

Global Histories of Philosophies in European Languages

A review

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ABSTRACT | How a philosophical global history can be constituted is a question that has not yet found a concrete and generally accepted answer. If one compares the approaches of global histories of philosophy that have appeared so far, it becomes clear that some of them differ greatly from one another in their approaches and in the topics they deal with. This article analyzes various global histories of philosophy by comparing the content of selected publications in order to find out which cultures, systems of thought, and traditions are favoured in these writings and which focal points can be found in a comparative approach. This review focuses on eight works that can be described as global histories of philosophy.

KEYWORDS | Global History of Philosophy; World Philosophy; Non-European Traditions; Cross-Cultural Philosophy; Without Any Gaps; Global Perspectives

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In the 21st century, we are observing for the first time the beginnings of a turnaround in the historiography of philosophy in European languages. A change is now taking place in the wake of a Eurocentric worldview that dominated academia between the 18th and the 20th centuries through which the image of philosophical historiography was fundamentally shaped by European thinkers. This change is reflected in a slowly growing integration of hitherto marginalized cultures and philosophical traditions in recent works on the history of philosophy (Elberfeld 2017a, 13–19). In particular, under titles such as “World History of Philosophy” or “Global History of Philosophy,” a greater variety of regional philosophical traditions are increasingly being included.¹ Yet how a philosophical global history can be constituted is a question that has not yet found a concrete, generally accepted answer. If one compares the approaches of global histories of philosophy that have appeared so far, it becomes clear that some of them differ greatly from each other in their methods and the topics they deal with. To analyze these differences, it is worthwhile to compare the content of selected publications to find out which cultures, systems of thought, and traditions are favored in these writings and what emphases can be found in a comparative approach. This literature review² focuses on eight works that can be described as global histories of philosophy. The majority of these publications were published in English, but particular works in German, French and Italian are also considered.³

In 1998, a global philosophical encyclopedia commissioned by UNESCO was published under the title *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle (Universal Philosophical Encyclopedia)*. The work includes systematic and methodological accounts of various traditions of thought, presented in multifaceted approaches that are exceptional on many levels. The first volume introduces problematic areas of philosophy by taking global issues into account (Jacob 1989). In the second volume there is a philosophical lexicon of terms in three sections, including an intercultural context that focuses on Asia (Auroux 1990). Impressively, the third volume offers a dictionary of works of philosophical, multicultural traditions on a scale unlike any other dictionary in a European language to date (Mattéi 1992). In the fourth volume, a global discourse of philosophy is developed which analyzes above all the importance of languages for philosophy (Mattéi 1998). Within

¹ In addition to publications on the global history of philosophy, there are other fields that operate in global history, such as: *Intellectual History* (see, for example, Moyn 2013), *History of Ideas*, *Global History of Knowledge* etc. This literature review, however, deals exclusively with literature in the history of philosophy.

² This review was first published in German in *Polylog* (Herzl 2021). The English translation is my own.

³ I have deliberately not included the following three works in the literature review because these publications do not live up to what their titles promise with regard to cultural diversity: Adeline (2015), Wilczek (2004), and Bagginini (2018).

the four volumes, the high methodological awareness and the strong differentiation of various discourses are especially remarkable. It is undisputed that this encyclopedia provides many starting points for new approaches to a global historiography of philosophy and comprehensive material for the further development of global historical research (Elberfeld 2017b, 302–303).

A now well-known work was written by Ninian Smart, who set a milestone in the historiography of philosophy by publishing the book *World Philosophies* in 1999. Smart's intention is to introduce his readers to philosophically reflective traditions of thought that can be found in different cultures (Smart 1999, ix). The structure of the book is basically arranged geographically, with the exception of certain religions such as Islam and Judaism, which are treated in individual chapters. Smart's initial focus is on Asia, with Buddhist and Hindu teachings described first, followed by Indian epistemology. Smart then discusses teachings from China, Korea, and Japan, with China receiving the most attention. Here, from Taoism to Confucianism, influential traditions from classical Chinese philosophies are outlined. It is surprising that entire chapters are devoted to each of these countries, while the philosophies of Greece, Rome, and the Middle East are treated together in one chapter. It is evident from Smart's approach that he deliberately does not prioritize ancient European philosophical history, but instead outlines it as one philosophical current among others. His treatment of Europe on an equal footing with other areas is an innovation insofar as works entitled "World Philosophy" often present primarily non-European traditions.⁴ He then illustrates Islamic and Jewish philosophies as well as philosophies from Europe, North America, Latin America, and modern Islam. After this, modern philosophical discourses from South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan are described. Finally, Smart briefly discusses some African philosophical traditions. The balance in the regional distribution, as well as the distinction between ancient and modern philosophical traditions, is noteworthy. It shows that Smart does not simply reduce non-European philosophy to ancient traditions, but also considers more recent discourses.

