

Redefining Defining Philosophy

An Apology for a Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy

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Bertrand Russell opened his *Outline of Philosophy* by saying that the definition of philosophy varies according to the philosophy one adopts.¹ It is hard to take his words at face value without ending up skeptical of any definition at all. If the commonalities one finds in the variety of philosophies are only an extension one's own initial assumptions about what counts as philosophy and what does not, then those assumptions—as generous or stingy as they may be towards the variety—can only function if they themselves are exempted from criticism. Others may question those assumptions, but they only do so from *other* assumptions, which will be challenged by those who do not share them. There seems no escape from the circularity except to rise above the debate and proclaim that the only thing common to all philosophies is the certitude each of them has that they have defined the field correctly. Russell himself ignores the problem he raises, satisfied that it is enough to “define” philosophy as “an unusually obstinate attempt to arrive at real knowledge” to bear on certain problems “not covered by the special sciences.”

Russell may have only been poking fun at the idea of gathering all of philosophical thought into a single, comprehensive history. Yet when he

1. Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy* (Edinburgh, R. & R. Clark, Ltd.), 1.

came to composing his own history of philosophy fifteen years later,² he made no attempt to disguise his starting point: philosophy—not *western* philosophy, but just philosophy—begins with Thales. Mention is made of Arabic philosophy in the middle ages and the arrival of Indian philosophies ancient and modern in nineteenth-century Europe, but it is only their appropriation by western thinkers that interests him. Most of it was excluded by reason of his inveterate dislike for the way myth and religion stunts intelligence and an insistence that the history of philosophical ideas be told against the background of the social and political life runs throughout the book. These were also his grounds for rejecting what he knew of Japanese thought as the antithesis of philosophy.

The year after Russell's history appeared, the first volume of Frederick Copleston's massive *History of Philosophy* began to appear in print. His aim, as he put it, was to provide an objective account but to do so from a standpoint of Thomistic philosophy, which he did not hesitate to hold up as the standard of a *philosophia perennis*.³ In his late years Copleston had a change of heart. The neglect of eastern ways of thinking did not seem as self-evident as it once had. In a series of lectures delivered in 1978 he tried to pursue the idea of introducing an "inter-cultural dialogue" into philosophy with specific reference to Islamic, Indian, and Chinese thought, concluding in an understatement meant more to humble his own efforts than his convictions, that "if the east can learn from the west, as it undoubtedly can, we cannot exclude the possibility that the west may have something to learn from the thought of other cultures."⁴ This was the starting point for his 1980 Gifford Lectures, later to be published as *Religion and the One*:

No sensible person would object to the attempt to broaden one's horizon and to understand different philosophical traditions, especially in a world in which people of different cultural background are becoming more and more inter-dependent in a variety of ways.⁵

Two years after the publication of these lectures, he paid us a visit at

2. Published in 1945 as *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945).

3. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 10, 21.

4. *Philosophies and Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 170.

the Nanzan Institute and held a colloquium in the subject “Metaphysics Today.” In the course of those comments, and during a lively discussion at dinner, he was reticent about defining philosophy (except for a reference to Thomas Aquinas’ idea of the “general movement of the mind towards the divine” and its echoes in Karl Jaspers), but confirmed the point that philosophy had to be opened to other traditions. Twenty years on, there seem to be a few more sensible persons in western circles of professional philosophy than in Dr. Copleston’s experience. Still, I know of no definition of philosophy coming from the east, even the most comprehensive, that has made the slightest impression on mainstream philosophy in the west.

I chose to contrast Russell and Copleston because their careers overlap at the point that western philosophy has begun to rub its eyes and have a second look at its own parochialism. We are now well along in the process, and the amount of published material attesting to the new mood is extensive. Even more striking than this shift of mood, however, is the fact that the shift is part of the western philosophy’s attempt to assimilate the non-west. In stronger terms, the underlying assumption that defining philosophy, however one defines it, remains a western prerogative is as tacit as ever. The spectrum of opinion regarding the inclusion of non-western philosophies reaches from the overtly intolerant to the extremely generous, but the overall effect on philosophies outside the western tradition is still disabling.

On the face of it, it would not seem to matter *where* the call for broadening the definition of philosophy comes from, as long as it succeeds. The closer one looks at this conversion—or perhaps better, the further away from western philosophical circles one stands to look at it—the more apparent becomes the danger of seeing it as a western prerogative. Rada Ivekovic, a Yugoslavian Indologist, observes to the point:

The west has globalized its civilization by enforcing it on the rest of the planet. In order to be able to do so—because this constitutes a move of appropriation used both in history and in philosophy—it had to proclaim its civilization neutral and universal.... This globalization of the western model is a globalization much for the worse, and the more remote it is from the model-giver, the more degenerate it is.

