Cultural centrisms and intercultural polylogues in philosophy

Franz Martin Wimmer

A "dilemma of culturality" for philosophy, tending to universality, is given with the fact that there is not a single and definitely adequate language or tradition of philosophy. There are many, each of which is cultural, not natural. The question is about the possibility of systematic philosophy, with the presupposition that there are different cultural coinages in every philosophical thinking, which can be influential on every level of reflection and argumentation. Intercultural philosophy is bound to reflect on this problem. In the following chapter, I propose to distinguish four different types of centrism being influential in intercultural encounters: expansive, integrative, separative, and tentative centrism. Thereafter, some examples are given for certain types of centrism in the fields of history and philosophy. Finally, I shall argue for dialogical, or rather polylogical, interactions in the field of philosophy.

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The dilemma of culturality of philosophy

The project of philosophy, as I understand it to be, is fundamentally a trial to ascertain insights concerning basic ontological, epistemological and normative questions, and to express such insights adequately, thereby making them approachable and arguable in an intersubjective way. With respect to its content, philosophy can be characterised in a traditional (Western) way as dealing with either ontological, or epistemological, or else ethical questions, in order to clarify concepts and propositions connected with such fields. Philosophy, we may say, basically tries to solve questions of ontology, epistemology or ethics. It does so by way of argumentation, which means that reason and logic in some way or other are to be expected as being universally used. With respect to its form, philosophy is developing definitions, as well as some sort of meta-language, which allows the making of explicit general statements.

Philosophy in this technical sense of the word can be found in the heritages of different ancient societies, although one must not agree that it has developed in literally any human group. Therefore, philosophy in a technical sense is neither the unique outcome of only one – say, the Greek or Occidental – heritage, nor must we assume that it can be found in the traditions of all and every society or culture. It may be safe to look for philosophical contributions in some of the Eurasian populaces, beginning with the Axial Period (±800–200 BCE) as Karl Jaspers and others have suggested. However, one has to consider equally origins of philosophising in sub-Saharan Africa, in Arabic Islam, or in pre-Spanish America, to mention but the most eminent cases. The crucial point is that we have to deal with several origins of later philosophies, originating in societies that were different linguistically, socially, and with respect to their worldviews and religions. Some of those traditions, especially the traditions of ancient China, Greece and India, as well as the aforementioned ones, still remain influential in today's societies in such a way that different orientations are provided that may be incompatible with each other in some respects. At the same time, by the process of modernisation and globalisation is given the necessity to promote, or at least to develop, common ideas. The fundamental question for philosophy in such a situation consists in the need to inquire about the conditions of the possibility of systematic philosophy, with the presupposition that there are different cultural coinages in every philosophical thinking that can be influential on every level of reflection and argumentation.

A "dilemma of culturality" for philosophy, tending to universality, is given with the fact (which is irritating for every argumentation) that there is not a single and definitely adequate language or tradition of philosophising. There are many, each of which is cultural, not natural. More is at stake here than just a completion of Eurocentric historiography of philosophy by the depiction of non-Occidental traditions and by comparisons with them, if we are to be entitled to talk about interculturally oriented philosophy at all.[1] The Latin prefix *inter-* denotes a mutual relationship and it may suffice, hinting to the fact that we are using the adjective "intercultural" with respect to the noun "philosophy". Thereby it is indicated that what is under consideration is not some sort of "philosophical" or "historiographical" interculturality, but is merely philosophy – however, philosophy in such a way that this discipline itself has to reflect constantly its own concepts, questions and methods with respect to the fact of its own culturality.

One of the consequences of such a situation is that one inevitably has to interpret the thoughts of others by one's own concepts and categories. Given this fact, the question arises whether such a "centrism", inevitable as it may be, always works along identical lines. I want to show that there are different types of centrism, whose differences are relevant to philosophy and to chances and forms of intercultural encounters.

