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December 6, 2009

What Is 'Non-Western' Philosophy?

Part One

Justin E. H. Smith

I.

I used to get very upset at the suggestion that there might be such a thing as 'non-Western philosophy'. Some years ago a German anthropologist friend told me she had heard, out on Broughton Island in Arctic Canada, Inuit elders using their free time, in the dim light of slowly burning seal blubber, to engage in leisurely dialogue about the nature of space and time. That's different, I insisted, because they were only addressing the issue (I supposed) within the comfortable mythological confines of their culture, rather than asking what space and time look like when you strip away your culture's contingent myths, which are, as Spinoza would say, satisfying only to the imagination, and then see what is left over. I had an even stronger complaint about what had come to be called 'African philosophy', 'Native American philosophy', and so on. These, I thought, were more the product of an unfortunate misunderstanding brought about by the politics of identity, which supposed that every identity group --and often what counts as an identity group, I noted, is only slapped together in hasty response to the classificatory schemes of the West: as if there could have been anything like a unified tradition across the African or North American continent prior to the period of colonial expansion-- must come up with its own version of whatever it is that the West is thought to do well. I felt horribly discouraged when, on more than one occasion, while working the 'philosophy table' at my university's open house, I would meet adult Cree and Mohawks thinking of returning to school who, as they explained, might want to study 'your' (i.e., my) philosophy someday, but didn't feel any particular urgency to do so, since "we've got philosophers of our own."



Are there in fact Cree philosophers, not as in academically trained philosophers who are ethnically Cree, but as in full members of Cree communities who, without 'the West' so much as hearing of it, fulfill a role in their communities that could justly be called the role of a philosopher? I now think this is a very important question, and not to be dismissed. John Dewey thought so as well, it seems, and in the foreword to a curious 1927 work by Paul Radin, entitled *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, the great pragmatist endorses Radin's view that "philosophic origins are not to be sought for in the cruder and conventionalized forms which religious beliefs assumed among the populace at large, but rather in the interpretations of the small intellectual class, whose ideas may have been crude because of limitations of subject matter at their command, but which at least were bold, independent, and free within these limitations." Radin goes on to describe a debate he heard among some Dakota elders over the question whether "the rock and the earth are married or not." Radin says that to us this question may appear 'trivial' (an odd choice of words; I think Radin should have said 'nonsensical'), but nonetheless it is a question "of an entirely speculative nature," and most importantly for Radin, it is a question that will not be of interest to the ordinary lot of men, who "will simply regard it as a fact." It is the speculativeness of the question, together with the exclusivity of the group asking it, that qualifies this domain of Dakota discourse as 'primitive philosophy'.

Naturally, the Cree I speak with at the open houses do not want to be credited with their own primitive or proto-philosophy; they mean to say rather that their tradition does something that is entirely equal to, and entirely separate from, what the tradition that supposedly began with Thales does. Whether this is the case or not is to me the interesting question, rather than whether, as Dewey and Radin both seem to suppose, Native Americans in the pre-contact state did something that bore the same relationship to real philosophy as the one we generally suppose branches of ethnohistory like medicine or astronomy bear to modern science.

The possible reasons to think they did not and could not have had a separate-but-equal philosophy are, I think, four. First, the tradition was entirely oral, so that there could be no body of texts on which to build from generation to generation. Second, as Dewey notes, they were limited in the range of subject matter at their command. Third, as I've already mentioned, and as Radin's chosen example shows, the sort of philosophical questioning that motivated the discussions seems to have been devoted to the fine-tuning, rather than to the clearing away, of myths: there was no radical pursuit of the reality masked by conventions, as there clearly was among the Greeks. Finally, there does not seem to have been the sort of sociocultural complexity to give rise to multiple ways of being within the same community (classes, specialized labor, and so on), and as Aristotle himself noted, it is this sort of social complexity that makes possible a niche for philosophers, who in turn reflect back upon the diversity of their society and take an interest in discovering the unity behind it.

