

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

PHI2023-0319

Athens, 12 October 2023

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Athens, 12 October 2023

ISSN: 2529-167X

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On the Origin of Philosophy and its History

Inquiry about the origin and the history of philosophy may be pursued from multiple points of view. The inquiry that follows is undertaken from a philosophical point of view. Right at the outset, let it be borne in mind that the pursuit of such understanding is and must remain an issue for philosophy. Whatever is subject to a philosophical investigation is inescapably an issue if only because what philosophy is is a philosophical issue.

For centuries, in the minds of many people, philosophy has been associated with the search for truth and with the search for knowledge. Although this is not the only association philosophy has, it is the one I want to focus attention on now. It is the search for truth and for knowledge that initially drew me to the study of philosophy and that draws a sizable number of students to it. In the search for truth and for knowledge, I had uncritically heard and read about what was said about philosophy and its history. As a philosophy instructor, I had also uncritically taught what I had been taught, what I had heard, and what I had read about philosophy and its history. One day, it dawned on me that questioning of what I had heard, read, and taught was integral to philosophizing. Consequently, I set on a course of questioning the truthfulness what I had heard, what I had read, and what I was telling my students about philosophy. In part, what follows is a result of this questioning.

During my questioning, I came face to face with a centuries old belief deeply rooted and widely held in Euro-West that philosophy originated in Greece and that, in the history of humankind, the first or the original philosophers were Greeks. Indeed, this was once my belief, and it is what I taught my students. The impression that was instilled in me and that I instilled in my students was that this version of philosophy was the only version of philosophy. In other words, Euro-Western philosophy was the universal philosophy. Consequently, since there was no other philosophy, it was misleading to qualify philosophy as "Euro." But as it is or as it ought to be a philosophical imperative, I started asking myself whether this belief was true. Were Euro-Western philosophers and Euro-Western historiographers of philosophy speaking the truth about philosophy and its history? I wanted to assure myself that what was being claimed was true and that what I was saying to my students was likewise true. After a critical examination of this belief, I concluded that it was untrue.

In part, my conclusion was triggered by a reflection on an observation on philosophy made by Martin Heidegger, a prominent Twentieth century European philosopher. He says,

What is philosophy?" We have uttered the word "philosophy" often enough. If, however, we use the word "philosophy" no longer like a worn-out title, if instead, we hear the word "philosophy" coming from its source, then it sounds thus: *philosophia*. Now, the word "philosophy" is speaking Greek....

The word *philosophia* tells us that philosophy is something which, first of all, determines the existence of the Greek world. Not only that *-philosophia* also determines the innermost basic feature of our Western European history.¹

What Heidegger says about philosophy was not a discovery by him or a personal revelation by a Supernatural being. It was not a message emanating from Apollo and conveyed to him via the voice of Apollo's priestesses. He was expressing a deeply entrenched and widely held belief in the European world. It is also a belief that Europeans have spread throughout the world. The questions that ought to be raised are: Is this belief indeed true? If it is, what is the philosophical evidence that it is indeed so? How do fellow Europeans who share this belief know that what they believe about the source of philosophy and about the history of philosophy is true? Is it true simply because it has been accepted as such for centuries? Does this longevity justify a philosophical criterion for the truthfulness of a belief?

The questions that are raised above deserve philosophical answers for they touch on the very nature of philosophy. Appropriate answers to philosophical questions are inescapably philosophical. Non-philosophical answers to philosophical questions are evidence that one is deaf to the questions that are asked or that one misunderstands them. Accordingly, philosophical questions and philosophical answers, for example, ought not to be mistaken for or confused with scientific questions or with scientific answers. Similarly, philosophical questions and philosophical answers to them should not be mistaken for or confused with theological or religious questions with theological or religious answers as was the case in Medieval or in early European thinking.

Assuming that Heidegger is a philosopher, the answers he gives about the nature of philosophy and the source of philosophy, the truthfulness of what he says depends on what philosophy says. What he says is not necessarily identical with what philosophy says. Philosophy has its own voice -a voice mediated by those who truly understand what it says. Regarding the question about the source of philosophy, one must look for a true philosophical source and not for any other source. Furthermore, one cannot recognize the source of a true philosophical voice without knowing what such a voice is. If what Heidegger and fellow Europeans say about philosophy is true, they must truly know what philosophy is. Do they have such knowledge? One cannot expect an answer from them unless one knows

¹Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy*, translated by Jean T. Wild and William Kluback, Albany, New York: New College and University Press, Inc., 1956, p. 29.

that they are philosophically truthful. If they have an untrue understanding of philosophy, accepting their answer would be accepting what is untrue. Moreover, he or she who is expecting a true philosophical answer from them must have a preunderstanding of the true nature of philosophy; otherwise, he or she runs the risk of accepting what is philosophically unacceptable. One must protect oneself from being lied to by others and from lying to oneself. Although one may not have a true understanding of philosophy, one must embrace the possibility of being lied to if one is to protect oneself from false belief regarding what is said about philosophy. We need to protect philosophy so that philosophy can protect us and help us protect it.

