

The Idea of a Global History of Philosophy

Principles and Experiences

We have three terms: “*philosophy*”, “*history of philosophy*”, “*global history of philosophy*”, and two approaches: *principles* and *experiences*.

“Philosophy”?

I do not (merely) operate with “philosophy” as comprehensive ideas and convictions, as “life views” or “world views”.

Here, “philosophy” is conceived as (implicitly or explicitly) implying some *epistemic claims* and some degree of a ‘give and take’ of reasons.

This definition of “philosophy” is decisive for our discussion of “history of philosophy”.

“History of philosophy”?

In trying to understand what another philosopher said or wrote, there are two levels:

- (i) What did s/he actually say or write? E.g., is it true that Hegel uttered these statements or made these claims?
- (ii) Does it make sense, is it true, what this or that philosopher uttered, and presumably claimed?

“The history of ideas” is confined by the first question, that of interpretation. “Philosophy”, and “history of philosophy”, goes further, taking the validity questions seriously.

Thereby we enter a dialogue with other philosophers and their epistemic claims. Hence, we may learn something *from* these philosophers, not merely *about* them. Insofar, history of philosophy implies a learning-process, epistemically, and thereby also personally.

On this background, four points:

(a)

In some cases, history of philosophy is conceived as a chronological presentation of a row of philosophers, one after the other, whereby each philosopher is seen as more or less separated from other thinkers.

This approach is legitimate. But thereby we miss the point that philosophers, when arguing, often *refer to other philosophers* and *discuss with each other*.

(b)

However, philosophers do not merely refer to each other and discuss with each other. Philosophers also *relate to epistemic claims raised by the various sciences and humanities*:

Philosophical thinking is *triggered* by the development of the various sciences and humanities. E.g., the new experimental and mathematically formulated natural sciences in the Renaissance triggered new philosophical thinking, both empiricist and rationalist thinking.

Moreover, there is *interplay* between philosophical claims and those of the various sciences and humanities – as to academic standards (e.g., demands of clarity) and main positions (e.g., the discussion around positivism).

Hence, history of philosophy should *be broadened*, and also relate to the epistemic (internal) history of the various sciences and humanities.

(c)

Furthermore, philosophy *relates to*, and *responds to*, various *challenges and events in human history*.

Philosophical thinking is *triggered* by social and cultural events and challenges. Hence, to understand and evaluate what a philosopher is saying, *the historical setting matters*. Cf. how new states, and new religious constellations, triggered political and theological thinking after the Renaissance and Reformation.

(d)

Finally, philosophical thinking also *relates to epistemic claims* inherent in political *ideologies*, or *cultural and religious convictions*. (Cf. Hume and Voltaire, as well as Marx and Nietzsche.)

To sum up, from these four points: history of philosophy should *be broadened*, and relate to decisive *socio-historical events* and to *epistemic claims* and *dominant ways of thinking*.

“Global history of philosophy”?

“Global”, in what sense?

- (i) “Global”, meaning something that is *found or takes place all over the globe*?
- (ii) “Global”, in the sense of *epistemic claims* that are seen as *valid all over the globe*?

Mathematical and physical validity claims belong to the latter. They are valid globally, also at places where no mathematician or physicist is operating.

In what sense could the same be said for philosophical claims?

To the extent that philosophical thinking is triggered by the development of various sciences and humanities, and also by decisive socio-historical events, there are elements of

“situatedness” that are essential in order to understand the questions raised, to understand the background and presuppositions of what philosophers are saying. To this extent, situatedness matters!

However, as *the contemporary world* is increasingly marked by *common challenges*, such as global capitalism and new technology, the differentiation of various sciences and kinds of expertise, as well as ecological crises, *the basic “situatedness”* for philosophical thinking has increasingly become *global and common to everyone*.

This goes for the situation and its challenges, but also for the *plurality of epistemic claims*, raised by various sciences and humanities.

For instance, philosophers discussing the question “what is Man?” cannot ignore biotechnology and brain research, or insights from social sciences and historical studies. In short, “Man between animal and robot”. Today, these are common challenges for philosophers and also global points of reference for a history of philosophy leading up to the contemporary world.

Insofar, learning processes initiated in ancient Greece and developed further in the early New Age and during the wide variety of Enlightenment processes, have thus increasingly become *common to all parts of the world*, and thus “*global*”.

Nevertheless, even though there are *common* epistemic requirements in contemporary science-based societies, and also *common* institutional and technological characteristics, there are also ‘*multiple modernities*’ in the sense of *different* institutional developments and historical experiences and learning-processes.

In talking in terms of a “*global*” situatedness, as a basis for a “*global*” history of philosophy, we should also take these differences into account. E.g., there are still some national and regional differences, also in philosophical thinking.

So far, we have three terms – *philosophy*, *history of philosophy*, and *a global history of philosophy*.

