

How is Thai philosophy possible?*

Soraj Hongladarom†

I. Why ask the question?

The relationship between the disciplines of philosophy and area studies seems to be tenuous. For one thing, philosophy is a normative discipline *par excellence*, while area studies is an empirical investigation aimed at gaining a detailed understanding of the area in question through observation and theory-making. This does not mean, however, that philosophy has absolutely no role to play, for area studies, being interdisciplinary in nature, has a tendency to include disciplines which can shed light on the main problems of the field. Its role, nonetheless, is usually limited to a kind of expository or explanatory investigation of the systems of thought or ways of thinking of the people in the area. That is not the same as philosophy, for if it were so, philosophy would be no different from intellectual history or cultural anthropology. And if philosophy cannot be distinguished from these disciplines then that would present a very strong case against keeping philosophy a viable discipline in this day and age. It seems that if philosophy cannot show anything

* This paper was originally presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiang Mai University, 14 to 17 October 1996. It was first published in the *Journal of Letters*, Volume 43, Issue 1 (2016): 183-199. This lightly edited version is reprinted with the gracious permission of the *Journal of Letters*.

† Soraj Hongladarom is a Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Science, Technology, and Society at Chulalongkorn University. He earned a PhD from Indiana University and lives in Bangkok, Thailand.

Synkrētic

worthwhile other than simply describing ways of thinking of various people, then it would really be redundant.

In this paper I shall present a rather brief argument against this tendency. Specifically, I would like to show that philosophy is still viable and autonomous, and in order to do that I shall try to demonstrate how Thai philosophy is possible. That is, I would like to suggest a foundational path for Thai philosophy the same way Kant did in his laying a foundation for metaphysics. To answer questions of the type ‘How is X possible?’ is to demonstrate how X comes to be, what the limits are beyond which X is impossible. That is, to show how X is possible is to show its condition of possibility, to use the Kantian way of talking.¹ Hence, the condition of possibility of Thai philosophy, as will be shown in more detail below, is that Thai thinkers and philosophers begin to search for the optimal way of living, the best direction the community as a whole should take, while acknowledging that there can be no final answer to such questions. This is different from the usual sort of investigation in other disciplines in that there is no assumption of finality. Philosophy consists of a process, an unending one, but one necessary for the health of the community, as I will try to clarify in what follows.

The reason why it needs to be shown how Thai philosophy is possible is, firstly, that philosophical study in Thailand is still limited to teaching the ideas and arguments of past or contemporary philosophers, both Western and Eastern. While this kind of study is very important, indeed indispensable, it is not a substitute for the kind of philosophical activity that should accompany it, which is an exercise in problem-solving ability where each party presents his or her own ideas regarding the issue in question and tries to convince the other through the use of reason and argument. The lack of such activity can be seen in there being only a handful of Thai philosophers who are active in proposing their own ideas to solve philosophical problems.² Another reason is related to the first, and might help to explain it. Thai culture is so imbued with Theravada Buddhist thought that Thai people in general do not see any need to look for solutions elsewhere, for it seems to them that Buddhism provides the solution to every possible philosophical

problem; one only has to look back at the tradition to find them. Or if Buddhists have nothing to say about a particular problem, then they tend to conclude that the problem itself is not worth investigating, a waste of time.

However, the present situation in Thailand and elsewhere demands that this complacency in thinking be revamped. If Thai culture is to surge forward and remain responsive to the changes brought about by world conditions, then it has to become adaptive. This does not merely mean that Thai culture has to change and embrace elements from foreign cultures; Thai culture is already doing that. But what needs to change is the complacency in regarding Buddhism as providing the solution to every possible philosophical problem. To be complacent in thinking means one is stuck in one's own attitudes and ideas and cannot see beyond them. If one believes that Buddhism provides every answer, then one does not need to think for oneself. If one believes that the authority which justifies philosophical beliefs comes from Buddhism alone, then it seems that one will not be as responsive to the external circumstances as one should. For philosophy does not limit itself to the primary concerns of Buddhism, it is much broader and concerns itself with the complexities of the mundane world more than religion does. Thus, for some vexing philosophical problems which have a strong bearing on people's lives, such as the just distribution of limited resources, there does not seem to be a clear-cut answer. To depend wholly on Buddhism, believing that it can provide a real solution, then, would only mask the tendency to refrain from thinking and finding answers for oneself and for one's own society. The present circumstances of the world, characterised by their strong interconnections and dynamism, demand that members of each society be alert, active and responsive to change. Philosophy, in my conception at least, has a role in creating such a disposition.

