

THE 50 GREATEST PHILOSOPHERS ARE WESTERN

Posted on November 1, 2022 by Ricardo Duchesne



It could be that the most important historical question that points to a monumental contrast between the West and the Rest is the following: why did Western civilization produce all the greatest philosophers in history? If we agree that philosophy, at least until the first half of the nineteenth century, covered every branch of knowledge and dealt with the ultimate questions about the nature of reality and the meaning of life, being and becoming, why there is anything rather than nothing, what is good and evil, what is the difference between knowledge and opinion, it follows that identifying the nationality of the greatest philosophers may be a most revealing factum in our evaluation of the comparative achievements of civilizations. One does not have to agree with Aristotle that the "*highest good*" is the pursuit of wisdom to take seriously his claim that, if "*all men by nature desire to have knowledge*," and if the highest form of knowledge is expressed by philosophers, because, as Heraclitus said, "*they are inquirers into many things*," then it can be reasonably stated that the civilization that produced the greatest philosophers is the civilization that achieved the highest.

The History of Philosophy = The History of *Western* Philosophy

When scholarly histories of philosophies began to be written after the mid-1750s, that is, histories based on a relatively comprehensive study of the sources, it was agreed that true philosophy began in sixth century BC in Greece when a group of men known as the Pre-Socratics introduced a new way of inquiring for the "*causes and principles*" of the natural world grounded on rational judgements rather than on legends, myths, or gods responsible for the happenings of the world. They generally agreed with Aristotle's confident claim that Thales of Miletus (623-545 BC) is the first known "*inquirer into nature*" who can be distinguished from earlier poetical "*myth-makers*" such as Hesiod and Homer.

It is not only that histories of philosophy began their accounts with ancient Greece. These histories were almost entirely, if not completely, about the contributions of Western philosophers in the conviction that philosophy as a venture that relies on reasoned arguments for its truth claims—even in philosophers like David Hume who believed that "*reason is the Slave of the passions*"—is a uniquely Western achievement. G.W.F. Hegel's "Lectures on the History of Philosophy" (1819–1831), which were given to students, and recently published by [University of Nebraska Press](#) in three volumes, devote a brief opening section on "*Oriental Philosophy*" and thereafter the three volumes are entirely dedicated to European thinkers, starting with Thales. For Hegel, the history of Western philosophy "*shows us a succession of noble minds, a gallery of heroes of thought, who, by the power of Reason, have penetrated into the being of things, of nature and of spirit, into the Being of God, and have won for us by their labours the highest treasure, the treasure of reasoned knowledge.*"

This conviction that philosophy was almost entirely a Western phenomenon was held by historians of philosophy from every school of thought until recently. The neo-Kantian [Wilhelm Windelband](#), believing that philosophy concerns the *"independent and self-conscious work of intelligence which seeks knowledge methodically for its own sake,"* began his two volume classic, *A History of Philosophy*, published in 1892, with the ancient Greeks, without mentioning a single non-Western philosopher. Windelband believed that *"the history of philosophy is the process in which European humanity has embodied in scientific conceptions its views of the world and its judgments of life"* (p. 9). The historicist and existentialist Julián Marías, in his *Historia de la Filosofía* (1941), which went through countless editions, and was translated into English, also starts with the Pre-Socratics and ends with José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) without a word about a non-Western thinker—even though he says that *"philosophy is a way of life,"* which seems to fit with the *"Eastern"* tradition of seeing philosophy in terms of an inner or spiritual religious quest. The difference is that Marías thinks that philosophy is also about *"knowledge"* that *"justifies itself [and] constantly demonstrates and proves its validity."* Therefore, philosophy is a way of life *"that consists precisely of living according to a certain knowledge; therefore, this way of life postulates and requires this certain knowledge. It is this knowledge which determines the meaning of the philosophic life."* Of course, the word *"knowledge"* is also used in Eastern philosophies, but Marías agrees with the standard Western view that it was with the Pre-Socratics that *"a completely new human attitude"* emerged: a theoretic instead of a mythical attitude. The *"mythic man"* is enveloped by the surrounding world, lives in a world of things he can't differentiate in terms of their properties and contrast to the thinking self. In contrast, the *"theorizing"* philosopher differentiates the knowing self: *"instead of being among the things, he is opposite them, alienated from them, and thus things acquire a meaning of their own which previously they did not have"* (1967: pp. 2-4).

