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THE BATTLE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION AND THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

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1

INTRODUCTION

‘Western Culture’ (and its near synonym, ‘Western Civilization’) is today, in Britain, Europe, the US and other English-speaking countries, a contentious phrase, and in many university and intellectual circles, a toxic one.¹ Why has it fallen into such disrepute? Why do men and women, many of whom are fervent admirers of the writings of Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, who stand awe-struck before the Parthenon or St Paul’s, and spend their happiest evenings listening to Beethoven quartets, *Tosca* or the *Ring*, rather than trumpeting the value of the Western Culture to which all these works belong, prefer to urge that it should have a smaller place in syllabuses, broadcasts and public discussion?

The main reason is that discussions about cultural traditions, properly the province of historians of philosophy, science and the arts, became entangled by pundits with the grand (and probably ultimately

ill-formed) questions about ‘the rise of the West’ and about what is called ‘Western Culture’ or ‘Western Civilization’ but is really material that belongs to economic, social and political theory.

The words ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ have a narrow sense and a wide one. In the narrow sense, ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ refer just to intellectual and artistic products and activities, such as literature, the visual arts, architecture, philosophy and the sciences, and perhaps also applied sciences and arts, such as engineering, medicine and law. In the wider sense, ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’ refer to all human activities: in this wider sense, then, a culture or civilization means talking about, for instance, per capita GNP, life expectancy, air quality, transport networks, systems of government and much, much else, besides the sciences and arts. This distinction is of central importance for all that follows, and to make sure

it does not become hidden ‘Western Culture’ and ‘Western Civilization’ with a capital ‘C’ will be used to convey their wide meaning, whereas ‘western culture’ and ‘western civilization’ (lower case ‘c’) are used to designate their narrow-sense meaning.

In Part One of this essay, it will be argued that the present antagonism to the idea of Western Culture is in part a reaction by today’s intellectuals and academics to the claims that had been made for it by a previous generation, and are still defended by some of them. Both the earlier protagonists of Western Culture and its detractors today share an acceptance of totalizing history and uncritically follow the Enlightenment values of freedom, democracy and reliance on reason. The best defence of the products of western culture is to separate them from, or better to reject entirely, the wide-sense terms ‘Western Culture’ and ‘Western Civilization’ and the type of totalizing historical writing that uses them. In place of the unhistorical histories of Western Civilization and Western Culture, they should put careful studies of the various Traditions of the individual strands that make up western cultures, and other cultures, in the narrow

sense – for example, philosophy and the sciences, literature, architecture.²

Part Two will look at one of these Traditions, that of western philosophy. It will bear out the argument in Part One that Western Culture and Western Civilization in the broad sense, if they have any meaning at all, have nothing to do with western culture in the narrow sense by showing that the geographical boundaries of western philosophy are far broader than those of the West, as usually considered, and of many other strands of western culture. It also has a grimmer conclusion. There is a striking difference between what can be shown to belong to western philosophy by studying the Tradition in an open-minded, historical way, and how ‘Western Philosophy’ has been and still is presented in the texts books, where the conception of its scope has been moulded not only by prejudice and ignorance, but by two of the same forces that lie behind the histories of Western Culture in the broad sense: an uncritical confidence in Enlightenment values and a willingness to write history retrospectively, from the perspective of the victors.

² ‘Tradition’ with a capital ‘T’ has a special meaning here, explained in detail in Chapter 5, of maximal geographical tradition.



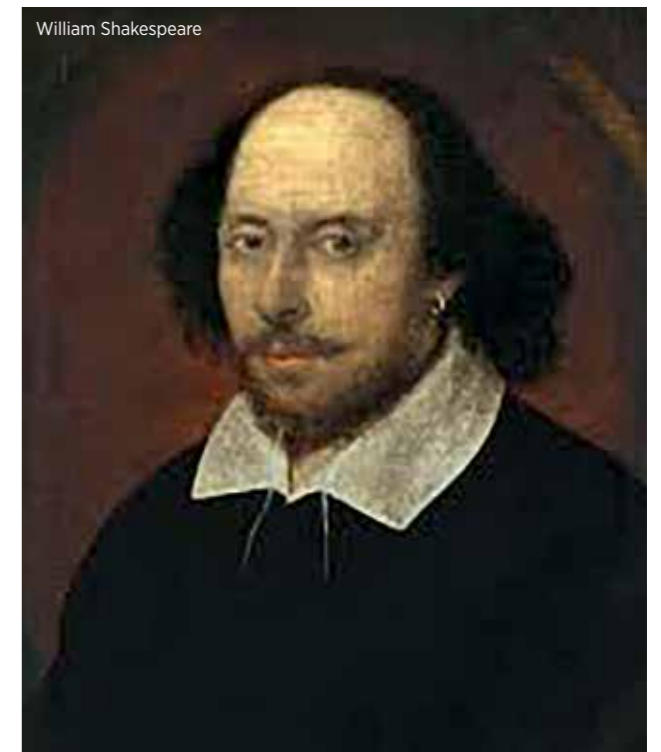
Ludwig van Beethoven



St Paul's Cathedral

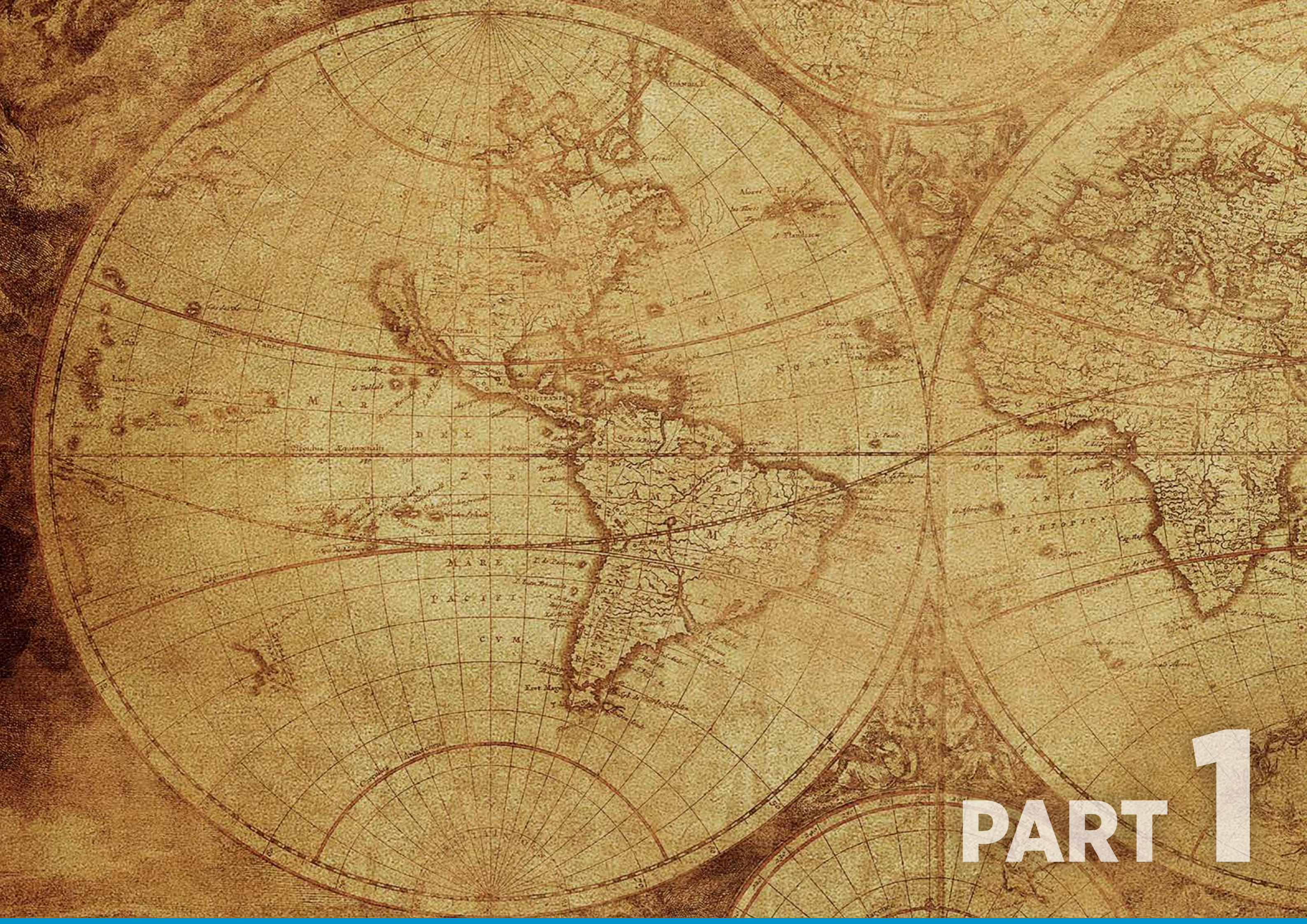


The Parthenon



William Shakespeare

¹ This pamphlet considers the problems surrounding Western Culture in the countries usually considered to belong to it. The notion is equally, but differently contentious within other non-Western cultures.



PART 1

2

THE RISE OF 'WESTERN CULTURE'

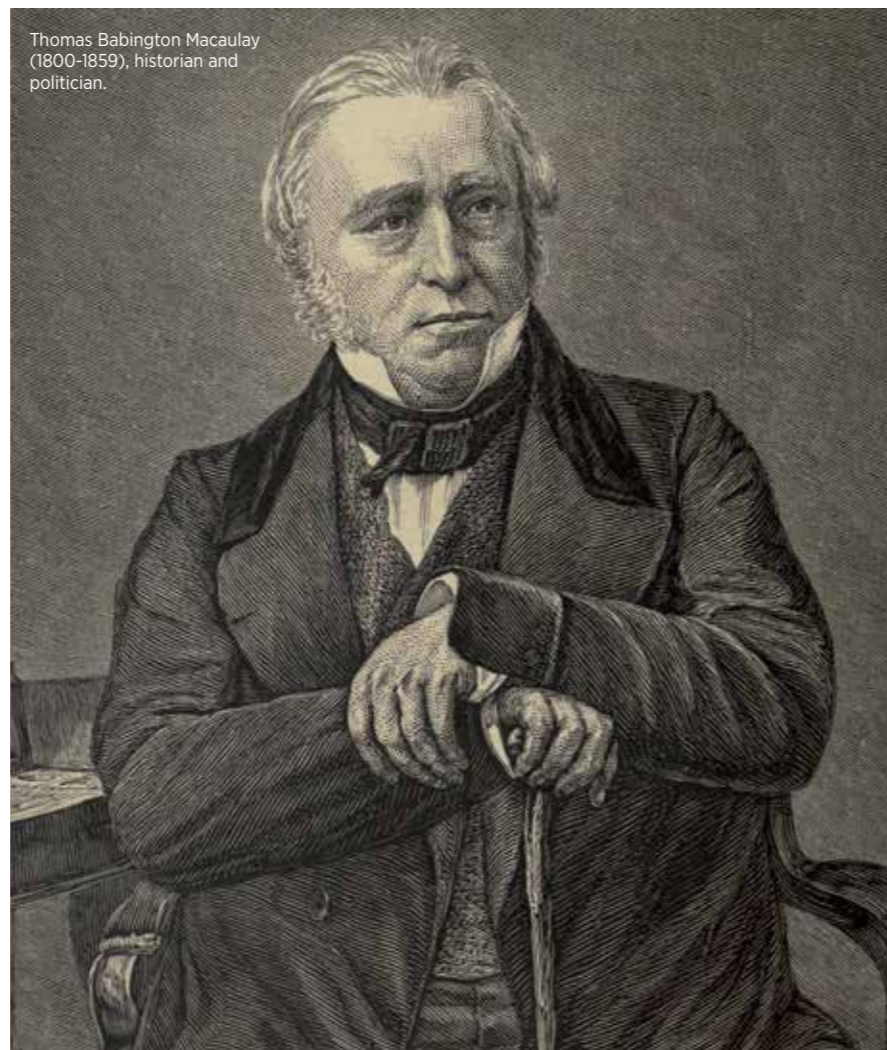
Western culture has a long history, but the term 'Western Culture', along with its twin 'Western Civilization', are hardly more than a century old. They were never, as they might seem, neutral descriptive terms. From the beginning, they had an evaluative component: strongly positive for roughly the first fifty years, increasingly negative in the second fifty years, leading up to the present. The terms reflect ways of thinking and evaluating that go back rather further,

and ultimately, to that period, the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which is often called 'the Enlightenment'. From these ways of thought derive the two central elements of the twentieth-century idea of Western Culture (or Western Civilization). One is a factual claim and the consequences drawn from it, explicitly or by tacit assumption. The other is an implicit methodological premise.

Two Premises for 'Western Culture': (1) the superiority of the West and its values

The factual claim is that, due to some of its special features, Western Culture developed over the centuries so that it has now become the world's dominant culture. The consequence drawn from this claim is that does not merely happen to be dominant: it dominates because of some special features that make it and its products superior. Western Culture is thus the culture that needs to be seriously considered. It is not exactly denied that there have been other cultures or civilizations, but they are squeezed to, or beyond, the margins.

Sometimes this supposition about the superiority of the products of western culture is explicit and even strident. For instance, in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay became involved in a dispute about how money should be spent in educating Indians. Should it pay for teaching in the learned languages used there for centuries, Sanskrit and Arabic, or for education in English? Macaulay argues fiercely that it should be English, because he is convinced of the deep inferiority of learning in both of these other traditions. After observing that 'a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia', he continues:



“ when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanscrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.³

More frequently, the assumption about the almost immeasurable superiority of Western Culture took the form, not of a strident assertion of the inferiority of other cultures, but of a simple neglect of their existence. When Matthew Arnold published *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, he talked of Hebraism and Hellenism, contrasted British manners with those of continental Europe and compared them to those of the United States. Although the 'sweetness and light' he believed culture could diffuse was no doubt a universal ideal for him, he never envisaged it arising except from European culture, based on the legacies of Greece, Rome and Jerusalem. Similarly, exactly a century later, the art historian Kenneth Clark would



Matthew Arnold, author, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)

call his famous television series, mainly about art history, and entirely on the European tradition, simply 'Civilisation', as if there were no other.