II. Two senses of 'cultural philosophy'

Before we take a close look at the demonstration, however, a rather important point needs to be clarified. In order to find out how Thai philosophy is possible, one has to be clear in what sense one uses

Synkrētic

the term ‘Thai philosophy’. One is reminded of terms like ‘Chinese philosophy’, ‘Indian philosophy’, or ‘Greek philosophy’, which mean of course the philosophies of the respective traditions, each one having a long history. What these philosophies share is that they are an integral part of the cultural traditions in which each takes place. Thus, I chose to call them collectively ‘cultural philosophy’. This is simply a term for referring collectively to all instances of ‘Y philosophy’, where ‘Y’ denotes a cultural or national entity. The philosophy constitutes what could be called the philosophical tradition, defined through shared canonical texts and sets of problems and methods. Examples are Plato’s and Aristotle’s writings in the case of Greek philosophy, Confucius’ and Lao-Tze’s in Chinese philosophy, and the Vedas in Indian philosophy. These texts partly define what it means to do philosophy in their respective traditions; they set out the problems and methods of philosophising. What is significant is that anyone can become members of these traditions, not by privilege of birth, but by subscribing to the same set of shared problems and methods constitutive of the respective traditions.

That is the first meaning of ‘cultural philosophy’—a way of doing philosophy consisting of a shared set of texts, problems, and methods. However, there is another meaning which does not rely exclusively on the shared set of texts. According to this meaning, derived from Hegel’s idea concerning the organicity of the social,³ the culture or national identity of the philosophers is the criterion of cultural philosophy rather than the shared texts and methods. Thus, in this sense, a Chinese philosopher working on a problem in analytic philosophy, intended for a Chinese (possibly scholarly) audience, would be doing Chinese philosophy, for what matters now is neither the problems nor the shared methods, but the nationality or cultural identity of the philosopher who does the work. A Thai philosopher working on an interpretation of Confucius is not doing Chinese philosophy either. If he intends his work to be a service to the Thai people, and puts his own cultural identity into his interpretive work, then he is actually doing Thai philosophy.

So, a cultural philosophy can be construed in both ways. Indian philosophy thus becomes either the philosophy defined mostly by

How is Thai philosophy possible?

the Vedic tradition, or any kind of philosophical activity done by Indians for Indians. The second meaning might not seem at first glance to be a serious one. For what is so important about the nationalities of philosophers involved in a project? Perhaps this sense could be made clearer if one understood it to be an expression of a cultural or national entity in terms of philosophy. Thus, Thai philosophy in this sense is an expression, a manifestation, of the whole culture when it is engaging itself in philosophical activity. This does not sound as grandiose as it appears because the manifestation here is only what members of the cultural or national entity talk about, engaging themselves in a problem they find valuable and interesting. Here the focus is on the cultural entity, not the textual canon. Thus, to say that a cultural philosophy is such a manifestation is only to say that it is the activity of talking, discussing, arguing by members of the entity in question on a common topic. What makes the talk philosophical is that it is based on rational persuasion and the topics concern general matters about what is really valuable or whether the direction the society as a whole is taking is really a good one. This topic on the nature of philosophy will be discussed in the next section. The philosophical topic which members of a cultural or national entity talk about is here less important than the activity of talking and discussing itself. Hence, since such an activity generally occurs within the limit or terrain of a cultural or national entity, it then defines a philosophy of that culture.