The liberal-minded Will Durant, in his popular book, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (1926), profiles only Western philosophers. In a "Preface to the Second Edition," written in 1962, we see the first inklings of multiculturalism, however, as Durant faults his book for leaving out *"Chinese and Hindu philosophy,"* even though he adds that Chinese philosophers were *"averse to epistemology"* or to inquiries into the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired. The analytical-empiricist philosopher Bertrand Russell, in his widely known book, *History of Western Philosophy* (1945), which was cited as one of the books that won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, took it for granted that the history of philosophy should be about Western philosophers. Philosophy began with the Pre-Socratics because it is only then that we see speculations on the nature of things with *"appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation."* Russell offered a chapter on "Mohammedan Culture and Philosophy" only to the extent that Muslims wrote commentaries on Aristotle. The Catholic philosopher, Frederick Copleston, in his

magisterial work, *A History of Philosophy*, published in nine volumes between 1946 and 1975, began with Greece and stayed in Europe, including a volume on Russian philosophy, right to the end.

This Western-centric attitude was unquestioned until recent times. It was the typical perspective of texts for university students. Konstantin Kolenda's *Philosophy's Journey: A Historical Introduction* (1974) says that it was the ancient Greeks who "*were able to think through to new, unorthodox questions.*" "*Mythical accounts about gods and about the world...do not necessarily concern themselves with the question of truth. Myth is something that is told and need not call for critical scrutiny, examination, justification. The idea of possibly discovering the true nature of reality behind the multiplicity of appearances and behind conflicting opinions is a most original and revolutionary idea in the intellectual history of man*" (p. 5). It is not only that the ancient Greeks posed critical questions—"*Is there some substance or some basic stuff out of which everything is made?*"—but that their answers consisted of "*reasoned*" arguments. Not a single Eastern philosopher is included in Kolenda's book.

In 1991, Norman Melchert published *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, in which he tells students that the value of philosophy is that it teaches you "*to believe for good reasons.*" Opinions are as good as the reasons behind them. "*That's what philosophy is*": teaching students how to think "*clearly and rationally.*" Every philosopher in Melchert's "*great conversation*" is Western. But didn't Nietzsche say that the "*will to power*" lies behind the grandiose claims of reason? And didn't Heidegger deny reason's ability to reveal the nature of being? Both Melchert and Kolenda include these two great philosophers for their originality and immense impact on contemporary thought. These thinkers, I will add, did not rely on mandates and conventions, educated in a world of myths and fables. The Nietzschean argument that behind the claims of philosophical reason lay a primitive unconscious will to power, archetypes inherited from the past long before any rational consciousness, articulated in-through an education in the rationalist tradition of the West. Heidegger attempted to access being (*Sein*) by means of a rigorous phenomenological analysis of human existence in respect to its temporal and historical character, conducting meticulous exegeses of philosophical texts from the Pre-Socratics onwards through the writings of medieval and modern philosophers.

The Great Philosophers, a 1987 BBC television series presented by Bryan Magee, which was made available in a book of the same name, only discusses Western philosophers in its 15 episodes, beginning with Socrates and ending with Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is true that in recent decades there have been noticeable attempts to accentuate the word "*Western*" in book titles in order to make it clear that it is not a history of philosophy *per se*. [*The Columbia History of Western*](#)

[*Philosophy*](#), edited by Richard Popkin and published in 2006, explicitly states that the book “has assembled 63 leading scholars to forge a highly approachable chronological account of the development of Western philosophical traditions”—from Plato to Wittgenstein and from Aquinas to Heidegger. At the same time, it says that “the Columbia History significantly broadens the scope of Western philosophy” to reveal the influence of non-Western contributions. There is a chapter “dedicated to Jewish and Moslem philosophical development during the Middle Ages, focusing on the critical role of figures such as Averroës and Moses Maimonides in introducing Christian thinkers to classical philosophy.” The book also acknowledges the influence of the Kaballah upon Spinoza, Leibniz, and Newton, and the influence of Moses Mendelssohn upon the work of Kant. Nevertheless, the focus remains entirely on the Western tradition; Muslims and Jews are included inasmuch as they were shaped by this tradition and contributed to it.