In the above quote, Heidegger says that when we hear the word “philosophy” from its source, it sounds “*philosophia*,” it is speaking Greek.” For him, Greece is philosophy’s source and, originally, philosophy spoke and speaks Greek. Heraclitus, one of Heidegger’s favorite Greek philosophers, allegedly, claims that “Eyes and ears are bad witness to men who have barbarian souls.” Does Heidegger have a barbarian or a non-barbarian soul? If he has a barbarian soul, he cannot be a good witness to what he hears when philosophy speaks. If philosophy speaks Greek, as a barbarian, he is deaf to what Greek conveys in its speech on philosophy. How is it to be determined whether Heidegger is or is not a barbarian? We cannot ask him, for he may lie to us. He may be a barbarian, in which case, he is a bad witness to what he hears or is deaf to what is being said. Neither can we turn to fellow Europeans for an answer for they too may lie to us or maybe barbarians and, hence, deaf to what philosophy says.

Barbarians are not country-specific or society-specific. They could be in, or they could be from any country or from any society. They could be in or from Global North or in or from the Global South. They are not race, gender, sex, religion, society, or culture specific. They have a planetary residence. Moreover, like all human beings, barbarians have eyes and ears too. They hear and speak too. But what they hear and say is barbaric. How can one distinguish who or who is not barbaric? One may readily dismiss others as barbaric, but the dismissal could be an expression of barbarism. How is one to protect oneself from the barbarism of others and from one’s barbarism?

It is worth pointing out that these are philosophical questions and deserve philosophical answers. What Heraclitus says is not dispositive, for there remains a philosophical question regarding what barbarism is. The fragment attributed to him could have been initially uttered by a barbarian. It may not have originated with him and, and even if it did, and regardless of its origin, it is not evident that it is a philosophical fragment, or that it has exclusively a Greek sense. It calls for a hearing and interpretation guided by philosophy in its true sense. Not all hearings or interpretations of this fragment are so guided. How is it then to be determined whether they are or are not guided by philosophy? Well, it may be said philosophy makes the determination here. But what constitutes such determination? How is the determination to be made without getting caught up in circular reasoning? To avoid circularity, again the question of what philosophy is must be retained as not fully answered. Neither Heidegger nor fellow Europeans can avoid addressing this

philosophical predicament. Consequently, what he or they say must be held philosophically suspect. One may be dealing with barbarians.

The truthfulness of Heidegger's assertion that philosophy speaks Greek depends on whether he is or is not speaking as a barbarian, on whether he is or is not speaking as a true philosopher. If a philosophical answer is not self-evident, one could reasonably conclude that he could either be one or the other - a conclusion that is likely to lead to skepticism. With this possibility, nothing categorically can be said about philosophy, its source, or its history. Heidegger does not appear to be cognizant of this possibility. He speaks dogmatically. Dogmatism has no place in philosophy. It poses a danger to philosophy. It renders one unphilosophical.

Those who are familiar with Heidegger's writing on philosophy will readily recognize that in matters apparently philosophical, Greek language is privileged. In his book *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he says,

... Western grammar sprang from the reflection of the Greeks on Greek language. For along with German the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and most spiritual of all languages.²

To my knowledge, nowhere do Greek philosophers make this claim and even if evidence could be discovered indicating that they made such a claim, its truthfulness is philosophically questionable. The Greeks did not know all the languages spoken by all human beings and neither does Heidegger. The attribution of this assertion to the Greeks is philosophically and radically suspect if not downright false. To my knowledge, the hierarchization of human languages is not a Hellenic determination. If it were, philosophical evidence would have to be produced in support of its truth. It seems reasonable to conclude that it is Heidegger's determination, and it is a judgment of questionable philosophical merit. It may be barbaric or anti-philosophical.

If human languages are hierarchical, one would have to know all of them to determine where each fit in the rank order. There is no philosophical evidence that Heidegger offers in support of his claim regarding the hierarchy of languages. To my knowledge, no one possess such knowledge and it is possible that no one will ever possess it. Moreover, internally, each language changes or is changed when it is in contact with other languages. There is no pure language. Neither Greek nor German is an exception.