Consequently, the example of the Thai engaging in interpreting Confucius can be seen as part of the concrete manifestation of the Thai culture in its reflexive activity of extending beyond itself in order to adapt itself so as to be responsive to changes. There is a caveat, though. The Thai who undertakes to interpret Confucius must do so in the context of Thai culture. That is, merely possessing Thai nationality or ethnicity is not a sufficient criterion to qualify as doing Thai philosophy. One has to “live within” the culture in question. This sense of living within is rather difficult to define, but one aspect of it is that one has to be a full member of the culture. For example, the Thai interpreting Confucius has to be Thai culturally. It will not do if the Thai grows up abroad and has little or no cul-

Synkrētic

tural ties with the homeland. In short, living within a culture includes the sense of belonging to that culture, a willingness to identify oneself as a member of that culture. Otherwise, the Thai here would really be doing Chinese philosophy had he grown up and imbibed aspects of Chinese culture so that he just became another Chinese. Another aspect of “living within” is that the philosophers’ intended audience has to be made up of members of the culture he or she belongs to. This point is not difficult to grasp because if a Thai philosopher transmits his or her own philosophical viewpoints, not to members of his or her own cultural entity, but to those of another culture, then it could hardly be said that he or she is doing Thai philosophy.

Which sense is the correct one, then? Maybe the answer depends on our decision, and therefore the question is not an interesting one. What we really need, on the other hand, is a way to know how to achieve something valuable for us (read Thais) through the activities of talking, discussing, arguing. One has to realise that the authority of the self which serves as a basis for epistemological certainty is a thing of the past. At least that is my philosophical position, which of course cannot be argued for in full detail here.⁴ Certainty does not lie within oneself, neither can it be found in an individual’s relation to a reality outside. This does not mean that reality has no role, but that the relation to reality is always mediated by aspects of one’s own cultural identity, webs of beliefs constituted not by an individual alone, but by the community of which he or she is a part. If this position is really a tenable one, then the activities of talking, discussing, etc. are crucial for gaining at least an insight into whether the direction in which the society or community as a whole is heading is the right one, or the most appropriate one considering the circumstances. These activities are what philosophers have always done. Not only philosophers, to be sure, but it seems that, owing to the nature of their discipline, philosophers are particularly apt for the job. And since these activities occur within the confines of a culture, or a community, then we can see the general picture of how such a cultural philosophy as the Thai one is to be possible.

III. Philosophy as a reason-based activity
in search of value

The two senses of cultural philosophy described above share a common trait in that they are both activities of talking, discussing, and arguing among interested parties. In the former sense, the interaction and arguments centre on the corpus of sacred texts or accepted practices and the interpretations and viewpoints offered are operative within this framework. In the second sense, the activities are more loosely based. They are not necessarily tied to a particular set of texts or practices. But since one cannot walk away from one's own cultural identity, the two senses of cultural philosophy are here conjoined at this juncture. On the one hand, merely sticking to the canonical texts and following canonical interpretations is hardly a way to remain responsive in the modern world; on the other hand, without such ties to the tradition, it appears that members of the cultural community are cut loose and have no-one to hold on to except themselves. If that were so, then there would really be no sense in which an activity could be termed Thai philosophy.

Hence, there is a sense in which both are correct; they are equally correct as instances of what philosophy is, or should be, in my conception. The aim of the discussions and arguments is ideally to arrive at consensus on whatever topic participating parties in the activities are interested in. But actually the ideal is not necessary, for it is the activity itself which is important. Philosophy in this conception is not a state where one is one with Reality, nor a movement toward that Reality, but a contested, conflicting condition where parties agree on some very basic condition needed for arguments to get going, such as the use and rules of logic, but disagree on almost everything else. Richard Rorty has argued that philosophy is actually a conversation among whoever is interested and has enough leisure to participate, with the purpose of just continuing the conversation.⁵ However, if that is only the purpose there is for philosophy, then it is impossible to see how the conversation should be allowed to go on. If it is really the case that knowledge consists in individuals in a community depending on one another for challenge, revision, and

Synkrētic

support, then the activities of conversing and arguing become an important tool for the community to revitalise itself, to turn back upon itself so that it would not become redundant in a rapidly changing world. Philosophy in my conception consists of just such activity of arguing, discussing, talking, *etc.*, in other words activity whereby participants join in when they want to enter the debate, when they have something to say to the whole, when they either agree or disagree with any of the viewpoints offered to the members.⁶ All occur under the umbrella notion that knowledge is to be found in such an activity. Since knowledge is a value term, in that to say of a proposition believed that it is a piece of knowledge is to commend it highly, then philosophy in this conception has a strong affinity with value.