My sense is that none of these reasons is alone sufficient for judging a tradition of reflection to be non-philosophy, and moreover that there probably never has been a society characterized by these four features. Only the first and the fourth can now be studied by philological and archaeological means; as for the second and third, it's too late to measure them now, as there really are no pre-contact traditions remaining, but only, so to speak, mirror traditions, which, for example, turn the reflections of scattered Dakota and Cree into 'Native American philosophy', and turn the sundry world-views and practices rooted in the Vedas into 'Hinduism'.

II.

Speaking of the Vedas: many who are not willing to concede that there could be such a thing as Native American philosophy are nonetheless very comfortable calling certain tendencies within the Indian --that is the subcontinental Indian-- tradition by that name. At the same time, they see it as a

distinct species of philosophy, 'non-Western philosophy', and suppose that any contact it might have with the Western kind can only be of the compare-and-contrast variety. (Many continue to approach Arabic philosophy in the same way, in spite of the seamless continuity between the Greek, Arabic, and Latin phases of the Aristotelian tradition.)

What, now, is really going on in the bracketing of Indian philosophy in this way? It seems to me that 'non-Western' as applied to any tradition of philosophy in fact functions as a sort of euphemism for 'not really philosophy'. And it seems to me that there are two reasons why this euphemism persists. First of all, there is the straightforward chauvinism of European civilization, which takes philosophy as a one-time affair, and as a sort of proper noun, Philosophy, designating an individual thing born in Greece and Greece only. Second, there is the unfortunate, and much more recent, insistence upon the absolute and inviolable otherness of once-colonized subjects, and the corollary denunciation of any interest a European might take in the tradition of those subjects as 'Orientalism'. Thus, unwittingly, the chauvinists and the postcolonialists have a common cause: to prevent us from realizing that Indian and European philosophy have the same ancestry, had significant, direct overlap in antiquity, have consistently remained focused on many of the same problems, which they address with much the same conceptual apparatus and many of the same theoretical presuppositions.

This is a realization, by the way, that was very vividly had at least once in European history-- by the Germans. To this day, in Germany Indo-European linguistics goes by the name 'Indogermanische Sprachwissenschaft': a vestigial sign of the widespread view in the 19th century that Northern Europeans and Indians --or at least the elite Aryan class of Indians that flooded in from the North in distant antiquity and subjugated the darker Dravidians-- are two branches of the same family. This perception had its grim conclusion in the Indophilia of certain Nazis, and in their attempt to restore the unity and purity of the Aryan family in part by exterminating the Semitic element among them. After the end of World War II, we no longer see much allusion to the historical unity of European and Indian civilizations, other than in the technical work of linguists who are not so concerned about civilizational questions. One might regret, however, the fact that the Nazis so thoroughly tainted a discovery that, in its 19th century incarnation in the groundbreaking Indological work of August Wilhelm Schlegel, Otto von Böhtlingk and others, was perfectly benign, and indeed revealed something remarkable about Europe: that it is in fact just a small peninsula of Asia.

Now this is not my area of expertise, but from what I can see the English tradition of Indology has been very different, and this is the tradition that decisively triumphed in the post-war period (there are of course some exceptions, including the work of Georges Dumézil, and even more so the work of Russian Indologists such as Tatyana Elizarenkova, who, perhaps because of their own relatively Eastern situation, do not seem to have stopped thinking of Indo-Aryan civilization as something all that other in relation to their own Slavic world). This tradition is grounded in an intensely chauvinistic sense of English particularity, and in a parallel sense of the utter difference of England's colonial subjects. This colonial attitude is reflected --again, unwittingly-- in the work of an Orientalist such as Edwin Arnold, whose 1879 book *The Light of Asia* is certainly Indophile in character, but seems incapable of saying anything at all about India except by way of contrast. I believe it is this Victorian approach, rather than the scholarly approach of 19th-century Germany, that has won out, and that ironically carries on under the banner of anti-Orientalist 'respect'.

III.