The Greek language Heidegger has in mind was not isolated from non-Greek languages. It was influenced by and influenced languages that surrounded it. They had to communicate with their neighbors and their neighbors had to communicate with them. How, for example, could they communicate with the North Africans or how could the North Africans communicate with them? Moreover, some languages are extinct and new ones come into being. It is an arbitrary act and unphilosophical to rank human languages regarding their philosophical status

²Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph Manheim, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 56-7.

without providing a clear philosophical criterion. In the absence of such criterion, ranking should be suspended.

If as Heidegger says, Western grammar is derived from Greek reflection on Greek language, German grammar (language), as a Western language, for the most part, derives from Greek language. As such, in terms of its possibility for thought, it does not make sense to put German language on the same level as Greek language. In the light of what Heidegger says, compared to Greek language, German language ought to have a lower rank. In terms of possibility for thought, German language is less potent compared to Greek language. Heidegger ought not to have put German language on the same level as Greek language. He may have misunderstood the sense of both languages. Indeed, he appears to acknowledge this when he grounds Western grammar on reflections on Greek language. He also appears to implicitly acknowledge this when he asserts that when we set aside worn-out views on philosophy, the word philosophy, when we listen to its source, speaks Greek. He does not say it speaks German. It is possible that Heidegger's Greeks were his Greeks and not Greek Greeks and that what he thought was Greek language was his Greek language and not Greek Greek language.

Heidegger's privileging or prioritizing Greek language in matters that pertain to philosophy is evident in literature on philosophy that he has produced. Most of his research on philosophy leads back to Greek philosophy and hence to Greek language. In his classic book *Being and Time*, he calls attention to the question of the meaning of Being -a question he claims has been forgotten. In his eyes, this is the fundamental question of philosophy -a question that was raised first in human history by the Greeks. He asserts that it is to the Greeks that we must return if we are to recover the true meaning of Being. According to him, even the formulation of the question concerning the meaning of Being was more clearly and originally formulated by the Greeks. To him, the return to Greeks -the originator of philosophy is not analogous to returning to primitives. It is not a return to the Hottentots.³ (*a racist and pejorative term used by Europeans to refer to a community of African people*). The Heidegger's Greeks- the Greeks who gave birth to "philosophy" were a special *civilized* breed of human race -far superior to any other sector of the humankind. According to him, it is to them that we must return for a true philosophical method. The philosophical method to take us there must necessarily be a Greek method. This method he calls "phenomenology" -phenomenology not as understood in Contemporary Husserlian based European philosophy, but as the Greeks primordially understood it.

It is noteworthy that, for Heidegger, among all European languages, German language, in terms of its possibility for thought, is ranked higher than the rest of these languages. But as far as all their grammar derive from Greek reflection of Greek language, relative to non-Euro-Western languages, these languages are, regarding the possibilities for thought are the most powerful and spiritual compared to other human languages. In other words, non-European languages are philosophically inferior to European languages when it comes to matters that pertain to the possibility of thought. I am reminded of Placide Tempels, a Belgian

³Ibid., p. 15.

Christian missionary, who posing as a friend of Africans, put forth a notorious proposition regarding the possibility of the existence of African philosophy. In an infamous book titled *Bantu Philosophy*, he said,

We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognize themselves in our words and will acquiesce, saying, "you understand us: you now know us completely, you "know" in the way we 'know.'"⁴

This reminder helps us as we speculate on Heidegger's approach to language and its place in the speech about philosophy; that is, as we speculate on his view on philosophy of language.

Heidegger's thinking about language, about the language of philosophy, about the source and the history of philosophy, I propose, is unintelligible if one does not grasp the context of his thought. A clue to the context of his thought is found in Judeo-Christianity. He is a child of the Medieval Christian theology -a theology that represents a historic corruption of philosophical thinking. In this theology, philosophy is rendered captive to Christian theology and serves it. To be sure, Heidegger warns us against mistaking philosophical thinking for Christian thinking and vice versa.⁵ (*Introduction to Metaphysics*, p.7). It is questionable whether he himself takes heed to this warning. What seems to be the case is that he projects Greece as if it were philosophy's Garden of Eden or philosophy's Holy Land -not the land of Zeus and other Greek Gods and Goddesses, but the land of the Judeo-Christian God, apart from whom there are no other Gods. Apparently, according to Heidegger, his Greeks are God's Chosen People in matters that pertain to philosophy. Their language, Greek language, is the Divine language, and the only truly Divine language. Despite an avowed secularism, Europeans continue this tradition believing that they are the Chosen Ones, and that their languages are Divine or, at least, descendants of the true God.