Types of cultural centrism

Expansive centrism

By "expansive centrism" we understand the idea that "the truth" about something, or "the optimum" of a certain way of life is already reached definitely, and therefore has to be disseminated

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[1] For comparative philosophy cf. Bahm (1995:7): "It [comparative philosophy] is not preoccupied directly with the solution of particular problems, such as the nature of truth or self or causality." If Bahm is right, one seriously has to doubt the "philosophical" impact of such comparisons.

everywhere. Such an idea can be read from several fundamentalist stances, as well as from theories about the necessity of modernising and civilising non-European humankind. The idea is that there is a centre, where reigns true faith, definite knowledge and objective progress. There is also a periphery, ruled by paganism, super-stition, backwardness and underdevelopment.

It is the task of the centre in that perspective to expand and to supersede, and ultimately to eliminate everything else. This leads to the imagination of a monologic process, a procla-mation of salvation in the religious sense, and of prosperity and happiness in the secular sense. Since it is essential in such an idea that there are no serious alternatives to the truth or the optimum proclaimed, the "monologue" has to go to all directions, but no response from elsewhere ought to touch on the centre. Therefore, we can illustrate this type of expansive centrism in the following way:
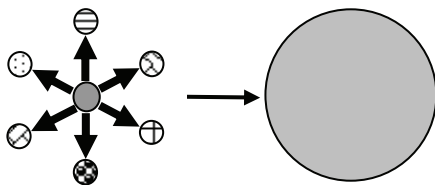

Figure 1: Expansive centrism

Integrative centrism

A second type, which can be coined "integrative centrism", may start from the same conviction about the objective superiority of one's own ways of thinking and living, but one may at the same time be convinced that no particular activity is necessary to overcome rivals. One's own way could be thought to be attractive to such a degree that it would be sufficient in itself to attract and integrate others. We find such an idea in classical Confucianism, when Mencius is discussing the question on how to gain power. The task of the centre in such a view consists in the permanent maintenance or restitution of what is known to be the right order. No further activity of the centre is thought to be necessary, since the attractivity of the centre is so strong that every activity comes from the periphery, aiming to adapt people to the way of the centre. With such an idea the result is a monologic process, too, in the sense of offering the good way of life. There

can be no more alternatives to that offer than is the case with the first type. In both cases, there is a complete antithesis of one's own way, held to be the only right way, with the many foreign ways being on the other side.

Both types, too, have in common that there is nothing valuable to be expected from the outside and that the differing ways of thinking and living will therefore ultimately vanish. It is the common conviction of both these types of centrism that their respective ways of thinking and acting are held to be without rival. In this sense, the conviction not only of superiority, but also of exclusivity, prevails. The idea of an "integrative centrism" can be depicted as follows:
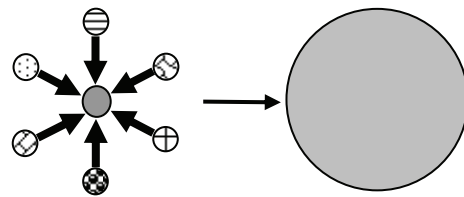

Figure 2: Integrative centrism

True dialogues – and polylogues – in philosophy not only require that the participants be open to each other's arguments, but also that they are convinced of their own way of thinking and do not give this up without sufficient reasons. This leads to a decisive question: Are there orient-ations that are compatible with the conviction of the optimality of one's own way of thinking, and that do not imply the assertion of exclusive validity or truth?

The question will be decisive, if we accept the description of the situation of philosophy in the process of globalisation given above. It implies that orientations will coexist that are incongruent and even incompatible, but which are rooted in well-developed and differentiated discourses. If, under such conditions, something valuable is expected to result from encounters, we will have to look for types of "centrism" that are not exclusivistic.

Separative or multiple centrism

We can distinguish a third attitude, which accepts that there coexist several or many convictions side by side. They may tolerate each

other, and there may even been mutual esteem, so that the situation is characterised by a multitude of separate "centres". In this perspective, diversity and multiplicity, not homogeneity, is basically accepted in a "multicultural" understanding. The danger of such a view – which is probably fatal for philosophy – can be that differences are seen to be insurmountable, as if they were conditioned naturally, not culturally.