The claim about the dominance of Western Culture in terms of power, military and economic, which was not true in earlier periods, became obviously the case in the last two centuries, when Britain, France, the USA and other western powers ruled large areas of the globe. But what enabled people to make the move from the fact of dominance to the general superiority of Western Culture?

In some areas, such as military technology, the basis of their conquests, the inference of superiority was clearly justified. Various theories were used to support its more general application. Some were supposedly biological. It was common during the eighteenth century to argue that the Europeans or white races have abilities for higher thought, social organization and hard work shared only in smaller measure or not at all by the rest of humanity, and in the mid-nineteenth century, writers such as de Gobineau would present the claim to the superiority of Western culture in starkly racial terms.⁴ Much more palatable to today's sensibilities is the theory advanced, at the turn of the twentieth century, by Max Weber, the founder of sociology. In his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues, on the slenderest of evidence, that non-western arts, sciences, law, administration and patterns of social organization, whatever their achievements, lack a special sort of rationality that is found in their western equivalents. This rationality, what he calls 'the specific and peculiar rationalism of Western culture' is also, Weber argues, at the basis of Western capitalism (and indeed Western socialism).⁵ What accounts for the practical success of the West is also, therefore, by this theory what distinguishes its cultural and intellectual achievements more generally.

Most deeply of all, however, what underlay the confidence that the West was not just more powerful, but better than the rest was a widespread acceptance of the central values of the Enlightenment, as put forward by thinkers such as Kant, and embodied in different ways in the rhetoric, if not the reality, of both

³ Macaulay 1965, sections 10-11.

⁴ De Gobineau 1884 (first edition 1854).

⁵ See Weber 1992, xxviii for the quotation, and the Author's Introduction for the line of argument.

the French and the American Revolutions: the power of reason and the achievability through it of human freedom. The values were accepted as universally valid. Western culture, it was thought, had come to understand and champion these values, whereas they were but dimly perceived, or entirely rejected by

other cultures. The thinker who best expressed this widespread, but often implicit, line of thought was Hegel – and it was he too who was most influential in creating the other, methodological element in the concept of Western Culture or Western Civilization.

Two Premises for ‘Western Culture’: (2) the methodological premise

The methodological premise is that a history of the development of a culture or civilization in the wide sense can be written, and that such a history is more than sum of its parts. The culture or civilization concerned takes on an individual identity, so that we can speak of the rise of (for instance) Western Culture, its characteristic features, its virtues or its faults.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that this type of totalizing historical writing became established, although some aspects of the method had been anticipated by Giambattista Vico, the century before, and to some extent (ironically, given how Arabic philosophy would come to be treated) in fourteenth-century North Africa by Ibn Khaldun. Hegel’s approach is one of the clearest examples of the totalizing approach. Human history, he believes, is the story of the gradual development of Spirit, freeing

itself, over the course of the centuries, from matter. All the diverse aspects of human activity and their changes can be explained by following through this idea, and Spirit might best be glossed by ‘culture’, taken in the wide sense (but with especial prominence given, nonetheless, to the arts and philosophy) and seen as a unitary principle behind its particular manifestations.

As this summary indicates, Hegel not only provided a methodology for totalizing history. He also connected it with the Enlightenment values, freedom in particular, that underlay claims about the superiority of Western Culture. ‘World history’, he declares, ‘goes from the East to the West: Europe is the very end of world history ... The Orient knew, and knew alone, that one person is free; the Greek and Roman world, that some people should be free ...’⁶

‘Western Civ’ – its rise

As has been suggested, Hegel was enormously influential. Many nineteenth and twentieth-century historians who would regard his metaphysical apparatus with horror absorbed a diluted version of his understanding of history. In many places, for much of the twentieth century, the most popular approach to history was one, sometimes nicknamed ‘Whig History’, that diluted from Hegel a generalized belief in progress and freedom – which it, however, identified with democracy – and reason – which it identified with modern science. Among the most enthusiastic and unselfconscious followers of this way of writing history were the founders of the ‘Western Civ(ilization)’ courses, which were a prominent feature in US education from the time of the first World War

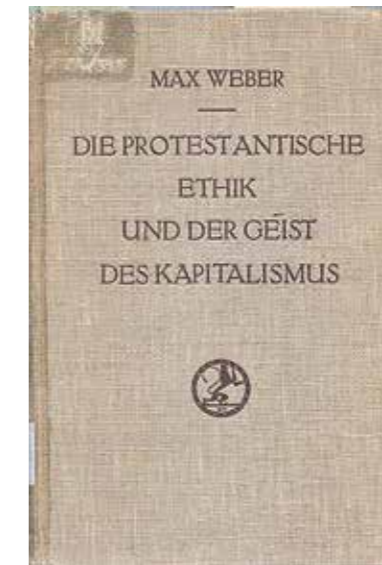
to the 1960s. These courses, and the plethora of books published to support them, show in a very pure form the conception of Western Culture or Civilization against which the generations of the 60s and 70s would turn, and which is now demonized.

The courses were introduced partly in order to fill a gap in general education, which was thought to have suffered because of a move towards specialism in the US universities, and perhaps also as an attempt to justify American involvement in the European war, or perhaps rather in reaction to the destruction caused by the war.⁷

These books present a very general history of thought, art, literature, politics and the social and

economic order, usually starting with prehistoric societies, going on, via Egypt, to Ancient Greece and Rome and then concentrating on Western Europe. Their tone tends to be business-like and, in so far as they offer an interpretation, Whiggish. Western culture is a story of progress, and its most recent stage is seen in the achievements of science, which are contrasted with superstition, a characteristic of earlier centuries, but not yet completely overcome. The most influential teacher at the start of movement was James Robinson. A specialist summarizes his work in this way:

“In substance, Robinson’s textbooks are basically intellectual history (with an overlay of economic, social, and cultural developments), the story of what he called “the mind in the making,” the perceived evolution of rationalism, science, and liberal values. In form, the narrative begins in a tight description of progress from prehistory to the close of the Middle Ages, then broadens in the coverage of modern Europe and its influence on other continents. In effect, the past is subordinated to the present, recent history becomes “relevant” history, the human past becomes the prologue to European history, and Europe is interpreted as the seat of modernity,



The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904), by Max Weber

the source of “contemporary ways of doing and thinking.” Western history in Robinson’s texts is, therefore, “high history,” overarching the past of other peoples.⁸

Similarly, in his *History of Western Civilization*, published in 1935, Robinson’s follower, Harry Elmer Barnes looks to a ‘candid and secular approach to the reconstruction of human knowledge in every field’ but

laments that religion, which above all is responsible for ‘cultural lag’ is the primary intellectual factor that discourages it.⁹ Barnes identified modern history ‘with the scientific struggle to liberate the mind from superstition and obscurantism, and placed the Enlightenment at the center of their story’.¹⁰

These twentieth-century expositors of Western Civilization did not scorn other cultures openly, and they could point to the ‘Western’ in their titles as a good reason for their omission. There was, though, a tendency sometimes to write on the basis of the tacit supposition mentioned above, as if the story

of western progress were the whole story of world progress. To quote again from Barnes: his, book he says, gives a ‘survey of the origins of man and of his progress from the status of the supreme but untutored representative of simian life to the builder of an impressive world-civilization.’¹¹

And Demise

Widespread, and usually compulsory, though the Western Civ courses were, support for them was not universal. As early as the 1940s, some Harvard academics objected to the course because of the way it neglected non-western cultures, and some writers of the time tried, indeed, to overcome these limitations and write

genuine world histories.¹² From the 1960s, staff and students started to lose confidence in the aims that had driven the Western Civ courses, although at first the disaffection was as much with the idea of non-specialized, compulsory courses as with ethnocentrism.

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Chapter 3

⁷ See Allardyce 1982 and Duchesne 2011, 4-6.

⁸ Allardyce 1982, 705-706.

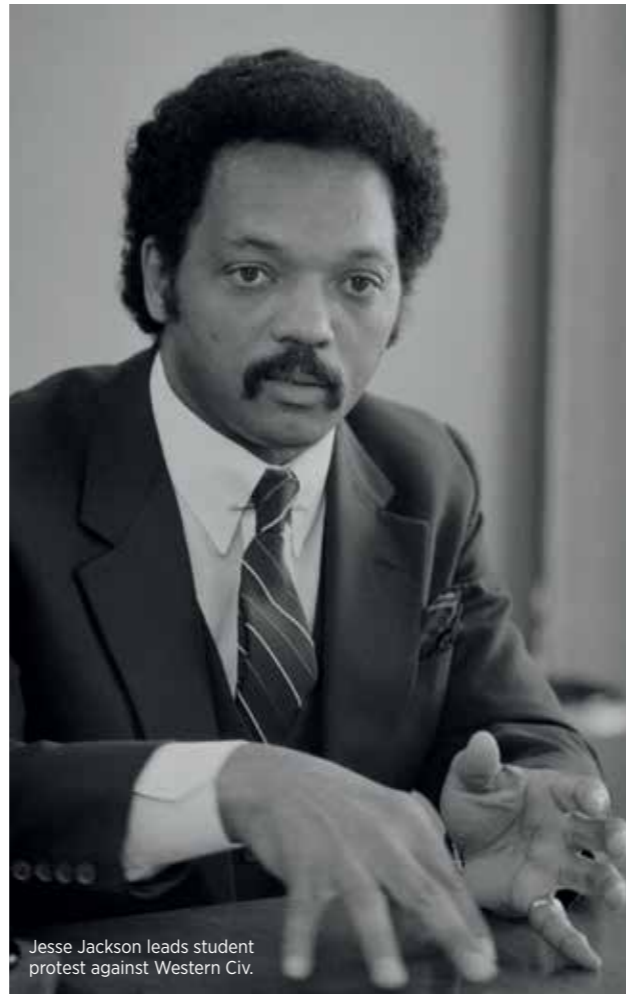
⁹ Barnes 1935, II, 1104.

¹⁰ Duchesne 2011, 5.

¹¹ Barnes 1935, II, 1109.β

¹² See Allardyce 1982, 717; Duchesne 2011, 8-10.

The case of Stanford University provides a good illustration. In 1969, it was decided that the Western Civ course there should no longer be compulsory, but this decision coincided with the abolition of the 'General Studies Program' altogether.¹³ Twenty years later, however, the objections to a successor course in the humanities there, established in the early 1980s and known as 'Western Culture', were clearly aimed at what the university's website calls 'its lack of diversity and its predominantly Eurocentric readings'. The affair drew in leading politicians. William Bennett, President Reagan's Education Secretary, said that changing the course would be bowing to 'curriculum by intimidation'.¹⁴ The Reverend Jesse Jackson, who was a candidate for the Democratic nomination in the race for the next President, joined hundreds of students on January 15, 1987, chanting 'Hey hey, ho ho, Western Civ has gotta go.' The course was replaced in 1989 by one that included the study of non-European cultures and works by women, blacks, Hispanic people, Asians and American Indians. The university explained at the time that this new course would include 'ideas and values drawn from different strands' of American society to deepen students' understanding of 'cultural diversity and the processes of cultural interaction' and that it would pay 'substantial attention to the issues of race, gender and class' in the required reading.¹⁵



Jesse Jackson leads student protest against Western Civ.

3

WORLD HISTORY AND THE DEMONIZATION OF WESTERN CULTURE

Explaining the Rise of the West

The fate of Western Civ courses at US universities provides a vivid illustration of how, by the 1980s, the proud twentieth-century approach to Western Culture or Civilization (with its eighteenth and nineteenth-century roots) had become unacceptable. What replaced it?

The most revealing place to seek an answer to this question is by looking at how, over the last three or four decades, historians have dealt with the historiographical question posed by the very notion of Western Culture, whether it is proudly accepted, questioned or rejected. How is the rise of the West – that is to say, of what is called 'Western Culture' or 'Western Civilization', using these terms in their broad sense – to be explained?¹⁶

The answer given by, or implicit in, the histories that accompanied Western Civ courses, and accepted far more generally in Europe and America from the nineteenth century onwards, was explained in the last chapter. According to this Old Answer, Western culture became dominant because of its superior character. Hegel provided a sophisticated philosophical explanation for this superiority in terms of freedom, and a conception of totalizing history that

made it easy to move from the dominance of the West to asserting the superiority of its culture.

Recent historians of the rise of the West have had to accept the first of the two premises on which this now widely rejected Old Answer rested. They must accept the methodological premise that a history of the development of a culture or civilization in the wide sense can be written and is more than sum of its parts – a sort of Hegelianism, though perhaps watered down, or perhaps adapted (as in Marxism). To disavow it would be to deny the *raison d'être* of the sort of history they are writing. They also have to accept at least part of the second premise. They cannot deny the reality of Western power and dominance, even if, as many of them predict, it is now coming to an end with the increasing strength of India and China. They have been left, therefore, with two ways of countering the Old Answer. Either they can deny that the dominance of the West was the result of the special features of Western Culture – for instance, its pursuit of freedom and its cultivation of reason. Or they can accept that it did result from its special features, but that these are features that show, not the superiority of Western Culture, but its deficiencies, indeed its wickedness.

Western Dominance Not Due To Its Culture

To deny that the West became dominant because of any special features of its culture, historians need to

provide an alternative explanation. For example, the geographer, scientific popularizer and historian, Jared

¹³ Allardyce 1982, 724

¹⁴ See *New York Times*, April 2, 1988: 'Stanford Alters Western Culture Course'.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a useful survey of the historiography, see Daly 2015.