We know with certainty that following upon the Eastern campaigns of Alexander the Great there was significant cultural hybridity between the Hellenic and Indic worlds. The third-century Buddhist emperor of India, Aśokaḥ the Great, sent missionaries to convert Greeks to his own religion (he also sent missionaries in the other direction as far as Sri Lanka and Burma). A generation or so earlier the Greek geographer Megasthenes had written a work called the *Indica*, which has unfortunately been lost, but which we know from extensive citations in other works identified many points in common between Greek and Indian philosophy. Thus Strabo reports that "concerning generation, and the nature of the soul, and many other subjects, they express views like those maintained by the Greeks. They wrap up their doctrines about immortality and future judgment, and kindred topics, in allegories, after the manner of Plato." By the early centuries of this era, Alexandrian Platonist philosophers such as Philo and Clement (representing Judaism and Christianity, respectively) would show a casual familiarity with the ways of the 'gymnosophists', i.e., naked world-renouncers from India who were, most likely, representatives of the Jain sect.

But what was perfectly familiar in antiquity would fall entirely off of the radar by the early modern period. An early modern Sinophile such as Leibniz had no interest at all in the traditional cultural forms of the Indian subcontinent. This probably had something to do with the fact that in the 17th century India was dominated by the Moghul Empire, and thus could easily have been presumed to be simply a Muslim land by European outsiders, whatever traditional 'barbarian' practices the villagers may have preserved (until just a century earlier than that, the Baltic lands were known to have preserved a vital pagan tradition as well, but no one thought to study it). The differing perceptions of India in Greek antiquity on the one hand, and early modern Europe, on the other, provides a vivid reminder, I think, that although Europe has always oriented itself towards Greece, Greece did not orient itself towards Europe. Ancient Greece was retroactively incorporated into Europe, but from its own point of view belonged to a world that included India at least as much as it included the regions that would later form the European Union, whose members would in turn insist on fast-tracking Greece into the Union in view of its symbolic importance. Strabo, for his part, was more interested in writing the geography of Libya than of Europa.

IV.

So we have the historical fact that, whatever later developments occurred, ancient Greece is no more Western than ancient India, except in the bare geographical sense. Both have reincarnation, humoral medicine, polytheism, ritual animal sacrifice, phallic cults, and so on. Both represent different branches of an original group, probably originating somewhere on the Pontic Steppe, that split apart roughly a millennium before either side started recording its tradition in writing. Between the split and the earliest records we have, they both drifted very far, and mingled with the local traditions of the places they settled, but for all that remained cousins.

But cousins can be very unlike one another, and beyond this historical fact of shared ancestry, we may still ask: did the Greeks begin doing something peculiar at some point, something that other civilizations did not think to do, that would then be communicated to the Romans, and from there to Christianized Europe?

One curious feature of the Indian tradition, which might be invoked to buttress the claim to Greek uniqueness, relates to the first objection earlier on to the claim that the Dakota have their own 'philosophy': although there is a long textual tradition in Sanskrit, writing seems to have been perceived as a sort of crutch rather than as an object of learning in itself. The tradition is in its essence oral, but relies on writing, when necessary, to record what cannot be preserved in individual human brains. The great 5th-century BC grammarian Pāṇini composed his masterpiece, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, by having his students memorize different parts of it. In this respect, then, one can really not say of the Indian tradition that *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, whereas many have supposed that the Western tradition is fundamentally textual. Vedic commentators in contrast seem to have thought: what good is learning if it's outside

of the head? The goal is to know, not to potentially-know through the proximity of a knowledge-containing book. Now whether this really marks out a difference or not is far too large a topic to engage here, as it seems to me to require a thorough interrogation of the nature of writing. I'll just say here that I am persuaded by archaeologists such as Bruce Trigger, and anthropologists such as Frank Salomon, that writing begins as tallying (not so different, then, from early mathematics), and is understood more as an *aide-memoire* than as an end in itself. From this point of view, the Indian preference for orality and memorization over textuality defies our usual value distinction between literacy and illiteracy, and suggests that an oral culture might actually be *more* learned than a culture that needs to record its ideas in writing, like so many beads in a bowl representing the number of sheep bought and sold in an ancient city-state.

