

Chinese Philosophy as a Mirror for a Better Insight into Greek Philosophy

Παντελής Γκολίτσης

Tatian, one of the Christian Apologists of the second century, a Pagan convert of Syrian descent, starts his discourse entitled *Against the Greeks* (Πρὸς Ἑλληνας) with the following words:

“Be not, O Greeks, so very hostilely disposed towards the Barbarians, nor look with ill will on their opinions. For which of your institutions has not been derived from the Barbarians?”¹

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 1.1-4:

The art of divining by dreams, prognostication by the stars, augury by the flight of birds, anatomy, astronomy, magic, geometry, alphabetic writing, poetry and song, the mysteries, the plastic arts, writing history, harmony and music, the smith’s art and epistolography are, then, listed by Tatian as inventions attributed to some Barbaric nation. Even elegance of diction (what Aristotle called τὸ ἑλληνίζειν, i.e. accuracy in diction) is not spared by Tatian:

“As matters stand, to you alone it has happened not to speak alike even in common intercourse; for the way of speaking among the Dorians is not the same as that of the inhabitants of Attica, nor do the Aeolians speak like the Ionians. [...] I am at a loss whom to call a Greek”

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 2.13-3.2

¹ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 1.1-4: Μὴ πάνυ φιλέθρως διατίθεσθε πρὸς τοὺς βαρβάρους, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἑλληνες, μηδὲ φθονήσητε τοῖς τούτων δόγμασιν. ποῖον γὰρ ἐπιτήδευμα παρ’ ὑμῖν τὴν σύστασιν οὐκ ἀπὸ βαρβάρων ἐκτήσατο; (Translation by J. E. Ryland)

Tatian utters in seeming exasperation.² The art of rhetoric is said to serve injustice and slander by the Greeks, who “often represent the same thing at one time as right, at another time as not good” (what Roman philosophers would later call *in utramque partem disputatio*); the art of poetry is said to be employed by the Greeks to

“describe the battles and the amours of the gods and the corruption of the soul”.³

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 3.9-13

Finally, Tatian asks the Greeks:

“What noble thing have you produced by your pursuit of philosophy?”⁴

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 2, 1.1

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He then sets out a series of accusations about the doctrines and the conduct of life of Diogenes (the Cynic), Aristippus, Plato, Aristotle, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Pythagoras and others, until he concludes ironically:

“Let such men philosophize!”⁵

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 2, 2.8-9

The Greeks, according to this Christian Apologist, are not true ‘lovers of wisdom’ (φιλόσοφοι) but rather φιλόψοφοι, that is, ‘lovers of mere sounds and words’, who “profess doctrines one against the other”;⁶ they are leaders of sects

² Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 2.13-3.2: στάσεως δὲ οὔσης τοσαύτης παρ’ οἷς οὐκ ἐχρῆν ἀπορῶ τίνα με δεῖ καλεῖν Ἕλληνα.

³ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 1, 3.9-13: ῥητορικὴν μὲν γὰρ ἐπ’ ἀδικία καὶ συκοφαντία συνεστήσαθε, μισθοῦ πιπράσκοντες τῶν λόγων ὑμῶν τὸ αὐτεξούσιον καὶ πολλάκις τὸ νῦν δίκαιον αὔθις οὐκ ἀγαθὸν παριστῶντες· ποιητικὴν δὲ, μάχας ἵνα συντάσσητε θεῶν καὶ ἔρωτας καὶ ψυχῆς διαφθοράν.

⁴ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 2, 1.1: Τί γὰρ σεμνὸν φιλοσοφοῦντες ἐξηνέγκατε;

⁵ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 2, 2.8-9: καὶ οἱ τοιοῦτοι φιλοσοφεῖτωσαν!

⁶ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 3, 3.6-9: διόπερ μὴ παραсурέτωσαν ὑμᾶς αἱ τῶν φιλοψόφων καὶ οὐ φιλοσόφων πανηγύρεις, οἵτινες ἐναντία μὲν ἑαυτοῖς δογματίζουσιν, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ἐπελθὸν ἕκαστος ἐκπεφώνηκε. Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 3, 3.9-11: μισεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἕτερος τὸν ἕτερον, ἀντιδοξοῦσι δὲ ἑαυτοῖς διὰ τὴν ἀλαζονείαν.