The book, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, which consists of four separate volumes published between 2004 and 2007, by the British philosopher and theologian Anthony Kenny, also focuses on those works in the Jewish and Islamic tradition that became important to the Western tradition. I am certain that if Popkin and Kenny really believed there were Eastern, or African, or Aztec philosophers, who had made philosophical contributions as significant as Aristotle, Descartes, or Locke, they would have included them. Using the term “Western” was likely in response to politically correct pressures to avoid identifying philosophy *per se* with “Western philosophy.” There have indeed been very strong pressures since about the 1990s for a more “inclusive” history of philosophy—in a Western world dedicated to multicultural immigration. A recent, highly publicized book is *Taking Back Philosophy* (2017), by Bryan Van Norden. It condemns American universities for “failing their students by refusing to teach the philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa, and other non-Western cultures.” [Without a background in Western philosophy](#) other than reading a few books by members of the Frankfurt School, Van Norden demanded that Western philosophy be seen as merely one current among many equally gifted ones. In a much commented NYT’s article, under the threatening title, “[If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is](#),” he called upon universities “to look beyond the European canon in their own research and teaching.” As if aware that he lacked reasoned arguments to back his claim that Inca philosophy was as profoundly significant, Van Norden embraced Herbert Marcuse’s “repressive intolerance” idea in [another New York Times article](#). We should tolerate leftist views only, for “justice dictates that access be granted to opinions and people...[that] benefit the community”—that is, multicultural communities. Those who disagreed with him were complicit with “nationalism” and “racism.” In support of him, Patricia McGuire, the President of Trinity Washington University, was direct in stating that inclusiveness in philosophy had nothing to do with the quality of non-Western philosophy: “Let’s face facts: there’s a Muslim Mayor in London, signifying the fact that even those who revere All Things

British need to catch up with the now-settled reality of great diversity in contemporary life. The canon of learning should reflect that, including Philosophy."

These mounting pressures to avoid "racist" exclusions of non-Western philosophers clearly account for A.C. Grayling's decision in his otherwise great book, *The History of Philosophy* (2019), to include a "Part V: Indian, Chinese, Arabic-Persian and African Philosophy." Grayling tries to argue that India, China, and Arabic-Persia developed schools of thought that discussed such perennial questions as what is truth, meaning, existence, and value – the truth, however, is that he has a hard time showing they did so in "intellectually rigorous ways." At most, using his own criteria of what constitutes philosophy (which excludes religion, casuistry, apologetics, or beliefs devoid of sound reasoning) he shows that there was an incipient philosophical tradition in India, China, and, due to the influence of Aristotle, in medieval Islamic civilization. He does not demonstrate that in these civilizations (again with the exception of Islamic Aristotelians) there were sustained inquiries "into the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired." While there were "inquiries into the nature of reality and existence" and into "what is good," there were no treatises on what constitutes valid and sound reasoning. Moreover, it is implicitly obvious that Grayling's account of these civilizations concerns an ancient or medieval period of creativity, consolidation of a few basic outlooks, followed by repetition or decline.

When it comes to "African philosophy," Grayling finds himself in a quandary of his own making: "are there philosophical schools of thought in Africa that are distinguishable from traditions, religions, folklore, mythology, poetry, art and collections of maxims?" He can't avoid suggesting that Africa did not produce a philosophical tradition. Only "if one attaches an extended and very loose sense to the label 'philosophy'" it is possible to talk about African philosophy. But he cautions not to equate "denials of its existence" with "an implicit dismissal of Africa." "There is much to discover in Africa, for example the rich and deeply attractive concept of Ubuntu." This term stands for "kindness, goodness, generosity, compassion, caring." While these virtues are not unique to Ubuntu, "it is appropriate that as humankind itself came out of Africa, so one of the best ideas about how it can flourish—the idea of Ubuntu—should emanate from there too." This is actually how this otherwise very intelligent history ends: with a childish call upon whites to think about Ubuntu and with the implication that if whites want to go far, they need to practice Ubuntu towards the African migrants invading Europe.