Let us recall that in the European world, at one time, Greek was the language of philosophy and those who did not speak it or understand it were not truly philosophically educated. Later, when Latin replaced Greek, those who did not speak or understand it were not truly philosophically educated. When modern European languages replaced Latin, they became the languages of philosophy, the languages of the philosophically educated. Those who did not speak or understand them were philosophically ignorant. Greek, Latin, and modern European languages were not only the languages of philosophy -the languages that Philosophy spoke, but they were also the languages of the educated in general. To be educated was to be educated in Euro-Western languages. If, as is widely believed in the European world, that it is language that sets human beings apart, those who did not speak these languages had no place in the human landscape. If they had a place, it was a

⁴Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, translated by Rev'd Colin King, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959, p. 36.

⁵*Ibid.*, Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 7.

place reserved for the sub-human or for beasts. In such a place, there was no place for philosophy, or for true speech on philosophy. It was a place for philosophical “evangelization.” Outside the European world, European philosophers come across as “evangelists,” as preachers or as invader-settlers. It rarely occurs to them that, in principle, philosophy is not subject to evangelism. African has endured the most of this evangelism.

In relation to the non-European world, Europeans have adopted an evangelical psychology. The non-European world is seen or has been constructed as a *tabula rasa* on which “philosophical” seeds have to be planted and watered by Europeans. This is referred to as the teaching of “philosophy.” To be philosophical is to be philosophical the way that Europeans are philosophical. Here, the would-be philosophers are taught to believe that Greece is philosophy’s source, and that the Greeks were the earliest philosophers in human history, Greek language is the primordial language of philosophy, and that Europeans are the direct heirs and bearers of the history of philosophy. Writ large, what we have here is a colonial-imperial project allegedly launched from the very heart of philosophy. In scope, it is a planetary project that is unrivalled and unparalleled in human history. It has brought into being unparalleled and unrivalled subjugation of human beings - subjugation that is unrivalled and unparalleled in human history. In modern European history, this history has included the construction of a racist world - a world in which the non-European peoples have been victims of European racism. Philosophy has been conscripted to assist in the construction of this world. The belief that philosophy originated in Greece and that the first philosophers in human history were Greeks and that Greek language and the European languages arising from it has been weaponized in the genocidal war against non-European peoples. It has been used a missile to attack the humanity of these peoples. The European historiographers of philosophy and European cartographers of the geography of philosophy have been and are warriors in this de-humanizing war. Judeo-Christianity has energized them. They are soldiers in the Christian Army. Their leading battle song is “Onward Christian Soldiers.” In the European world, this song lies at the heart of European philosophy. At times, secularism is taken as camouflage. As previously said, as a Christian, this Army is evangelical. It preaches to the heathens and to the savages. It has no time or place for a genuine philosophical dialogue. For centuries, the European conception of philosophical dialogue has been a monologue: Europeans talking to themselves. There is no negotiation or compromise with those who contest this. It has embraced a monologue that it parades as a dialogue. Philosophy as a true dialogue has been suppressed. Others are prohibited from contesting this truth. They have been projected as Barbarians. The contestants are enemies of truth and enemies of knowledge and are to be totally vanquished.

Colonization of the language of philosophy is a staple diet in European Academy. The Athenian Academy is not and should not be confused with or mistaken for the European Academy. The latter is a Christianized Academy. Once this transformation has taken place, once the Athenian Academy has been colonized by Europeans, the language of philosophy ceases to be the language of philosophy. Philosophy’s geography is also, thereby, erased. Decolonization of

philosophy and its language, and the de-erasure of the erased geography of philosophy need to be undertaken. For this process to succeed, there must be a striptease of Euro-centric discourse on philosophy, its source, and its history. This is a necessity if there is a recovery of philosophy and if true geography of philosophy is to be recovered if the true language of philosophy is to be recovered.

The use of Greece, Greek language, Greek philosophy, and the history of philosophy has been used by Europeans to construct Europe and to construct European self-identity. This has also been at the expense of non-Europeans. What should or ought necessarily to happen is to highlight this historic offence to philosophy. The Greeks have a non-delegable obligation to set the record straight and not allow themselves to be used for an anti-philosophical project.