However, it is also a blind spot in the sense that the west does not seem prepared to acknowledge the cultural dissymmetry, or the arbitrariness of its universalistic claim.⁶

This scotosis is epidemic and there seems to be no cure in sight. As carefully as we diagnose it and as offensive as it is to the founding principles of critical thinking, it is so deeply rooted in the dominant institutions that allow philosophers to do what they do in public forum that even the mildest suggestion of reform seems impractical. If we are not merely to include non-western philosophies but to take the inclusion as an occasion to liberate the definition of philosophy from western control, there is no way to avoid a reform of the philosophical academy as a cultural reality.

For example, the reasons behind Renan's somewhat overblown observation over a century ago that Thomas Aquinas owes practically everything to Averroes and Albertus Magnus to Avicenna⁷ have been reconfirmed by twentieth-century studies in Islamic thought. But this has not the slightest impact on the assumption that the condition for Islamic thought becoming philosophical is that it be assimilated into the western tradition. *Extra academia, nulla philosophia*. As long as we accept that philosophy is a western discipline and that therefore the west holds the copyright on definitions and redefinitions of it, philosophy's universality remains radically unphilosophical. However freely philosophies from the east are allowed to blow freely through the thick iron bars of the western academy, philosophy itself remains imprisoned.

The reasons the bars remain in place have to do not so much with habits of thought as with habits of thinking about thought. Behind the rich variety of philosophical opinion, there is something like a form of the forms of philosophy that decides what can qualify as universal and what not. It is more than the merely epoch-specific frame of our thinking, what Foucault called the *episteme*, and more than a claim that all forms of philosophy are synchronic, cultural constructs. What is needed is an awareness that no form of philosophy, and no group of forms, can

6. Rada Ivekovic, "The Politics of Comparative Philosophy," *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, ed. by Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 223.

7. Ernest Renan, *Averroes et l'averroïsisme*.

stand apart from their conditions to dictate the form of the forms of philosophy.

The habit of thinking that western philosophy is exempt from these conditions is difficult to locate without standing outside of it and at the same time having the deepest understanding of what it is to stand inside of it. Perhaps *too* difficult. Take the case of Nishida Kitarō and his successors. Although seeming to meet this qualification of standing within and without western philosophy at the same time, in fact they do not. They fulfill the requisite conditions of outsiders in that their language and intellectual background is radically distinct from that of Europe and the Americas, but they do not really qualify as insiders. They have harvested a remarkable crop of western ideas and became accustomed to consuming it in a most remarkable way, but they do not share the soil and climate in which the philosophies they worked with grew and flourished. Lacking that, they remained outsiders. A bridge to the east, to be, sure, but a bridge from the outside.

My suggestion is that solid insight into the habitual form in which we think about the forms of philosophy is not the starting point of a world philosophy but its consequence. It is only when traditionally non-western forms of philosophy have found their way into the habitual way we define of philosophy that we can, in hindsight, understand what it was that prevented us from doing so. Criticisms of western parochialism masquerading as universality are relatively easy to understand when it comes to global economics, more difficult when it comes to the globalization of human rights, and still largely opaque when it comes to the anatomy of knowledge itself.

In an important sense the form of the forms of thought is only transparent after it has lost its dominance. At the same time, the loss of dominance means that it is no longer rooted in habit, and that in turn implies that it has lost its roots in the sentiment that must accompany rationality if it is to make any difference in the way we actually think, including the way we think about the past. A change of reasoning is not effected by reason itself; it always implies a change of heart. And the requisite change of heart, a metanoia, is not the fruit of legislation or institutional reform; rather, the opposite.

The redefining of philosophy, then, is not primarily a matter of hammering out an inclusive definition but rather of initiating a process that results in a redefining. That said, habits—at least the more collective

kind—do not change without a proper environment to stimulate the change and support it once it has taken place. And, let it not be forgotten, they are changed more easily in the young than in the old. It is only natural, in the case of a tradition as old and revered as the philosophical, to think that a change of habit about what counts as philosophy and what does not should be decided by debate at the highest levels. I tend to think the opposite.

I recall being struck by a comment Nishitani Keiji made in a series of roundtable discussions held directly after the War.⁸ The conversation, as I remember it, was on Japan's finding its place in the community of nations, and Nishitani added, almost parenthetically, that lasting cultural changes take place not at the core but at the fringes. In a sense the history of Japan's interaction with the world at large is affected less by major exhibitions of the arts and international congresses that bring together Nobel laureates, or by major trade agreements, than by much humbler events too much on the border to be newsworthy. But it is in the border-towns that intermarriage, the give-and-take of languages and dialects, the introduction of new foods on the dinner table, and the crossbreeding of ordinary wisdom and religious practice is most likely to take hold naturally. As these syncretisms, so common in all civilizations, spread to other locales, they either batten and grow strong or become diluted and pass away. In any case, they change in the advance. In contrast, what is institutionalized at the center and diffused outwards never has quite the same sense of natural growth, is constitutionally disposed against change, and nearly always leaves the resentment of an imposition the further removed one is from the center, a resentment that often survives far into the future.