The First and the Second List of the Greatest 50 Philosophers

Below is my list of the 50 greatest philosophers, all from the West. There are very strong reasons to

exclude non-Western philosophers from this list. However, I have created a second list of the next fifty greatest, which do include a reasonable number of non-Western thinkers—insomuch as they had a profound impact on their respective cultures, and did contribute the best philosophies outside the West. How did I come up with these two lists? I did by trusting the authority of the histories of philosophy I have referenced above, including additional histories of both the West and the East to be cited below. Throughout my student days, undergraduate and graduate, and as a professor, I have read a sizable number of primary philosophical works in combination with many secondary books and articles. My own philosophical views have influenced to some degree the choices I have made, but overall I have relied on histories written by authors from a wide variety of perspectives, Kantian, Hegelian, materialist, phenomenological, empiricist, pragmatic, existentialist, analytical – and specialists in non-Western philosophies. I have also tried to bring out the best from ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods.

First List

1. Abelard (1079-1142)
2. Anaximander (b. 610 BC)
3. Anselm (1033-1109)
4. Aquinas (1225-1274)
5. Aristotle (384-322 BC)
6. Augustine (354-430)
7. Bacon, Roger (1214-1292)
8. Bacon, Francis (1561-1626)
9. Bentham (1748-1832)
10. Berkeley (1685-1753)
11. Carnap (1891-1970)
12. Democritus (460-360 BC)
13. Deleuze (1925-1995)
14. Derrida (1930-2004)
15. Descartes (1596-1650)
16. Fichte (1762-1814)
17. Frege (1848-1925)
18. Hegel (1770-1831)
19. Heidegger (1889-1976)
20. Heraclitus (535-475 BC)

21. Hobbes (1588-1679)
22. Hume (1711-1776)
23. Husserl (1859-1938)
24. James (1842-1910)
25. Kant (1724-1804)
26. Leibniz (1646-1716)
27. Locke (1632-1704)
28. Marx (1818-83)
29. Mill (1806-73)
30. Nietzsche (1844-1900)
31. Ockham (1285-1347)
32. Parmenides (b. 501 BC)
33. Peirce (1839-1914)
34. Plato (428-348 BC)
35. Plotinus (204-270)
36. Pythagoras (570-495 BC)
37. Quine (1908-2000)
38. Rawls (1921-2002)
39. Reid (1710-1796)
40. Rousseau (1712-1778)
41. Russell (1872-1970)
42. Sartre (1905-1980)
43. Schelling (1775-1854)
44. Schopenhauer (1788-1860)
45. Duns Scotus (1266-1308)
46. Socrates (470-399 BC)
47. Spinoza (1632-1677)
48. Wittgenstein (1889-1951)
49. Zeno of Lea (b. 489 BC)
50. Žižek (1949 -)

This is a remarkable statistical fact. It needs to be emphasized this is not a comparison of the West against three or two other civilizations groups, but a competition of the West versus the Rest. Aside from the Muslim, Chinese, and perhaps the Indian world, no other culture in the world, not the Mayas, not the Aztecs, not the Khmer Rouge Cambodians, not the Tibetans, not the Aksum civilization, not the

Egyptians, not the Assyrians, not the Bantus, not the Babylonians, not the Japanese, not the Koreans—NO other culture in the world, produced any great philosopher. Let it be repeated: this is not a list based on arbitrary, idiosyncratic, purely personal, or politicized assumptions. It is based on solid, widely recognized histories of philosophies. Before I go on commenting on this list, let's take a look at my second list, created for the purpose of finding a way to include non-Western thinkers, for the sake of argument.

