

The great circle of philosophy

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In a book that is learned and ambitious as well as accessible, Vincent Citot compares the philosophies of eight different civilizations to understand their cyclical evolution from a religious to a scientific stage.

À propos de : Vincent Citot, *Histoire mondiale de la philosophie, Une histoire comparée des cycles de la vie intellectuelle dans huit civilisations* (A World History of Philosophy: A Comparative History of the Cycles of Intellectual Life in Eight Civilizations) Presses universitaires de France, 2022. 516 p., 29€.

The question of the origins of philosophical thought is a problem that has marked the history of philosophy. The best known and most common answer is also the root of one of the most difficult prejudices to eradicate: that philosophy was born in ancient Greece and is of purely Hellenic origin. From Hegel to Husserl, there is no shortage of illustrious philosophers who have embraced this framework. Since the second half of the twentieth century, the debate has recentered itself on a less Eurocentric basis, which often adopts the contrary position, searching for far-fetched convergences and similarities between philosophies belonging to very different periods and settings.

One reason for the persistence of the Hellenocentric paradigm is its criteria for defining thought as philosophical. These are the criteria we inherited long ago from the ancient Greeks: from the beginning, the Greeks are said to have been interested in the real world and to have aspired to understand and explain it through the tools of

reason. Hence philosophical thought has always been considered as conceptual thought, based on reason and logic. Texts and literature are viewed in similar terms. Yet other forms of thought and writing exist that make it necessary to redefine how philosophical thought is to be understood.

If one adopts a broader perspective--of the kind Vincent Citot's book provides--a redefinition of this nature becomes possible. While his book's title suggests a more or less extensive chronology of philosophy's history on a global scale, its subtitle makes the author's goal even clearer: the history of philosophy is presented as a *comparative history of the cycles of intellectual life in eight civilizations*. The book is the fruit of an ambitious research project in which Citot applies a method that he had theorized in earlier articles (see the list of these publications on the site of the *Philosophoire*), which seeks to grasp the universal character of philosophy's history by showing the distinct contributions of each civilization. The result is a narrative that is at once civilizational, intellectual, cyclical, and comparative.

From Greece to Japan, by way of China

In selecting the eight civilizations presented in the book, Citot's criteria are continuity and quantity. "Many cultures have produced philosophy, but few did so in a massive way, over a long period, and in writing, making it possible to recount their history" (p. 15). It is also a necessary historical requirement that their writings have survived, which considerably reduces the number of civilizations for which the evolution of philosophical thought can be documented. All the remains are eight cultural regions: Greece, Rome, Islam, Russia, India, China, and Japan, which Citot presents in this (non-chronological) order (Chinese and Indian civilization being older than Greek civilization and philosophy¹).

These criteria seem quite restrictive, as they exclude civilizations from the southern hemisphere, notably Africa and South America. This is not necessarily a shortcoming, particularly since Citot justifies these choices in the introduction. But these issues remain a matter of debate, for at least two reasons. First, one finds in these

¹ In relation to the problem raised at the outset of this review, this comment about Chinese philosophy should leave no doubt as to philosophy's origins: "Everywhere, philosophy is born from a cultural reorganization and the importation of foreign ideas. Except in China No matter how far back into antiquity one goes, only Chinese origins can be found for Chinese philosophy" (p. 349).

parts of the world philosophical traditions engaged with historical, social, and geo-territorial problems so significant that even UNESCO has examined the southern hemisphere's intellectual heritage. Second, books already exist on the history of regional philosophy in Latin America and Africa. While these criteria justify Citot's choices from an historiographical standpoint, the absence of some civilizations from this history of philosophy remains a debatable choice.

The history of civilization and philosophical thought

To get beyond the model of logical-rational thought that originated in Greece, Citot proposes the following definition: philosophy is "thought that seeks to justify itself by various means that are persistently pursued" (p. 14). Since the work of philosophers belongs to a culture's broader trends and intellectual expression, philosophy does not exist in isolation from a civilization's culture and intellectual life. Philosophizing, after all, is not the only way that humans think. Religion and science are, in addition to philosophy, two other ways of thinking that are inherently human. The universal character of human thought manifests itself through three ways of exploring the question of truth: religion seeks truth through authority-based discourses that are socially legitimized; philosophy accesses truth through reasoning and criticism; and science formalizes experience and reasoning, turning them into models. Each of these ways of thinking corresponds to an attempt to *decenter* existence: religion, philosophy, and science all grasp reality by transcending individual standpoints (p. 17).