I have argued elsewhere for this conception of philosophy as a rational activity consisting of debates, discussions, refutations, justifications, *etc.* on topics of a general nature which concern what the rest of the community finds valuable.⁷ From the viewpoint of the community—a Hegelian perspective—the activities of the philosophers are manifestations of the community in its role as reflective thinkers and skeptical doubters. Philosophy for the community here is not a state whereby the community can claim that it has got in touch with Reality, whatever that may be. Philosophy explicitly attempts to dissociate itself from such finality. When there is finality, there is really no philosophy. Philosophy is a process, an activity.

Therefore, the possibility of Thai philosophy is straightforward. Thai philosophy is the activity of discussing, arguing, debating, refuting, affirming, *etc.*, all through the use of logical reasoning, to arrive at some kind of value which the community finds appealing. If such an activity happens in Thailand, *that* is Thai philosophy.

IV. Thai philosophy as a reflective activity by and for Thais

As mentioned before, Thai Studies aims at understanding various aspects of Thai society and thus is an empirical investigation. Philosophy, being a normative discipline, therefore seems to have a

How is Thai philosophy possible?

tenuous relationship with it. However, a Thai conducting an investigation in Thai Studies is an instance of the Thai community reflecting on itself, and this is as it should be. And if the reflection eventually consists in rational debates (for it is hardly conceivable that when the community reflects on itself it would involve only one individual) on the question of values or some broad questions a methodology for which has not been settled, the activity of philosophising results. That is the way Thai philosophy is possible. Consequently, philosophy and Thai studies seem to be in much closer relationship than previously appeared. A normative and an empirical, descriptive discipline seems to be much intertwined.

Since we are Thai (after all I intend to address this paper to Thais), it is never possible that we stand back and try to look at our culture and way of life as if we were a foreigner. A distance afforded to the foreigner never materialises for us. This is the same for other people reflecting on their own culture as well. Note that this is not the same as saying that it is not possible for a foreigner to understand Thai society, or to have a detailed knowledge of it, for that would commit one to the fallacy of basing authority of knowledge on one's individual self, a philosophical theory which I am trying to dismiss. It is entirely possible that foreigners can have as thorough knowledge of Thai society as the best Thai scholars. However, since a Thai's perception of her own society is always clouded by her own cultural identity, while a foreigner's is not, what happens is that the foreigner can see something that Thais perhaps fail to see since it lies too close to take notice. Thus, sometimes we need to read what foreigners have to say about our own culture and society in order to put ourselves in their shoes and see things through their eyes. We gain fresh perspectives this way which may help us to break from the ties of culture and habit. Thai Studies by a Thai is, then, in principle different from what foreigners do to study our society. The former is an instance of self-reflection, while the other is not. Neither is superior nor inferior to the other; they are just different.⁸

An implication of this for Thai philosophy is that, since Thai studies by a Thai is an expression of the community's reflecting on itself, the discipline has a strong affinity to philosophy, despite the

obvious differences. Thus, philosophy can indeed be a part of the collaborative, interdisciplinary effort of Thais to understand themselves, as well as that of members of the world community to understand Thais. What sets it apart is that philosophy is by nature reflective and skeptical, not, as usually understood, a mere set of doctrines to be described and catalogued. In this sense Thai philosophy, let me emphasise, is not just a set of doctrines, but the activities of Thai people when they enter into rational argumentation in order to understand deep questions that other disciplines find too intractable to study.

V. Conclusion

So, Thai philosophy is possible through argument and discussion. Continuity with the past is also important, and plays a strongly formative role. It is what sets the activities occurring in Thailand apart from those of the same type occurring in other cultures. Whatever is distinctive of Thai culture is formative in the sense that it provides a scheme by which talks, debates, concerning deep values take place. However, since the activities themselves are by nature not limited within these horizons, the tradition thus affords only a starting point, a frame of reference which can be adapted or modified by the very members of that tradition themselves. This is just a fancy way of saying that the tradition is alive and responsive to outside developments. In this way, there is no need to be concerned that Thai philosophy in this conception is a break with the tradition or the past. It is merely the tradition itself, but in its active, dynamic role. Thai studies thus become in part an activity of Thais to understand themselves. There is no need to boast that this is the only way to understand Thai culture; in fact foreigners may have a better perspective than we do, since they are not hampered by biases or prejudices that shadow us. But without the Thai community reflecting upon itself, trying to see its role in the scheme of things as well as the overall meaning of what there is and what it means to be Thai, then such a community would remain locked within its self-imposed prison of tradition. Thai culture would thus become no better than a showpiece in a museum.