Second List

1. Al-Farabi (870-950)
2. Alghazali (1058-1111)
3. Anaxagoras (500-428 BC)
4. Aurelius (21-180)
5. Averroes (1126-1198)
6. Bonaventura (1221-1274)
7. Bergson (1859-1941)
8. Böhme (1575-1624)
9. Boethius (480 – 524 AD)
10. Brentano (1838–1917)
11. Zhuang Zhou (369-286 BC)
12. Comte (1798-1857)
13. Confucius (551-479 BC)
14. Collingwood (1889-1943)
15. Davidson (1917-2003)
16. Dewey (1859-1952)
17. Diderot (1713-84)
18. Dilthey (1833–1911)
19. Dugin (1962 -)
20. Dummett (1925-2011)
21. Empedocles (490-430 BC)
22. Epicurus (341-271 BC)
23. Erasmus (1469-1536)
24. Gadamer (1900-2002)
25. Grotius (1583-1645)
26. Habermas (1929-)

27. Hempel (1905-1997)
28. Herder (1744-1803)
29. Hsun Tzu (Xunzi) (298-238 BC).
30. Kierkegaard (1813-1855)
31. Kojève (1902 -1968)
32. Lao Tzu (604-532 BC)
33. Lucretius (96-55 BC)
34. Luhmann (1927-1998)
35. MacIntyre (1929 -)
36. Malebranche (1638-1715)
37. Mencius (372-289 BC)
38. Montaigne (1533-1592)
39. Mo Tzu (479-438 BC)
40. Merleau-Ponty (1907-1961)
41. Ricour (1913-2005)
42. Rorty (1931-2007)
43. Schmitt (1888-1985)
44. Scruton (1944-2020)
45. Seneca (4 BC -65 AD)
46. Sextus Empiricus (ca. 200)
47. Spencer (1820-1903)
48. Strauss (1899-1973)
49. Thales (624-548 BC)
50. Zhu Xi (Chu Hsi) (1130-1200).

If there is a bias in my lists, it is that I neglected philosophers of history (Spengler, Vico), philosophers of science (Kuhn, Nagel, Feyerabend), of mathematics (Hilbert, Lakatos), of language (Jakobson, Austin, Searle), of law (Pufendorf, Kelsen, Hart), of logic (Boole, Turing, Gödel), and social theorists that are no less philosophical than Chinese thinkers like Confucius (Montesquieu, Sorokin, Weber).

The Score

The score for the two lists combined is:

- Europeans 80.5 = 80.5%
- Jews 9.5 = 9.5%
- Chinese 7 = 7%
- Muslims 3 = 3%

If we add Jews to the European list, insofar as they were all educated in Europe, then the Western score is 90 = 90%. Augustine was a Berber according to Gerald Bonner's authoritative biography *Augustine of Hippo*: *"There is no reason to suppose that he was of any but Berber stock"* (p. 36). Augustine was thoroughly educated in the West. The top four philosophical nationalities are the ancient Greeks, the Germans, the English, and the French. The fact that Indian philosophy can't be divorced from India's major religious traditions, or was never conceived as a separate intellectual pursuit, explains why I could not include Indian philosophers, great as they may have been as religious thinkers. Surendranath Dasgupta's impressive five-volume work, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, published between 1922 and 1955, is fundamentally about Buddhism, Jainism, *"the six systems of Hindu thought,"* including the Bhagavadgita, the *"most revered of all the Hindu texts,"* the philosophy of Srikantha, which argues that the [Shiva](#) and the [Brahman](#) are the one and the same, and Saiva philosophy, which posits *"the soul's bondage within the fetters of existence."* Sue Hamilton, an expert in Indian philosophy, [acknowledges](#) that *"what Westerners call religion and philosophy are combined in India, and that its philosophies are correctly referred to as soteriologies, or 'system of salvation.'"* The Indian philosophical tradition holds that *"understanding reality has a profound effect on one's destiny."* The attempt *"to understand the nature of reality"* is a *"spiritual undertaking, an activity associated with a religious tradition."* The aim of Indian philosophy was to escape from consciousness, to obliterate the thinking self; and every philosopher, or every philosophical outlook, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism, were preoccupied with the notion of reincarnation, the process of birth and rebirth, the transmigration of souls and the *"release"* of the soul from that process.

We know that a belief in rebirth/[metempsychosis](#) was held by Greek historical figures, such as Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato. But as Russell qualifies, the very Pythagoreans who believed that the *"soul was subject to a sequence of transmigrations... gave rise to a scientific and more especially a mathematical tradition... in spite of the mystical element arising from the orphic revival."* Sue Hamilton agrees, adding that while in Western medieval philosophy the existence of God was taken to be true as an article of faith, attempts were made to separate truths established by means of reason alone, and to even establish the existence of God by means of reason. In modern times, Kant, a devout Christian, would go further by insisting that *"what one could know for certain was strictly limited to what could be ascertained by means of reasoning...one could never have certain knowledge about issues of faith"* (pp.