“one hating the other and indulging in conflicting opinions because of their arrogance”.⁷

Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 3, 3.9-11

Sectarianism in philosophy as refuting the very enterprise of philosophy (which makes us think also of the cliché “the contending voices of a hundred schools” of Warring States Chinese philosophy), as well as **the divide between Greek and Barbaric**, have been the guiding forces of modern accounts of the *history of philosophy*, which was to be sharply distinguished from *philosophy* itself in the post-Kantian era. The eighteenth-century German pastor [2] Johann Jakob Brucker (1696-1770),⁸ the first historian of philosophy in the modern sense and author of a *Critical History of Philosophy*, made, indeed, ‘Sectarian philosophy’ the third and last historical phase of Greek philosophy, which was of course historically important but philosophically obsolete. The ‘Sectarian philosophy’ of the Greeks was preceded, according to Brucker, by their ‘Political philosophy’, which was “chiefly adapted to the formation and improvement of states, and the civilization of society”, which was in its turn preceded by the ‘Fabulous philosophy’, i.e. the teachings of figures such as Linus and Orpheus. Nevertheless, philosophy for Brucker did not start with the Greeks. The first out of the three periods of Brucker’s history (roughly corresponding to our sense of ancient, medieval and modern) comprised both Barbaric and Greek philosophy, treated independently by the German historian in two different sections. Overemphasizing Diogenes Laertius’ introductory remarks to his *Lives and Doctrines of the Most Illustrious Philosophers*, Brucker accused

“the inhabitants of Greece, who were very early remarkable for literary and philosophical vanity, and soon learned to make use of an artificial method of philosophizing”

of being

“unwilling to allow that philosophy had any existence in other countries, except where it had been borrowed from them. They could not persuade themselves that the mere communication of precepts of wisdom in the simple form of

⁷ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos*, 3, 3.9-11: μισεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἕτερος τὸν ἕτερον, ἀντιδοξοῦσι δὲ ἑαυτοῖς διὰ τὴν ἀλαζονείαν.

⁸ J. J. Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae a mundi incunabilis ad nostram usque aetatem deducta*, Leipzig, 1742–1744.

tradition [that is, not by way of independent scientific investigation], and in language harsh and dissonant compared with their own, could deserve to be called philosophizing”.

J. J. Brucker, *Institutiones historiae philosophicae*, Leipzig, 1747, translation by W. Enfield, London 1791, I, p. 16.

Following, nonetheless, the lead of Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which the Pythagorean Timaeus narrates to Socrates that the wise Athenian Solon was once instructed by an Egyptian priest,⁹ that is, in Brucker’s idiom, a ‘barbarian’, the German historian was ready to admit that

“the Barbaric nations [...] became possessed of knowledge rather by simple reflection than by scientific investigation, and that they transmitted it to posterity rather by tradition than by demonstration. Whereas the Greeks, as soon as they began to be civilized, discovered a general propensity to inquiry, and made use of scientific rules and methods of reasoning. Hence it is easy to perceive that, though the improvement of philosophy is to be ascribed to the Greeks, its origin is to be sought for among the barbaric nations”.

J. J. Brucker, *Institutiones historiae philosophicae*, Leipzig, 1747, translation by W. Enfield, London 1791, I, p. 17.

Now, it has not been properly noted so far that in the very beginning of the European historiography of philosophy Chinese philosophy transcended this kind of dichotomy. Brucker considered various ‘Barbaric’ beginnings of philosophy – Chaldean, Persian, Egyptian, or Indian – but the Chinese do not appear in this part of his narrative. Brucker treats Chinese philosophy entirely apart, that is, in an Appendix (“Hints relative to the modern state of philosophy in Asia”), starting his necessarily cursory treatment with Fuxi and treating Laozi, Confucius, Mencius and Zhu Xi as proper philosophers. Following the lead of Leibniz, Brucker asserts [4] that “[Confucius] *life is said to have been in every respect worthy of a philosopher [...]*”; but he immediately retracts in accordance with his general idea about the value of philosophy, which he considers to be inferior to (true) religion:

⁹ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 22b 3-8: καὶ τινα εἰπεῖν τῶν ἱερέων εὖ μάλα παλαιόν· ἦν Σόλων, Σόλων, Ἕλληνας ἀεὶ παιδῆς ἔστε, γέρον δὲ Ἕλληνας οὐκ ἔστιν. Ἀκούσας οὖν, Πῶς τί τοῦτο λέγεις; φάναι. Ἄνοι ἔστε, εἰπεῖν, τὰς ψυχὰς πάντες οὐδεμίαν γὰρ ἐν αὐταῖς ἔχετε δι’ ἀρχαίαν ἀκοὴν παλαιὰν δόξαν οὐδὲ μάθημα χρόνων πολλῶν οὐδέν.

