As the inspirational Mutazillite movement centred around Basra and Baghdad professed between the 8th and 10th century: Even the 'Koran, as the speech of God, was created'.³² Hence, religion was thought to be historically contingent. In Khayyam's words:

Eternity!—for it we find no key;
Nor any of us past the Veil can see.
Of Thee and me they talk behind the Veil
But when that parts, no more of Thee and me.³³

The failure of Khayyam to redeem himself, the fact that neither his poetry nor his 'drunkenness' could bring him closer to God, is also, paradoxically, the source

³⁰ Khayyām 1999: 478.

³¹ Quoted in Aminrazavi (2006: 281).

³² Fakhry 2014: 63.

³³ Quoted in Aminrazavi (2006: 283).

of the irresistible secular merit of his poetry and philosophy. Khayyam presaged that the individual is constantly obliged to bridge the gap between this alien world and the necessary and absolute Divinity designated as God. Yet this utopia is by definition unattainable—sameness with God is the ‘impossible ontology’ or *mumtani*^c *al-wuğūd* in Ibn Sina’s words. In this way, Khayyam and the Avicennian tradition tried to establish an essentially secular world-view, which also explains the ‘non-religious’, rather hedonistic life-style that these free-thinkers lived. Certainly, God as *mumtani*^c *al-wuğūd*—the impossible ontology which explains the inherently secular order—precedes the notion of Kant that an ‘ethical community’ requires ‘God’ as the ‘presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect.’³⁴ For Kant, as well, the idea of God as an unattainable ontology, requires that we carry our own fate and that no religious doctrine can help us to establish a godly ordained order on earth.

This idea of Kant is at least comparable to Khayyam’s assertion that humanity is dependent on the idea of ‘God’ as a divine, unattainable moral entity.³⁵ Mysticism (Sufism), poetry, the arts and above all philosophy become the inevitable routes to seek respite from the mundane world and to simulate closeness with God. They hold out the promise, never to be kept, of a realm of consciousness where the individual could at last find an image of perfect equilibrium, of sensuous pleasure that would rescue her from the antinomies of her present existence. As such, philosophy (and poetry) embody a much perfected form of ontological negation. In this way for Khayyam and Kant, the idea of God functions as a propeller for a productive form of criticism and as an incubator for secular expressions of critique and philosophy. This relegation of God to a meta-physical ‘no man’s land’, would also explain why some of these classical philosophers were harassed and in the case of the Iraqi-Persian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj (858–922), executed for their ‘heresy’ by the orthodoxy of the day.

However, for too long these resemblances, that would prompt every thorough teacher to check a paper for plagiarism, never really entered into any of the standard books about the history of Philosophy because of the false claim that the enlightenment didn’t ‘twaddle’ with God or that Averroes and Avicenna were mere commentators of Plato and Aristotle. All of this makes one sympathise with those intellectuals who have argued that the theft of knowledge during the European enlightenment, was a convenient political strategy to legitimate the civilising mission at the heart of colonial conquests and its various underlying racisms. Certainly, by today’s standards, the godfather of the ‘*Vernunftsgedanke*’, Immanuel Kant was a racist. Undoubtedly, contemporary critical scholars correctly argue that the philosophy of luminaries such as John Locke (1632–1704),

³⁴ Kant 1996: 97. See also Palmquist (2009: 10).

³⁵ Nasr 1996: 81.

David Hume (1711–1776), etc, foundational as they were for the European enlightenment, must be indicted because they believed and tried to explain quite 'scientifically' that Black, natives, and other peoples were not only barbarians, but racially inferior and therefore in need of correction by 'European' civilisation. All of this has been established in the most recent critical scholarship about the Enlightenment and rightly so.³⁶

4 Embraces of self and other

We have argued that there was a conscious and concerted effort to claim Philosophy for Europe, as a means to buttress a hegemonic discourse. In its political manifestation, this Eurocentricism fed into the colonialist *Zeitgeist* and its underlying misogyny and racism. Even those readers who deny that there was a link between the untruth professed by Eurocentric scholars about the history of philosophy, must acknowledge that the examples curated for this article provide enough evidence to assume that by denying the global loci of philosophical thought, enlightenment philosophers were implicated in an ignorant denial of global history.³⁷

How likely is it that Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Locke never heard of Avicenna, when medieval European philosophy was heavily influenced by him? If they didn't, how credible are they as philosophers?

