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EDITORIAL

The Indo-Pacific origins of philosophy

Synkrētic is a new journal devoted to Indo-Pacific philosophy, literature, and cultures.

The Indo-Pacific is that vast expanse of sea, islands, and continents which converge on maritime southeast Asia, then ripple out into its hyphenated oceans. In short, it is made up of the Asia-Pacific region plus that minor added detail of South Asia, which was cut out when its boundaries were drawn up by diplomats in the 1990s.

Though it is a 19th century European construct, the concept *Indo-Pacific* has only gained widespread currency in recent years. Many sound arguments for why this frame better fits our remarkably diverse region have identified political, strategic, and economic grounds. The Indo-Pacific has been called the new centre of global economic growth. While true, to reduce it to 60% of global GDP or US $50 trillion is to sell it short. It is also called the world's geopolitical centre of gravity. This is typically a bad place to be. In physics, the centre of gravity tends to attract large, heavy objects. *On War*, the West's military classic, says that the centre of gravity is where the 'most effective blow is struck' to an enemy force.[1] Gravity is at work when half the world's 470 submarines patrol six cramped chokepoints in one Southeast Asian archipelago.

But few arguments have identified culture, which in silent and subtle ways threads this otherwise disparate group of countries together. The Indo-Pacific region is more than the central nervous system of world trade, guarded and threatened by rival networks of military bases. It is also a superhighway of ideas which, over millennia, gradually connected the inestimably diverse civilisations of East, South, Southeast Asia, and Oceania into an ever-closer union.

While Europe was a Roman province, the Indo-Pacific's overland Silk Road and maritime trade routes were great conveyor belts of ideas, which sailed down the South China Sea and through the Malacca Strait.

Thus, an Indian prince closes his eyes under a tree for a week. Just a few centuries later, Buddhism has spread to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Some of its roots reach as far away as Greece. By the 19th century, 'Indian wisdom flows back to Europe' at a rate of knots, which some philosophers hope will fundamentally change European thought for the better.[2] The philosophy born in Nepal soon sails into San Francisco harbour in the hearts of Chinese migrants. In the present day, millions of Westerners close their eyes like the Buddha to meditate. The Indo-Pacific did fundamentally change the West's thought, ethics, and spirituality, entangling both regions as a result.

For millennia, Indo-Pacific thinkers have created, innovated, and refined philosophical thought on the deepest problems of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, ethics, and science in the context of their own cultures. But to understand and sometimes even see *Indo-Pacific philosophy*, three common assumptions need to be let go.

The first assumption to discard is that philosophy is done either by: i) an academic alone in their cold office reading an angry genius; or ii) an angry genius alone in their Swiss summer house denouncing their academic readers. This cliché of modern Western philosophical practice reduces the 'wisdom lover' (*philosophos*) to an individual writer. After all, we only think as individuals and only think clearly in writing.

Nothing can be learned without letting go of this idea. The Indo-Pacific's 4.3 billion people belong to twenty-odd countries. Each one is a microcosm of sub-national cultures, clans, and tribes. China counts 56 cultures, Indonesia has 300, the Philippines lists 181. Australia is made up of 278 cultural groups, two of them comprising 250 Indigenous cultures. 1,652 languages are spoken in India and 1,300 in the Pacific. Of the latter, half are spoken in Papua New Guinea alone, the most linguistically diverse country in the world. Each one of these cultures birthed religious, philosophical, and

scientific traditions worthy of consideration. Few focus on the individual, a fundamentally Western idea.[3] In many, wisdom lives in speech and not books.

The second assumption to discard is that the Greek tradition is the *alpha* and *omega* of philosophy. The myth of a so-called 'Greek miracle', popularised by French philosopher Ernest Renan in 1899, exerted a powerful influence on how Western philosophers interpreted Indo-Pacific thought.[4] The term is recent but the story old. Since the Enlightenment, it has been taught that the historical mission of Greece, and therefore its heir Europe, was 'to detect and emphasize the reason or the reasonableness of the universe.'[5] While the world was wrapped in a veil of gloom and superstition, a few Greek geniuses received the Promethean flame and brought its light—logic, reason, science, philosophy—to the nations. 'And their eyes were opened, and they knew…'[6]

Hegel elevated Western philosophy's creation story to a theology. His famous remark, 'what is real is rational', was a *Sanctus* to the Greek miracle, the 'pivot upon which the world-wide revolution then in process turned.'[7] Hegel saw the Greek Spirit as special for being practically 'free from superstition'.[8] The Greeks ushered in the 'dawn of Thought'.[9] Even their myth was better, presumably their honey sweeter.[10] Their 'metaphysical miracle', as Nietzsche called it, was unparalleled.[11] Central to it was the claimed ability of thinkers from Thales to Aristotle to tear reason (*logos*) out of the clutches of myth (*mythos*).[12] This criterion would be applied to Indo-Pacific cultures.