1-12). Nevertheless, Sue Hamilton, as is generally the case with Westerners who study Eastern thought, misleads readers with her view that Western philosophy "*tends to be concerned with detailed and technical questions about kinds of logic and linguistic analysis*" – whereas Indian philosophy is a "*spiritual undertaking*" about "*big metaphysical questions*" concerning the meaning of life and how to live one's life in order to have an effect on one's destiny. Van Norden also criticizes the notion that the West discovered the "*one universal method of rationality*." Chinese philosophy has its own modes of reasoning and its own way of searching for the truth.

Let's leave aside the fact that both India and China have now embraced the scientific rationality of the West, apparently with the conviction that this rationality is universally useful. The Western philosophical tradition contains the most reasoned critiques of the pretensions of reason in favor of alternative ways of finding meaning and making sense of the universe—intuitive, poetical, artistic, archetypal ways. The difference is that those philosophers who pointed to the limitations of reason would go on to develop alternative methodologies, or fully articulated philosophies, such as hermeneutics, phenomenology, and existentialism—by individuals well educated in the Western rationalist and empiricist traditions. I will return to this point below. Jacob Böhme, whom Hegel called "*the first German philosopher*," and is included in my second list, had a major influence on Schelling, and German thinking in general, with his idea that an irrational force, the *Ungrund*, a groundless will, was the primary fount of being, not reason.

Seven Chinese philosophers out of 100 is more than enough. In China there are five major philosophical traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, the School of Names, the Mohists, and the Yin-Yang school. All these traditions emerged in ancient times, and thereafter, in what we called the "*medieval*" and "*modern*" eras, all we get are "*neo*" developments of these schools: "*Neo-Confucianism*" and "*Neo-Taoism*," or philosophers who combined aspects of the various schools to produce slightly different ideas. The highly respected sinologist, Frederick Mote, goes as far as to say that every major philosophical outlook in China's history occurred "*within a revitalized Confucianism*"—notwithstanding the role of Daoism and Buddhism. This is why I included only one philosopher that is not from ancient times, namely, Zhu Xi (1130-1200). Xi is indeed seen as the philosopher who "*exercised the greater influence on Chinese thought*," except for Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzu, and Hsun Tzu. He synthesized most currents within Chinese philosophy within a grand Neo-Confucian system, with his "*most radical innovation*" being the selection of "*the Analects, the Book of Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean...as the Four Books*," commenting on them, and making them the orthodox foundation of the Chinese civil service examinations from 1313 to 1905 (1963: p. 588-90).

Including other Neo-Confucians in the list would have been the same as including notable European philosophers who followed in the footsteps of prior great philosophers, such as the so-called Cambridge Platonists: [Henry More](#) (1614–1687), [Ralph Cudworth](#) (1617–1688), [Benjamin Whichcote](#) (1609–1683), [Peter Sterry](#) (1613–1672), [John Smith](#) (1618–1652), [Nathaniel Culverwell](#) (1619–1651), John Worthington (1618–1671), George Rust (d. 1670), [Anne Conway](#) (1630–1679) and John Norris (1657–1711). Including Neo-Taoists would have required including many gifted Cartesians: [Antoine Arnauld](#), [Balthasar Bekker](#), [Tommaso Campailla](#), [Johannes Clauberg](#), [Michelangelo Fardella](#), [Antoine Le Grand](#), Adriaan Hereboord, [François Poullain de la Barre](#), [Edmond Pourchot](#), [Pierre-Sylvain Régis](#), [Henricus Regius](#), [Jacques Rohault](#), [Christopher Wittich](#).

Should We Really Include Chinese Philosophers?