This brings us to the question of finding a place in philosophical academia where those engaged in the study of non-western thought can feel at home and contribute to the process of redefining what it means to think and teach and write in a tradition that includes the western heritage but is no longer controlled by its history. It is clearly naïve to demand parity from the outset; better that parity be earned than that it be imposed in the name of academic egalitarianism. At the same time, as long as non-

8. Roundtable discussion with Kōsaka Masaaki, Mutō Kazuo, Kuyama Yasushi, Endō Shūsaku, et al. Published as 戦後日本精神史 [Postwar Japanese Intellectual History]. Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1961.

western philosophies have to contend with a nominal inclusion that makes it impractical to produce students who have no prospects of finding employment, the chances of earning the stature to be heard within the academic word of philosophy are slim. The realpolitik of the professional philosopher and the limits it imposes on nobler ambitions of philosophy are a heavy burden. The vast majority of departments of philosophy around the world may be ideal locations for a border-town environment where different traditions can interact, but the addiction to aligning oneself to the bias against non-western philosophies is every bit as strong as it is at the center of leading philosophical trends.

I realize this is a very sweeping generalization, and that I am hardly the right person to be holding the broom, given that I have lived nearly all of my academic life outside of the western academy. But over the past twenty-five years scores of graduate students and professors of Japanese philosophy from around the world have found their way to the Nanzan Institute, and from them I have gathered my impressions about the struggle to be heard. I know far too little to try to apportion blame for this state of affairs. It is enough to note that the process of redefining philosophy seems to be dragging its heels, and therefore that some kind of new stimulus is in order.

The situation, let it be said, is not much different in Japan, where philosophical societies and universities departments lean so far to the west as to make one wonder whether the resistance to non-western philosophy is not stronger in Japan than it is in the west.⁹ Even as I write preparations are being made to host the sixty-third annual meeting of the Philosophical Association of Japan, whose contents look for all the world like a western congress—except perhaps that eastern philosophy is more poorly represented. The category “eastern philosophy” has existed in Japan since the Meiji era when it was introduced with a modified Dewey decimal system for library classification, but anything having to do with it is more likely to be found under the category of “Intellectual History”

9. I have addressed this problem briefly in two essays published in the pages of the Kyoto University journal *Japanese Philosophy*: 哲学翻訳の脱聖化, 日本の哲学 4 (2003): 45–65 [English version: “Desacralizing Philosophical Translation in Japan” *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 27 (2003): 46–62]; 日本の哲学の場所: 欧米から見た, 日本の哲学 [*Japanese philosophy*] 3 (2002): 126–40 [English version: “The Place of Japanese Philosophy.” *Japan Studies Review* 8 (2004)].

or classified as part of the general study of non-Japanese Asian languages and literatures. The most notable exception is Kyoto University, where the legacy of Nishida and his disciples continues to flourish, respected at arm's length by the philosophical academy at large.

I assume that a different kind of stimulus is needed to begin a process of redefining philosophy in Japan, but if the revival of interest in Kyoto school philosophy in the past decade in Japan is any indication, I fear that the principal stimulus will come from an awakening in the philosophical fatherlands of the west. While it is not impossible that a revolution in the definition of philosophy in Japan would echo favorably in the west, the barriers of language and culture are still too high to expect much in this regard. In any event, it is the place of non-western philosophies in the west that concerns me here.

The first step in the process of redefining philosophy, it seems to me, is to make the choice for the reading of non-western philosophies more available and more appealing for teachers and students *within the academic framework of philosophy*. Even if the track is shorter and narrower than the full and broad course of western philosophy, it should run parallel to, not outside of, the accepted universe of philosophy. The number of specialists qualified in non-western philosophies is large in many countries of the west, rising in others. Assuming that these teachers and scholars would perform with the same competence as their counterparts in classical philosophy, there is every reason to assume that students exposed to both, even if in disproportionate measure, would begin to intuit intersections and pursue them in higher studies. There is no risk in predicting this will happen; it has already started. Indeed, there is every indication that the response among teachers of philosophy to the challenge to intersect with other traditions not yet known in the west, and to reflect this in their published work, lags far behind the demand for it among those who will form the next generation of teachers of philosophy. Those who hold in their hands the power to certify competence in philosophy have shown themselves more than competent at stifling this demand. The struggle for available funds and resources, as well as the natural inclination to direct students in what one knows best rather than in what one understands poorly, is no longer as self-evident an excuse as it once was. On the contrary, the dwindling interest in philosophy in the west demonstrates that efforts to preserve the status quo are out of touch with the reality of how the study of philosophy can best play its role in

today's world. I am not so naïve as to suggest that redefining what counts as a course in philosophy is any kind of a long-term remedy for what ails philosophy. I mean only that at present it seems to be more help than hindrance.

