

A History of Western Thought

Gunnar Skirbekk and Nils Gilje, *Filosofihistorie. Innføring til europeisk filosofihistorie med særleg vekt på vitenskapshistorie og politisk filosofi*. (Literally: “History of Philosophy. Introduction to European history of philosophy with special emphasis on history of sciences and political philosophy”.) English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twentieth century*.

Nils Gilje came in contact with the textbook for the first time as a student. He has been co-author since 1987. There have been various editions and revisions of the Norwegian text. First edition in 1970, with subsequent editions in 1972, 1976, 1980, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2007. The latter, in collaboration with Anne Granberg, Cathrine Holst and Rasmus Slaattelid.

(i) Background

In 1962, I became a teaching assistant (*hjelpelærer*) at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bergen. One of my responsibilities was teaching for *examen philosophicum*, mandatory for all university students, and which included introductory courses in the history of philosophy.

At that time, there were two parallel courses in the history of philosophy for this exam, one going from Ancient Greek philosophy to the Renaissance and one from the Renaissance to our times. In the fall of 1962, professor Tranøy had the first one and I the second. I attended Tranøy’s lectures (he was a brilliant lecturer), and he generously gave me copies of the notes that he used for his lectures. As part of my education, I taped my own lectures (by “wire recorder”, as it was called in those days), and after each lecture I wrote them down. After a few semesters, I had a manuscript for the whole course.

At that time, as a textbook, we used the one that was written by Arne Næss, in many ways an excellent book, focusing on preciseness and argumentation. (However, as a student, I had spent a year in France, being interested in existentialism, and one year in Germany, where I had met Heidegger, whose philosophy I was working on at that time; in short, I was no “Næssian”, such as Næss was at that time.) Moreover, after having taught for

four years in Bergen, I had spent a year at the University of California in San Diego (1966-1967), where I had followed the lectures given by Herbert Marcuse. He emphasized political philosophy and historical situatedness, an approach quite different from that of Arne Næss. It then struck me that there was something to be learnt from both of them, the emphasis on arguments and preciseness in Næss and the historical background with an emphasis on political philosophy in Marcuse.

At the end of the 1960s, as the university expanded, the ex.phil.-students at the University of Bergen were divided into groups, according to their choice of faculty. At that time, I had the responsibility for the courses in the history of philosophy for the students at the Faculty of Social Sciences. What was subsequently to become a textbook in the history of philosophy was initially a manuscript for those who were going to study at this faculty. In 1970, the manuscript was handed in to Editor Knut Lie at the University Press in Bergen under the title *Innføring i politisk teori* (“Introduction to political theory”). During the first two years, the manuscript was published in the form of two stencilled booklets in A-4 format (student price, 18 Norwegian crowns for each). The booklet was launched as a pilot project. Students were asked to give their comments, and so they did. We are now talking about the early-1970s: students were bright and dedicated, and they appreciated being involved in the project. (A reminder: in this booklet, there were also short sections from the original texts of philosophers and thinkers, in Norwegian and English, but also in German, covering Luther, Kant and Hegel, and in French, covering Plato, Montesquieu and Rousseau. At that time, all high school students, *gymnasiastar*, had courses in English, German and French.) In 1972, the book appeared in a revised version under the title “Politisk filosofi” (“Political Philosophy”). Since 1980, the book has had the title *Filosofihistorie* (Full title: *Filosofihistorie. Innføring til europeisk filosofihistorie med særleg vekt på vitenskapshistorie og*

politisk filosofi; English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twentieth century*).

(ii) Pedagogical approach

As a rule, the pedagogical organization was as follows: The textbook, with extracts from original literature, was part of a comprehensive approach, with lectures for the whole group and with smaller workshops where the students discussed central issues (often with a supervisor present) and where in turn they wrote answers that were handed in and corrected by the lecturers (and commented upon during the next lecture when there were points of general interest). In short, the students were trained in discussing and in writing, in addition to following the lectures and reading the textbook (with original texts).

Regarding the textbook, the main approach consists in an attempt to combine arguments and actualization with history and *Bildung* – to combine Næss and Marcuse, as it were: truth claims and arguments should be taken seriously, and at the same time, philosophical ideas and discussions should be seen as historically situated.