We may indeed ask: Is Confucius really a philosopher? After all, Confucianism is a *"doctrine of worldly social-mindedness,"* a guide for proper moral behavior for the scholar gentry class of China's despotic bureaucratic state, a doctrine that, in the words of [Joseph Needham](#), became a *"cult, a religion, based on a kind of hero worship and borrowing from the cults of nature-deities and ancestor worship"* (1997: p. 79). Confucius never asked questions about the ultimate nature of reality. The Confucian term *"all under heaven"* does not refer to the universe, the infinite, but is a term that denotes the geographical area associated with the political sovereignty of the emperor.

One could seriously argue that China produced individuals better described as writers of guidelines on how best to rule, how best to meditate, contemplate nature, combined with some allusions and illustrations about the *"boundless"* and about the ways of nature, without *"elaborate reasoning and detailed argument."* These last quoted words are from Fung Yu-Lan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Yu-Lan, after stating that China has a rich philosophical tradition with contributions in logic and metaphysics; and after clearly stating that a *"philosopher must philosophize...must think reflectively on life, and then express his thoughts systematically... [and offer] theories [that are] the products of reflective thinking,"* (p. 2) goes on to say:

"The fact is that Chinese philosophers were accustomed to express themselves in the form of aphorisms, apothegms, or allusions, and illustrations. The whole book of Lao-tzu consists of aphorisms, and most of the chapters of the Chuang-tzu are full of allusions and illustrations. This is very obvious. But even in writings such as those of Mencius and Hsun Tzu, when compared with the philosophical writings of the West, there are still too many aphorisms, allusions, and illustrations. Aphorisms must be very brief;

allusions and illustrations must be disconnected" (p. 12).

He adds that this way of thinking is "*not articulate enough*," but that this "*insufficiency*" ("*briefness and disconnectedness*") is "*compensated*" by the "*suggestiveness*" of the allusions (pp. 11-12). Yu-Lan is right that this lack of "elaborate reasoning" is "*obvious*" to anyone who reads Chinese philosophers. I will go further in saying that Chinese philosophy never rose beyond the pre-rational, mystical, poetical, bureaucratic, style of writing that prevailed in all cultures up until the ancient Greeks singularly discovered the faculty of reasoning and came to realize that there is a mind that reasons, and that this mind can generate its own rules of reasoning in conscious distinction to presuppositions from extra-philosophical beliefs.

This conscious differentiation of reason from its object, and appearance of free self-determination, this awareness by reason of itself as both tool and object of reasoning, reached its culmination in post-Kantian idealism, but it was Aristotle who did the most in ancient times to delineate what constitutes a proper philosophical statement about what there is and what constitutes a valid form of reasoning about why something is so. He invented formal logic, a precise language about reality, about what things can be said to be substances and the reasons why they are as they are. He showed that true philosophical statements are composed of basic categories—substance, quantity, quality, relationship, place, time—which express the various ways in which being is, and that these statements can be formulated to be subject-predicate statements. This is just a little part of what this incredible philosopher did.

In some ways Chinese philosophers resemble Pre-Socratic philosophers. Aristotle criticized the Pre-Socratics for failing to articulate fully criteria for differentiating faulty arguments from good arguments. This is what Aristotle sought to provide with his formal logic and the syllogism. Chinese philosophical statements are devoid of demonstrative reasoning. Chinese arguments lack clearly stated primary premises, with precisely defined categories. Actually, in fairness to the Pre-Socratics, even though they did not invent syllogistic reasoning, they did discover *logos*, that there is a rational order in the world and that humans have a faculty, *nous*, which they can employ in contradistinction to beliefs handed down without reasoned debate.

The words from Needham I cited above about Confucianism come from *The Shorter Science & Civilisation in China: 1*, which is an abridgment in three volumes of Joseph Needham's [magisterial project](#) with the same title, which consists of twenty seven books dealing with the history of science

and technology in China. Needham, still recognized as the most impressive scholar of Chinese culture, is the author of most of these books. While he was not keen about Confucian philosophy, he wrote admiringly about the Taoists, Mohists, and Legalists, claiming they made fundamental contributions to scientific knowledge, empiricism, and to a "*mechanistic-naturalistic*" conception of the world. He thinks that members of these schools rose above the "*metaphysics*" of philosophy. (Needham, by the way, was a Marxist who believed that science had rightfully displaced philosophy, and this is why he wanted to portray Chinese thinkers as harbingers of modern scientific thought. I reject this positivist downgrading of philosophy). As it is, all the passages that Needham brings up from Chinese philosophers strike me as poetical, mystical, and alchemical statements. The founding text of Taoism written by Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (300 BC) consists of a string of impressionistic statements about "*the Way*." This book of five thousand words is as long as a magazine article. He claims that Lao Tzu wrote in a language similar to the proto-scientific language of the Pre-Socratics, citing the following:

