

EDITORIAL

The case of the two Tahitians

A philosopher who met a doctor, a carpenter, or a shoemaker in a bar would be at risk of believing she had much to teach them about the world and even their trades. The reason for this is simply mathematical: whereas the carpenter has only one claim to expertise, carpentry, the philosopher takes the whole of life as her canvas, which includes carpentry.

Fatally, then, our philosopher could not help but reserve the right, even if only in theory, to opine, analyse, or comment on each area of human knowledge. But even a right that only exists in theory must on occasion be used in practice if it is not to be lost. It is this tragic fact which seals our philosopher's demise. For, if goaded into it by one or two drinks too many, she is in mortal danger of making use of the right bestowed on her by the pre-Socratics. That is, to theorise on the politics of nurse-doctor relations, elocute on the æsthetic intricacies of the French dovetail, and deliver a stirring homily on the ethics of meat consumption to three silent patrons.

Such awkward encounters may explain why Tagalog, the Filipino national language, minted the image of the philosopher or *pilosopo* as a foolish babbler 'who argues lengthily, whether rightly or wrongly.'¹ And if we are honest, we must concede that the highest literary representation of this type of philosopher is that of Dr Pangloss in Voltaire's *Candide*. A character whose name literally means 'Dr All Tongue', who holds expertise in something called metaphysico-theologo-cosmolo-nigology, which no one understands and he least

of all. But it would be unfair to subject all philosophers to Voltaire's biting caricature, all the more so because he is not above reproach. Perhaps a thinker who wrote 2,000 treatises, encyclopædias, pamphlets, poems and over 20,000 letters is not best placed to critique the loquaciousness of other philosophers. *Qui s'y frotte, s'y pique*, as they say.²

But it is not necessarily true that the worst trait of many philosophers is their inability to hold their tongues. Witness the great lineage of worshippers of silence from the Pythagoreans to the Cynics and the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and practically all ascetics. It should not surprise us that even across these great monastic traditions, vows of silence were a more rarefied and respected kind than the banal vow of chastity, reflecting the common fear of the spiritual dangers facing the idle babbler. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. But for every Socrates, whose disciples while away his last hours before his execution while 'he talks, talks, talks',³ there is one Han Shan, a Chinese Buddhist recluse who composed verses in silent contemplation, scorning men as he sat 'crosslegged, wild hair waving at the sky'.⁴ Even the Stoics, an ancient Greek school not averse to speech, promoted the virtue of silence. As Seneca rightly notes in his play *Thyestes*, 'the art of silence is taught by life's many ills',⁵ and he himself used an 'eloquent silence' to get points across.⁶

Verbosity cannot, then, be the chief sin of the philosopher. No, it is not that it speaks much that marks out this curious creature, which trait it shares with every kind of the *Homo intellectualis* species. The historian as well as the literary critic, the novelist and the poet each talk, usually about themselves, and all just as tiresomely. The true mark of the philosopher is not their mellifluous tongue, but the enormity of their self-given task whose reach encircles the globe many times over. Philosophy is special for encompassing all of life. From the stars and moons, quarks and qualia, Thales' gods and olive press, Aristotle's *Arche* and Plato's forms, to Diogenes' experiment in biology, which reportedly killed him after he ate a raw polyp—no object, concept, or discipline can be beyond its reach. No natural limits can hem in its pretensions. So, we shouldn't be

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surprised to find in Plato's *Republic*, a canonical text, Socrates weighing in on the medical, carpentry, and shoemaking professions.⁷ Nietzsche⁸ and Heidegger⁹ also philosophised with and on the carpenter's hammer, which need not imply any knowledge of how to actually wield one.