An entirely new approach to the global historiography of philosophy is provided by Elmar Holenstein who, in *Philosophie-Atlas. Orte und Wege des Denkens* (*Philosophy Atlas. Places and Ways of Thinking*) (2004), focuses on geographical contexts. Holenstein argues that ways of thinking and the content of thought can be more easily grasped by looking at the place of origin, which means that, in his view, geographical location has a decisive influence on philosophical ideas, which is why he includes maps and diagrams in his work (Holenstein 2004, 7). In doing

⁴ As for example in Garfield (2011), or Solomon (1995).

so, he draws special attention to the fact that philosophical considerations, which are nowadays attributed to Central European traditions, often originated in other areas of the world. For Holenstein, finding connections and parallels between different currents of thought and examining them in consideration of the geographical location is an important factor of both contemporary and future philosophy (9). The main part of the book is divided into four “histories of philosophy,” which are organized as the four cardinal points. Africa and South America have not been included in these subdivisions, receiving only a small subchapter in the introductory section on the various origins of cultures. The first of the four main chapters (“West”) includes European philosophy and the philosophy of the “Nile-Amu-Darya Region.”⁵ The chapter “South” describes South Asia, i.e., the Indian subcontinent as well as countries with South Asian or Indian writing cultures in Southeast and Central Asia. “East” deals with East Asia, namely China and countries with Chinese scriptural culture. Finally, “North” describes currents of thought in the North Atlantic, Western and Northern Europe, and North America. It is astonishing that Holenstein, despite the at least partially very successful intention to revolutionize the classical presentation of the history of philosophy, decisively excludes South America and Africa from the so-called “Four Histories of Philosophy.”

A new approach is offered by Peter Adamson (2010–) in his podcast *History of Philosophy without any Gaps* which integrates and comprehensively presents previously marginalized traditions of philosophy and interviews experts on the respective topics.⁶ About five hundred episodes are now available to listen to online, ranging thematically from ancient Greece to the Middle Ages to the 20th century and covering areas such as Islamic philosophy, Indian philosophy, and Africana philosophy.⁷ With the success of the podcasts, Adamson began publishing some of the audio content as books in 2014. To date, six volumes have been published, with more works planned. The first book, *Classical Philosophy*, is about pre-Socratic philosophy as well as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Adamson 2014). The second volume, *Philosophy in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, deals with Hellenistic philosophy in the first part and paganism in the Roman Empire in the second part. The third part includes the Christian philosophy of the Roman Empire (Adamson 2015). It is with the third volume of that the series begins the examination of non-European philosophy with *Philosophy in the Islamic World* (Adamson 2016). With his fourth volume, Adamson covers a topic that has received little attention to date: the European Middle Ages, which is treated here in terms of the

⁵ This is the name Holenstein uses for the region classically called the “Middle East.”

⁶ Adamson: *Online Podcasts*. <https://historyofphilosophy.net>

⁷ There are 403 episodes in the main series, 107 episodes on Africana philosophy and 62 episodes on India.

manifold interconnections with non-European philosophical traditions. The Middle Ages have rarely been studied in this holistic manner. The work comprises 78 chapters through which an extraordinary complexity of medieval philosophy is presented (Adamson 2019). The fifth volume, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, highlights the philosophical significance of various Indian, Buddhist and Jainist doctrinal texts (Adamson 2020). In the last part of this volume, there is also an excursus on Tantra and an interweaving of Indian thought with Greek and Islamic traditions. The latest volume on *Byzantine and Renaissance Philosophy* was published in May 2022 and deals with Byzantine philosophy in the first part and the Italian renaissance in the second (Adamson 2022). A book publication is planned for the episodes on Africana philosophy.