Now another concern about Indian philosophy has often been that it, like the Dakota meditation upon the marriage of the earth and rocks, remains confined within a mythological tradition, to wit, the religious tradition that would later be dubbed 'Hinduism'. The only appropriate response to this concern is: well, then Thomas Aquinas isn't a philosopher either, since his reflections on the nature of substance, form, matter, and so on, also took place within a mythological framework, and there were plenty of unargued-for presuppositions that he could never even think to question. There is also a perfectly reasonable concern that this is true of any community trying to think its way out of its own contingent situation. Add to these considerations the fact that materialism, atheism, skepticism, and so on have probably been more widespread on the Indian subcontinent than on the European subcontinent over, say, the past 3,500 years, and you'll agree it's very hard to maintain the objection based on a distinction between the merely somewhat reflective but essentially religious tradition, on the one hand, and true philosophy on the other. It may of course be the case that a certain strain of Indian philosophical reflection is initially motivated by a question that could not have been asked outside of the Indian religious context, but that doesn't necessarily determine the direction in which this strain may subsequently move. Moreover --and this is a point that Jonardon Ganeri makes well, echoing Bertrand Russell, in his otherwise far too reconstructionist *Philosophy in Classical India*-- a person is rational when he or she uses rational methods to achieve certain aims, and the exercise of reason has nothing to do with the choice of ends. In this respect, there can perfectly well be rational arguments for the marriage of earth and rocks, or for the superiority of Vishnu to Indra.

Let us briefly consider in the Indian context, finally, the remaining two concerns that arise out of Dewey and Radin's characterization of Dakota reflections as mere 'proto-philosophy', namely, that there was limited subject matter to reflect upon, and that this limitation was a direct result of a relatively low degree of sociocultural complexity. I am myself strongly inclined to think that this sort of complexity is a real condition of the full exercise of what could look to us like philosophy, in the full sense, in another culture. This is of course not to say that the brains of hunter-gatherers are any less subtle or developed than those of city dwellers, but only that their subtlety is expressed in a different way, one that is more ecologically sensitive, and context-dependent. I am inclined to agree with Aristotle that it is social stratification, and the non-intellectual labor of the majority, that makes specialized intellectual labor possible. But if this is correct then *prima facie* there is all the more reason to expect to find a high level of philosophical activity in India, since it would be hard to conceive of a civilization that has historically been more stratified than the one that traces its tradition back to the *Rig Veda*.

And as for having what Dewey called "sufficient subject matter," there is no doubt that up until the early modern period Indian astronomy, medicine, and so on in no way lagged behind what was going on elsewhere in Eurasia. It seems reasonable to suppose that just as grain storage and its consequent social complexification facilitate the emergence of a specialized intellectual class, scientific inquiry carries with it reflection upon the methodology and ultimate aims of that inquiry, i.e., it carries with it what of late has come to be called 'philosophy of science'.

V.

I have barely touched upon any of the actual content of Indian philosophy, in a way that might provide a sense of what is distinctive about it, and so of whether it deserves to be cordoned off in the way that it has by self-appointed representatives of Western philosophy. In the sequel to this essay, I would like to focus on the centrality of grammar in the Indian tradition, and what this reveals about how we might to attempt to characterize the Indian philosophical tradition as a whole. Wendy Doniger has gone so far as to say that grammar is for Indian thought what theology has been for European thought, and indeed it often seems that in the Indian tradition reflection on the character of phonemes, for example, is at once a reflection on divinity. In this very early stage of my own Indian philosophical education, this seems to be the central point of difference between the two traditions, and is one that I would like to explore further. It is also a point of difference that gets no attention whatsoever in the usual dichotomous positioning of India as a place that specializes in 'Eastern thought', in contrast with Europe's 'philosophy'.

*

Works consulted for this essay:

Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, London, 1879.