No item big or small can escape the grasping of all true philosophers, whose subject matter is not one particular thing but *all* things, with the concrete always put in service of some more or less universal and necessarily abstract theory. At least so it once was in the philosophical heyday of the Western European tradition from the 18th to the 19th centuries, which produced some of the boldest philosophical world-building of this kind. The chief of these thinkers was the famed Prussian son Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant compared his *Critique of Pure Reason* to 'the first thoughts of Copernicus',¹⁰ and declared his work 'an entire revolution' and anything before it 'a mere groping' in the dark.¹¹ A revolution—now that is expansive! Kant did not hesitate to tear apart the 'cobwebs' of other schools of thought and to mock them as jugglers.¹²

But all expansiveness is forgiven someone whose revered *Critique* not only achieved the 'momentous restructuring of the domain of philosophy',¹³ but which has been compared to a holy book for its revolutionary effect on human thought. The German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) ironically compared it to the Bible, for if the latter exorcises demons, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* cures bad thoughts.¹⁴ Heine is right to call Kant 'the arch-destroyer' of old ideas more violent than an executioner, and to describe his as 'destructive, world-annihilating thoughts.'¹⁵ For if a thousand other philosophers, swollen with vanity, fell victim to the original sin of the discipline—the desire to know it all—Kant almost succeeded. Heine writes:

Not without reason, therefore, did he compare his philosophy to the method of Copernicus... So formerly reason, like the sun, moved round the universe of phenomena, and sought to throw light upon it. But Kant made reason, the sun, stand still, and the universe of phenomena now turns round, and is illuminated the moment it comes within the region of the intellectual orb.¹⁶

Having recentred the West's intellectual universe, Kant earned his place at its centre. This achievement could not but leave a mark on Kant's own character, and it is noteworthy that his ethics fuses honour-loving 'pagan' pride with the 'monk's virtue' of humility.¹⁷ But the risk was great indeed for Kant, for in destroying old worlds and fashioning a whole new one, he reached the searing heights at which the sun melts man-made wings. And so, it was inevitable that the world-destroying mind of the Königsberg professor, who despite having never ventured out of town and seen a mountain could describe nebulae,¹⁸ would overreach by directing his theories at shores and peoples he had never seen.

In this issue of *Synkretic*, we find Kant mired in a controversy about a subject as remote from Prussia as far-away galaxies in this pre-colonial era: the Tahitians. His few sources on this people consisted of travel writings, entries in James Cook's diary, and his conversations with sailors at the port of Königsberg.¹⁹ But this did not stop Kant from proffering opinions, which six interviewees analyse variously in this issue, along the lines of Tahitians being a waste of space on their island if all they do is graze as happily as cows and sheep. Would it not have been better for them not to exist at all?²⁰ This is a clear case of philosophy's expansive instinct running wild.

In his interview, Simon Swift, Associate Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Geneva, takes the reader through the personal backstory of Kant's remark, which was in part a settling of scores with his former student-turned-philosophy superstar J.G. Herder (1744-1803).²¹ The University of California's Associate Professor of German Chunjie Zhang explores the surprisingly commonplace idealisation of Tahiti in 18th and 19th century European culture, which was imagined as a land of untrammelled personal, religious, and sexual freedoms. Zhang offers the counter-example of Georg Forster (1754-1794), who accompanied his father on one of Cook's voyages. Although charmed by Tahiti, his descriptions were 'a serious science' based on empirical, first-hand observation, unlike Kant's, which were based on hearsay.²²

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In these two contemporaries' minds we find two contrasting images. In Forster's, the Tahitian is an individual being with blood and flesh and opinions who, like the old Tahitian in Diderot's *Supplement*, can retort to the Western critic of his culture that 'our happiness you can but disturb.'²³ In Kant's mind, the Tahitian is an abstraction prior to all experience and an inconvenient one at that, which must be subordinated to higher and higher abstractions like a species, history, and humanity to gain the right to speak about his own happiness.²⁴