A significant balance in the representation of the different currents of worldly thought can be found in *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* (2011), edited by Jay L. Garfield and William Edelglass, in which – in addition to a strong focus on Asian and Islamic thought – African philosophies receive increased attention. According to the authors, the objective of this book is, on the one hand, to highlight the importance of the history of diverse philosophical traditions. On the other hand, it aims to emphasize the fact that the philosophical world today is significantly polyglot, that is, multilingual (Garfield and Edelglass 2011, 6). First, the introduction draws critical attention to the widespread belief that one's own culture is the only one in which important philosophical thoughts arise. Second, the editors draw attention to the common assumption that cultures without fully developed written traditions are too "primitive" (3) to establish important philosophical ideas. Third, the illegitimacy of these prejudices is emphasized, as they ignore the long history of cross-cultural philosophical influences, where philosophical dialogues between, for example, Greek, Persian, and Indian peoples, were already commonly established in ancient times (3–4). Garfield and Edelglass' book contains 43 essays by culturally diverse authors. The first part, dealing with Chinese philosophy, primarily contains writings on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism (9–108). The second part covers non-Buddhist Indian philosophy (109–86). The third and fourth parts also deal with Asian traditions, namely Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese and Korean philosophy respectively (187–388). In the fifth part of the book, Islamic philosophy appears for the first time (389–460) and African philosophy is treated last in the sixth part (461–544). Strikingly, Latin America does not receive a chapter of its own. Indigenous peoples and Native American Philosophy are only mentioned in the seventh and last part, which deals with current trends in global philosophy (562–573). Fortunately, the book also contains an essay on global feminism.

A series worth mentioning has been published since 2011 under the title *The*

Oxford History of Philosophy, edited by Jonardon Ganeri et al. The publisher writes that this open-ended series is about the project of developing a new form of historiography of philosophy. In each volume, the author explores the development of philosophy in a specific time and culture, placing the ideas involved in their historical contexts.⁸ The first volume, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India*, covers a rich array of topics, including the transliterations of Sanskrit into Persian, Indian intellectual practice, and metaphysical, mathematical, and linguistic aspects of Indian philosophy (Ganeri 2011–). This volume is followed by a series of works on European and North American philosophy, with two volumes devoted to each of the following traditions: French philosophy (Gutting 2011; Clarke 2016), American philosophy and pragmatism (Misak 2013; Goodman 2015), and British philosophy (Hutton 2015; Hurka 2015). It was not until seven years after the first work that another book appeared on a hitherto academically marginalized topic: Jewish Philosophy of the Middle Ages (Rudavsky 2018). The work focuses on the explanation of Jewish metaphysics with a small excursus on ethics and the good life. The next volume examines *The Golden Age of Indian Buddhist Philosophy in the First Millennium CE* (Westerhoff 2018). The last book published so far is about the turn against metaphysics in Austrian Philosophy from 1874–1918 (Textor 2021). The classification criterion of the publication series is not clear: while in some cases it is individual countries or religions which are treated, in the case of North America a whole continent is being highlighted.

In 2014, Virgilio Melchiorre edited the highly innovative anthology *Filosofie nel mondo* in which experts trace the development of philosophy in various marginalized regions and traditions of the world. The volume begins with a short chapter on occidental philosophy (Greece, Christianity, and modernity). This excursus ends after 30 pages, followed by a chapter on analytics and, interestingly, the Australian school from the critical perspective of the exportation of analytic philosophy to various regions of the world (Melchiorre 2014, 47–66). Of all the works described so far, one finds by far the most intensive examination of Russian philosophy in Melchiorre, which is described in its development in almost 200 pages and with an extensive bibliography (69–248). In contrast, the section on classical Islamic philosophy is very brief. However, a separate chapter is devoted to contemporary Islamic philosophy; here Islamic philosophy is not simply reduced to medieval philosophy. Two chapters on Jewish philosophy follow, divided into old Jewish philosophical traditions and philosophical traditions since 1945, in the latter there is even a section on Jewish feminist thought. In the chapter on Chinese