The main task of the various centres in this view will consist in the conservation of their respective identities and heritage, and in the differentiation from other traditions. These traditions will persist in neat segregation from each other. Under certain conditions, they will tolerate each other, but they will not allow influences in questions of "truth" and "values"; there will be no discourse between them. The situation can be illustrated as follows:
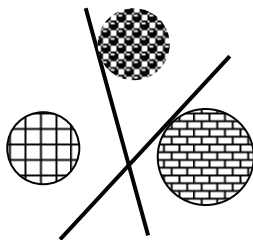

Figure 3: Separative or multiple centrism

Tentative or transitory centrism

Another type of centrism can be seen as transitory or tentative, allowing both the conviction of being right, and openness to basically different views of others, who are equally convinced of being right. It may even be a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the other's conviction that I am "absolutely" sure about my view. Here, too, plurality and not uniformity is thought to be foundational, though in such a way that every concrete instance of thinking is not held to be final, but provisional.

Suppose that there are four possible participants in a dialogue or polylogue on some issue. Any one of them can be interested in the others and open to them to different degrees. They are all acting and thinking from their respective fields of evidence and all have "cultural coinages". Still, these conditions may lead to processes of

influencing that can be intended to develop mutual argumentation. Every participant in such a situation remains a "centre", but none of these centres is held to be the definitive one. Everyone essentially agrees that there may be views and insights different from, and even contrary to, his or her own.

When there are sufficient motives for dialogues, each centre will try to convince the others (or some of them), if they are philosophising at all. By a process of convincing I understand a qualified form of influencing somebody, which ought to be distinguished from manipulating as well as from persuading. All of these expressions and respective argumentative actions have in common the aim to change somebody's opinions or ways of behaving and acting.

However, only processes of convincing ought to be considered decisive, even if persuading or manipulating practically may lead to the same effects. In a tentative understanding of being "centres", there will be persistence, openness, acceptance of arguments and criticism of others, which may be illustrated as follows:
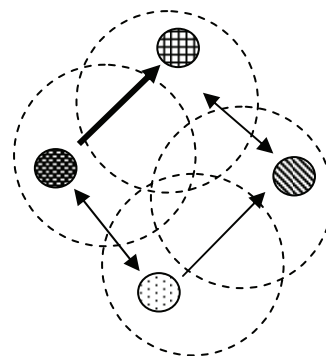

Figure 4: Tentative or transitory centrism

Exclusive centrisms in action

Every one of the four mentioned types of apprehending and criticising thinking that is different from one's own, is developing certain strategies to demonstrate its own superiority. In this sense, every type is centrist. They differ according to the different hierarchies of knowledge and abilities they imply and, consequently, in the difference in expectations and valuations of the other. The three types mentioned first have in common that everything that is thought to be of real interest and reliability is supposed to be found within

one's own tradition. Expansive centrism, as well as integrative and separative centrism, do not seriously expect that there is something to learn from other cultural traditions.

The example of history

This can imply – in a Euro-centrist understanding – that the history of humankind in general, and the history of human thought in particular, is seen as one great process, the essential contents and results of which can be learnt best – or rather, exclusively – from Occidental history. Examples of such a view can be found in the history of several historical disciplines.

Concerning world history, the view was held commonly until the 18th century that the Bible contains all essential stages and personages of humankind. For example, some people surmised that Chinese history was seen to have started with Noah, identified as the "Yellow Emperor" and having founded that culture in the East, far away from the reigns of his sons Sem, Japheth and Ham (Gottsched, 1756:7ff). The British historian Walter McDougall (1986:19) depicts more recent views within his field quite ironically, when characterising Anglo-Saxon traditions of history writing at the beginning of the 20th century:

Once upon a time the historical profession was more or less united, at least in the English-speaking world. Professional historians shared a common exposure to the classical and Christian traditions, a common Anglocentric perspective, and a common interpretive theme: the progress of freedom. This, of course, was the liberal or "Whig" interpretation of history that traced mankind's pilgrimage from Mesopotamia to Mount Sinai, to Runnymede, Wittenberg, and "two houses of Parliament and a free press" – and assumed that backward peoples, if not weighed down by anchors like Hinduism, would follow the Anglo-American peoples to liberty.