Of course, there were instances of mutual recognition, too. But mostly they can be located in the period *before* the enlightenment. For instance during the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) heavily borrowed from Ibn Sina and his theory of creation:³⁸ 'It was Avicenna, not Aristotle', it is established, 'who had described the subject of metaphysics as things that *can* exist without matter, thus bifurcating the subject-matter of metaphysics' which heavily influenced Aquinas's metaphysics.³⁹ Later on in the pre-Enlightenment period, histories of philosophy nodded to eastern sources of knowledge, without offering any systematic engagement, for instance in the first history of philosophy written in English in 1656 authored by Thomas Stanley. But contemporary scholars of racism and Eurocentricism in European Philosophy have rightly demonstrated that almost any book entitled 'history of philosophy' published over the last two centuries promoted the myth that 'philosophy began in ancient Greece about 2600 years ago ... was subsequently developed by other Greeks and later the Romans' and

³⁶ Said's work continues to gain currency in that regard. See, for instance, his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994). See also the work of Dabashi, for instance his *Europe and Its Shadows: Coloniality after Empire* (2019).

³⁷ For further examples for this influence see Hasse (2020).

³⁸ See López-Farjeat (2012).

³⁹ Houser 2013: 6 (emphasis in original).

was then perfected 'by other European thinkers, principally those from Germany, France, and Britain.'⁴⁰ Western philosophy as exclusive Philosophy could only be invented through this theft and denial of global thought. It is in this sense that the title of this paper should be understood: It is only in the process of extremist 'othering' that an exclusive self could be designed, institutionalised and enacted. It is in this way that 'eastern' philosophy gave birth to 'western' philosophy *qua* Philosophy, it is so that it is its origin.

All of these instances of wilful distortion fed our suspicion that the enlightenment project was also a grand ideological misnomer and a fatalistic betrayal of knowledge that contributed to several tragedies of European history until today. Perhaps this trend started with Immanuel Kant indeed, as the important work of Lloyd Strickland, Jia Wang and others suggests.⁴¹ That said, for our argument it is central to capture that any philosophical system, certainly the so called 'western' one, is rooted in global loci of thought. Hence, the history of philosophy as the root knowledge system of the social sciences and the Humanities has to be reconquered and written as global thought. As one Junior-year student at the University of Illinois demanded with reference to her institution:

We must begin offering non-Western philosophy courses here at the University of Illinois. Not only must they be offered, but they need to be more than optional. The curriculum needs to be restructured in order to incorporate these truly modern, global philosophers.⁴²

As we have argued at the start of this paper, there have been some very recent efforts to overcome the entrenched insularity of so called 'western' philosophy from other systems of thought. For instance, Bryan von Norden authored a multicultural manifesto to that end which amounts to a powerful indictment of the way philosophy is taught in North America.⁴³ Likewise, Peter Adamson, Julian Baggini and the aforementioned Lloyd Strickland have started to address some of the Eurocentric traditions that this article tried to identify, too.

Furthermore, Philosophy as 'world thought' is celebrated by UNESCO on every third Thursday of November and this can be seen as the institutional manifestation of critical approaches to the ethnocentric legacies of philosophy in Europe, North America and Australia. In fact, although recent data suggests that in the United States 'Philosophy confers a relatively small proportion of its degrees on traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities when compared to the

⁴⁰ Strickland and Wang 2023: 76.

⁴¹ Strickland and Wang 2023: 76.

⁴² Martinez 2021.

⁴³ See Van Norden 2017.


other disciplines profiled by the Humanities Indicators ... the share has grown since 1995', especially boosted by graduates from 'Hispanic decent'.⁴⁴

Optimistically, I do believe—and in my other writings have tried to demonstrate—that today we can appreciate the archives filled with the work of eastern and western, northern and southern thinkers in a truly comparative manner.⁴⁵ It is not at least thanks to the availability of a counter-archive to Eurocentric readings of philosophy, that we have enough knowledge at hand to free ourselves from the shackles of tribal thinking.

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⁴⁴ 'Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Degrees in Philosophy'. *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, circa 2019. Accessed 20 July 2023. <https://amacad.org/humanities-indicators/higher-education/raciaethnic-distribution-degrees-philosophy>.

⁴⁵ See further Adib-Moghaddam (2023).

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