Diamond, explained the phenomenon geographically. Eurasia's geography gave it better access to cultivable plants and domesticable animals; its geography also explained Europe's political fragmentation into a number of states, a circumstance that produced the best conditions for technological development and exploration.¹⁷ A decade and a half earlier, E.L Jones had explained Europe's ascendancy by the innovation encouraged by its fragmentation, and this in turn by its landscape. He also points to a smaller number of natural disasters in Europe than Asia in early modern times, and the relative ease of crossing the Atlantic from Europe and so gaining access to vast natural resources.¹⁸

A different way of explaining Western dominance without reference to any special features of Western culture is to emphasize its contingency: other civilizations also had, and often earlier, the features that enabled the West to rise. This was the social anthropologist Jack Goody's line. In view (he writes):

“ of earlier achievements and later advances, what I regard as inadequate is any theory that claims to find something profoundly 'structural' in Asia that prevented these developments from taking place, or in Europe that advanced them. In looking at Europe, and specifically England, our

natural egocentricity has often led us to assume a priority at deep, socio-cultural levels whereas the evidence for this is either thin or non-existent. The reasons for achievements in both West and East are more contingent. That leaves many questions to be asked and answered in a more particular, less ethnocentric way than has often been the case.¹⁹

The distinguished historian of the Islamic world, Marshall Hodgson, argued similarly, emphasizing that, until modern times, the great civilizations were Asian, such as those of medieval Islam and China. The Europeans achieved their dominance, he argues, not from their own cultural resources, but by taking ideas and technologies from Asian cultures. Moreover, there was nothing predetermined about their rise. It might easily have been that Chinese or Islamic civilization became dominant.²⁰ In the Oxford (and now Notre Dame) academic Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's blockbuster, *Millennium*, a similar view of Western Civilization is implicit in the limited treatment it receives, at least until the chapters dealing with recent events. The mood is set, perhaps unintentionally by the very first sentence of the Preface: 'I have a vision of some galactic museum of the distant future, in which Diet-Coke cans will share with coats of chain mail a single vitrine marked 'Planet Earth, 1000-2000, Christian Era.'²¹

Western Dominance By Oppression

Many of the more recent analysts of the rise of the West attribute it, as a survey explains, 'neither to alleged virtues of Europeans nor historical accidents but largely to policies and practices of Europeans enabling them to dominate peoples and resources beyond their shores ... All these authors agree ... that the rise of the West involved exceptional violence, aggression and exploitation.'²²

The theoretical underpinning for these interpretations comes ultimately from Marx, but it has been worked

out with particular reference to world history by a variety of twentieth-century historians, especially the American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, in the four monumental and much translated volumes of *The Modern World-System*.²³ Wallerstein does not claim that capitalist oppression is peculiar to Western Culture, but it is in the West, he believes, that it has reached its full development.

Authors who take this view often concentrate on a particular region of the world and its exploitation

by the West – Chile and Brazil for André Gunder Frank, for instance, and Africa in Joseph Inikori's analysis of the causes of the Industrial Revolution, which in turn made Western dominance possible.²⁴ Inikori, in fact, is not an aspirant world historian, but a

meticulous specialist. It is the dispassionate balance of his discussion of how the slave trade was tied into the industrial revolution that makes his analysis particularly useful for those who wish to discredit the Western Civilization in which it took place.

Western Civ - again

These academic debates might seem far away from the main currents of intellectual life. In fact, they have been shaping it. The disparaging attitudes that today's historians of Western Civilization show to the object of their study, even while they are engaged in explaining its rise, have become commonplaces.

Stanford, where in the 1960s Western Civ was first seriously challenged, provides a striking illustration. In 2016, some Stanford students, who ran *The Stanford Review*, launched a petition to reintroduce a course 'covering the politics, history, philosophy, and culture of the Western world Western culture based course for all students.' The reaction surprised them. One of the students involved explained to the media:

“ The Stanford Review, a student-run publication, launched a petition to bring western civilization courses back to Stanford and then all hell broke

loose. We the writers, we didn't even realize how counter-cultural and unpopular it would be on a college campus to think that all students should have a basic introduction to the greats of the western tradition.²⁵

The irony is that the organizers of the petition accepted the premise that Western Culture should be blamed for slavery, oppression and much more. As one of them explained:

“ The scientific revolutions hundreds of Stanford students use would gain historical context. We would lament the horrors of slavery and oppression—and applaud those who fought for freedom.²⁶

But this apologetic attitude was not nearly enough for many of these students' peers. As a newspaper reported:



Vote for Western Civ? Stanford Review's 2016 campaign

17 Diamond 1997

18 Jones 1981.

19 Goody 1996, 8-9

20 Hodgson 1993.

21 Fernandez-Armesto 1996, xiii; on this book, cf. Duchesne 2012, 62-69.

22 Daly 2015, 98.

23 Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989, 2011.

24 Inikori 2002.

25 <https://www.foxbusiness.com/features/stanford-university-says-no-to-western-civilization-courses-in-curriculum>

26 <https://www.thedailybeast.com/stanford-students-want-western-civilization-studies-back-as-the-pc-backlash-begins>

“Stanford is already a four-year academic exercise in Western Civilization and an uncritical one at that,’ [one of them] said, citing a world food economy class in which her professors

refer to impoverished African villages without mentioning ‘the role that colonialism had in shaping poverty across the global south.’²⁷

Enlightenment Values Turn Against Themselves

The furore caused by the Stanford petition does not merely illustrate how the idea of Western Culture or Civilization has become toxic in intellectual and university circles in Europe and America. It is striking how, in fact, the views of the petition’s originators and those of its detractors converge. Those who launched the petition do not support Western Civilization because it is the civilization to which they belong, or because of its many great achievements, but rather because of those from it who ‘fought for freedom’. Like their opponents, they lose no time in condemning ‘slavery and oppression’. The difference seems to be that, for their opponents, Western Civilization has almost entirely failed to live up to its values. It has, for instance, betrayed the cause of freedom through colonialism.

The same Enlightenment values that were adopted uncritically to present Western Culture as uniquely

valuable in the Western Civ courses are now used to demonize it. For the present-day critics of the West, as much as for its twentieth-century eulogists, the pursuit of freedom and cultivation of reason are regarded, not as the values of a particular era (one that to some extent still continues), but universal values to which people in all ages and times should subscribe. For the eulogists, the fact that non-Western societies had apparently failed to follow or aspire to these values made them immeasurably inferior to Western Culture, which in its progress embodied them. For the demonizers, Western Culture, with its slave ships, hungry peasants, exploited and shackled women and oppressed minorities, has achieved world domination in spite of these values. For both groups, the values are the same, and they are accepted in the same absolute and universal way.

²⁷ Ibid.

4

WESTERN CULTURE AND western culture

For those who want to defend the products of western culture in the narrow sense – its intellectual achievements and artistic monuments – against marginalization and worse, it should now be clear why they need to find some way that does not involve a return to the heroic framework of Western Culture, as once exemplified by the Western civ courses and championed even now by some writers who bravely resist the tide of opinion.²⁸ That framework involves two big assumptions. One of them is open and obvious: that totalizing history is a sound approach and can be applied to individual traditions to which these achievements and monuments belong. The other assumption is deeper and must be searched out:

it is that we should support, as universally and always applicable, the values of the Enlightenment. Not only are both assumptions highly questionable. It has also been shown that they are in fact shared by those very people who today side-line or attack Western Culture.

The achievements of western culture in the narrow sense can, therefore best be defined by questioning that vast, amorphous object that pundits discuss using the terms ‘Western Culture’ and ‘Western Civilization’, by attacking the very notion of Western Culture in the broad sense, irrespective of whether it is regarded as heroic or demonic.

Western Culture, Essentialism and Organic Unity

In his Reith Lectures, now written up as a book, Anthony Appiah, who is both a fine analytic philosopher and what is known in the US as ‘a leading public intellectual’, has begun that process. He puts very clearly the point that the two previous chapters here have illustrated in detail:

“Once Western culture could be a term of praise, it was bound to become a term of dispraise too. Critics of Western culture, producing a photographic negative – light areas exchanged for dark – emphasizing slavery, subjugation, racism, militarism, and genocide, were committed to the very same essentialism, even if they saw a nugget not of gold but of arsenic.²⁹

Despite his impeccably liberal (in the American sense) credentials, Appiah has no wish to denigrate the achievements of western art, music, literature and thought, which he sees as having been blackened by association with social and political phenomena that have nothing to do with them. He identifies the problem as being that of essentialism. People imagine that there is an essence, a gold nugget or, for the detractors, arsenic, which runs through all Western Culture, which they conceive in a broad sense as a ‘complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’, as Appiah quotes an advocate of this view as proposing.³⁰ Appiah draws out the implications of ‘complex whole’. The vision is of

²⁸ See, for instance, Landes 2006, Duchesne 2011; and cf. below, n. 34 on Niall Ferguson.

²⁹ Appiah 2018, 202.

³⁰ Appiah 2018, 190. He is quoting the nineteenth-century anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor.

“ culture not as a loose assemblage of disparate fragments but as an organic unity, each component, like the organs in a body, carefully adapted to occupy a particular place, each part essential to the functioning of the whole. The Eurovision Song Contest, the cutouts of Matisse, the dialogues of Plato are all parts of a larger whole.³¹

But, argues Appiah, there is no essence of Western culture, no organic whole that unites all its parts.

Appiah's objections are powerful in their rhetorical thrust. But, unfortunately, they will not convince many advocates of the view he is, rightly, attacking. For a start, he criticizes them both for treating Western Culture as an essence, and for considering it to be an organic whole. But how can something be both an essence and an organic whole? An essence is a property that everything of a certain sort must have in order to be what it is. For example, a water molecule must have the structure H₂O. Every water molecule thus contains what is required for its being water, and if just one water molecule survives, because of it water exists. An organic whole – for instance, a symphony – is not such an essence, nor has any such essence. No part of it – say the slow movement, or say the score for the clarinets – has what is required for being a symphony: there is no symphony without there being all the parts of it together.

Appiah might reply that this impossible position is precisely that of his opponents, but few of them

Western Culture, Totalizing History and western culture

The study of western culture, in the narrow sense – and ultimately, perhaps, western culture itself – is ill-served by the historians who write about Western Culture or Civilization in the broad sense. What they are really trying to do is just to write totalizing history. When they say that their subject is Western *Culture*

would accept this judgement. Rather, many of those who discuss Western Culture look back, as explained above, consciously or unconsciously to Hegel. In his philosophy of history, Hegel sometimes leans towards essentialism and sometimes uses the notion of organic unity, but he does so in a sophisticated way. He sees culture as constantly changing and moving, through contradiction and resolution, to realize itself more perfectly. His thinking is open to many objections, but they are not obvious, knockdown ones, such as that he has confused essences and organic unities.

A more effective way of attacking the whole way of thinking involved in using the concepts 'Western Culture' and 'Western Civilization' is the one that will be followed here, of questioning the implications of totalizing history, its sense and its value.³² 'Western civilization' and 'western culture' can be understood in a narrow sense, as a heterogeneous collection of traditions. The type of totalizing history written by those who talk of 'Western Culture' or Civilization' with a capital 'C', it will be shown, cannot properly discuss these traditions, because they exhibit a geographical and historical variety at odds with the totalizing method. If totalizing history is not – as, it will be argued, it should be – rejected entirely as vacuous, it must at the least be acknowledged that its generalizations about the West have nothing at all to do with the traditions in thinking and the arts that make up western culture or civilization in the narrow sense.³³

or *Civilization*, they mean that they are going to write about every sort of phenomenon in the history of the West. These phenomena include cultural activities in the narrower sense, but only as a tiny part of their vast subject.

Consider one of the more recent and most brilliant of these books, first published by Niall Ferguson in 2011. The book's main title is simply *Civilization*, but as the subtitle (*The West and the Rest*) makes clear, it fits into the Rise of the West genre, even though it is hard to place it neatly among the battle lines described in the last two chapters.³⁴ Its range of discussion is extraordinary, from the economics and techniques of cotton production to theories of racism; from the reasons for Ottoman expansion and defeat to the worldwide effects of medical science; from clock-making to blue jeans. References to literature and the arts, however, are almost absent. Science is indeed discussed in detail, but only with regard to its practical consequences in power politics – as providing the technology for wealth creation and the weapons for conquest. Ferguson should not be reproached for leaving out almost everything that belongs to the extension of 'culture' and 'civilization' in the narrow sense: that is neither where his interest lies, nor where he believes he can find the best evidence for the task of explanation such totalizing history undertakes. He promises to reveal the six 'killer apps' of western power.³⁵ Why use the word 'civilization'? The book is simply a general history of the West and its rise, and a prognostication of its decline.

Totalizing history, by its nature, tries to see the entire range of its material as a whole, developing together chronologically. So far from distinguishing within culture in the narrow sense the different, separate strands, it merges them together and then combines them with all sorts of phenomena. By doing so, it fails to respect how different pursuits were thought about in their own times: how they were distinguished from and connected to other activities, what they were aiming to achieve and how and why it was thought they should do so.

Totalizing history is also usually backward looking. Indeed, it is most often history written by the victors. Accounts of 'the Rise of the West' wear this character of looking-backward-from-victory in their very name, even if, as is now more often than not the case, these victors regret their conquests and see them as occasions for shame rather than rejoicing. The selection of what falls into their scope is made



retrospectively. In the present case, for instance, a notion of what countries the West includes is taken from present-day or recently past geopolitics and then projected backwards, making changes to allow for migration (so North America and Australasia, parts of today's West, are not considered western before they were settled by Europeans). If a totalizing history selects an area (for instance, health or politics), then it will also define this scope by present-day criteria. And if, as is usual, the history is one of victory – even of victory regretted – then this judgement of victory too will be made according to the terms of the present.

There is, then, a strong objection to be made to all or at least much totalizing history, on grounds of anachronism. Totalizing historians look to the present to give both scope and purpose to their investigation of the past. Rather than be content with the never-ending task of trying to understand what has happened and of giving historical explanations – that is to say, explanations of how things happened in a way that they might not have done, they offer pseudo-scientific explanations, in terms of progress, or racial superiority, or freedom, or killer apps and even suggest that they can prognosticate about the future or teach their readers how to meet its challenges. No wonder such books are popular. But are they history?