Moreover, before coming to the *answer*, the reader should be acquainted with the *question* behind, and the background for that kind of question, and also with the kind of *arguments* that are involved, and for (and against) whom one is arguing, and finally also with the *implications* of the various answers. In other words, a four-point concern, focusing on (i) questions, (ii) arguments, (iii) answers, and (iv) implications – where the answer itself, taken alone, might appear as unreasonable or farfetched, as for instance in the case of the “first philosopher”, Thales, who supposedly had said that “everything is water”, straight forward an unreasonable statement (even on a rainy day in Bergen), but a statement that makes sense when seen as a first approach within the extensive discussions among pre-Socratic philosophers on questions of change and

stability; and when seen in that perspective, with radical implications in terms of a secular worldview: everything can be understood by changes within a natural substance. Bluntly stated, to see the relevance of the answer, we have to look for the underlying question, we have to look at the reasons that might have been given, and also on the implications of the whole approach, and we ought to see each philosopher as a participant in an ongoing discussion, as within pre-Socratic philosophy from Thales to Democritus, and further into skeptical reactions among the Sophists, leading up to anti-skeptical approaches in Socrates and Plato, which again foster philosophical reactions in Aristotle. In short, not single answers, but a concern for underlying questions and possible reasons, as well as for implications, and a concern for how each philosopher could be seen as situated within discussions with other thinkers. Hence, philosophers should be taken seriously for what they say, and at the same time they should be seen as situated, both in a socio-historical sense and in relation to other scholarly and scientific activities in their surrounding (as in the case of the interplay between the new natural sciences at the end of the medieval ages and classical rationalism and empiricism, as in Descartes and Locke). These are the basic pedagogical ideas, underlying this history of western thought.

On this background, the book gradually developed in such a way that it could be read on a private basis – or *con amore* – and thus be used regardless of examinations and of any particular syllabus.

In retrospect, there is a lesson to be learnt from the way this history of philosophy came about: In order to write a textbook, firstly, the author ought to teach for those concerned; secondly, the author ought to be actively involved in research in the field and thus keep oneself professionally updated. Both are required: a close contact with those for whom the text is written and a close contact to the subject matter one is writing about.

(iii) Other people start using the book

Our textbook in the history of philosophy, celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2010, is shaped by the philosophical background and pedagogical setting delineated above, both as to its style and the philosophical approach. For one thing, political philosophy has a key position; the same is true of the development of the sciences, not only the natural sciences but also the social sciences and the humanities, including law and theology.

Even though the book was originally written for those who intended to study at the Faculty of Social Sciences, over a course of time it was also used by others, both at the University of Bergen and at universities and colleges elsewhere in Norway. The responses from colleagues and students were helpful in bringing about the ensuing revisions of the book. Consequently, it gradually became a general introduction to the history of philosophy, not one that was designed for a particular syllabus.

The book, written in New Norwegian (one of the two official Norwegian languages), was also used at Danish universities. On the question whether my Danish colleagues had critical remarks, I did not get any reaction about the language. However, there were remarks on the chapter on Søren Kierkegaard: the presentation was too severe and Ibsen-like, there had to be more double-reflective irony! Hence, the text was changed accordingly. The original version, written in New Norwegian, did well at Danish campuses – it was even exhibited in windows of the Paludan's bookstore in Fiolstrædet in Copenhagen. That is, this Norwegian version did well until the Danish publishing house Gyldendal understood that there was money to be earned and thus got the book translated and published in Danish. In the preface of the Danish version we may read that the Danish translator had done his best to preserve the straight-forward and easily readable linguistic form of the original Norwegian text (“bevare originalens ligefremme og letlæste sproglige form”).

(iv) Resistance

However, at home not everything was idyllic. In Bergen, in the fall of 1968, there had been critical discussions related to the proposal of a “rationalization” of the universities, presented by an official commission (*Ottosen-komitéen*). In the spring of 1969, the Historic-Philosophical Faculty arranged an open meeting in a movie theater (*Engen kino*), crowded with people, where the philosophers played an active role. (During the vote, 4 persons supported the proposal for an economic-administrative rationalization of the university, 432 voted against – including a professor in economics, Holbæk Hansen, who had been a member for the commission.) In short, the political debates that were characteristic of the student revolt were now going on at Norwegian universities, though within civilized and democratic frames.

Even so, when the first version of textbook in the history of philosophy was published in the spring of 1970 – under the title “Introduction in political theory” and with sections on Marx and Mao (though together with other political figures – value-conservative, liberal, socialist, and even fascist) – the reactions were soon to be felt, primarily by the professorial elite among the historians (who were experts on power games among politicians in the national assembly, but not on philosophy). A campaign was launched against the book, partly in open arenas, such as the Faculty Council, but also by hidden actions. In retrospect, the editor of the Norwegian University Press in Bergen (Knut Lie) had stories to tell about subtle attempts¹ to stop a further publication of the book, by means of clandestine contacts with the university director (who was a member of the editorial board). Nevertheless, the campaign failed. On the contrary, there were steadily new editions in Norwegian, and gradually the book was translated in other languages.