Among others, Western colonies misapplied the myth of this Greek miracle as a lens through which to understand local cultures. When this failed, force was often used to impose the West's secular and religious myths onto colonised cultures. The reflexive use of European philosophy to explain local conceptual universes, on which there were initially scant and linguistically uninformed data, created an enormous distortion field guaranteeing misperceptions and conflict even before politics interfered.

In Australia, the rich traditions of Aboriginal philosophy were often dismissed as meaningless superstition. Dreamtime stories

were collected and analysed, but marketed and sold as mythology, *i.e.* pre-philosophical. Into the 1960s, a dead French philosopher still convinced anthropologists that Aboriginal people lacked logic.[13] In other words, they had not yet read Aristotle, whose famed thought travelled everywhere Catholic missionaries went in the Indo-Pacific, like the Philippines.[14] In this context, it would be unsurprising if Aristotle sounded more like a mythical figure to First Australians. In the Middle Ages, the West's own holy men had called him *precursor Christi in naturalibus*, God's precursor in nature.[15] And to this day, Australian 'philosophers are mostly only telling the stories of the Greeks.'[16]

If we have learned anything from past attempts in the last few centuries, let it be that Indo-Pacific philosophies will not be best explained by Aristotle, Locke, or Kant. They must be understood in their own endogenous categories, as developed by those who think in them, in respectful collaboration with other qualified experts thinking in different traditions. But to truly appreciate the wisdoms of the Indo-Pacific, they must also be read as an overarching, contiguous story being constantly and messily overwritten, as a living palimpsest. No single culture writes or owns the whole book. It is anonymous, collective, like a sacred text.

A final assumption best set aside is that cultures, like oil and water, don't mix and are best bottled separately. People have attempted to draw sharp dividing lines between philosophical traditions for centuries. Often, the motive was to protect the West's elixir of life, philosophy, from contamination by so-called 'wisdom traditions', collective forms of cultural knowledge which generations pass down 'uncritically'.[17] Is this distinction valid?

In Europe, the philosopher strips universals of cultural particulars, knits old ideas into a new conceptual net, presents it at a conference: a wisdom tradition lives on. In the Pacific, a philosopher infuses cultural particulars with universals, weaves old ideas into a new tapa cloth, offers it at a gathering: a wisdom tradition lives on. The substantive difference, if there is one, is one of style and cultural context.

To hermetically seal philosophical traditions would be to starve them of the oxygen on which thought lives. Indo-Pacific ideas don't belong in empty museums and under glass display cases, unintelligible but at least untouched. They belong in the world from which each draws breath. 'Philosophy,' Emerita Quito writes, 'is ultimately human before it is Eastern or Western.'[18] No culture has copyrighted *filosofia*, the love of wisdom, least of all the Greeks. Even Greek philosophy, on closer inspection, is a lot less Western than it is claimed to be.

The West, Daya Krishna argues, distorted its cultural self-image by selectively identifying it with Aristotle. Greece worshipped as many gods as India; the West keeps only its 'goddess of Reason'.[19] Did not Thales, who they say first reasoned aright,[20] say 'everything is full of gods'?[21] Just like Laozi, the Chinese founder of Taoism who is still worshipped today, Greek philosophers too were gods, like the volcano-jumping Empedocles and Pythagoras of the golden thigh.[22] Socrates, that great reasoner, reveals in the *Apology* that he is literally a 'gift from God'.[23] Not even Aristotle rejected myth. In a sense, he says, philosophy is the same thing since both arise from wonder.[24]

Indo-Pacific and Western philosophies can enlighten one another too. Pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander taught that death is an 'atonement' for the 'injustice' of life.[25] Yakili, the sky god of the Kewa people in Papua New Guinea's southern highlands, taught a remarkably similar doctrine.[26] Anaximander taught that humans had to claw their way out of the belly of scaly fish to survive. Melanesians taught that humans had to shed their skins like a snake to survive.[27] Indonesian and Pacific traditions tend to agree with Thales that nature is full of gods.[28]

Indo-Pacific philosophy is not always a story of clashing ideas. It is also one of cross-cultural cooperation, imitation, and replication for ours is a *syncretic* region. The concept of syncretism still arouses horror among religious and philosophical thinkers with orthodox inclinations. It refers to the habit cultures have of stealing each other's values, ideas, practices and symbols; of keeping parts they like, discarding those they dislike, and merging the rest. What

emerges is syncretic. It is strange that this habit should still be so vilified when every orthodoxy was once such a gnarled, sorry-looking creature.