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Comments



Wonderful essay, as usual. I was wondering if you had considered the importance of Buddhist thought in your discussion of "Indian" philosophy. If not, this book might be helpful:

<http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/Philosophy/Eastern/~~/dmlldz11c2EmY2k9OTc4MDE5NTMyODE3Mg==>

Posted by: Mike M | [December 7, 2009 at 06:19 AM](#)



I always read your essays with delight, and come away with feelings of admiration. Both particularly strong for this essay, which addresses a topic of particular interest to me.

Coincidentally, something you'd written in an earlier essay had me wanting to commend Wendy Doniger's *Hindus* book to your attention, so I was pleased to learn from this essay that no recommendation was needed. I'm eager to follow your future exploration of her analogy between the role of grammar in Indian philosophy and the role of theology in European. Like you, I found it intriguing.

One matter... 'quibble' is probably the word. I note the following in your essay:

"...there are of course some exceptions, including the work of Georges Dumézil, and even more so the work of Russian Indologists such as Tatyana Elizarenkova, who, perhaps because of their own relatively Eastern situation, do not seem to have stopped thinking of Indo-Aryan civilization as something all that other in relation to their own Slavic world)."

I'm wondering if you didn't accidentally let one extra negation slip in.... maybe a word-processing oversight? My understanding of your point is that the Russian Indologists you cite DO seem to have stopped (thinking of Indo-Aryan civilization as all that other... etc.).

As I read your blog, I find myself envying your students. Thanks for your generosity in sharing with a wider audience.

Posted by: David Kosofsky | [December 8, 2009 at 05:24 PM](#)



I wrote the following in an email, and Mr. Smith asked that I post it here for him to reply to.

I have made one minor correction (I wrote Eurasia originally, intending to write Europe) and have slightly changed a few of the sentences in construction but not in meaning.

*

Dear Mr. Smith,

I read with some dismay your essay "What is Non-Western-Philosophy (Part One)" and felt compelled to write you.

For the sake of your time, I will limit myself to two general complaints, and even then briefly as I can. The first concerns your paragraph on Cree philosophy, where I believe three of the four points in the essay are either not pertinent to the argument made or are mistaken. I believe the second complaint is more substantial, so you may wish to skim until there.

Your essay states:

"The possible reasons to think they did not and could not have had a separate-but-equal philosophy are, I think, four. First, the tradition was entirely oral, so that there could be no body of texts on which to build from generation to generation. Second, as Dewey notes, they were limited in the range of subject matter at their command. Third, as I've already mentioned, and as Radin's chosen example shows, the sort of philosophical questioning that motivated the discussions seems to have been devoted to the fine-tuning, rather than to the clearing away, of myths: there was no radical pursuit of the reality masked by conventions, as there clearly was among the Greeks. Finally, there does not seem to have been the sort of sociocultural complexity to give rise to multiple ways of being within the same community (classes, specialized labor, and so on), and as Aristotle himself noted, it is this sort of social complexity that makes possible a niche for philosophers, who in turn reflect back upon the diversity of their society and take an interest in discovering the unity behind it."

On the essay's first point--that an oral tradition could not constitute a body of texts on which to build from generation to generation, I believe that this is both incorrect and misconceived. (I will deal with misconceived further on.) As a blanket statement, I can think of three extant examples of a body of texts which built through generations and yet were transmitted solely orally: the Hebrew Torah, the Iliad, and the Odyssey. (It is likely true of the lost Telemachiad/Telemachia as well--and the generally supposed synthesis of the Iliad and the Telemachiad to make the current Odyssey--serves only to strengthen this argument.) The Torah alone seems to me to disprove this first contention as a general rule.

On the second point, I have no particular contention. (I have no specialization in pre-contact Cree one way or another.)

On the third point, a lack of written history does not indicate that radical changes of thought did not take place. Indeed, I believe it is deeply misguided to assert that the ontologies of thought were static over (say) a thousand years simply because there are no recorded changes. However, if we are to approach the issue as whether there is a current, extant Cree philosophy, the third point should better read: "Current Cree 'philosophy' does not do what I believe philosophy does, namely clear away myths a la a tradition which follows from classical Greece." This is a much different point from the stated one, and I will address it below.