“It is nevertheless asserted by the missionaries of the Franciscan and Dominican orders that Confucius was either wholly unacquainted with, or purposely neglected, the doctrine of a future life, and that in his moral system he paid little regard to religion”

J. J. Brucker, *Institutiones historiae philosophicae*, Leipzig, 1747, translation by W. Enfield, London 1791, II, p. 625.

– a serious fault for the pietist Brucker.

The first time that Chinese philosophy was omitted in a modern European narrative related to the history of philosophy was in [5] Dietrich Tiedemann’s *Geist der speculativen Philosophie* (6 volumes, Marburg, 1791-1797). Tiedemann (1748-1803), who was professor of philosophy at the University of Marburg, thought that ‘contemplative philosophy’ – what the Greeks called *theôria*, and which in his history arrives at a halt with the philosophy of George Berkeley – started in Greece with Thales; Tiedemann argued that:

“it has not been proved, nor can it be proved, that Thales and his first successors have received any doctrine from the Chaldeans, the Persians, the Indians or other oriental countries, or that they were in any connection with them; what they took from Egypt was only too little” .¹⁰

D. Tiedemann, *Geist der speculativen Philosophie*, Bd. 1: *Von Thales bis Sokrates*, Marburg, 1791, p. XX

Tiedemann does not speak a word about the Chinese. It was his younger contemporary Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761-1819), professor of philosophy at the University of Jena and author of a twelve-volume *History of Philosophy* published in the beginning of the nineteenth century,¹¹ who granted to the Chinese ‘philosophizing’ (*philosophiren*) but not philosophy itself.¹² Thus, the notion of a kind of an oriental,

¹⁰ D. Tiedemann, *Geist der speculativen Philosophie*, Bd. 1: *Von Thales bis Sokrates*, Marburg, 1791, p. XX: “Nun aber ist nicht erwiesen noch erweislich, das Thales und seine ersten Nachfolger, von Chaldäern, Persern, Indiern, und andern Morgenländern, Meinungen haben angenommen, oder mit ihnen in einiger Verbindung gestanden; was sie aus Aegypten entlehnten, war wenig [...]”.

¹¹ W. G. Tennemann, *Geschichte der Philosophie* (12 volumes), Leipzig, 1798-1819. Tennemann was the first to proclaim that “*the history of philosophy is not itself philosophy*”.

¹² See W. G. Tennemann, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie für den akademischen Unterricht*, Leipzig, 1812, ²1816, § 21 and § 78.

pre-philosophical wisdom emerged, and the idea that philosophy really started with the Greeks was gradually established in the Academic world – an idea that, except perhaps for Diogenes Laertius, no Greek ever entertained.

Like other world philosophies, Chinese philosophy is actually largely unknown to Greek academics and students, who have traditionally focused on the philosophical canon established through European historiography and academic practice during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the Center for Ancient Greek and Chinese Civilizations, the opening of which we celebrate today, will promote unbiased knowledge about ancient Chinese philosophy. But this is not all. We are also interested in scrutinizing the establishment of the Western philosophical canon and in viewing into Chinese philosophy not only for its own merit, but also into it as a mirror which, unlike Tatian's mirror for instance, will reveal neglected aspects of Greek philosophical thought and practice. The reasoning behind medical art, the advisory poetry of Solon, Xenophon's political and military treatises, φιλοσοφία as conceived by the orator Isocrates are only some examples of thinkers and texts that lie outside the 'philosophical canon'. Chinese philosophy may help us broaden our perspective on Greek philosophy itself.

Zhuangzi, one of the masterpieces of Chinese philosophy, a text attributed to Master Zhuang (who was a younger contemporary of Aristotle), alerts us against false dichotomies and unreflected differentiations. Zhuangzi, of course, wished to set people free from needless conventions, which impede them from having control on their life, much in the sense of Ancient Greek Stoicism. But it also invites us retrospectively to reflect upon the dichotomy between 'philosophy' and 'pre-philosophical practical wisdom', or, to put it simply, between 'Western' philosophy and 'Eastern' philosophy'.

- Dichotomies penetrate the entire history of Western philosophy. The origin of philosophy. The aberrance of philosophy. Knowledge through divine revelation.
- Heuristic/Analytic
- Comparison is about similarities and differences, not about connections per se. Comparanda do not have to be spatially adjacent or contemporaneous.
- Inter-cultural collaborative research.

- Contextualizing knowledge production in socio-political conditions
- Comparative institutional history: how and why divergent forms emerge
- Brucker:
 - “What is now called Philosophy was, in the infancy of human society, denominated Wisdom.”
 - “Modestly professed themselves to be in the pursuit, rather than in the possession, of truth and wisdom.”
 - “A general map of the philosophical world.”