Even if the totalizers can answer these complaints, their histories of Western Culture are clearly quite distinct from the discussion of culture or civilization in the narrow sense, of the individual arts and sciences. These arts and sciences do not, except sometimes very indirectly, lead to power and dominion. They are

³¹ Appiah 2018, 206.

³² A different line of attack would be to target the Enlightenment values (and uncritical acceptance of them as universal). But this is a task for another occasion.

³³ This line of objection would be alien to Appiah. Rather than replacing discussion of Western Culture in a broad (and arguably vacuous) sense with a way of understanding western culture in a narrower sense, as a collection of geographical Traditions, Appiah wishes to play down the role of traditions. His attitude to cultural traditions is part of a wider project to advocate what he calls 'cosmopolitanism', emphasizing how we create our own identities rather than take up what has been made for us by places, languages and cultural traditions: see Appiah 2006. The other occasion, referred to in the last note, where Enlightenment values are subjected to criticism would also be the opportunity to scrutinize Appiah's interesting but destructive view – especially since it, like both the Heroic Western Culture and the Demonic Western Culture views he is criticizing, assumes the Enlightenment values of freedom and rationality as unquestioned bases.

³⁴ On the one hand, Ferguson is a defender of Western Culture and Enlightenment values, although in a rather narrow way that makes him see scientific progress, economic growth and consumer satisfaction as the only criteria for the success of a culture. On the other hand, he makes common cause with those who emphasize the inferiority of the West before modern times – as the blurb reads 'In 1412, Europe was a miserable backwater, while the Orient was home to dazzling civilizations'; and he also argues that the period of Western dominance seems to be coming to an end.

³⁵ Ferguson 2012, 12.

not necessary for living, but rather make it possible to live well, elevating human life from the merely bestial. If Western Civilization is seen as having marched to victory, bearing the insignia of progress and carrying the torch of freedom, none of the credit is due to them. If, as more commonly now, the West is seen to have achieved an inglorious dominance through enslavement and oppression, culture with a small 'c' is not to blame.

The totalizers might question whether there can be so sharp a distinction. Culture in the narrow sense, they will argue, is part of culture in the broad sense, and so western culture is part of Western Culture. But they are wrong, as will become clear in the next chapter, where the meaning of 'culture' and 'civilization, with small 'c's, is explained.

5

'WITH A SMALL C' – CULTURE, CIVILIZATION AND TRADITIONS

Understanding 'culture' and 'civilization'

In the last chapter, it was established that, even if totalizing history can be defended, when totalizing historians say they are talking about 'Culture' or 'Civilization', these words have hardly any distinct meaning, since they are talking about everything, and when they refer to the 'rise of Western Culture', or the 'rise of Western Civilization' they mean nothing at all different to when they refer simply to 'the rise of the West'. By contrast with the wide-sense meaning of these words, 'culture' and 'civilization' with a small 'c', understood in the narrow sense, do have a definite meaning.³⁶

Words can have a definite meaning, without being tightly defined. This is the case for 'culture' and

'civilization'. The meaning of the words is given by the range of activities they designate, and the members of this range are related as a family rather than as objects that all have a single defining characteristic. There is a central group of pursuits that almost everyone would say make up culture or civilization: philosophy, law, science, literature, the visual arts, architecture, music, opera, dance, cinema. There are other pursuits that many would consider also to belong to the wider family: medicine and technology, calligraphy, cookery, wine-making. There may be others (and it is the character of such families that they can gain new members: a pursuit that is now not part of culture might become so, or an entirely new cultural pursuit come into being).

Traditions

In most cases, these sorts of activity have gone on in many parts of the world for thousands of years, although there are exceptions.³⁷ Each activity can be divided into one or more maximal geographical traditions (called henceforth simply 'Traditions' with a capital 'T'), with its own history, distinct from the history of other geographical traditions of the same activity although often with links to some of them. A tradition is maximal geographically when it includes all of what is linked more than incidentally to a certain starting point.

To understand the concept of Tradition (that is: maximal geographical tradition) better, consider

how a geographical tradition can be non-maximal. There is an English tradition of music – that is, music written in England. Arguably, there are enough special ties between different pieces of music written in England for it make sense to consider them as a tradition, but there are also so many strong ties backwards and sideways with music from elsewhere in Europe that it is not a maximal tradition. The maximal tradition here is probably that of European music, though it would require expertise to decide its geographical boundaries, which will vary through the ages. Of course, European music has had important contacts

³⁶ There is, however, no generally recognized distinction between the meaning of the two, although some writers assign distinct meanings to them. In this essay they (and their large 'C' counterparts) are considered to be synonyms: cf. Chapter 1.

³⁷ Opera is an exception, since the tradition is mainly European, going back just to the seventeenth century, though there are arguably some other traditions of opera, such as that represented by the Peking Opera. And cinema depends on a technology invented only about a century ago.

with, for instance, Arabic music, but these should be considered as influences, incidental links to a different Tradition with a different starting point.

These names that we have for the various Traditions – ‘philosophy’, ‘science’, ‘visual arts’ and so on – reflect our ways of classing these traditions today in English. But as we follow each Tradition back in time, we find that in many cases not only the name, but the scheme of classification changes. Traditions that are now separate, such as philosophy on the one hand, and natural science on the other, were once unified. Once unified Traditions, such as literary writing and political rhetoric, have been split apart. Historians will often begin from the perspective of a particular contemporary discipline but, if they are true historians, they will put the material they single out for treatment back into the categories of its time, even though this will usually involve their delving into subject-areas that, on today’s account, should not be theirs.

And, if they are true historians, they will look at each strand over time, from the beginning, even when

their initial point of departure was provided by the interests and categorizations of today. They will find that each strand, each tradition that makes up culture or civilization in the narrow sense will have its own pattern of development, of interaction with, departing from and combining with other strands. When a specialist searches out the history of a tradition, the task is less like dropping a line and pulling it up with the catch than dragging up seaweed, the different strands often entangled, sometimes cut short, sometimes as it were merged into one.

Just as the ways of naming and dividing up Traditions varies over time, so they can vary even now, between languages. For example, among the Traditions of what we call ‘philosophy’ are Western Philosophy, Chinese Philosophy, Indian Philosophy and African Philosophy. But does ‘philosophy’ have the same sense in each case? Historians studying, for instance, the Chinese Tradition of philosophy, and approaching it from the disciplinary identity of Western philosophy, will need to be especially flexible in changing and developing their initial expectations, shaped by their own Western training, of the content of this Tradition.

Different Traditions, Different Geographies

Each Tradition is, by definition, maximal geographically. But what the geography is, and how it varies through history, is a matter of circumstances. Suppose we are thinking about Traditions of law. The weight of evidence is that there is no single Tradition of western law (or of European law). In most of the countries usually described as ‘western’, the legal system belongs to one of two distinct Traditions. One Tradition, that in most countries of continental Europe, goes back to the Roman Empire and its law. The other Tradition is that of Common Law, as found in England, Wales and Ireland, and many other English-speaking countries, notably the United States. There have been many contacts between the two Traditions, but not enough to make them into a single Tradition coming from two different roots.

By contrast, it is probably right to consider European literature as one Tradition, embracing works written in many different languages and places as distant as Edinburgh and Athens, Palermo and St Petersburg. But the Tradition that began, or at least flourished early, in Ancient Greece, was joined by other Traditions with different origins – the Germanic

combined one, of philosophy and science (see the section below).

The difference between the geographies of different Traditions shows more clearly than anything else how discussion of civilization and culture with a small ‘c’ is completely distinct from the sort of totalizing history that some write of, for instance, Western Culture. The pundits of Western Culture identify it as belonging

principally, at least, to one geographical area (though having spread everywhere in recent times). But there is no one geographical area to which the Traditions that make up western culture or civilization in the narrow sense belong. Each has its own geography, usually changing in its own distinctive way over the course of its history. And, in some cases, this geography does not correspond at all with what is commonly considered to be the West.

The History of Traditions and the Case of Western Philosophy

The section above has set out a way of writing the history of Traditions, where, as explained, ‘Traditions’ with a capital ‘T’ means maximal geographical ones. But have histories of Traditions been written in this way?

Rarely so. Most Histories, even supposedly general ones, of any of the disciplines and arts that make up culture, are shorter than a Tradition in their chronology and narrower than it in their geography. The titles of such general Histories one expects to find on the bookshelves of a well-appointed library are of the sort: *A History of English Literature*, *European Art: from the Book of Kells to Picasso*, *Ancient Sculpture*, *The Classical Tradition in Music*.

Sometimes, however, the titles seem to be sufficiently wide. One area where this happens frequently is philosophy. There are – as the next chapter will

illustrate – many books called *A History of Western Philosophy* or some variant on this theme. But rarely, if ever, have they ranged over the maximal geographical Tradition that should be called ‘western philosophy’. Rather, their conception of the extension of ‘western’ has been exactly that of ‘Western Culture’ or ‘Western Civilization’, and they have been written from the same sort of retrospective perspective as the totalizing histories that embody these concepts.

Part Two of this essay will focus on western philosophy – what the Tradition really is – and ‘Western Philosophy’ as it is usually presented. It will be both a case study, and more than one. Until the seventeenth century, this Tradition included not only what we would now call ‘philosophy’, but all of the natural sciences. Though only a strand, western philosophy is a central one in the history of western culture.



Nova Totius
TERRARUM
ORBIS
TABULA
a officina F. de Wit.
Amstelredamum

PART 2

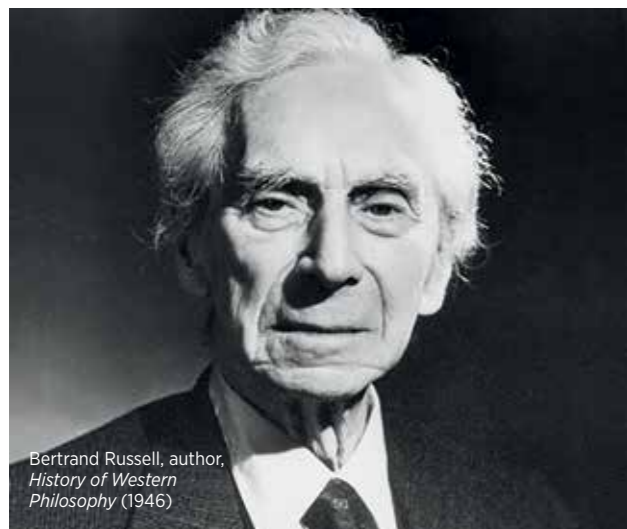
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'THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY'

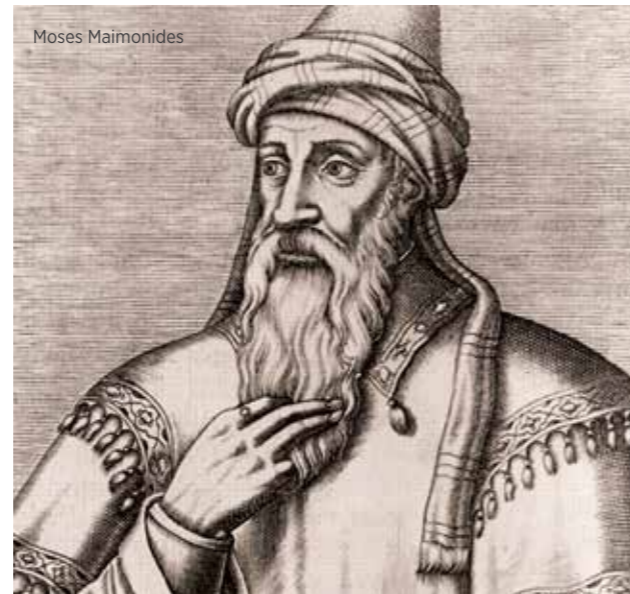
Western philosophy is the tradition that began with the Greeks. This is not, of course, to say that this is when *philosophy* began – other traditions are more ancient: Indian philosophy certainly, Chinese philosophy arguably so. But a distinctive tradition of thinking – as explained in the last chapter, covering a far larger area than would now be called 'philosophy' – began around the beginning of the 6th century BC and it is to this that the epithet 'Western' is applied, as opposed, for example, to Indian Philosophy or Chinese Philosophy.

But how Western is Western? To judge from widely-read general *Histories* of 'Western Philosophy', 'Western' has a rather narrow meaning, somewhere in between that of 'European', 'Western European' and – especially where the *History* concerned is written in English – 'Anglophone'.

Consider the most famous of them, the *History of Western Philosophy* published by Bertrand Russell in 1946 (Russell 1946), so successful publicly that it gave him financial security for the rest of his long life. After a long section on ancient philosophy, centred around the Athens of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, there is



Bertrand Russell, author, *History of Western Philosophy* (1946)



Moses Maimonides

a shorter section on 'Catholic Philosophy', beginning with figures from the Roman Empire and going on to writers who worked mainly in Northern Europe, especially the Universities of Paris and Oxford. The final section, on 'Modern Philosophy', starts by looking at some Italian writers, before focussing entirely on Holland (just for Spinoza), France (just for Descartes and Bergson) and principally on Germany and Great Britain and (towards the end) America. Philosophy outside the bounds of present-day Europe and North America is confined to a chapter of 20 pages (less than 2.5% of the whole book) on what he calls 'Mohammedan Philosophy', mostly occupied by a Gibbonesque account of the early Islamic dynasties. He allows four or five pages for a vague and wildly inaccurate account of the views of Avicenna, Averroes and Maimonides, before reaching the magisterial conclusion: 'Arabic philosophy is not important as original thought. Men like Avicenna and Averroes are essentially commentators.'³⁸

³⁸ Russell 1946, 427.



