

## Preface

Those engaged in philosophy in European and American universities rarely pay attention to the debates past and present going on in Japan. The obvious reason for neglecting such a long and rich intellectual tradition is that few Western philosophers have the requisite linguistic and historical knowledge to evaluate seriously what Japanese philosophy has to say. But there is a still deeper reason, one that is seldom articulated by philosophers in the West. Their lack of engagement with non-Western philosophy is often motivated by the idea that philosophy is an intellectual discipline that emerged in a Western context (namely, ancient Greece), developed into an academic specialization in Western institutions of learning (namely, in medieval universities where philosophy was taken as the core of the “liberal arts”), and played a fundamental role in the rise of Western science (namely, in connection with the construction of a “scientific worldview” in early modern Europe). If there is interest in philosophical currents and schools outside of the West, it is tied up with the question of how Western ideas have been appropriated there and in what directions they have developed.

This approach of non-Western philosophers clearly betrays a colonial attitude. The emergence and evolution of their own tradition are taken as normative for considering other traditions, and foreign modes of thought are finally viewed in the light of their own. However, there are philosophical methods and standards of rationality that can stand on their own without having to be measured against or compared with one’s own. Stepping away from the colonial attitude requires critical reflection on one’s own tradition. Three things strike me as important in this regard.

First, it is worth asking in which places and under which social, politi-

cal, and institutional conditions philosophy emerged as an intellectual discipline. The concrete milieu leaves a decisive mark on the philosophical questions that are asked. For example, it is no coincidence that, given the varieties of social order in ancient Greece, questions should arise as to what the proper form of the state should be. Similarly it is no coincidence that throughout medieval Western Europe, where the impact of Christianity was strong, the question of the relationship between God and the human person should have been central. Philosophical questions and problems do not fall from the skies; they always rise up out of concrete contexts and historical constellations. To be clearly aware of these contextual ties is to assert critically that one's own questions and problems do not simply belong to a general "philosophia perennis" but are expressions of a specific culture and time. This is particularly clear when one compares one's own questions and problems with those that were posed in another culture and under other circumstances. Only then will the mixture of overlaps and serious differences come to light; only then will it become apparent that there is no way to assert in advance which are the important problems. By engaging with philosophical currents of another culture, one will also be driven to recognize and rethink the birthmarks of one's own philosophical problems

Secondly, it is also worth examining the relationship of philosophical debates to religious, artistic, and scientific debates. Philosophy is not an isolated discipline, untainted by other intellectual pursuits as it were, posing its own questions and constructing its own self-enclosed systems. Rather philosophical debates take up numerous questions that have become dominant in circles outside of philosophy. The famous problem of theodicy, which was discussed in a distinct religious context, is one such example. Without the assumption, within that context, of a good God, the question of how a good God can permit evil in the world would not have been raised. The decisive factor here is that the philosophical problem can only be stated with precision if one takes into account the tacit assumptions prevailing at the time. This means that there is no deciding in advance which contexts are relevant and which problems deserve special attention. We have first to compare various contexts with one another—both within a particular culture and across cultures—and inquire how a problem could become significant in a spe-

cific context. Only then can the uncritical assumption that philosophy is an autonomous discipline be overcome. To be specific, only when one has compared the catalog of philosophical questions posed in the Western tradition (ranging from theodicy to semantic and metaphysical questions) with the corresponding catalog of Japanese philosophy, can one realize that there is no such thing as a “natural” philosophical question, floating free of space and time. What is taken to be important in one philosophical tradition depends in large measure on its ties to structures outside of philosophy, from religion to art to science. In different cultures these ties take completely different forms.

Thirdly, rational standards and claims to conceptual clarity and logical stringency, need to be subjected to critical demonstration. There is no general definition of rationality that can be imposed on all philosophical discourse. Rather these standards take shape within such discourse and serve in part a variety of aims. It is hardly fitting to take the standards that governed medieval scholastic debates and hold them up as the norm of what it is to be rational. They were specific to discussions held in small university circles where they served a specific aim (namely, the interpretation of classical texts). Only a comparison of the standards of rationality elaborated in different contexts can clarify the full range of possibilities and dispose of the idea that the matter can be settled once and for all and formulated in universally applicable terms. This fact becomes even clearer when Western and non-Western standards of rationality are being compared. There is no neutral standpoint from which to decide what is rational; this is a matter to be taken up within philosophical discourse itself. To judge what counts as a rational argument and what does not requires a painstaking reconstruction of different discourses, always keeping in mind historical changes that can take place within such discourse.

Given these three points, a concern with non-Western philosophy is not only important for broadening the current base of philosophical knowledge. Nor does it serve only, as we stated at the outset, to clarify where and how Western philosophy has been received. Engaging non-Western philosophy is a process of critical confrontation with one’s own philosophical questions, methods, and standards of rationality. It has an essential contribution to make in overcoming colonial attitudes and see-

ing that if we are to measure foreign philosophies with our own yardstick, we need to measure our own philosophies with theirs. Japanese philosophy is not simply one more field of specialization for experts. It poses a challenge for all Western philosophers to critically reflect on their own tradition and thereby take seriously the ancient philosophical mandate, “Know yourself!” Self-knowledge succeeds only through knowledge of the other.

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