⁸ See Ganeri: *Oxford University Press Website*. <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/o/the-oxford-history-of-philosophy-ohphil/?cc=us&lang=en&>

philosophy, classical Chinese schools such as Confucianism or the philosophy of Lao Tzu are described in addition to the philosophy of modern and contemporary China (336–390). The chapters on the Latin American region (391–454) and on African philosophy (455–652) are exceptionally extensive. However, the discussion of Latin American philosophy only begins in the second half of the 19th century and includes the main representatives of the various positions on the question of the existence of a “Latin American thought” from José Martí to Leopoldo Zea to Enrique Dussel. The chapter on African philosophy focuses on the debates about the existence of African philosophy, as they were conducted in Africa in the 20th century, and their main representatives and directions from ethnophilosophy to wisdom philosophy. There are also sections on the philosophy of art and music in Africa, as well as various liberation, philosophical, and decolonial approaches (Fanon, Mudimbe, Wiredu). The survey ends with a chapter on Indian philosophy (653–799) and two chapters on Japanese philosophy. The first chapter on Japanese philosophy covers, among other things, Buddhism in Japan, but also the thought of the well-known philosopher Nishida Kitarō (801–874), while the second chapter is dedicated to the Kyoto School (875–906). What is remarkable about Melchiorres’ approach is that for all regions and traditions covered, emphasis is placed not only on presenting historical philosophical traditions, but also on providing insight into contemporary discourses.

Storia della filosofia. Un approccio globale by Giovanni Pampanini (2019) is a work that does not speak of a single history of philosophy, but of many worldwide histories of philosophy. The introduction formulates four central theses: 1) The history of philosophy cannot be separated from political history. 2) Non-European philosophies should be presented together with European philosophies. 3) The sources and terms of academic philosophy have to be extended (e.g. by terms from other humanities or from art and culture). 4) Global developments must not be separated from philosophy (Pampanini 2019, 14). Similar to Holenstein, Pampanini integrates geographical maps into his book. In the first part under the title “Antiquity,” influential historical figures from Buddha to Jesus and Mohammed to Montezuma are treated comparatively and the 15th century is discussed as a century of transition (19–128). The second part about modernity leads from the 16th to the 18th centuries (129–242). Finally, the third part about contemporary philosophy deals with philosophical discourses of the 20th century, regionally divided into the “West,” – to which include, besides North America and Europe, also South America –, Asia (Japan, China, India, Pakistan, Persia, Turkey, Lebanon, Indonesia, and Malaysia) and Africa (subdivided again into Arab and African philosophers). It is a pity that Africa is kept very short in comparison to the “West” and Asia (243–430).

It is noticeable that a variety of approaches to global histories of philosophy

can be found in European languages. These range from topic-centered, geographically oriented histories to chronologically ordered histories. Despite diverse approaches, there are some features that stand out in a comparative view. First, Indian philosophy (followed closely by Chinese and Japanese philosophy) is the most covered. There tends to be a strong emphasis on Asia, which could be due to the richness of the available written material of Asian philosophies, as well as the long-established tradition in European philosophy of dealing with Asia (see Leibniz or Schopenhauer). Second, both South America and Africa, as well as philosophies of indigenous peoples, are either categorically omitted or treated only marginally. The reason for this can probably be found primarily in the scripture-centeredness of academic philosophy and the accompanying exclusion of oral philosophical traditions.

Thus, from a comparative review of recently published global histories of philosophy in European languages, a number of problems can be identified. First, the representation of philosophical traditions in different regions of the world is unbalanced. Second, there is a lack of consideration of philosophical historical works outside of occidental traditions. Especially in Japan there is a long tradition of global philosophical historiography which can serve as a methodological model for research in the history of interweaving traditions and should not be disregarded.⁹ Third, it becomes clear that there is an overarching lack of reflection on methods and basic concepts of the previous philosophical tradition, as well as a deficit of differentiated engagement with prevailing exclusion mechanisms in philosophy and its historiography. In order to integrate non-European philosophical traditions into the historiography of philosophy in European languages, both a critical examination of the discipline and a reform of its methods and concepts are needed.

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⁹ In addition to Japan, China and Korea also have a long tradition of writing philosophical histories. For Japan, see Krings et al. (2022); for China, see Wang (in this issue); and for Korea, see Park (forthcoming).

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