These two images collided upon Forster's return from Tahiti, when he publicly attacked Kant, the world-destroying genius of the *Critique*, for refusing to be cowed by facts when it came to the Tahitians. Forster was incensed by Kant's theory of race which, as Thomas P. Saine writes, speculated 'that the true color of the natives of Tahiti and other South Pacific islands was not yet known with certainty, because there had not yet been a Tahitian born in Europe for the inspection of anthropologists.'²⁵ Influenced by British empiricism, Forster critiqued Kant for projecting his concept of race onto the Tahitians, and then purporting to find it 'in a place where it does not exist.'²⁶ Instead of Tahitians being brought to him as he wished, Kant may have benefitted more from joining Forster and visiting them on Cook's second voyage, as the Tahiti-based Robert Koenig wryly notes.²⁷

Robert Bernasconi, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Philosophy and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University, writes that 'Kant was provoked by Georg Forster's description of Tahiti as one of the happiest spots on the globe' because he imagined non-white races to be less industrious than Europeans. 'He viewed the happiness of the Tahitians as a product of the ease with which they were able to provide for themselves...their happiness was their downfall.'²⁸ Robert Loudon, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern Maine, also observes that Kant's critique of the Tahitians hinges on their happiness. Because they supposedly only go about enjoying themselves, Kant looks down on them for violating their duty to themselves, which in his view is to develop their talents and rational capacities.²⁹

Eunah Lee, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at St. Joseph's University, also points to Kant's 'fundamental anti-hedonism' as one of the reasons underlying his attack on the Tahitians. 'For Kant, the goal of human life is not to idle in a happy state but to strive for perfection through labour, to be worthy of happiness.' Kant assumes that 'humanity will fully reach its perfection *as a species*, not as individual human beings,' which leads him to think that 'humanity will fully reach its highest stage by the European white, denying other non-white races this privilege.'³⁰ While there is a broad consensus among interviewees on characterising these ideas as racist, the degree to which Kant's views reflected either prejudices widespread in his era or a central part of his philosophical project which served to justify later mass killings is still debated.

Beyond the black sand shores of French Polynesia, Issue 2 of *Syncretic* takes the reader to Australia's Kakadu and Kimberley regions for a *tour d'horizon* of the Aboriginal concept of walking the land in Emeritus Professor Freya Matthews' page-turning essay.³¹ This issue is also privileged to feature the ancient oral history of the Yuwaalaraay people from outback New South Wales, which tells the story of a lunar deity named Bahloo the moon.³² With both focussing on Thailand, Professor Soraj Hongladarom of Chulalongkorn University takes readers inside the debate of how Thai philosophy is possible,³³ while the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Professor Emeritus Thongchai Winichakul shines a spotlight on the 6 October 1976 massacre in Bangkok.³⁴ And much as Zach Lindsey's charming new translation solves the centuries old mystery of a Spanish soldier who teleported from Manila to Mexico,³⁵ the reader is transported to inner-city Lahore by Masood A. Raja's scintillating translation of Pakistani writer Bano Qudsia's critically acclaimed novel *King Buzgard*.³⁶ This issue includes translations from the German—Anna Ezekiel's rendering of Karoline von Günderrode³⁷ and Christian Romuss' of Georg Lichtenberg and Fritz Mauthner³⁸—and from the Chinese by Span Hanna.³⁹ Finally, Preciosa de Joya⁴⁰ and Tony La Viña⁴¹ reflect on the life and teachings of the illustrious Filipino thinker Padre Roque (1924-2021).

Each in their own way, these Indo-Pacific writers' thoughts and stories seek to portray their own cultural surroundings in intimately concrete detail before staking a claim to understanding the whole world, or some abstraction in its image. Philosophers of all traditions would do well to learn from their intellectual humility.