Fourth, the social complexity argument is, to me, deeply flawed in ways that implicate points one and three. First, it is a presumption that one cannot be a philosopher without being a professional philosopher--a position which seems to strike out Boethius and Marcus Aurelius from the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, among many others. In strong form it would also strike out Wittgenstein's Tractatus itself, written when Wittgenstein was simply living off his father's fortune, before he came to Cambridge and threatened Popper with a hot poker. But say we are willing to rewrite our knowledge of what philosophy is to fit this: are we willing to say that the only people capable of philosophy are academics? What if an academic takes a job outside of academia, as a farmer--does she immediately stop being capable of philosophy? It strikes me most of all that to tie philosophy to a profession is nonsensical, and elitist.

Unfair! you say. The essay talks about social complexity, and moving from academic to farmer shows social complexity. Indeed. The Cree would have had numerous contacts with other tribes, which would each have had a different ethos and world view. They would not have had a unified world made solely of their myths (in the Barthesian sense), but would certainly have had contact with many others, all with their own myths. Likewise, I believe it is mistaken to believe that there would have been unity of discourse solely because the Cree lived in small tribes--that is not a view that can simply be asserted because Aristotle said so, but must be argued from actual synthesis or analysis. I believe that current anthropology will not support the Aristotelian conclusion.

(As a general statement about the Americas and Native American philosophy, I will here note Mann's 1491 and point out that for most of recorded history the Americas were more populous, not less, than Europe. Even to follow Aristotle about social complexity seems not to apply to the Americas, then.)

In sum, the generalizing to the particular does not appear to follow these points in the argument as written.

*

My second major point is, in fact, the tenor of the essay.

I will start by noting that the number of professional, academic linguists who are prescriptivists is so small as to be essentially nil. (Languagehat, whom you link to, is one such example.) I say this not as an appeal to authority as much as something worth contemplating. I bring up prescriptivism because in those four points you suggest, in essence, a platonic form of philosophy. This is a poor way to conceive of things, and I hope to explain why both in (small-p) pragmatic and in normative terms.

Language is dialogic, as are words. That is, language depends on shared meanings between two speakers. More precisely, however, it depends on shared meaning constraint.

Let me give an example of meaning constraint: I have a cup in my hand. What does this mean?

When I write the word cup, for instance, it doesn't tell you definitely what it is (this ceramic mug from the coffee chain Second Cup that's in my hand, made cheaply in China; an ochre plastic sippy-cup with a protruding spout; etc.) but what it is not: cup isn't something that you push open to go into a room or a building (that's a door), not a thing you put on to protect your hands (a glove), and so on. Is a mug a cup? Does the set of mugs fall into the set of cups, like squares into rectangles? Are mugs and cups two completely separate things with meanings that do not overlap? The point is not that there is or isn't a correct answer, but that you know when I say cup I have not necessarily constrained mug, even while constraining door.

So. The essay written is concerned with constraining a meaning of philosophy, by arguing that it does not mean what everyone thinks it means, but that it means what a very small group of privileged people have decided that it means. When your acquaintance tells you that he studies Cree philosophy, you do in fact know what he means--something regarding speculation into the metaphysical, epistemological, and/or ethical aspects of human existence.

This is, in fact, a common understanding of philosophy, which as a native-level speaker you share with the hundreds of millions of other native speakers out there. What we are talking about, then, is not a coherency of discourse--you and your acquaintance have created dialogic understanding together--but a legitimacy of discourse. You, as a philosopher, as an expert, as a professor and so forth, are in the position of imparting or denying legitimacy to what he is saying. In fact, the entire essay is about legitimizing or denying legitimacy to a cultural discourse of non-western philosophy. In contrast, you share a role as legitimizer with a low-thousands number of other professors and scholars.

I find it a difficult argument that even though the term philosophy is widely used, its "correct" meaning is held by a group of people, to whom one might gain access necessarily by subscribing to their view of the meaning. This obviously points to issues of privilege and democracy, especially when constructed along strongly socially mediated lines, as in point one above. (Again, there is no platonic form of philosophy, which should be obvious alone from what constituted "philosophy" to Aristotle, Descartes, and Wittgenstein.) Further, the idea of special-philosophy creates a special status for "philosophers" that simply does not apply to everyone else. Poetry doesn't seem to be constrained by written texts, nor music, nor religion, nor history, and it is unclear why philosophy should be when those are not.