What feeling can Karel Kupka's *Aboriginal Madonna* painting, displayed in Darwin, inspire if not that wonder in which philosophy is said to start? If a protest must be lodged, let it be addressed to Jesus, a Jewish syncretist. Or to the founder of Buddhism, who was a Hindu. Much as three Greeks fill all of Europe with their thoughts, so three Germans still influence communism in Asia. Indian migrants mesh Hinduism with Indigenous cultures in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Fiji.[29] Indonesia is Islamised by Chinese ships.[30] A Chinese philosopher recruits Aristotle to settle a dispute with Confucius.[31]

Some might call this all rather eclectic. We call it home. We call it *Synkrētic*.

Daryl Morini

Notes

1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Vol I, Book 6, transl. J.J. Graham (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1908), 354.

2 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Presentation*, Volume I, ed. Daniel Kolak, transl. Richard E. Aquila (London: Routledge, 2016), 415.

3 In *Synkrētic* №1: Emerita Quito, 'On Asian and Western minds', 58-72.

4 Guy G. Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 122.

5 George P. Conger, 'Did India Influence Early Greek Philosophies?', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jul. 1952): 126.

6 Luke 24:31.

7 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, transl. S.W. Dyde (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2008), xix.

8 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 255.

9 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 287.

10 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 298-299.

11 Saverio Clemente, Bryan J. Cocchiara, *mis*Reading *Nietzsche* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 12.

12 Robert L. Fowler, '*Mythos* and *Logos*', Robert L. Fowler, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 131 (2011): 45.

13 In *Synkrētic* №1: A.P. Elkin, 'Leibniz and the Dreaming', 12.

14 In *Synkrētic* №1: Daya Krishna, 'The West's goddess of reason', 46-57; Emerita Quito, 'On Asian and Western minds', 58-72; Florentino T. Timbreza, 'Filipino logic', 107-110; Leonardo N. Mercado, 'On snow and the Filipino mind', 99-102; Rolando M. Gripaldo, 'How to outgrow Kant', 123-126.

15 Andrea Oppo, *Lev Shestov: The Philosophy and Works of a Tragic Thinker* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), 130.

16 Lauren Gower, *What do you need a whitefella's education for? A yarn about Aboriginal philosophy*, Thesis for a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Philosophy, School of Philosophy, University of Tasmania, 2012, 20.

17 This author's useful distinction is used for illustrative purposes. There is no implication that its author agrees with the motives discussed in this piece. William J. Gavin, *In Dewey's Wake: Unfinished Work of Pragmatic Reconstruction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 150.

18 In *Synkrētic* №1: Emerita Quito, 'On Asian and Western minds', 68.

19 In *Synkrētic* №1: Daya Krishna, 'The West's goddess of reason', 46-57.

20 'Thales said goodbye to myth!' wrote Nietzsche. See Laurence Lampert, *What a Philosopher Is: Becoming Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 99-100; Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

21 This fragment is found in Aristotle, *De Anime* 411a 18, in Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumberg's Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 227.

22 In *Synkrētic* №1: Voltaire, 'Pythagoras in India', 218-221.

23 Plato, 'Apology', in *The Last Days of Socrates*, transl. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin, 2003), 70.

24 A.P. Bos, 'Aristotle on Myth and Philosophy', *Philosophia Reformata*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1983): 1-18.

25 Cited in Frank N. Magill, *The Ancient World*, Volume 1 (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 69.

26 Mary N. MacDonald, 'Thinking and teaching with the indigenous traditions of Melanesia', in *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*, ed. Jacob Kẹhinde Olupona (New York: Routledge, 2004), 316.

27 In *Synkrētic* №1: George Mombi, 'The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*', 36.

28 In *Synkrētic* №1: Byron Rangiwai, 'The mystery of the god Io', 73-85; H.T. Whatahoro, Te Mātorohanga, Nēpia Pōhūhū, Aporo Te Kumeroa, Percy Smith, *et al.*, 'Io of the hidden face', 189-204; Ferry Hidayat, 'What is Indonesian philosophy?', 24-33.

29 In *Synkrētic* №1: Mary Rokonadravu, 'The brief, insignificant history of Peter Abraham Stanhope', 145-155.

30 Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009).

31 In *Synkrētic* №1: Hu Shih, 'Logic as rectification of thought', 86-96.