(v) Translation and publication abroad

¹ Notably, by a senior professor at the history department, Alf Kaartvedt.

Regarding translations and publications abroad, Germany was the first. In 1993, the book was published at Suhrkamp Verlag, with the title *Geschichte der Philosophie*.² In the early months of 1994, the winter Olympics were arranged at Lillehammer, with good results for Norwegian skiers; in that perspective, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* presented the book as a Norwegian achievement similar to that of combined cross-country skiing.³

At that time, we were two authors. From 1987 onward, my former student Nils Gilje had joined me as a co-author. The two of us collaborated with philosophical proof-reading of the German text, since the translator, Lothar Schneider, was a translator of literary texts, not of philosophy. Evidently, there are some major problems in translating a philosophical text, and more so in the case of a history of philosophy where one has to cope with quite different conceptual horizons and epistemic approaches. In such cases, there is a need for a double competence, a general linguistic competence as well as a philosophical competence, and the latter has to embrace a wide scope of philosophical concepts and ways of thinking – not an easy task. Moreover, this textbook is written as an introduction for young people, “with a straight-forward and easily readable linguistic form” (to quote the Danish translator once more, himself a philosopher), and thus the linguistic style is important for an adequate translation. This need for a linguistic-philosophical double competence turned out to be a recurrent challenge in the various translations.

Two years later, in 1995, the book was published in Danish by Gyldendal publishing house. The same year (1995) it was also published in Swedish, by the publishing house Daidalos. In 1996, after 26 years, the book was translated and published in the second official Norwegian language, Danish-Norwegian

² At that time, I had been involved with a couple of publications at Suhrkamp Verlag: *Wahrheitstheorien* 1977, initiated by Jürgen Habermas, and *Die pragmatische Wende* 1986, in collaboration with Dietrich Böhler and Tore Nordenstam.

³ *FAZ* Febr. 24, 1994. Title: “Auf der Denkerloipe. Norwegisch kombiniert vom Start zum Ziel der Philosophie”, by Stefan Majetschak.

(*bokmål*): the editor (Knut Lie) was afraid that many Norwegian students, being used to Danish-Norwegian (especially in Oslo), would buy the Danish version rather than the original version written in New Norwegian. Consequently, when the book appeared in Danish in 1995, there was no way back: it was soon published in the second official Norwegian language, *bokmål*.

Some years later, in 1999, the book was published in Icelandic, by Háskólaútgáfan in Reykjavik, under the title *Heimspækisaga*. This was the first comprehensive history of philosophy written in Icelandic. In order to establish a common national terminology, across different philosophical schools and traditions, many Icelandic philosophers (*heimspekingar*) took part in the translation – all in all more than 20, with Stefán Hjörleifsson as the main person.

In this case, there is a point to be made: for a Norwegian, having a book translated and published in Icelandic is a special honor, since the Icelandic language is basically the same language as the one used in Norway in the medieval age (say, from 800 to 1200, Norse or Old Norwegian), the language of the Vikings and of the great Icelandic sagas. Thus, for a Norwegian to be published in Icelandic, that gives a feeling of being a classic, while still alive! (As a comparison: how would it be for a French philosopher to be translated into Latin, by Latin-speaking and philosophically well-updated colleagues, living on an island with Latin-speaking citizens somewhere out in the Atlantic?)

The next year, in 2000, the Russian edition was published by Vldos Publishing House in Moscow, with the title *Istoria filosofii*, translated from the German and the English versions (the latter was available as a manuscript at that time), by two Ukrainian philosophers, Vladimir Kuznetsov and Sergei Krimsky. Professor Kuznetsov stayed in Bergen, at my institution, during the translation; he had frequent and extensive discussions with us, the authors, the entire time, in order to confirm the philosophical and linguistic correctness of the Russian version (since we, the authors, were not able to do the professional proof-reading of the Russian text, in the way we did with the German and the English

versions, and later with the French text). There were soon new editions of the Russian version: 2001, 2003, and 2008 (according to information given in 2010). In the preface, we the authors expressed our interest in comments and questions, and soon there were emails from readers throughout the post-Soviet region, from Irkutsk to Yerevan. By 2008, around 35,000 copies had been sold, supposedly the most popular history of philosophy book in the Russian region.