This tale, McDougall (1986:19) is thinking, can no longer be told in such a way:

This vision held sway until the cataclysm of 1914–18 made belief in progress more difficult to sustain, the Great Depression eroded faith in liberal institutions, and decolonization forced consideration of non-Western cultures on their own terms.

One may wonder whether the same could be said about some politicians of today, when talking about developmental goals and means.

The example of philosophy

Concerning philosophy and its development in the singular, the view of the German idealist Hegel (1982:33) may still be with us. He describes the activity of the "spirit" as being a unique, progressive movement of self-development, in a very vivid metaphor. That movement Hegel sees as a series of developments, which together do not sum up to a straight line, but to a circle, whose periphery is made up by a lot of circles. It is decisive for Hegel's understanding that these "many circles", forming the one great circle of philosophy, are seen to be exclusively Occidental.

For example, scepticism is one of the spirit's realisations, such that a peripheral circle can be symbolised by the name of "Sextus Empiricus", but there is none by the name either of "Nagarjuna" or of "Wang Chong", both also sceptics in their respective contexts. Hegel explicitly excludes such a possibility. So-called "oriental philosophy" is none of his business when describing the philosophy of humankind – it is only "something preliminary", which has to be dealt with for the sole reason to show "why we do not treat it in a more extensive way and how it is related to the concept of true philosophy" (Hegel, 1982:111).

Hegel's reasoning is that philosophical thinking everywhere realises in particular, special ways. Such thinking, however, will not gain solidity everywhere. In "oriental intuition", the "particular is destined to vanish". Solid thought has its ground: the "firm, European reason". And it is only to abstain from such solidity that "oriental ideas" are useful, Hegel (1982:136) tells us.

Up to our time, it can be learnt from Western philosophers that "philosophy in a strict sense" can be found nowhere except in Occidental tradition. One example may suffice. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, well known in the field of hermeneutics, quite recently stated that basically it is "a question of mere arbitrariness" whether we call "the talk of a Chinese sage with his pupil 'philosophy', or 'religion', or 'poetry'" – and that the same is true of Indian traditions. The "concept of philosophy", so

Gadamer (1993) tells us, "is not yet applicable to the great answers given by the cultures of East Asia and India" to the fundamental questions of mankind "which have been asked for by philosophy in Europe all the time".

Unfortunately, with such utterances we often – and also in Gadamer's case – do not come to know whether they are meant to hold in the same sense for every "Chinese sage", for any "Indian tradition", etc. It obviously does make a difference what author and what text are meant when classifying something as philosophy, religion or poetry. It makes a difference in both Eastern and Western lore and, of course, it makes a difference elsewhere, in Africa and America – everywhere.

It seems obvious to me that the argumentations of Mencius and Xunzi on human nature, of Mozi on knowledge, morality and justice, of the Zhuangzi on the criteria of truth, and so on are contributions to philosophy. Why such texts could indiscriminately be classified as religious, I just cannot see. And, if some of such texts evidently possess poetical quality, the same is true for philosophical texts from Parmenides to Wittgenstein.

The point is not to equate one cultural tradition of philosophy with philosophy itself. Avoiding such a shortcut – which reminds strongly of the theologian's phrase *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* – will require the elaboration of both a generic concept of philosophy, and of transcultural hermeneutics. Either can be done only if mono-centrism and exclusiveness in the understanding of the history of philosophy are overcome.

Such exclusiveness is met not only with Occidental thinkers. I may quote the answer of the director of an Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (quoted in Garfield, 2002:229) to the proposal to give lectures about Western philosophy at his institute:

> I can understand why you have come to India to study Buddhist philosophy, for our tradition is indeed deep and vast. But I frankly don't see what we have to learn from you, for Western philosophy is very superficial and addresses no important questions.

Of course, it would be interesting to know about the specific understanding of "Western philo-sophy" allowing this judgment. The very same sentence about either position can be – and has been – passed within Western philosophy itself.