Each civilization goes through these three approaches, which correspond to three successive moments in the history of thought: a *preclassical period*, characterized by religious thought; a *classical period*, in which philosophy emancipates itself from religion; and a *postclassical period*, in which science marginalizes other forms of thought. The advantage of grouping together the different expressions of human thought into three categories is that it allows for a better understanding of thought's evolution. This approach justifies the historiographical decision to examine eight civilizations in terms of their intellectual cycles. Like Vico in the *Scienza nuova* (as well as Ibn Khaldun, who came up with the idea of historical cycles even earlier), Citot constructs a cyclical narrative of the intellectual history of different civilizations, showing the evolving relationship between religion, philosophy, and science.

A Return to Comte's Three Stages

The cyclical model of three stages is a nod to Auguste Comte's law of three stages. In Citot's narrative, "the history of philosophy follows a preclassical-classical-postclassical cycle, which consists in successive reorganization of three major ways of accessing truth" (p. 21). As with the law of three stages, the succession of these three phases is characterized, in this comparative history of philosophy, by religious, philosophical, and scientific forms of thought. While the substance of these frameworks is similar, particularly in relation to the social and cultural dimension of the evolution of human thought, there is, however, a fundamental difference between Comtian positivism and Citot's paradigm.

In Comte's law of three stages, the metaphysical stage, which corresponds to a civilization's or an individual's philosophical age, is a transitional stage between the fictions of the theological stage and the certainty of the scientific stage. Only this final stage produces certainty, whereas the first two are unproductive, as their role is confined to paving the way for later stages. Comte's positivist vision is the basis for a conception of progress, ultimately assigning a regressive character to religion and philosophy vis-à-vis science.

Citot's model, by contrast, shows that philosophy has never ceased to exist, though not always as the quest for truth's sovereign form. This is obvious, as "philosophizing varies depending on whether intellectual life is dominated by religious figures, philosophers, or scientists" (p. 21). Science, for its part, does not constitute civilization's final stage. To the contrary, it can succumb to the same fate as religion and philosophy, find itself confined to secondary status. In this respect, the examples of China and Greece show that thought evolves in fits and starts rather than in a linear fashion. Chinese thought has a multi-millennial history during which it never disappears, consisting of a sequence of three, thousand-year cycles (p. 350). Greek thought, by contrast, disappears and engenders first Roman, then European thought.

Finally, if Citot, like Comte, yields to the temptation to organize his thinking around a Hegelian-like triad, he deserves credit for dignifying this form of thought without locking himself into a positivist framework that views religion and philosophy through the distorting lens of "progress."

A scholarly yet popular history

Citot's book is aimed at all readers, from specialists who can place its learning and research in broader contexts to amateurs who will benefit from the bibliographies found at the end of each chapter to enrich their knowledge. It is also a book that contributes to the question of philosophy's origins, even though its narrative is not chronological and Eurocentric residues persist. These are notably evident in the order in which it presents its material, starting with Greece and ending with Japan, by way of Rome, the Islamic world, Russia, Europe, India, and China. In this sequence, Chinese civilization appears after western civilizations, perhaps because Citot decided to begin his history with a society that is familiar to French and European readers.

In conclusion, this is a sincerely written and presented book, whose author is conscious of the limits of such projects in terms of exhaustivity and depth. The result is a comparative history that aspires to be informative and educational and, in so doing, accepts the risk of being ethnocentric, particularly when comparing eastern and western philosophy--despite the fact that the latter was born later. Consider these examples: the Indian philosopher Kautilya (c. 260-275) "wrote *Arthashastra*, which, due to its objective spirit and a political realism shorn of moral considerations, has been compared to Machiavelli's *The Prince*" (p. 311); the Chinese thinker Wang Chong (27-c.100) is presented as a free and skeptical spirit who "abhorred the orthodoxy, traditionalism, and superstitions of his age, due to which he was compared to the Greek Lucian of Samosata" (p. 372). One should concede this decision to Citot, as it is justified by his desire to make understandable thinkers who belonged to very different mental frameworks. Yet readers should be encouraged not to prioritize the similarities and symmetries between forms of thought that are so distant from one another in time and space.

Further Reading

UNESCO publications:

- *Existe-t-il une philosophie latino-américaine?*, publication of the proceedings of UNESCO's Third World Philosophy Day [2004], Paris, 2006.
- *Manuel de philosophie: une perspective Sud-Sud*, ed. P. Chanthalangsy and J. Crowley, UNESCO, 2014,
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000228412>.

African Philosophy

- Sévérine Kodjo-Grandvaux, *Philosophies africaines*, Éditions Présence Africaine, Paris, 2013.
- Hubert Mono-Ndjana, *Histoire de la philosophie africaine*, Éditions L'Harmattan, Paris, 2009.

Latin American Philosophy

- André Vidicaire, "La philosophie latino-américaine : un procès territorial," *Horizons philosophiques*, 2(1), p. 77-90, <https://doi.org/10.7202/800886ar>.

Other

- Marietta Stepanyants, "Repenser l'histoire de la philosophie," *Diogène*, 223 (2008), p. 75-90. <https://doi.org/10.3917/dio.223.0075>.

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