The English version was published by Routledge in 2001, with an American philosopher (now living in Norway) as the translator: Ronald Worley. The English title: *A History of Western Thought. From ancient Greece to the twenties century*. The change in the title, using the term “thought” in stead of “philosophy”, was partly motivated by the fact that the title “A History of Western Philosophy” is already taken (by Bertrand Russell), and mainly motivated by its comprehensive approach, including political ideas as well as the history of sciences, not only the natural sciences, but also the social sciences and the humanities, as well as theology and jurisprudence. Ergo, the broader term is the better one: “A History of Western Thought” – though, not entirely correct, since there are also non-Western sections, on Chinese and Indian thinking, in addition to sections on Arabic contributions and Islamic thinking.

In the fall of 2001, just after 9/11 and the attack on *The World Trade Center*, the fax machine started ticking, with a query from Tashkent in Uzbekistan: if they could be allowed to publish the book in Uzbek, with the purpose of promoting democracy and an open society, and with the intention of distributing the book for free to 63 institutions of higher education in Uzbekistan? The letter came from the Open Society Institute in Tashkent, an institution inspired by Popper (*The Open Society and its Enemies*) and financed by Soros. The following spring, in 2002, the Uzbek edition was available (*Falsafa tarihi*), with a new preface that I was asked to write; and in writing this preface, in contact with Uzbek colleagues, I was reminded of the fact that this region had played a crucial role in earlier times, located on the Silk Road

between east and west, before the Europeans began sailing around the continents.

In Uzbekistan, there is a Tajik minority (about 20% of the population). As soon as the Uzbek version was published, we got a request from Tajik colleagues in Uzbekistan, as to whether they were permitted to translate the book into Tajik. Permission was given. In 2004 the Tajik translation was published, again with a new preface, this time initiated by Tajik colleagues (who emphasized that their community had an older tradition than the Uzbek population; Tajik is an Indo-European, whereas Uzbek is a Turkmen language).

In 2004, the book was published in Chinese, in Shanghai, translated by Chinese friends and colleagues, primarily Tong Shijun and Yu Zhenhua, both connected to the Marco Polo exchange program (between East China Normal University in Shanghai and the University of Bergen, see below). As in the case of the Russian translation, there was a tight collaboration between the Chinese translators (who read English as well as German) and the authors. Six years later (2010), the book had been published in five editions, in addition to an unknown number of pirate copies (which is honorable, since it shows that readers on the black market conceive the book as an exciting one, not merely as a compulsory reading for official curricula). In 2012, there was yet another edition, this time in two volumes.

During a search on internet (searching for something else) it suddenly came up that this history of western thought had been translated and published in Turkish – first edition apparently in 2004 and the third edition in 2006. Nobody knew, not the Norwegian publisher nor the authors. Through friends from the region, we were informed that the book sold well in academic bookshops in Turkey. Then, in the fall of 2010, we got a kind letter from a Turkish publisher, asking for the permission to publish the book. The permission was given, though with the remark that this request was somewhat delayed, since the book had already been out for several years, in three editions.

A French translation was published in 2010 by Éditions Hermann in Paris. Three French colleagues, Jean-Luc Gautero, Angélique Merklen, and Jacqueline Boniface, collaborated with the translation, using the English and the German translations. Moreover, Jean-Luc Gautero, the coordinator, had close contact with me throughout the process of translation. In addition, to ascertain the philosophical adequacy of the translation in relation to the Norwegian original, I took part in the philosophical proof-reading of the French text. Jean-Luc Gautero wrote a preface for the French version.

The same year, 2010, the book was also translated (by Adil Asadov) and published in Azerbaijani in Baku, without any participation on our part.

Moreover, at that time, the Persian translation had been underway for quite some time; in 2012 the text was ready, but the publication needed some more time.

In 2012, the Arabic translation was published in Beirut, by the Arab Organization for Translation. The translator was Ismaël Hagar Hadj, who also wrote a preface for the Arabic version. The book was launched as a public event during the Norwegian-Lebanese Cultural Week in Beirut in April 2012. By way of this publication in Arabic, this history of western thought had made the journey along the Silk Road, from the east to the west, from Beijing to Beirut – in eight languages: Chinese, Uzbek, Tajik, Persian, Azerbaijani, Russian, Turkish, and Arabic. In addition, it is available in eight western languages: French, English, German, Icelandic, Swedish, Danish, Danish-Norwegian (*bokmål*), and New Norwegian (*nynorsk*). There is an agreement for an Albanian publication. Moreover, in major countries, like China, Russia, and Turkey, the book has been sold in large numbers. Why?