Averroes, Basilica of Santa Maria Novella, Florence

More recent surveys, almost all far less opinionated, unbalanced and plain ignorant than Russell's – though also less engaging – share his geographical emphases to a remarkable extent. What is almost certainly the most recently published of them, *A History of Western Philosophy: From the Pre-Socratics to Postmodernism*, by C. Stephen Evans, published in October 2018, takes, if possible, an even narrower view of its West than Russell, with no section at all explicitly dedicated to philosophy in the Islamic world. Equally narrow is Anthony Gottlieb's prize-winning two-volume *History*, published by Penguin.³⁹

These are all popularizing books, written by non-specialist authors. But consider two much longer, ambitious and serious general histories. In 1946, the year of Russell's *History*, Frederick Copleston began to publish a nine-volume *History of Philosophy*, completed in 1975, in which he aimed to avoid the prejudices of writers like Russell. Copleston was a Jesuit, yet the work has been widely praised for its objectivity. Yet he gives just 20 pages (out of more than 5000) to Arabic philosophy, and his geography is much the same as Russell's, except that he added an extra volume on Russian philosophy.

In *A New History of Western Philosophy*, first published as a whole fifteen years ago, Anthony Kenny, both a

renowned philosopher and historian of philosophy, gives far more serious and knowledgeable attention to the Middle Ages than Russell and, indeed, most others who have published similarly general histories. But it is a strictly European Middle Ages, where 'Arabs' can be at best influences,⁴⁰ and the shape and geography of Western Philosophy is hardly different from that followed by Russell. As the publisher's blurb explains:

“ Anthony Kenny tells the story of philosophy from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment into the modern world. He introduces us to the great thinkers and their ideas, starting with Plato, Aristotle, and the other founders of Western thought. In the second part of the book he takes us through a thousand years of medieval philosophy, and shows us the rich intellectual legacy of Christian thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Ockham. Moving into the early modern period, we explore the great works of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant, which remain essential reading today. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hegel, Mill, Nietzsche, Freud, and Wittgenstein again transformed the way we see the world.

We move, therefore, from Ancient Athens, via a very short detour to North Africa (Augustine) to Paris and Oxford and then stay firmly in Northern Europe: France, Britain, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany.

By contrast with the writers of general *Histories*, over the last twenty five years specialists have become far more aware of the importance of Arabic (and, though to a lesser extent, of Jewish and



Bust of Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Tehran.

³⁹ Gottlieb 2001, 2017. There is a very perceptive review of the first volume by George Steiner: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/dec/10/philosophy>

⁴⁰ See e.g. Kenny 2005, 33: 'The Christian Eriugena was a much less important precursor of Western medieval philosophy than a series of Muslim thinkers in the countries that are now Iraq and Iran.' For the complete edition of Kenny's *History*, see Kenny 2012.

Byzantine) philosophy. This change has particularly affected those who work on medieval philosophy, for it was during this period that all four branches of the western Tradition most clearly had their own identities and yet interacted with each other (as will be made clear in the following chapters). The French historian of philosophy, Alain de Libera's *La philosophie médiévale* of 1995 was a pioneer in this respect, insisting on treating the non-Latin traditions as important in their own right, not merely as contributors to a central, Western European tradition. Recent work, such as that presented in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, shows how the Arabic tradition, so far from disappearing after 1200, when it ceased to influence Latin thinkers, continued up to the nineteenth century and, in some places, continues still today.⁴¹

In principle, this research should make clear to everyone that the western philosophy does not

have the very limited geographical, European and latterly northern Europe boundaries it has been set in the tradition of *Histories* of Western Philosophy. In practice, however, it is not just that this work has not yet reached the attention of the wider public. Rather – perhaps as a result of the general tendency in university circles to demonize anything to do with the civilization of the west – the tradition of Arabic philosophy is regarded as something distinct from the western Tradition. Publishers will regularly issue general books on medieval philosophy and on modern European philosophy and, side by side, general books on Islamic philosophy. A well-read non-specialist should be more aware today than thirty years ago of the achievements of philosophers in the Islamic world, but is not likely to be any closer to realizing, as the next three chapters will show, that they are every much a part of the western Tradition of philosophy as the work of Aristotle, Aquinas, Kant, Hume and Hegel.

⁴¹ El-Rouyaheb and Schmidtke 2017.

7

THE REAL HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

(1) ANTIQUITY AND THE FOUR TRADITIONS

The Broad Space of Ancient Philosophy

'Western philosophy' is the name for the philosophical tradition that begins with the Greeks. The geographical range of this tradition in the ancient world is usually overlooked. When Greek philosophy is mentioned, people think immediately of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, all of whom worked in Athens. The earlier Greek philosophers are called 'pre-Socratics' and so latched on, as precursors, to this Athenian tradition. It is easy to forget that Thales and Anaximander, the earliest of all, were from Miletus, in present day Turkey. Another important early figure was Heraclitus, from Ephesus, also in Turkey. After the flowering of Athenian philosophy and literature, Greek philosophy and literature became the high culture of the Roman Empire.

Western Europeans today like to see themselves as the heirs to that Empire. But, although its heartland was indeed Rome and the adjacent area of Italy, the Roman Empire was above all Mediterranean, flourishing on the European and the African side, and taking in much of the Middle East. Philosophy in later antiquity extended over the full range of the Mediterranean. The most influential of all its thinkers was Plotinus (203-270 AD), who established what became the dominant school of Neoplatonism. He worked at the centre of the Empire, in Rome, writing in Greek, the usual language for philosophy in the ancient world, but he had been born in Egypt. His pupil, editor and follower, Porphyry (233-305), was from Tyre in Lebanon. Augustine, the greatest of the



late ancient philosophers writing in Latin, grew up and spent most of his career as writer and bishop on the North African coast, in what is now Algeria.

The two outstanding later Neoplatonists, were Iamblichus of Tyre, in Syria (245-325), and Proclus, born in Constantinople. Proclus spent his career, in the fifth century, as master of the Platonic School at Athens. When, in the sixth century, Justinian closed the School of Athens, its philosophers migrated to the court of the philosophy-loving Khosrow I, King of Persia, finally settling at Harran, within the Byzantine Empire but close to the border with Persia (its ruins are in Southern Turkey). But there was another,

The Four Traditions

There were four main traditions that developed out of the philosophy of the ancient world: the Greek, the Latin, the Arabic and the Jewish. If ancient Greek and Roman philosophy is like the trunk of the Western tradition, then they are its four principal branches. Philosophy in the Greek tradition was conducted in Greek, in the Byzantine Empire, the continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire which, after the rise of Islam, consisted for the main part roughly of present-day Greece and Turkey.⁴²

Philosophy in the Latin tradition flourished in the lands now thought of as Western Europe: Italy and, by the ninth century, France were the greatest centres of activity, with England and Germany increasingly important and, eventually, centres of study from Sweden to Portugal and the South of Italy. Although the main language was Latin, philosophical work also took place in the vernaculars, both Germanic (Old English and Middle English, Old High German) and, from the twelfth-century onwards, Romance (Italian, Old French, Catalan).

Arabic philosophy took place in the vast area that rapidly, in the seventh century, became the lands of Islam – what scholars sometimes call the ‘Islamic world’, the 1970s neologism being used to indicate that the political and cultural sphere dominated by Islam included both the adherents of other religions (Christians and Jews) and activities not required by, or in some cases antipathetic to, the Muslim religion.

equally prestigious Platonic School at Alexandria, which continued until the town fell to the Muslims in 641.

The fall of Alexandria and the end of its Platonic School did not, however, spell the end of the Greek tradition of philosophy in Egypt, the Middle East and North Africa. Quite to the contrary, the Muslim conquest marks the beginning of a period in which Western Philosophy would expand far beyond the already wide bounds once marked by the Roman Empire, so that its domain would stretch from Ireland in the West to within a few hundred miles of the China in the East.

This area extended from Spain in the West (though almost all the peninsula was reconquered by early in the thirteenth century) to Uzbekistan in the East, including North Africa and Iran. It thus included a large part of what had been the Roman Empire, with most of the Western Empire excluded, and a great deal more, since the Romans had never conquered Iran or penetrated far into Central Asia. Although Arabic was the language of religion and learning and the principal tongue for philosophy, important philosophical work was also done in Persian.

Jewish philosophy could be considered simply as part of Arabic philosophy and, later, Latin philosophy: why it should, rather, be considered a separate branch of Western Philosophy will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

In addition to these four major branches of Western Philosophy, there are some minor traditions, each of which extends its geographical extent. The most important of these was the Syriac tradition. Syriac was the literary language used by many Christians in the East of the Byzantine Empire, a large number of whom migrated further eastwards to escape persecution by the Byzantine authorities, who held some of their denominations to be heretical. A tradition of writing philosophy in Syriac began in late antiquity and continued until the thirteenth century. The Syriac writers were especially important as intermediaries between Greek and Arabic culture,

since they often knew Greek and Syriac is a Semitic language, which can be translated into Arabic with relative ease.⁴³ There was an Armenian philosophical tradition too, that goes back to late antiquity.⁴⁴ Both

Religion and Philosophy

One of the four main traditions, the Jewish tradition, has been called by the name of a religion, and two of the others could be described, more fully, as the ‘Greek Christian’ and the ‘Latin Christian’ traditions. The Arabic tradition included Muslim, Christian (and Jewish, but they are considered here separately) writers, but from the thirteenth century onwards it could be described as ‘Islamic philosophy’.⁴⁵ Some readers today, educated to believe that there is a sharp division, or even an incompatibility, between philosophy and religion, may wonder whether these traditions are philosophical at all, since each is identified with a faith.

The truth, however, is that the subject-matter of philosophy and religion have always greatly overlapped, often to the point of near identity, and it is in terms of aims and methods that a distinction can be made, although even here it is neither easy nor neat. Again, the idea that ancient pagan philosophy was independent of religion, which then as it were invaded or took over in the Middle Ages until philosophy proper was rescued by the non-religious thinkers of the early modern period – a view that has often, implicitly or openly, justified jumping over the millennium 500 to 1500, as if they were merely marginal to the history of Western

The Traditions and the Platonic Schools

The main single source of continuity for the Greek tradition of philosophy were the two Platonic schools already mentioned, at Athens and Alexandria. The name ‘Platonic’ might sound rather restrictive, as if to imply that it was not ancient philosophy that survived, but just the version of it elaborated by one thinker,

of these traditions looked especially to Aristotle’s logical work. There was also a Georgian tradition, with a strong interest in Proclus and Neoplatonism, which flourished especially in the twelfth century.

Philosophy – is almost entirely unjustified. The so-called pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle were all deeply concerned with religious questions. Although the Stoics, like these earlier thinkers, had no personal God like that of the Jews, the divine shaped their conception of the universe, and even the Epicureans accepted the existence of Gods (who, they believed, were sublimely indifferent to the affairs of humans). The more openly and elaborately theological nature of late ancient Christian writings was paralleled among the pagan Neoplatonists of the time. As for the supposed secularism of early modern philosophy, few thinkers have ever been so obsessed by matters to do with God’s power and its relation to human freedom and the immortality of the soul as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. Think even of the nineteenth century: who could deny that God is central, though in quite different ways, to the thinking of Kierkegaard and to that of the noted atheist, Nietzsche?



42 See De Libera 1994; Marenbon 2007 and 2016a.

43 See Hugonnard-Roche 2004.

44 See Calzolari and Barnes 2009.

45 Ibn Kammuna, an important thirteenth-century Arabic philosopher, was very probably Jewish (although there are some reports that he converted to Islam late in life). But there is nothing in his main philosophical works that could not have been written by a Muslim.

albeit a very great one, and his followers. It is indeed true that Plotinus saw his work as a revival of Plato's thinking. But Porphyry was an enthusiastic student not just of Plato (and Plotinus), but of Aristotle, and especially Aristotelian logic. He ensured that the curriculum at Athens and Alexandria would include Aristotle's works. They were considered to harmonize with the writings of Plato because, although the two men apparently differed on many points, their divergences could be explained by a difference in their aims. Whereas Plato aimed to describe what is immaterial and perceptible only to the intellect, Aristotle wished to help us understand the world as it is revealed to us through the perceptions of our senses.

As a result of Porphyry's harmonizing framework, the schools adopted a curriculum that began with the study of Aristotelian logic, progressed to his physical writings, ethical and metaphysical writings before going on to the study of Plato. The range and extent of Aristotle's oeuvre had two effects. It meant that the course of studies at Athens and Alexandria, especially

if extended with specialists mathematical and astronomical texts, covered almost the whole span of scientific knowledge. It also made these Schools perhaps more Aristotelian in their overall interests than Platonic, with some famous thinkers, such as Ammonius in fifth to early sixth-century Alexandria, who were obviously devotees of Aristotle. Certainly, the other ancient philosophical sects – Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics and Cynics – were frowned on, but Plotinus and Porphyry had not themselves in fact been able to avoid the influence of Stoic thought, which had been dominant in the preceding centuries.

All four traditions of philosophy – Greek, Latin, Arabic and Jewish – looked back to the Platonic Schools, directly in the case of the Greek and Arabic traditions, indirectly for the Jewish. But there were also other channels by which each of the traditions was connected with its source in ancient philosophy. The next chapter will consider the two for which the connection with the Schools was closest and most important, the Greek and Arabic traditions; and the chapter following the other two traditions.