Daryl Morini

Notes

- 1 Emerita Quito, cited in Anne Quito, 'The Philippines' greatest female philosopher', in *Synkrētic*, №1 (Feb. 2022): 116.
- 2 *Qui s'y frotte, s'y pique*: A French dictum first recorded in the 16th century meaning 'if you play with fire, you get burned'. Literally, 'rub it and you'll get stung,' with reference to the porcupine.
- 3 Lev Shestov, *All Things are Possible*, transl. S.S. Kotliansky (London: Martin Secker, 1920), 18, aphorism 5.
- 4 Han Shan, 'Spurned by philosophers', transl. Span Hanna, 171.
- 5 Seneca the Younger, *Thyestes*, line 317, in Alessandro Schiesaro, *The Passions in Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 157.
- 6 Andreas Heil, 'Vision, Sound, and Silence in the "Drama of the World"', in *Brill's Companion to Seneca: Philosopher and Dramatist*, eds. Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 556.
- 7 Plato, *The Republic*, transl. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 53, 92, 113, 120, 142.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, transl. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 3.
- 9 David R. Cerbone, 'Composition and Constitution: Heidegger's Hammer', in *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Fall 1999): 309-329.
- 10 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110.
- 11 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 113, 110.
- 12 Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 119, 200.
- 13 Jane Kneller, 'The Poem of the Understanding: Kant, Novalis, and Early German Romantic Philosophy', in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Elizabeth Millán Brusslan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 22.

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- 14 Heinrich Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment* (London: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1882), 107.
- 15 Heine, *Religion and Philosophy*, 109.
- 16 Heine, *Religion and Philosophy*, 114.
- 17 Robert B. Loudon, 'Review: Kantian Moral Humility: Between Aristotle and Paul', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Nov. 2007), 632-633.
- 18 See 'Immanuel Kant: Discoverer of Nebulae and the Multi-galaxy Universe', in *Futurism*, 19 February 2014, available at: <<https://futurism.com/kant>>.
- 19 Chunjie Zhang, 'Tahiti in the European mind', 65.
- 20 'Does the author really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?' Immanuel Kant, 'Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the philosophy of the history of humanity. Parts 1 and 2* (1785)', transl. Allen W. Wood, in Robert B. Loudon and Günter Zöller (eds.), *Anthropology, History, and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142.
- 21 Simon Swift, 'Kant's critique of idealised Tahitians', 47-55.
- 22 Chunjie Zhang, 'Tahiti in the European mind', 63.
- 23 Denis Diderot, 'Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, 1772', transl. Carole Warman *et al.*, in *Tolerance: The Beacon of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 114-115.
- 24 Robert Bernasconi, 'The whitewashing of Kant', 56-61.
- 25 Thomas P. Saine, *Georg Forster* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), 45.
- 26 Saine, *Georg Forster*, 45.
- 27 Robert Koenig, 'Kant and the Tahitians', 44-45.
- 28 Robert Bernasconi, 'The whitewashing of Kant', 59.
- 29 Robert Loudon, 'Kant's impure ethics', 77.
- 30 Eunah Lee, 'The colour blindness of reason', 71.
- 31 Freya Matthews, 'To know the world we need to "walk the land"', 13-25.
- 32 Peter Hippai *et al.*, 'Bahloo the moon', 107-116.
- 33 Soraj Hongladarom, 'How is Thai philosophy possible?', 26-40.
- 34 Thongchai Winichakul, 'The silence of Thai history', 164-169.
- 35 Luis González Obregón, 'The soldier who teleported from Manila to Mexico', transl. Zach Lindsey, 117-132.
- 36 Bano Qudsia, 'King Buzzard', transl. Masood A. Raja, 83-106.
- 37 Karoline von Günderrode, 'Muhammad's dream in the desert', transl. Anna Ezekiel, 133-144.

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- 38 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, 'An onion with a thousand roots', transl. Christian Romuss', 145-147; and Fritz Mauthner, 'The critique of language', transl. Christian Romuss, 148-152.
- 39 Han Shan, 'Spurned by philosophers', transl. Span Hanna, 170.
- 40 Preciosa de Joya, 'An encounter with Father Ferriols', 153-157.
- 41 Tony La Viña, 'Obituary: Fr Roque J. Ferriols, SJ (1924-2021)', 158-163.