To subscribe to correct meanings in general, I contend, is to have a platonic form of what each and every word means, a position I think is not defensible historically nor cross-culturally. But more than that, this essay presumes to tell a native speaker that he is speaking his native language wrong. Think about this. And it is doing so in discourses that are specific to race and ethnicity, geography, privilege and status. It is to tell someone--a Cree, over whom you and I have enormous amounts of privilege--that his way of viewing the world must be subsumed into ours, or at the very least delegitimized.

Posted by: Mario | [December 15, 2009 at 07:38 PM](#)



Mario,

You seem to be a very intelligent and well-read person. Unfortunately, your comment hasn't put that erudition to good use, mostly because it says next to nothing.

At the end of the day, is Sarah Palin just as much a "philosopher" as was Wittgenstein? I should hope not, but I know many people, perhaps a healthy majority of US Americans who would affirm that sentiment.

Or, take George W. Bush's declaration that "Jesus Christ" was his favorite political philosopher. Again, millions of English-speaking people agreed that he had correctly (or at least not incorrectly) used the term 'philosopher' in making that statement. Of course, the results of that folly have been horrendous and are visible for all the world to see.

Instead of setting up a straw man to attack the argument in this essay ("there is no platonic form of philosophy"), perhaps we should step back and ask whether there's a middle ground between the typically-deconstructivist approach that you seem to be arguing for and the cartoon Platonism of which you accuse the above essay.

Would a family resemblance notion of 'philosophy' not hold enough water to satisfy a measured consideration of the linguistic information that you cite? And, given this notion of 'philosophy', should we not begin with what is (presumably) best known to the writer and audience of the essay ('Western philosophy', 'footnotes to Plato', etc.).

As for your remarks extolling democratization of language usage, surely you are not then claiming the legacy of Socrates while making such statements? In 'Western philosophy', at least, the primary aim has been to point out that the crowd has gone wrong, that it is perpetually walking off a cliff, especially when it is most convinced of its rightness.

While one might quibble about the relative virtues and vices of democracy, surely we would agree that the professionalization of brain surgery has been, on the whole, a positive development. And isn't the development of the mind by philosophy (not to make a statement about what a 'mind' is) at least as important such that it should not be fully handed over to "the masses?"

Finally, I would submit that we should always privilege discourses inasmuch as they have a better grasp of truth than do others.

Posted by: [Alyoshakaramazov.wordpress.com](#) | [December 17, 2009 at 10:15 PM](#)



alyoshakaramazov:

I am sorry that you find my points meaningless (that "it says next to nothing"). I meant to point out a normative aspect of Mr. Smith's essay that I find problematic--for it is not an essay on "How are Western and Non-Western Philosophy different?" or even "In what ways are we talking about the same thing and different things when we talk about Western and Non-Western Philosophy?" but on whether there is such a thing as Non-Western philosophy. You are free not to think it is problematic.

I find it interesting that you place your thesis at the end of your comment ("we should always privilege discourses inasmuch as they have a better grasp of truth than do others"). This is easily defensible for the sciences, but less so for social ontologies like the meanings of words. I currently think very similarly to John Searle in this regard, and if you are more interested you can read his paper "Social Ontology: Some Basic Principles" here:

<http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~jsearle/AnthropologicalTheoryFNlversion.doc>. In short, something like the idea of philosophy only exists because we all think it does; there is a social ontology that gives those phonemes meaning, something that in fact cannot be measured scientifically, and so "truth" is more slippery than it seems.

(I am fudging here important differences between Searle's conception of social ontologies, Kuhn's paradigms, and Foucault's epistemes; in this particular case the subtleties do not strike me as important.)