8

THE REAL HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

(2) GREEK AND ARABIC PHILOSOPHY TO 1450

Greek Philosophy and Arabic Philosophy were, as just explained, the closest of the four traditions to the thinking of the late ancient Schools. But the closeness was of two quite different sorts: a deep linguistic and cultural continuity for the Byzantines, a geographical and historical accident (the presence of one of the

Platonic Schools in the conquered city of Alexandria) for the Arabs. The results, however, were the opposite of what, from this description, might be expected. It was in Arabic, not Greek, that the philosophical energy of the late ancient Schools was recreated and developed.⁴⁶

Greek Philosophy

The Byzantines were the direct inheritors of the Eastern Roman Empire; they called themselves, indeed, not 'Byzantines', nor 'Greeks', but 'Romans'. Athens and Alexandria, until its conquest, were part of its empire. All the manuscripts of Greek philosophy – many more than have survived to this day were stored in their libraries and, most important of all, Greek, the main language of this philosophical inheritance, was theirs. This closeness turned out to be an obstacle, however, rather than an advantage to the flourishing of philosophy in Byzantium.⁴⁷

On the one hand, new work tended to follow the older models slavishly, so that it was hardly new after all. For example, the outstanding Byzantine intellectual of the ninth century, Photios, is most famous for his *Bibliotheca*, a record of his vast reading. Moreover, those who, in philosophy, went beyond a few of Aristotle's logical works were often the subject of ecclesiastical censure. On the other hand, the fact that the pagan culture of antiquity was so clearly the heritage of the Greeks, put the Church authorities into

an almost constant state of high alert. The greatest danger they feared, and the accusation that could lead to a scholar's dismissal and punishment, was what they tellingly called 'Hellenism' – being too Greek. For example, the commentator John Italos, a devoted Aristotelian, was condemned in 1076, accused of reviving ancient pagan doctrines; though also satirized for not having the courage to present the



⁴⁶ For a bibliography of philosophy in the four traditions in this period, see Marenbon 2016b. For introductory reading, de Libera 1994, Marenbon 2017 and (very brief) Marenbon 2016 are convenient. Pasnau 2014 is fuller, as is Marenbon 2012a: both need to be supplemented for Jewish philosophy by Nadler and Rudavsky 2008 and for the Arabic tradition by El-Rouyaheb and Schmidtke 2017.

⁴⁷ This point is made with learning and eloquence in Gutas 1998.

non-Christian teaching more directly. The authorities' fears were not entirely groundless. In the fifteenth century Gemistos Plethon's love of Neoplatonism really did lead him to try to revive what he took to be the ancient, pre-Christian way of thought.

The liveliest philosophical path in Byzantium was probably that which aimed to continue, not the thinking of Plato, Aristotle and their dedicated commentators, but rather the Greek Christian thinkers, such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and, especially,

Pseudo-Dionysius. The outstanding thinkers in this line were Maximus the Confessor in the seventh century, John of Damascus in the eighth and Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth. This path also drew inspiration, in part, from the ancient Greek tradition, including currents of Platonism that dated before the period of the Schools. It also introduced – as will be found in each of the other main branches of the Western tradition – its own peculiar elements, in its case closely related to Byzantine ecclesiastical ceremonial and its form of monasticism.

Arabic Philosophy

The greatest inheritors of the Greek tradition, as preserved and developed in the Platonic Schools, were – not the Greek-speaking Byzantines – but the philosophers, usually writing in Arabic, of the Islamic world. Nothing in the pre-Islamic background of the Arabs, nor in the early years of the Islamic conquests, would have led an observer to anticipate this development. It took place, partly because the School of Alexandria, with all its manuscripts, had survived intact until the Muslim conquest, and the Christian, Syriac-writing, Greek-speaking scholars had already begun to treat Greek philosophy in a Semitic language and were available as translators. It came about partly, too, as a result of Persian influence. The Greek tradition of philosophy began to flourish in Arabic dress only after the 'Abbasid Caliphs, strongly supported by the Persians, replaced the Umayyads in 750 and, in 762, moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad, near to Persia. Zoroastrianism, the state religion of the ancient Persians, had an open attitude to foreign sciences, which, it was held, all went back ultimately to Zoroaster, so that by studying Greek philosophy, Persians were merely reclaiming their own heritage. By adopting a similar attitude, the Caliph al-Mansur (754-775) could hope to appeal both to the Persians who had already converted to Islam and make conversion more appealing to those who remained Zoroastrians. His successor, al-Ma'mun, was concerned rather to give himself the image of a Persian absolute monarch, from whom all political, religious and cultural authority derived, and so it suited him to present Islam as the champion of ancient Greek wisdom, which was scorned by the Greeks' descendants, the Byzantines.⁴⁸

As a result, a large part of the Greek material used by the School of Alexandria – ranging over all of philosophy and the sciences – was put into Arabic in the eighth and ninth centuries. The earliest of the great Arabic thinkers, al-Kindi (c.806-866), and the first of those who can be considered as a *faylasuf* (a Greek-style philosopher), was probably important in setting up and organizing this translation movement. Al-Kindi was a polymath, with strong interests in mathematics, the sciences and metaphysics. He was particularly attracted by the ideas in the translations of material based on the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Proclus (Plato's own dialogues, however, were not translated into Arabic, although the arguments of some of them were known through translations of epitomes by Galen). By the next century, there was a group of philosophers in Baghdad – some of them Christians, although their outstanding member, al-Farabi (c.870 – 950/1), was a Muslim – who were devoted to studying the works of Aristotle, and developing their own thoughts on that basis, in much the same manner as the thinkers in the Schools of Athens and Alexandria, and using commentary material from these schools.

The most important figure without doubt in the Arabic tradition – arguably the central philosopher in the whole of (real) Western Philosophy – is Ibn Sina or, as he has come to be known, by his Latinized name, Avicenna (before 980 – 1037). Avicenna was born near Bukhara, in the East of the Islamic world (present-day Uzbekistan), and this geographical distance, along with his own great confidence in his genius, helped to embolden him to take an approach

to Aristotle and the ancient tradition sharply different from that of the Baghdad Aristotelians. He too took advantage of the rich resources of commentary material from the School of Alexandria, but, rather than following the structure of Aristotle's discussions and commenting on them, he rethought and refashioned the Aristotelian heritage, in a series of philosophical encyclopaedias. So successful was he that, with one exception, Avicennian Aristotelianism displaced the Aristotelianism of the Schools (from which, however, it derived). Later scholars read and commented on the works of Avicenna, not Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle's own texts ceased to be studied. The logical and philosophical tradition seemed like an autochthonous one, though in reality it remained a branch of a tree which had been rooted and grown up in Greek soil.

There had, even before the time of the earliest Greek-style Arabic philosophers, been a different tradition of philosophical and theological thinking, called *kalam*. This type of speculation originated from moral problems posed by Islamic doctrine and also from the challenges raised to the new religion by its Christian opponents, which were framed within a context of dispute among Christians over doctrinal questions. It quickly also covered questions about the physical and metaphysical constitution of things.⁴⁹ As well as drawing on the Greek heritage indirectly, through the Christian influence, it has been argued that some of the early *kalam* thinkers had access to currents of Greek thinking that went back to before the dominance of Platonism.⁵⁰ *Kalam* represented therefore both another way, besides the material from the School of Alexandria, in which philosophy in Arabic continued the ancient tradition, but also a special development within Islamic thinking, with its points of reference with the Quran and the hadith tradition, and some central doctrines, such as atomism, that had been decisively rejected by the Aristotelico-Platonic Schools, although they had been advocated by some earlier Greek philosophers.

Perhaps the most influential of all the *kalam* thinkers was Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). Al-Ghazali was far more than an exponent of *kalam*. He was an authority in

the central Islamic discipline, law; he also followed the path of *sufi* mysticism; and he was one of the best and deepest readers of Avicenna. He was also, apparently, Avicenna's strongest opponent, since he wrote a book called *On the Incoherence of the Philosophers*, criticizing Avicenna's doctrine, three tenets of which (the eternity of the world, God's lack of knowledge of particulars, denial of the bodily resurrection) he declared to be heretical. Yet, in fact, al-Ghazali was willing to take over into *kalam* almost all of Avicenna's Aristotelianism, providing these three heresies were eliminated and, as the first cause, for Aristotle's impersonal first cause there was substituted the personal, providential God of the Quran. In the following centuries, *falsafa*, as had been represented by al-Farabi and Avicenna, and *kalam*, tended to merge. Outside Islamic Spain, there were no more thinkers who represented themselves as *falsafa*, Greek-style philosophers, although philosophy in the Avicennian tradition flourished. Avicennian-type material became common in *kalam* discussions, and Avicennian commentaries and handbooks were influenced by *kalam*. Although this later Islamic philosophy-and-theology is only beginning to be studied by historians, there is good reason to think that the whole period from Avicenna until 1350 can be described, as one scholar polemically declared, as 'the Golden Age of Arabic philosophy'.⁵¹

Islamic Spain in the twelfth century was an exception to the pattern found in the rest of the Muslim world. Its leading thinker, Ibn Rushd or Averroes (1126-1198), although an important judge and courtier, made as a philosopher few concessions to any influences outside Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. Averroes looked back to al-Farabi and Baghdad Aristotelians and, like them, dedicated himself to providing commentaries on Aristotle's texts, although, in doing so, he ended by advancing some highly original doctrines. Not long after Averroes's death, Islamic Spain was reduced by the Christians to a small, subservient enclave, and Averroes's work had almost no influence on later writers in Arabic. By contrast, his writings, translated into Latin and Hebrew, were very important for both Jewish and Christian thinkers.

⁴⁹ See Treiger 2016 for a general introduction to the origins of *kalam*.

⁵⁰ See Crone 2016.

⁵¹ Gutas 2002.

⁴⁸ See Gutas 1998.

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THE REAL HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

(3) LATIN AND JEWISH PHILOSOPHY TO 1450

Unlike the Greek and Arabic traditions, the Latin and Jewish branches of Western Philosophy had no *direct* connection with the late ancient Schools. The Jewish philosophers had only indirect connections, whereas

for the Latins, indirect connections with the Schools were just one of the ways in which they were linked to the ancient tradition.

Latin Philosophy

The earliest way in which the Latin tradition was connected to antiquity was, in fact, less a matter of connection than continuity. Historians of philosophy are used to separating ancient from medieval philosophy – and they then wonder about when to place the starting date for the Middle Ages, around 500 or around 800. But an unprejudiced observer would see, rather, an unbroken tradition of Latin philosophy that lasted through from the ancient world. Although Greek was the main language for philosophy in the antiquity, Latin writers, from the time of Varro and Lucretius (first century BC) had written on philosophical subjects; Cicero was particularly keen to philosophize in the language of which he was so great a master, Seneca too; and later, both pagan writers, such as Macrobius and Martianus Capella, and Christian ones, outstandingly Augustine, continued the tradition. It runs through Cassiodorus, in the sixth century, Isidore of Seville in the seventh, writers in Ireland of that century and the next, the Englishman, Alcuin, who became Charlemagne's schoolmaster and other Carolingian authors. The tradition drew on a range of ancient material and schools, but Aristotelian logic, and Platonism, as presented by Plotinus and Porphyry, and as understood through the writings of Augustine, were especially important. In the work of John Scottus Eriugena, in the mid-ninth century, the tradition was powerfully influenced by Greek Christian thought.

The thinking of the Platonic Schools was transmitted to this tradition in the first place by Boethius (c.476 – c.525). Boethius was a Roman aristocrat, who lived in Rome and then Ravenna at the time when Italy was ruled by the Ostrogoths. A Christian, like almost all the educated classed in Italy by this time, trained in Greek as well as Latin, and with close ties to Constantinople,



Philo of Alexandria

Boethius had access to the writings of the Schools even if he did not, as was once thought, actually study at the School of Alexandria. His works, especially the commentaries on Aristotelian logic, were shaped by the thinking of the schools. Although they were well known to Cassiodorus, and partly known to Latin writers in the ninth and tenth centuries, it was only around the year 1000 that they began to shape philosophizing in the Latin tradition. What Latin writers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, such as Anselm, Abelard and Gilbert of Poitiers took from the ancient Schools, through their Christian intermediary Boethius, was distinguished by its emphasis on logic and precise logico-linguistic analysis – a habit of mind in some respects like that of analytical philosophers today.

The Latin tradition was again transformed by fresh contact with ancient material in the years around 1200. Most important were direct translations of almost the entire works of Aristotle (previously, they had known just some of his logic). Material from the Platonic Schools, beyond that transmitted by Boethius, could now be read both in direct translations from the Greek of some writings and as presented by Arabic commentators. The structure of the universities of Paris and Oxford, which were coming into existence at this time – and later of

universities throughout Europe – developed so as to teach this newly-available ancient material. Students would begin (and the great majority finish) in the Arts Faculty, which was, in effect, a Faculty for the study of the complete range of Aristotle's logic, natural science and metaphysics. A minority of students would then go on to the 'higher' faculties of medicine, law and theology. The theology faculties, peopled by students and teachers who had already spent years studying logic and Aristotle, were the setting for some of the most adventurous and sophisticated philosophical work in the period.

Some philosophical work had been done in the Germanic vernaculars as early as the ninth and tenth centuries. In the twelfth century, however, a stream of vernacular philosophizing grew up within the Latin tradition that complemented the Latin writings from the schools and universities, rather than merely diffusing their doctrines in a simpler form to a wider audience. It drew on a tradition of philosophical Latin prosimetra and poetry going back to Boethius and to twelfth-century authors such as Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille. Among its greatest exponents were Jean de Meun, writing in French in the thirteenth century, the Florentine Dante and Geoffrey Chaucer, writing poetry in Middle English in the late fourteenth century.⁵²

Jewish Philosophy

There were some Jews of antiquity who wrote philosophy, or philosophically, in Greek: the most famous was Philo of Alexandria, in the first century AD, whose writings, influenced by Stoicism and Platonism, were drawn on by Greek Christian thinkers, but not by later Jews. Rather, the Jewish philosophical tradition began again afresh within the Islamic world, where educated Jews shared in the Arabic language and culture that surrounded them, and so in that culture's connections with Greek philosophy. Many historians treat this first period of medieval Jewish philosophy as completely part of Arabic philosophy, but there are good reasons to recognize it as a separate branch of the Western Philosophical tradition, partly because the Jewish philosophers' interests were shaped by a number of specifically Jewish concerns (and even their Arabic was Judaeo-

Arabic – Arabic written in Hebrew characters); partly because Jewish philosophy in Arabic is closely linked to a second period of Jewish philosophy written in Hebrew in Christian Europe.