(vi) A popular book, but why?

The question came up in different contexts: A popular book, but why? There are lots of histories of philosophy in the world. How could it be that this one,

originally written in Norwegian for a Norwegian audience, could reach out in all these countries, both in major European countries, like Germany and France, supposedly self-sufficient in this respect, and all along the Silk Road, from East Asia through Central Asia to the Middle East? On the request of director Taher Labib at the Arab Organization of Translation, the following notes were written on the occasion of the Arabic publication of *A History of Western Thought*:

Notes on the occasion of the Arabic translation of “A History of Western Thought”

This book was originally written in Norwegian, as a text for the introductory courses in the history of philosophy that are mandatory for all university students in Norway. Due to extensive discussions with the students, and useful remarks and proposals from colleagues, the text was gradually developed until it got its present shape as a comprehensive introduction to the philosophy of western thought. One of my students from the early years, Nils Gilje, became a co-author at a later stage.

The book is now read and used in many countries. At present, it is available in 16 languages, from French to Chinese, from Russian to Turkish – in eight West-European languages and eight languages from Russian and eastward.

Why? There are many books in the history of philosophy, so why do people choose this one? We may rephrase the question: How is the book evaluated by foreign readers? What do they find attractive? These questions were given to colleagues in Russia and China where the book is much used and read. In brief, these are the answers:

- (i) The way it is written: The book is written in a language that is easily accessible for readers who are not professional philosophers, and at the same time, it is written in a way that is problem-oriented and argumentative.

- (ii) The presentation is comprehensive: It starts with early Greek thinkers and goes the whole way up to thinkers of our time. It does not end with Kant or Hegel, or some other classical thinker of the past. It goes the whole way up to contemporary thinkers and debates.
- (iii) Moreover, the presentation is comprehensive in the sense that it does not operate with a narrow notion of philosophy. It operates with a comprehensive notion that includes main ideas and positions in political theory, and that includes a presentation of main developments in the sciences, in the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences, not to forget jurisprudence and theology.
- (iv) In addition, it is comprehensive in the sense that it also focuses on how ideas and thoughts are situated historically and socially. Intertwined with a philosophical approach, taking questions and arguments seriously at face value, it has a historical and sociological perspective on philosophical ideas and discussions.
- (v) Finally, Chinese readers appreciate the mentioning of Chinese thinkers, and Russian readers, in the former Soviet Union, appreciate that Marx and Marxism are presented in the same way as other thinkers, not overlooked nor presented dogmatically as defenders of “the final truth”.

To the extent that these responses from foreign readers are reliable, we may presume that Arab readers will appreciate the joint presentation of philosophy, theology, and science in the medieval ages, including Arab thinkers and scholars, as an integral part of this history of western thought.

At this point we may recall that the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – appear as “western religions” when seen from a Chinese position. And why not? In our time it is no longer evident what counts as “the center for the world”, from which the rest of the world is seen as “east” and “west”.

A related point is the following: Is there only one way of being modern, say, the Anglo-American, or are there “multiple modernities”? What does it mean to be Chinese and modern, Arab and modern, or Norwegian and modern? These are urgent questions of our time, and they represent a main concern underlying this comprehensive presentation of the history of philosophy: Conceived as a comprehensive history of basic ideas and discussions, it is thereby already concerned with the discussions as to how these ideas and processes have contributed to the development of the modern world. It is concerned with processes that shaped the modern world in its diversity and fragility, but also with its universal core, common to all, “western” or “non-western”.

It is up to the reader to evaluate the strength and weakness of a book like this. However, there is one more observation to be mentioned in this respect: In main European countries, such as France, Britain, and Germany, there is often a national bias when it comes to philosophy. In France it is very French, in Germany very German, and in Britain very British. On the other hand, in smaller countries, as in northwestern Europe, one has to “trade” with everybody, also philosophically. Being familiar with all the great nations and their intellectual traditions, one is less French than the French, less German than the Germans, and less British than the British, but at the same time, and for the same reason, more “European” than most of them.

To follow up on this point, we may address the following hypothesis: Those who look upon the world and world philosophy from

the Scandinavian countries, north of the former colonial nations of Europe, may have another attitude and self-awareness than the kind of condescending attitude to foreign cultures that may still prevail in countries with a colonial past.

Be that as it may, it is up to the reader to see whether this book conveys a perspective on the history of philosophy that is less biased than other presentations of western thought, and whether, for that reason, it is of special interest also for an Arab audience.