The "platonic form" line is an expression of my belief that there is little difference if any between asserting a single legitimate definition of something and the notion of platonic forms as a concept. I believe that Mr. Smith's essay is taking something in the world and holding up to an idealized conception of what that thing ought to be. (He may well defend himself on this.) The first part of my letter points out what I see as problems in his definition, but that could always be reconfigured; the second (the part you object to most) I intended to have point out a specific power relation that so doing calls up.

I have a problem with that power relation, and you do not, from your thesis. We differ, and that is okay. My most crucial point is that the essay tells a lot of native-English speakers that they are speaking their native language wrong--the vast majority, in fact. One can get to that point without the circuitous foray into language prescriptivism that I took.

I believe it is important to admit to this perpetuation of certain power relations, because it implicates a host of issues related to privilege: class, race, national origin, geography, sexuality, gender, colonial status, and so forth. For example, by the same type of argument one could likewise have told a group of men in the 50s that "gay" only means cheerful and that there was no such stable class as "gay men," only "homosexuals." "Gay men" and "homosexuals" are not terms of synonymy, even outside of gender specificity; "homosexuality" was not completely removed entirely from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders--far and away the most widely used text--until DSM-IV in 1994.

In general, I find it valuable and necessary to look at the results of our arguments and hold them up to our intuitions; and when they do not align question equally whether this is because of a poor argument or a poor belief. Here, I believe the argument falters.

Posted by: Mario | [December 19, 2009 at 01:25 PM](#)



Mario,

Thank you for your response. I didn't mean for that opening to sound so harsh, and I do apologize if you took it as such. You definitely did say something, but I'm enough of a platonist that anything less (i.e., nominalism of any sort) strikes me as a bit weak.

I definitely agree that we should be attentive to power relations and to the ways that normative discourses are used as tools for the colonization of spaces, bodies, and minds. Still, like I mentioned, I'm a enough of a platonist that I do think there is at least some sort of necessary correspondence between given words and ideas even in the midst of their obvious contingency. And I believe that there are, as I alluded to before, potential negative political consequences to your stance as well. Normativity is a two-edged sword.

Thank you as well for the Searle link; I will be sure to check that out.

(I'm sorry to post using my wordpress account, but I wasn't able to do so otherwise when I tried for some reason.)

Posted by: [Alyoshakaramazov.wordpress.com](#) | [December 21, 2009 at 01:12 AM](#)



Ouch!

It's painful reading about how you've twisted yourself into a pretzel rationalizing these "non-Western philosophies". There is a simpler way. Define "philosophy" narrowly enough, and avoid having to confront ingrained cultural prejudices.

Ahhh! Much better! And yes, you're welcome!

Posted by: ram | [March 9, 2010 at 02:53 AM](#)



"At the end of the day, is Sarah Palin just as much a "philosopher" as was Wittgenstein? I should hope not, but I know many people, perhaps a healthy majority of US Americans who would affirm that sentiment."

I'd like to hear your explanation of the nature and purpose of the Sarah Palin comment before I declare it just a cheap shot.

Posted by: Bert McCall | [December 7, 2010 at 12:42 AM](#)



Some good points touched on - but feel these could have been elaborated. Just wondered whether you had read any of Sri Aurobindo's writing on Eastern/Western philosophical approaches?

Posted by: Kalpana | [November 11, 2011 at 08:09 AM](#)



"In strong form it would also strike out Wittgenstein's Tractatus itself, written when Wittgenstein was simply living off his father's fortune, before he came to Cambridge and threatened Popper with a hot poker." - Mario

I just wanted to point out that the Tractatus was written after Wittgenstein's first venture to Cambridge, after meeting Russel and Moore. Indeed, it was written before he joined the faculty there, and before he got his degree there (With the Tractatus as his dissertation!), but it came after his true personal exposure to Russel! And to talk about his fortune in that way, at least in that tone, is quite unfair; he didn't want it at all, and lived a very, very modest lifestyle in spite of it.

Not that it's important to the discussion at hand. It was just something I wanted to mention.

Posted by: Chris L. | [November 26, 2011 at 12:13 AM](#)

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