There were Jewish philosophers writing in Arabic who followed the *kalam* style of thought, and those who followed al-Kindi's brand of Platonism. The philosophical culture of Islamic Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was particularly conducive to the development of Jewish philosophy. The *Fountain of Life*, a metaphysical treatise from the first half of the eleventh century that creates its own system from Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements, survives only fully in its Latin translation, in which it is anonymous. The work contains nothing explicitly Jewish, and was not thought by its Latin readers to be the work of a

⁵² Medieval philosophy in the Western European vernaculars is a field that has been little studied by specialist historians of philosophy, and until recently only touched on shallowly by literary historians: two important pioneering studies are Imbach 1996 and Imbach and König-Pralong 2013.

Jewish author. Only in modern times was the author identified as the great Hebrew poet, Solomon ibn Gabirol. A century later, Maimonides (1135-1204) was born in Spain, though he was forced to flee, eventually to Egypt. Maimonides is by the far the most important of the Jewish thinkers from the first period. Like Averroes, whose cultural background he shared, Maimonides regarded Aristotelian science as the best possible understanding of the world achievable by reason. By contrast with Averroes, however, Maimonides was not concerned to study Aristotle's own texts in detail – indeed, he was usually content to use al-Farabi's paraphrases to access their content. Moreover, he was centrally concerned with the question of how, or if, the Aristotelian understanding of the world can be reconciled with the Jewish vision, of which he himself, in his *Mishneh Torah* ('Second Torah'), was the greatest of all codifiers. His central philosophical work is called *The Guide of the Perplexed*, addressed to a reader with both a Jewish and an Aristotelian, philosophical education faced by this problem of compatibility. Ever since it was written, interpreters have debated what answer is given in Maimonides's deliberately opaque discussion.

Indeed, this interpretative question about *The Guide* was a central issue in the second period of Jewish philosophy. The *Guide* was very quickly translated into Hebrew, and it was one of the two central points of reference for Jewish philosophers living in Provence,

Spain and Italy and writing in Hebrew. The other point of reference consisted in the writings of Averroes, many of which were translated into Hebrew. Some of the thirteenth and fourteenth-century Jewish thinkers combined the Aristotelianism they learned through Averroes with a radical interpretation of *The Guide* to adopt a position that placed the truth almost entirely in Aristotelian science at the expense of traditional Jewish beliefs, though they remained observant and loyal Jews. Others reacted against this attitude. One of them, Hasdai Crescas, who lived in the late fourteenth century, framed his main philosophical work explicitly in opposition to Maimonides and, in attacking the Aristotelian science his predecessor had, he thought, espoused, anticipated important modern scientific ideas.

In the Islamic world, there was little distinctively Jewish philosophy after the time of Maimonides – although one of the outstanding thirteenth-century philosophers, al-Baghdadi, was of Jewish origin. Given the central influence of Maimonides and Averroes, it is easy to think of Jewish philosophy in the second period as a simple continuation of the earlier tradition. But its geographical setting made a difference. Most Jewish thinkers did not know Latin, but they could converse with Christians in the vernacular, and many of them, such as Gersonides, the outstanding Jewish philosopher of the earlier fourteenth century, seem to have been influenced by the methods and concerns of Christian philosophers and theologians.⁵³

53 For translations into Hebrew, see the next chapter.

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THE REAL HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

(4) INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION

Translation and the Integrity of the Western Tradition

So far, Western Philosophy from antiquity to 1450 has been described in terms of four separate main traditions or branches coming from the trunk of ancient thought. These traditions have, as has been shown, a common origin, but why should they not be regarded as essentially separate developments from it, rather than as the parts of a single overall tradition of Western Philosophy? The answer is that, as a few comments in the preceding chapters have already hinted, the four traditions were tied together as they developed by a complex series of translation movements.

The earliest of these movements is between Greek and Latin. In later antiquity, a number of Greek Christian writings of philosophical importance, such as the commentaries on Genesis by Basil and Origen had already been translated into Latin. In the ninth century, John Scottus Eriugena, put works by the outstanding early Greek Christian philosophers pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor into Latin; Nemesius of Emesa's work on the nature of man was translated in the eleventh century and Damascene's *On the Orthodox Faith* in the twelfth.⁵⁴ Direct translation from the Greek in the twelfth and



Spain's Christian and Muslim heritage - Toledo

54 See the list (which also includes works from the ancient, pagan tradition) by Michele Trizio in Pasnau 2014, (Volume 2) 798-802.

thirteenth centuries was also the main way in which, as explained above, Latin writers from the thirteenth century onwards had access to a wide range of ancient material. Some of this material came, at least at first, by way of Arabic, however.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were also the time of a major translation movement putting central works of Arabic philosophy (and Jewish philosophy in Arabic) into Latin. In Toledo, on the border between Christian and Muslim Spain, translations were made of, among others, important parts of Avicenna's work, some texts by al-Kindi and al-Farabi and Solomon ibn Gabirol's *Fountain of Life*. In the early and mid-thirteenth century, in Sicily and elsewhere, a large range of Averroes's commentaries were put into Latin, and at the same time Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* was also translated (via one of the Hebrew versions).⁵⁵

In 1204, the Fourth Crusade diverted from its object, the reconquest of the Holy Land from the Muslims, to capture and subjugate Constantinople, the capital of Eastern Christendom. The Crusaders founded the Latin Empire of Constantinople. Although the Byzantines managed to take back control in 1261, the incursion left an intellectual curiosity among some Greeks – strongly resisted by others – to know about philosophy written in Latin. As a result, over the next two centuries a selection of Latin material was put into Greek, ranging from Boethius and Anselm to Aquinas, Peter of Spain's very popular logical textbook and logical commentaries by Radulphus Brito, a leading Paris arts master at the turn of the fourteenth century.

The translations from Arabic into Hebrew, from the early thirteenth century onwards, the necessary condition for the second period of Jewish philosophy, have already been mentioned. Central to this whole



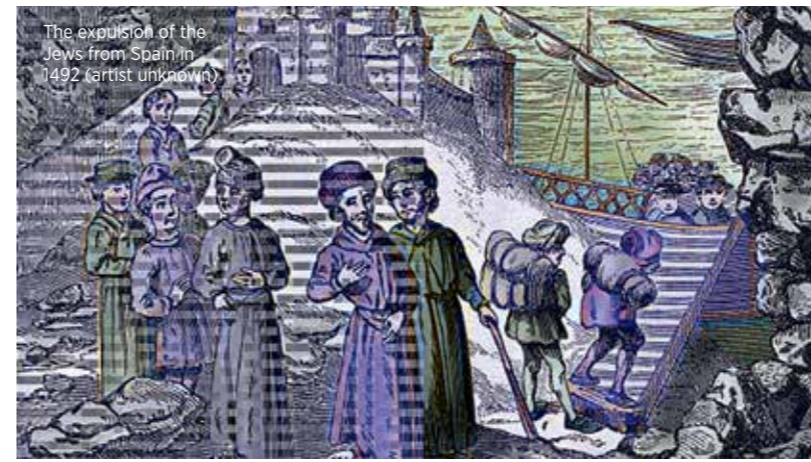
Maximus the Confessor

effort was Maimonides's *Guide* and the works of Averroes, but there were also Hebrew translations of Arabic writings by Jewish authors, works by al-Farabi, Avicenna, al-Ghazali and the philosophical novel by Ibn Tufayl, an older contemporary of Averroes's; along with a very large quantity of medical and astronomical literature.⁵⁶ There was also, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a movement to translate Latin philosophical works into Hebrew, including logical texts (such as Peter of Spain's textbook), writings by Aquinas, by Antonius Andreas, the fourteenth-century Scotist and Johannes Versor, the fifteenth-century Thomist.⁵⁷ There were also translations in the reverse direction, from Hebrew to Latin, mostly of works by Averroes not previously available in Latin.

Disintegration: from four branches of the tradition to two

1450 was given as an end-point for the two previous chapters, in which each of the four main branches of the Western tradition was discussed separately. The

reader could be forgiven for thinking that this date is supposed to indicate the end of the Middle Ages in philosophy, and the beginning of modernity or, if not



The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 (artist unknown)

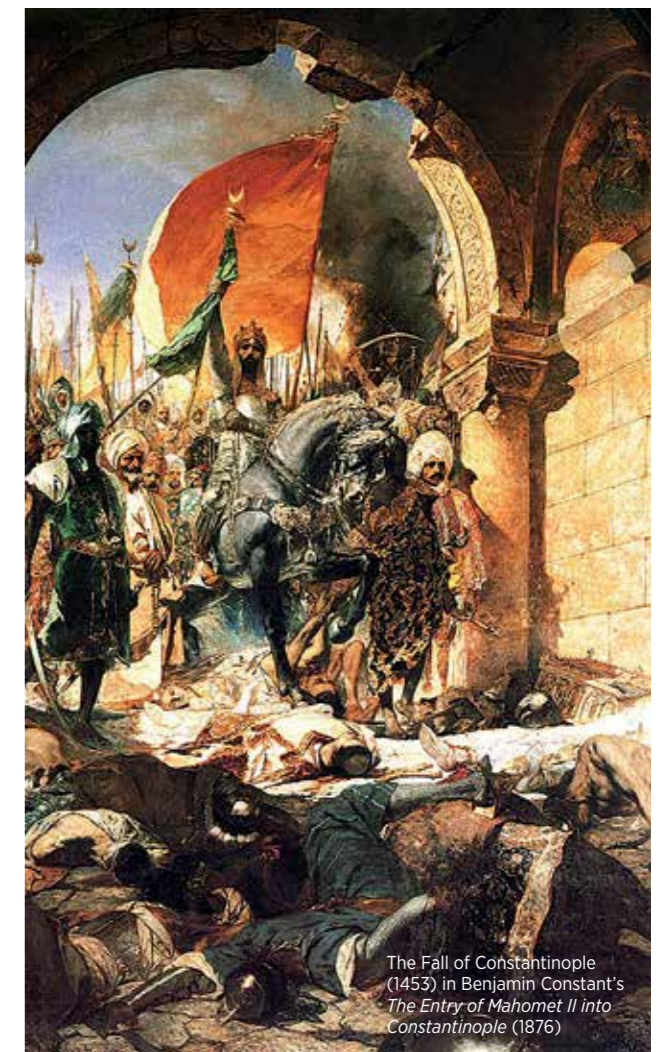
that, then the Renaissance. A date around this time is often used for such a purpose. But, for the history of philosophy, such a division would be misleading. 'Renaissance philosophy' does not designate a time-span but is an inept label usually used for philosophy done in Latin but out of the universities, or in Italy (or both), in the period from c.1400 – 1600, during all of which time 'medieval philosophy' was still being done in the University of Paris and elsewhere.⁵⁸ And the big change in the Latin tradition comes, as will be explained, only later, in the years around 1700.

1450 is, however, a good approximate date for the beginning of the disintegration of the parallels and links between the four branches. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Turks. The tradition of philosophizing in Greek survived in the area only for a few decades longer. The later fifteenth century was a hard time also for the Jews in Latin Europe, with a wave of expulsions, culminating in their having to leave Spain and Portugal, where Jewish philosophy had been particularly flourishing. Some of them found a new home in Salonika, now part of the Muslim Ottoman Empire and continued to write philosophy in Hebrew there in the sixteenth century.

A worse threat, however, to the separate existence of a Jewish tradition of philosophy would come, not from persecution, but integration. Elijah del Medigo (1458-1493) was probably the first Jewish philosopher, not merely to translate from the Latin tradition, but to be at home in it, translating some of his own work into Latin and enjoying a connection with the University of Padua. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Judah Abrabanel (Leone Ebreo) published (and most probably wrote) his *Dialoghi d'amore* in Italian. Spinoza,

the great Jewish philosopher of the seventeenth century, a heretic in the view of his correligionists, but steeped in the tradition of Jewish philosophy, was also a convinced follower of Cartesianism, the latest trend in the Latin tradition. In the succeeding centuries, there were some philosophers who happened also to be Jews (or partly Jewish), such as Wittgenstein and Husserl; and some, such as Moses Mendelsohn, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas and many recent and contemporary thinkers who are clearly Jewish thinkers. But those in both categories have worked within the framework set by Western European or Anglophone philosophy, so that Jewish philosophy, though it has survived as a branch of the Western tradition, was no longer, after about 1600, an independent branch.

By contrast, the traditions of Latin philosophy and Arabic philosophy maintained their independence. And each went their very different ways.



The Fall of Constantinople (1453) in Benjamin Constant's *The Entry of Mahomet II into Constantinople* (1876)

⁵⁵ See the list by Charles Burnett in Pasnau 2014, 814-822.

⁵⁶ See Harvey 2003 and Zonta 2012.

⁵⁷ See Zonta 2006, 2012.

⁵⁸ See Marenbon 2012b.

The Parting of the Ways: the Latin Tradition

The Latin tradition, as indicated above, continued without striking changes to its general character through until the second half of the seventeenth century – through the time, therefore, where many historians like to place the beginning of modernity.⁵⁹ In the second half of the seventeenth-century, however, the old curriculum, based on Aristotle, began to vanish from the universities in most European countries, in favour of teaching of the new science, and in many places strongly influenced by Descartes. In place of this unified study of logic, philosophy and natural science, the different modern sciences, along with mathematics and astronomy, began to develop separately from logic, epistemology, ethics and metaphysics. The study of the natural world and the universe came increasingly to absorb the energies of intellectuals. There had in preceding centuries been some thinkers with a strong interest in these areas, and they were often also leading exponents of philosophy in the narrower sense – take, for instance Albert the Great. The new science, usually based on mechanical principles and on heliocentrism, reliant on experiment and observation rather than ancient authority, increasingly had its specialists, who could be distinguished as, in today's language, scientists rather than philosophers.⁶⁰

At the same time, the level of technical sophistication with which some of the traditional philosophical disciplines were conducted declined sharply, especially logic, and ethics was mostly detached from the two frameworks, that of human nature and its excellences and that of divine command, that gave it sense. The Greek philosophers were largely forgotten, although those ancient thinkers, such as Cicero, who wrote in eloquent Latin, continued to be valued. Whereas the seventeenth-century writers, such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, who are usually considered, along with Locke, as the founders of modern philosophy, were deeply familiar with some (or in the case of Leibniz a great deal of) medieval thinking, even if they rejected important aspects of it,

their eighteenth-century successors were usually scornful and ignorant of what they described as a long period of barbarity and superstition.⁶¹ In the nineteenth century, there was an attempt, driven forward by the Papal Bull *Aeterni patris* (1879), to revive a distorted version of the philosophy of one medieval thinker, Thomas Aquinas, in order for the Church to counter, on philosophical terms, what it saw as the anti-religious tendency of the thought of the time. This neo-scholasticism proved a valuable impetus to medieval scholarship, but had little impact on mainstream philosophy.