Exclusive forms of centrism must be expected to rise from different conditions and convictions. Sino-centrism can be met with, but also Afro- and Islamo-centrism and others. In any case, as it is with Euro-centrism, different extra-philosophical motives will have to be taken into account: religious as well as nationalist and chauvinist, racist or ideological persuasions may be decisive.

Consequences and tasks: The model of a polylogue

The first consequence considering the situation of globalised humankind with basically different regional ways of thinking consists in a (self-) critical evaluation of philosophy as a profession. We have to acknowledge that any professional training of philosophers that equates the general term "philosophy" with the culturally bound term "Occidental philosophy" is misleading. For a long period, such an equation has been the case with almost all professional philosophers. It will therefore be no easy task, since as a necessary precondition – but by far not a sufficient one – Euro-centrism has to be criticised and developed into a general criticism of centristic ways of thinking, and moulded into a theory of non-centristic philosophy.

The relevance of cultural traditions for the present and the future has to be analysed. The first step, again, will be to reconstruct different traditions of thought in a comprehensive and differentiated way. In this field, contemporary African philosophers have done pioneering work. However, if their work is not limited to providing better self-understanding, but to leading to better understanding between persons of different cultural coinages, new categories and concepts must be elaborated. This will be a continuation of the project of European enlightenment with different means, not by relying on a unique method of science, but by creating a polylogue[2] of traditions.

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[2] I am talking about "polylogues" rather than "dialogues" to indicate that many sides, not just two, can be involved. Though *dia-* in "dialogue" means "in

Different degrees and forms of the influence of one or more traditions on other traditions have to be distinguished. To illustrate, let us take the case of, say, four relevant traditions: A, B, C, D.[3] Between all of these traditions there might be unilateral ($\Rightarrow$) or bilateral ($\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$) influences. Under these conditions we can formally distinguish the four models discussed below.

Unilateral centristic influence: Monologue

$$A \Rightarrow B \text{ and } A \Rightarrow C \text{ and } A \Rightarrow D$$

Such an "ideal" monologue of A towards B, C and D would look like this:
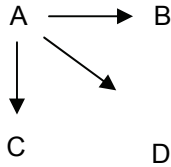
There are no influences whatsoever coming from others in the direction of A. Second, there is indifference and ignorance on the part of all others. Third, the influence of A works equally in any direction. Fourth, there is only one intention of influencing going into all directions. It is to be doubted whether any of these features of the model ever occur in real discourse. However, real processes can be intended to come close to such a model. There are unilateral conceptions of superiority, as we have discussed with respect to "centrisms". They may, for example, result in a

lack of South-South dialogues in philosophy. Moreover, there was, and perhaps still is, the concept of "the white man's burden" to act into all regions and directions in order to "civilise" the rest of the world.

However, the idea itself is not realistic. Could it be something like a regulative ideal? One would have to hold a very strong presupposition to believe that – one would have to be sure that A is right in every respect where there are differences with others. I doubt whether this could ever be shown by culturally independent means. Historically, the three models that follow seem to be more realistic.

Unilateral and transitive influence: Extended monologues

$$A \Rightarrow B \text{ and } A \Rightarrow C \text{ and } A \Rightarrow D \text{ and } B \Rightarrow C$$

In this stage, no dialogues are necessary, although through the double-sided influence on C (from A as well as B) comparative descriptions between A and B will become possible. For the tradition A, in this case, the other traditions remain "barbarian", B ignores D, and C ignores D. But B imitates A and therefore "civilises" C with concepts partly derived from A.