To take this first step, specialists in non-western philosophy teaching in western universities need texts, and need them in much greater variety than is presently available. Happily a number of general anthologies and introductions on “world philosophies” have begun to appear in recent years.¹⁰ This is only a first step, of course, but it is hard to imagine a generation of students trained in these wider reaches of philosophical thought who do not carry these habits of thinking over into their own teaching and research. It is surely such as they who will be equipped to take the next steps towards redefining philosophy for the professional academies and journals.

If this trend is allowed to continue and grow, and if the number of persons competent in the languages needed to read non-western philosophies grows in the west, the demand for more specialized source materials will keep pace. Obviously, to meet this demand, more translations will be needed. The linguistic barriers are still too overwhelming to expect the kind of dialogue that has taken place for centuries among the major languages of the western world.

In the case of the philosophical tradition of Japan, this entire process—the preparation of general introductions to non-western philosophies and the production of reliable translations—seems to have arrived at the point where energetic collaboration among scholars, teachers, and publishers is not only necessary but more possible than it has ever been before. It is into this stream of activity that the proposal for a *Sourcebook in Japanese Philosophy* means to step. Painted in the broadest of strokes, the sourcebook is intended as an extensive anthology focused on principal philosophical thinkers from the eight-century “esoteric” Buddhist figure Kūkai down to the present. The aim is to give an overview of the varieties of Japanese philosophy set with the intellectual climate of their

10. One thinks here of Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe, ed., *A Companion to World Philosophies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), and David E. Cooper, *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and of more specialized books like Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam's *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

age, and to assist in relocating a wider range of figures traditionally confined to the categories of Buddhist, Shinto, or Confucian thought.

The project is aimed at general students of philosophy and at those seeking orientation for future research. The more we have thought about the project, the clearer it has become that the middle way of high-level popularization is the only way to meet both aims. The celebrated seventeenth-century poet Bashō spoke of his “way of haiku” (俳諧の道) as a “difficult popularism” (不易流行), by which he meant that his art combined two distinct elements: the difficult discipline of thought and a natural and easily intelligible flow of composition. His ideal is ours. Unlike Bashō’s, ours not a task that can, or even should be managed alone. The range of material is simply too vast. Only through the cooperation of scholars within Japan and from around the world can we hope to bring the plan to term.

The present conference is a step in that direction. It seemed to us that that best place to begin was with a survey of just how Japanese philosophy—in the broad and still indeterminate sense of the term—has been studied abroad, of how it is faring at present, and of what its prospects are for the immediate future. In particular, scholars from the French, German, English, Chinese, Spanish, and Italian language-worlds have been asked to provide overviews of their respective areas with an eye to clarifying the nature and extent of the demand for resource materials on Japanese philosophy. Although the *Sourcebook* is initially planned for publication in English, it is hoped that the preparations will eventually serve similar efforts in other languages.

Behind all these efforts stands a simple conviction: if an overview of serious philosophical thought in Japan, fitted out with concrete texts, were available, it would answer an immediate need and help stimulate new directions in the redefining of philosophy. To what extent that conviction is as reasonable as it sounds, and to what extent it may have been premature or misguided, is something that can only be known in the trying. For the moment, the signs that the time is right are tip to toe encouraging.

That conviction is not, to repeat, rooted in anything like a clear definition of philosophy. All we can say with any certainty at this point is that however philosophy be redefined, that definition has to be *living*, *free*, and *inclusive*. Does Japanese intellectual history add anything distinctive to the definition? Or does it merely restructure the familiar ingredi-

ents of western philosophy in a different way? If, in the end, it looks as if there is nothing substantial to add, then the “Japanese philosophical tradition” will continue to be perceived as it is today: piecemeal, incomplete, unable to stand on its own without the support of the west. This is something that cannot be decided by definition in advance but only by a manifold and concerted conversation with philosophies of the west. The *Sourcebook* is an aid to that conversation.

William James once said that there is nowhere on earth you can stand from which the universe looks to be one. Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said of philosophy, at least not yet. Our hope is that the *Sourcebook* will bring us a little closer to that day when philosophers east and west, north and south, will agree that the claim that philosophy is anything other than radically plural offends the very foundational spirit of philosophy.