While, in the eighteenth century, philosophers resolutely turned their backs on much of their past, specialists in the languages, culture and writing of the ancient world were making available a far more comprehensive textual basis for Greek philosophy than had existed since antiquity. Some more historically-minded nineteenth and twentieth-century philosophers, especially in German-speaking countries – Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger – took advantage of this scholarship and forged connections between their own thinking and their own particular understanding of ancient Greek philosophy. The same is true of some recent Anglophone philosophers, such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams. For the main part, however, the analytical movement, which has dominated Anglophone philosophy since the work of Wittgenstein, Russell and Moore, early in the twentieth century, and is increasingly influential on philosophy departments in continental Europe, looks back, if at all, only to the Descartes and his followers in the seventeenth century and since.



René Descartes

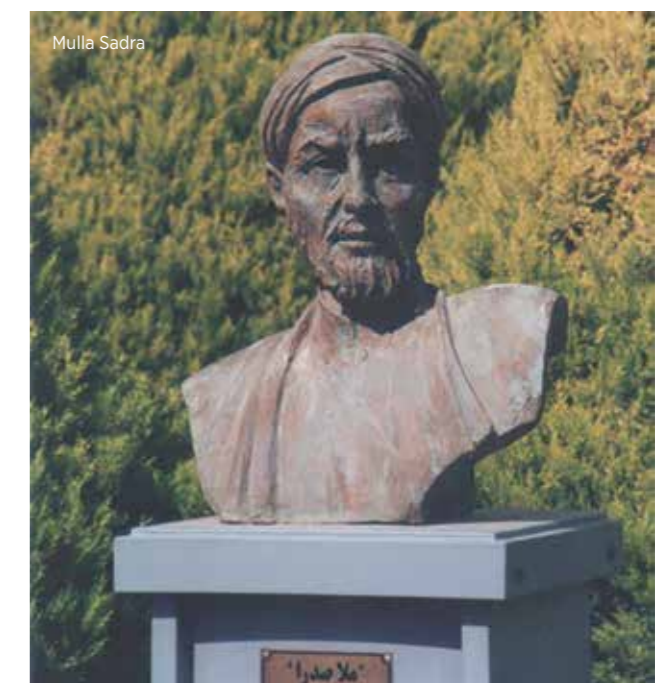
As European powers acquired overseas empires, the geographical boundaries of the Latin tradition were stretched. Philosophical work in the Latin tradition – in Latin and Spanish – began in South America in the sixteenth century, the beginning of a sub-tradition that continues to this day, though some scholars would argue that South American Philosophy should be considered as a separate tradition, which began before the Spanish conquests in the indigenous civilizations.⁶² In North America, Australia and New Zealand, universities on European lines grew up,

The Parting of the Ways: the Arabic Tradition

As explained above, recent historians have recognized that, so far from going into decline after the eleventh century (except in Muslim Spain), Arabic philosophy continued a Golden Age until 1350. But the tradition did not cease then and, indeed, it continued without the radical change that had overtaken the Latin tradition by about 1700, up until the nineteenth century, and in some places to the present day. Its geographical extension became even larger (as happened too for the Latin tradition), with three main settings: the Ottoman Empire, Iran and the Indian sub-continent. Arabic, the language of prayer, remained its principle vehicle, but philosophical works were written also in Persian (as had happened since the time of Avicenna), Urdu and Ottoman Turkish. Perhaps, in this long period and over such vast territories, there were other Golden Ages: arguably, that of Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Mulla Sadra) (1572-1640) and the School of Isfahan was one. For Mulla Sadra and his contemporaries, the central philosophical authority (as it had been, and would continue to be) was Avicenna; very important too were the mystic Ibn al 'Arabi (1165-1240) and the twelfth-century philosopher Suhrawardi, who had made a thorough critique of Avicenna's Aristotelianism. Mulla Sadra and his contemporaries also turned back to the earlier translations of Greek texts into Arabic, especially Neoplatonic ones.

Philosophy in the Arabic tradition after 1700 still remains almost entirely hidden, at least in Histories written in English and other European languages.

beginning with Harvard University in the seventeenth century. They proved to be important centres for the Anglophone version of philosophy in the Latin tradition and, today, most of the leading centres for work in this field are in the United States. German, French and English philosophy also began to be studied in the nineteenth or early twentieth century in parts of the world, such as China, Japan and India, which had and retain their own, independent philosophical traditions.



Mulla Sadra

An important exception is the *Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, which deals even-handedly with every period of the long tradition, picking exemplary writings from each. For a glimpse of how the tradition continued after the time of Mulla Sadra (and much influenced by him), readers can look at the final 200 pages of the book, and see how, for instance, logic in the Avicennian-Aristotelian tradition was being done at a high level in eighteenth-century Egypt, and Aristotelian physics (complete with arguments to show the impossibility of the heliocentric hypothesis) in nineteenth-century India.⁶³

⁵⁹ For a critical discussion of modernity and when (or if) it begins, see the papers at <https://www.medievalstudies.group.cam.ac.uk/resources>

⁶⁰ There is a vast amount of secondary literature on seventeenth-century philosophy, but most of it concentrates on a narrow range of authors whose works would become canonical in the following centuries and so gives a very distorted picture of the whole. Garber and Ayers 2000 give a more balanced picture than most. For a wide coverage, see the 8-volume history: Schobinger Holzhey and Schmidt-Biggemann 2011, although even it gives undue prominence to the retrospectively canonical authors.

⁶¹ To some extent, however, Aristotelian and scholastic ideas survived in central Europe: see the important chapter by Jacob Schmutz, 'Medieval Philosophy after the Middle Ages' in Marenbon 2012a.

⁶² For an overview, see Gracia and Vargas 2018; for metaphysical issues, see Nuccetelli 2017.

⁶³ El-Rouayheb and Schmidtke 2017; for a brief overview that extends into the post 1700-period, see also Adamson 2015, esp. 25-29.

WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: REAL HISTORY OR VICTORS' HISTORY?

The four preceding chapters do not, of course, offer, as they literally claim, a 'real' history of philosophy, because they are a set of headings and a list of names and not, as any history of philosophy must be, in considerable part, a discussion of theories and arguments. But the claim is true in the sense that they sketch out the lines of a real history and give some idea of its table of contents. By doing so, they indicate the shape of the Tradition of western philosophy – the tradition that originated with the Greeks – if it is investigated according to the method set out in Chapter 5 – a method designed to replace the totalizing history that, under the guise of writing about Culture or Civilization, writes about everything, and, rather, examine each of the strands of culture in the narrow sense separately, carefully establishing what in each case is the maximal geographical Tradition.

One thing is immediately apparent. The historical and geographical shape of this real history is utterly different from that of the History of Western Philosophy as commonly told, which was set out in Chapter 6. That History of Western Philosophy, it will be recalled, began in Athens but quickly migrated to Western Europe, to become concentrated, in the only period after the fifth-century BC to which much attention is given, in a few countries of Northern Europe – Germany, Britain, France, the Netherlands – and, more recently, America. The real history of philosophy sees the western Tradition quickly spreading over the whole Mediterranean area and then, with the Islamic conquest, over Central Asia as well, to the very borders of China. The real history sees the four branches of the western Tradition each flourishing through the centuries from 800 to about 1450, and

the Arabic and Latin branches (to which Jewish philosophy becomes attached) continuing until the present day (or, in many parts of the Islamic world, at least until about a century ago). Some may be tempted to doubt whether the Arabic branch in these last centuries is western. But they have no reason to do so. Not only does it derive as closely from the Greek tradition as philosophy in modern Europe, but it has adhered far *more* closely to the Greek heritage, even though that heritage has been so fully assimilated that it is not seen as foreign.

From the shape of this real history, an important conclusion emerges very clearly – it has already been adumbrated – about the relationship of totalizing histories of Western Culture or Civilization to the Traditions that make up culture in the narrow sense. It turns out, that in the case of philosophy, a Tradition that is part of western culture in the narrow sense is far *wider* geographically than Western Culture in the broad sense. Moreover, those who write about the rise of Western Culture usually dwell on the contrasts between the Civilization of the West and that of Islam, pondering their nature and causes, without realizing that, at least for philosophy, these are two areas within the same Tradition. There are, indeed, other areas (such as literature) where the Islamic world has a distinct Tradition from Europe. But, since philosophy also embraced all of science until the seventeenth century, it is, as has been emphasized, a central strand among those that make up culture in the narrow sense. And the very heterogeneity in geography and history of the different Traditions shows, as has already been argued, that they must be considered completely separately from the totalizing history of Culture or Civilization, if we consider that sort of history at all.

Why does the standard story of Western Philosophy diverge so sharply from a real history? Although part of the answer may be simple ignorance, the main reason is that, like general accounts of the rise of the West, the history of western philosophy has been written from the perspective of the victors. In this case, two victories are in questions. There is the victory over scholasticism in the seventeenth century, and, for the Anglophone tradition, the victory over Hegel and Idealism at the beginning of the twentieth.⁶⁴ The inheritors of these victories are those who are considered preeminent in philosophy within their tradition (and usually consider themselves pre-eminent in philosophy full stop). The history of philosophy has been moulded by them and for them. It is the history of works and ideas important to them and which speak directly to their projects and ideals. Just as American educators in the mid-twentieth

century looked back contentedly at the whole history of what they conceived to be Western Civilization from the vantage point of their values of freedom, reason and democracy and moulded a story to show how humans had reached such enlightenment as theirs, so philosophers at the same time looked back at the whole history of what they conceived to be Western Philosophy and saw it as a story of the achievement of untrammelled reason, leading finally to their own theories. Where American educators have now rejected this optimistic interpretation of the rise of the West, many philosophers and historians of philosophy continue unchallenged to present Western Philosophy as a story about the triumph of Enlightenment values. Before long – the signs are already there – these values will be turned against them, and 'Western Philosophy' will become as toxic a phrase as 'Western Culture'.

⁶⁴ It is true that, in some respects, these two victories cancelled themselves out, since many of the concerns and methods of the analytic tradition, which won the second victory, are closer to those of the scholastics than those of the seventeenth-century innovators who defeated them. Although this change has passed by many of the popularizing writers of general Histories of philosophy, it had had some effect, as in Anthony Kenny's very full coverage of medieval philosophy (though mostly limited to the Latin tradition).

CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have shown that the eulogizers and the, today more common, demonizers of Western Culture have a good deal in common. Both accept a totalizing approach to history that encourages them to make sweeping generalizations in their views about and attitudes towards Western Culture understood in a broad sense. This situation may seem just to be a matter of intellectual fashion, but it has wider repercussions. Scorn for Western Culture, capital 'C', cannot but pass over to the products of western culture with a small 'c' – the works of art and of thought that belong to its individual Traditions. This essay began with the Homer and Beethoven-loving intellectuals of today, who feel they must disparage western culture and marginalize it. The effect of their disparaging and marginalizing will be that the next generation is less likely to share their deep love for these and other classics of western civilization.

But is this such a bad thing? The great literary and artistic works of western culture now have to share with – or are side-lined in favour of – the products of other cultures (though this move has yet to take place in philosophy). What is the harm, though, it might be asked, if today's student readers are enjoying Li Bai instead of Virgil and Milton, or even in place of them? Until recently, we have been, arguably, very uninquisitive about distant cultures; if now we go too far in the other direction, to the extent of rather neglecting our own, is that not a reasonable corrective?

Such equanimity is misplaced. Although it is admirable to be open-minded and inquisitive about other cultures, people should in general give preference to the products of the traditions to which they belong. High culture is, indeed, more portable than many other sorts of tradition. A European in

London or Paris can become as fine a connoisseur of Sung porcelain as someone born, bred and living in Beijing. Chinese pianists, trained in Western music from an early age, show as much understanding of Beethoven and his idiom as their contemporaries in Bonn or Vienna. Still, portability works well only when it is the exception rather than the rule. If people's cultural diet consists of material that, because it originates in very different traditions, is hard to assimilate, they are likely to go through life with a wholly superficial culture, mostly ignorant (to take up the example) of Virgil and Milton, because they have never been given the time or occasion to study their work, and mostly ignorant of Li Bai, because they have read his poetry only in translation and without the background knowledge to make it fully intelligible.

It is, in any case, very unlikely that those growing up today are being offered a diet of Li Bai and his equivalents in the other areas of non-western culture. The great classics of other traditions, it will be contended (often rightly) are rarely immediately attractive to outsiders. Moreover, those who object to Eurocentrism, usually also object to what they perceive as longstanding prejudices against other marginalized groups – women, the working classes, those once classed as sexually deviant. Accordingly, the culture they promote in place of the western tradition is often contemporary, and is frequently chosen because it is considered relevant to today's concerns or because of the marginal identity of its producers, rather than because of its profundity of thought, its spiritual and aesthetic value. Those who wish us to scorn the outstanding products of the different Traditions of western culture are not offering us an exotic but equal alternative, nor even an inferior one: they are enemies of culture altogether.

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