Principles

Next point, two approaches, on how to write such an extended history of philosophy: A suggestion concerning *the principles*, and some remarks on *my own experiences*.

Referring to what is now said above, my ambition was that of writing a history of philosophy that is “argumentative and historical” – both epistemically oriented and historically situated. How?

First principle: Do not begin with the “answers”! Do not focus primarily on “answers”!

In short, four points:

- Background, and question!
- Arguments (reasons)

- Answer
- Implications

As an example, we may look at the pre-Socratic thinkers in ancient Greece. First of all, the textual basis is uncertain. Here is one interpretation: Thales from Milet (in Asia), the first of these thinkers, is supposed to have claimed that “everything is water”. Sounds absurd! But if that’s the answer, what might be the question? One suggestion: his concern, his question was that of understanding change. If so, he might have seen that life is based on water, and also that water might evaporate into ‘air’, or freeze to solid ice. From such an observation he might have concluded that “everything is water” in the sense that everything is either water, straight forward, or water in transformed versions, as in steam or ice, and then further on into all other things. Water could thus be seen as the basic element in these changes. Still a problematic claim! But with some logic to it. Moreover, if everything basically is water, in some form or another, and since water can be observed and understood, this seems to imply that we, human beings, can understand the whole universe. A dramatic implication!

But certainly a shaky one. Since water is transformed into everything and everything into water, why couldn’t we see something else as the basic element – for instance *apeiron*, suggested by Anaximander, who argues within the same setting as Thales.

Then the next generation, questioning the presuppositions of Thales and his Milesian colleagues. To put it bluntly, one thinker, Parmenides, questioning the notion of change, another thinker, Heraclitus (from Ephesos, in Asia), claiming that everything is change, *panta rei*. Then, a third generation, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, trying to mediate, operating with a set of unchangeable elements that combine and divide in various ways, whereby various phenomena, like bodies and houses, emerge and disappear. And finally Democritus, pushing these ideas a step further, stating that the universe consists of small, invisible and unchangeable elements – atoms – that move around in empty space, clumping together and splitting apart, whereby presenting an advanced notion of change (though without experimental support, that had to wait for modern times).

This is my point: Pre-Socratic philosophers *discussed with each other*, and about the others, *their reasons and presuppositions*. With texts and with discussions. Hence there were *fruitful learning-processes*. First, Thales and his followers, then Heraclitus and Parmenides, then Empedocles and Anaxagoras, and Democritus. Then, skeptical reactions, by the Sophists Thrasymachus, Gorgias, Protagoras – and reactions against skepticism, by Socrates/Plato, and Aristotle.

There were inherent discussions and argumentation, within a given position, and discussions and argumentations across various positions. Thus, fruitful learning processes.

Similarly, by means of the new natural sciences, and new states and new religious constellations: empiricists and rationalists, and Kant, and Hegel, were then followed by Marx, and Kierkegaard.

There are cases of internal argumentations, of reflections on one’s own presuppositions, and of discussions of the presuppositions and the inherent arguments of other (earlier) thinkers. In short, these are cases of creative learning processes.

Experiences

So far the principles. Then, how to do it?

Two main points: The authors of a history of philosophy should themselves be active researchers and thinkers within philosophy. At the same time these authors should have lecturing and teaching experiences by teaching for the intended audience.

Moreover, they should write in a way that is clear and easy to read. Presumed depth without clarity is no virtue – not in general, and certainly not for those who write an extended history of philosophy.

Then there is the problem of how to restrict and select. Which names and positions? How comprehensive? What perspective, pedagogically and philosophically? These are real challenges. Hence, authors should be explicit about their choices.

At the end, a personal remark: Our history of philosophy (Skirbekk and Gilje, *Filosofihistorie*) is now available in 18 languages – German, English and French, plus five Nordic languages, and along the Silk Road, from Beijing to Beirut, in Chinese, Uzbek, Tajik, Iranian, Azeri, Russian, Turkish, Arabic, plus Korean and Serb. How come? As an answer, the translators of the Russian and Chinese versions, who are also teachers, emphasize these points: the book goes all the way up to contemporary thinkers, it includes references to various sciences and humanities, and to socio-political thinkers, like Marx and Weber, and it includes thinkers in ancient China and India, and Arabic thinkers.

To sum up:

According to this notion of ‘history of philosophy’ the questions, arguments and claims of each thinker should be treated inherently, on their own premises, as well as in their relationship to other thinkers, and to relevant scientists and scholars, and also to political and religious thinkers, all of this conceived on the background of socio-historical events and various institutional constellations.

This *extended notion* of ‘history of philosophy’ can thus be seen as *a history of global modernization*, on the one hand realizing the plurality and diversity of philosophical approaches and claims, also regionally and nationally – insofar, ‘*multiple modernities*’; and at the same time, recognizing severe *common* challenges, increasingly world-wide, and common scholarly and science-related demands – insofar ‘*one modernity*’.