Notes

- 1 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martins, 1929), transl. Norman Kemp Smith. For example, A2/B6-A6/B10.
- 2 This can be seen from the sparse research done by members of philosophy departments throughout the country. Most of the research published in these few decades has been expository in nature, drawing mostly upon Buddhist sources. One reason for this may be the preferences of the individual researchers, but I think the more interesting and deeper reason is that Thai philosophers, being Thai and thus integral participants of the culture, feel that there is really no need to philosophise, as I have explained above.
- 3 See, for example, Charles Taylor's discussion of the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit* in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 376-378.
- 4 I have argued for this point extensively in *Horizons of Philosophy: Directions for Philosophy in Thailand* (in Thai), available at: <http://pioneer.chula.ac.th/~hsoraj/Horizon_of_Philosophy.pdf>.
- 5 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 377-379.
- 6 Thus, my conception differs from that of Jürgen Habermas, who in 'Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter' (in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds. *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987], 296-315) argues for a conception of philosophy as one retaining a place for 'empirical theories with strong universalistic claims' (310). That is, philosophy will yield to such theories when they are capable of demonstrating their justified occupation. Thus, philosophy in this sense has a strong universalistic overtone. For Habermas it points to a way whereby universalist claims are possible. However, for philosophy to be able to hold such a place seems to presuppose that it could in some way point to the universal, even though philosophy does not in fact grasp it. But that is a very different conception of philosophy than the one presented here, which is derived from situations where visions of what constitutes the good life and so on collide, a conception that changes the aim of philosophy from establishing truth to seeing what good could come out of unfinalisable arguments.
- 7 Soraj Hongladarom, *Horizons of Philosophy*.
- 8 Thongchai Winichakul, in *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Chiang Mai: Silkworms Books, 1994), 6-9, argues against claims made by traditional Thai scholars of Thai studies that Thai people know more about their subject matter than anybody else. I agree with him on this point. However, what seems to be missing from his account is that he does not provide a full reason in support of the thesis, nor does he see any merit in the conduct of Thai studies by Thais on the methodology based on what he calls 'the researchers' predetermined notion of what constitutes a Thai worldview' (8). I happen to disagree with him on both points. The first point seems to presuppose that Thongchai disapproves of a Thai studying her own society, but that is ironic, for Thongchai himself is a Thai, and thus necessarily subject to the same criticism he levels on the workings of other

Synkrētic

Thais studying their own culture. Thongchai supposes that these Thai scholars uncritically think that they know what ‘Thainess’ means, and this forms a core of his criticism, having rejected the idea that ‘Thainess’ can have any fixed meaning (9). But ‘Thainess’ does not have to have fixed meanings in order for these Thai scholars to be able to do what they are doing, and doing well. The word could be defined extensionally, as logicians say. That is, there is no need to find a fixed meaning for the word, what is required is only that there be some tangible criteria to separate all Thai people from others, such as holding Thai passports, living within a certain geographical region, and so on. These requirements are not abstract and are actually in use to find out who is Thai and who is not. To press for any deeper meaning than this seems to me a case of philosophical illusion.

On the second point, Thongchai seems to be denigrating somewhat attempts by Thais to understand themselves. But what is wrong with having such a predetermined notion of Thainess? Apart from the notion of fixed meanings just mentioned, the works of these scholars can well be seen as manifestations of the Thai community to understand itself, and as such there is hardly any need to justify the meaning of ‘Thainess’ involved in the projects, for that is always assumed. Viewed from this perspective, Thongchai’s own works, such as *Siam Mapped* but also other works which aim at understanding Thai society or its history, are likewise manifestations of this sort. Thongchai, to be sure, has a point in his criticisms, but one has to be aware that in a group’s reflecting upon itself there is hardly any point in trying to separate oneself from the reflecting, as if it were possible to stand back outside the circle of one’s own cultural identity and to find out which way of looking is the most truthful one.