In his book. Professor Christos Evangelou, a Greek philosopher, has already embarked on this project in his philosophically important book, *The Genesis of Philosophy, When Greece Met Africa*. Greek philosophers must part with false benefits that may have accrued by lying about philosophy and its history. They have been rendered enemies of the non-Europeans people by Europeans. They have non-delegable responsibility to set the philosophical record straight. Euro-Westerners also have a non-delegable obligation and responsibility to set aside centuries of lies they have heaped on themselves and to disgorge from themselves any toxic fruits that may have accumulated over the centuries. As for non-European people, they must cease being imitators of the European paradigm of philosophy which is mostly toxic to philosophy.

To guide us in the philosophical recovery processes, an African proverb may be worth noting. It says, “The earth is a beehive; we all enter by the same door but live-in different cells.” All human languages have a place for philosophy. They all equally possess the highest possibility for thought. To the extent that languages are the sites for the constitution and the disclosure of what is human, wherever human beings reside constitutes a possible source of philosophy. They all have a door into philosophy. In other words, the source of philosophy is wherever human beings are on earth. Wherever human beings are is not easy to identify. Euro-Western geographers of the human landscape have complicated the recognition of such a place. Their geography of anthropology has generated a problem in the understanding of what a human being is. In the Euro-West, being human has been defined in a way that makes European humanity paradigmatic of what it is to be human. This has been and is still disastrous. It has excluded some human beings from the fold of being human. For example. In reference to the African, Hegel, for whom the African is identical with the Negroe, says,

The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.⁶

⁶G.W.F Hegel, *Philosophy of History* translated by J. Sibree, London: Toronto: Open Media, 2017, p. 85.

This is not only a radical self-misunderstanding on the part Hegel or on the part of fellow Europeans, but also a radical error in understanding of the African and his or her homeland (Africa). There is a qualitative difference between being an African and being a Negro. An African is an African and a Negro is a Negro. The latter is a product of the European imagination. By misunderstanding the African, the European misunderstands himself or herself. Both Africa and Europe are also hereby misunderstood.

Self- understanding of Europeans and European understanding of their homeland (Europe) has had historic disastrous global implications. Geographicity of the human has been determined at the expense of the non-European people. Under the proper guidance of genuine philosophy, what should be recognized is that all human beings have a common geography -a geography that must be determined by all human beings with recognition that no human sector is privileged. There is a common door to the earth and all of us use a common door to what we are. The common door is the common door into the world of philosophy. It is not just Greece that should be presented as the cradle of philosophy. The entire earth inhabited by human beings is the cradle of philosophy. It may not be self-evident but wherever one finds human beings, there is the cradle of philosophy. Moreover, it is at every cradle of philosophy that the history of philosophy begins. This history does not go anywhere. It abides there. It is both singularly and commonly there. The entry door is the same as the exit door. This blocks a linear conception of the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is the history of the same. A human being cannot be other than human, and this determines the destiny of human history. A human being does not go shopping for human history. Human history is not for sale or for rental. It is not subject to import or to export. Human history is where a human being is. This ought to be self-evident in the history of philosophy for this history is the history of being human. Another relevant African proverb says, “Even the mightiest eagle comes down to the treetops to rest.” As human beings, we cannot defy terrestrial gravity - the gravity of our homeland. We are earthlings, or, as it said in Kiswahili, each of us is a *Mwananchi* – a child of the earth. Soar we must, but we must come home -the home for and of all of us. This is the message that philosophy offers to us depending on whether we have an ear for it. Often, we must visit a philosophical audio-pathologist to ensure the philosophical health of our hearing. As it is said in an African proverb, “A deaf ear is followed by death and an ear that listens is followed by blessings.”

It is worth reminding ourselves constantly that, to Europeans, what takes place in intra-European world may appear as a philosophical dialogue, but for non-Europeans, it appears as a monologue. A truly unbiased philosophical world-wide dialogue, about the origin and the history of philosophy, could emerge if the hegemonic European monologue on philosophy could be lifted off our shoulders. European philosophers have a non-delegable responsibility to undo what they have done in the name of philosophy and its history. Without a historic and fundamental revolution between Europeans and non-Europeans, there would not be a genuine philosophical dialogue on the origin and the history of philosophy.

The Greeks who were in the eyes of Europeans the originators of philosophy were neither Europeans nor Westerners. They were what they were: Greeks. Their philosophy was neither European nor Western. It was what it was: Greek philosophy. Obscuration of the difference has deep roots in the European conception of philosophy and its history. It is most unfortunate that this obscuration has been spread throughout the world by Europeans. True friends of philosophy and its history have a non-delegable philosophical duty to call attention to the calamity that has befallen philosophy and its history.