Partially bilateral and multilateral influence: Dialogues

There are many logically possible stages from:

$$A \Rightarrow\Leftarrow B \text{ and } A \Rightarrow C \text{ and } A \Rightarrow D$$

via:

$$A \Rightarrow\Leftarrow B \text{ and } A \Rightarrow C \text{ and } A \Rightarrow D \text{ and } B \Rightarrow C$$

up to:

$$A \Rightarrow\Leftarrow B \text{ and } A \Rightarrow\Leftarrow C \text{ and } B \Rightarrow\Leftarrow C \text{ and } B \Rightarrow\Leftarrow D$$
$$\text{and } C \Rightarrow\Leftarrow D \text{ and } A \Rightarrow D$$

Between each of these models several stages can be distinguished. We can skip listing all of them. Partially bilateral and multilateral influences are processes of selective acculturation. For tradition A, some other traditions are not "barbarian" any longer; they become "exotic". The same holds true for B, C and D in an increasing manner, but mutual influencing is never complete. The stage symbolised in the last paradigm represents a

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between", and does not linguistically imply "two", the association is common that a dialogue is between two persons or positions. Even comparative philosophy often tends to twofold, not manifold, comparisons and dialogues. Here, the term "polylogue" is used in the sense that many persons, coming from many philosophical traditions, enter into discourse with each other on a topic or problem.

[3] It is not at all evident in a given discussion that there will be unanimous agreement about what A, B, C or D means, nor about what traditions are relevant. If, for example, in an argument about human rights Confucianist as well as Occidental and Islamic conceptions of humankind are confronted with each other, the *muntu* concept of African traditions also has to be reflected upon – and such a list of likely candidates may become rather long.

polylogue between all relevant traditions, with the exclusion of D. In this situation, comparative philosophy is firmly established.

Let us now imagine an "ideal" polylogue between A, B, C and D.

Complete multilateral influence: Polylogues

A $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ B and A $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ C and A $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ D
and B $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ C and B $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ D and C $\Rightarrow\Leftarrow$ D

There are influences from all sides to every tradition; everyone is interested in every other; all of the influences are working with equal intensity. There is one and only one intended influence from every stance to any other. The situation looks like this:
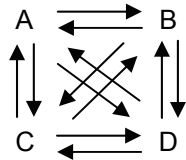
This again is not depicting reality. It is, however, important to ask whether such an ideal can serve as a regulative idea for practising philosophy on a global scale. It seems preferable for logical reasons, as there will be no presupposition of absolute rightness as long as there are different views. The presupposition here merely is that activating human reason in as many directions as possible will be effective.

Conclusion

Philosophers of all ages wanted to consider ontological, epistemological and ethical questions relatively independent of their own cultural and religious environments. The specific problem of contemporary philosophy arises from a situation where one of the cultural settings of the past has been more successful than others in establishing itself on a global scale – as being non-traditional but rather a "scientific" enterprise.

Obviously, it is the clandestine claim of philosophers to arrive at judgments that are transculturally valid. Even if that claim is illusory, philosophers have nevertheless tried to achieve this goal. This road has been taken in many

different ways in the past. In the present situation, intercultural reorientation of philosophy becomes a necessity that arises in the context of globalisation; it is not a choice, but a need. In this context there seem to be two alternatives. There is the programme of relying on method without reliance on tradition. This is the consequent alternative to ethnocentric and traditional thinking, but it is not feasible. It was not feasible in its Cartesian form, nor in the form it took in phenomenology or analytic philosophy. Every effort to philosophise in an exclusively methodological manner is led by criteria and concepts rooted in a cultural context.

The second alternative is seemingly less rigid. It consists in the confidence in one's own position within the classical tradition. One's own way of thinking, terminology and methods of argumentation seem reliable in this view. However, this is nothing more than ethnophilosophy, even if it is explicit, differentiated and well documented.

Is there a third way, a real alternative to Eurocentrism and the separatism of ethnophilosophy? I think there is. It consists in a procedure that is no longer merely comparative, or dialogical, but rather polylogical. Questions of philosophy – questions concerning the fundamental structures of reality, the knowability, the validity of norms – have to be discussed in such a way that a solution is not propagated unless a polylogue, between as many and as different traditions as possible, has taken place. This presupposes the relativity of concepts and methods, and implies a noncentristic view to the history of human thinking. At the very beginning, a rule can be formulated for practice:

Do not expect philosophical theories to be well founded, whose authors stem from one single cultural tradition.

The rule can be formulated in a positive way too:

Wherever possible, look for transcultural overlapping of philosophical concepts and theories, since it is probable that well-founded theories have developed in more than one cultural tradition.

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