"The ways of men are conditioned by those of the earth, the ways of Earth by those of Heaven, the ways of Heaven by those of the Tao, and the Tao came into being by itself" (90-1).

He cites many similarly worded passages from later Taoist texts; for example:

"All phenomena have their causes. If one does not know these causes, although one may happen to be right, it is as if one knew nothing, and in the end one will be bewildered...The fact that water leaves the mountains and runs to the sea is not due to any dislike of the mountains and love of the sea, but is the effect of height as such" (93).

But these statements are not at all "*mechanistic*" in outlook. They are not even at the level of the Pre-Socratic search for naturalistic causes. The way Taoists write about the Tao, the being that came to be by itself, lacks rigor; it is really a mystical way of apprehending a oneness that is complete onto itself, which they describe in hazy words, asserting that it is, but not deducing it. In contrast, when Parmenides wrote about "*the One*" he tried to deduce it from prior statements. Parmenides contrasts the expression that *something is* to the expression that *something is not*. He then argues that saying that *something is not* does not make sense since you cannot know what is not, and you can't even express it. He writes:

"There are only two ways of inquiry that can be thought of. The first, namely, that it is (and that it is impossible for it not to be), is the way of belief, for truth is its companion. The other way of inquiry, namely, that it is not (and cannot be), is a path that none can learn at all. For you cannot know what is not, nor can

you express it."

Having said this, Parmenides follows up with his main point that only that which is can be thought about in a meaningful way, and only that which can be thought about can be:

"It is the same thing that can be thought and that can be. What can be spoken and thought must be; for it is possible for it to be, but impossible for nothing to be...One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that it is.

From here he infers that what we can say about the One is that it is eternal, indivisible, unmoving, that is, uncreated and indestructible. He offers a rational reason for making this inference, saying that if we say that the One became, or came into existence, or will cease to exist, then this would be the same as saying that it was not before it became, and that it will not be after it ceases to be, which would amount to making expressions about things which are not, which is impossible since you cannot know or say anything about what is not. Therefore:

[The One is eternal], for how can "what is" be going to be in the future? Or how could it come into being? If it came into being, then it is not. Nor is it, if it is going to be in the future. Thus, is becoming extinguished and passing away not to be heard of."

Needham says that the paradoxes of the Mohist Hui Shih are similar to the paradoxes of Zeno. He cites this paradox from Shih: *"The South has at the same time a limit and no limit."* But as I have [argued elsewhere](#), paradoxes come in different degrees of difficulty; some paradoxes are "weak or shallow," based on unfounded suppositions, faulty reasoning, or ostensibly vague wording. The philosophical evidence shows that Europeans conceptualized all the sophisticated paradoxes in history. The Western mind did so because it has a peculiar inclination to seek truths that don't violate the self-legislated laws of reason, the law of contradiction, the law of excluded middle, and the law of identity. If a claim is illogically inconsistent, in violation of these laws, then the claim or the reasoning behind it must be reevaluated or rejected. This is why Europeans took [Zeno's paradoxes](#) seriously, for they seem to suggest that one could reach a logically unacceptable conclusion on the basis of sound reasoning from apparently sound premises. They wondered whether these paradoxes revealed deficiencies in the way we reason, calling for improvements in our reasoning powers, a better system of logic and a more precise usage of language.

At the same time, however, some European thinkers did not conclude that paradoxes were mere

expressions of faulty reasoning but a testimony to the limited nature of the human mind in its capacity to offer rationally consistent answers about the ultimate questions of the universe and life. Heraclitus came to the conclusion that reality was inherently contradictory and thus paradoxical. The intellectual culture of paradoxes in China was fundamentally different in degree of sophistication, the reaction of intellectuals to paradoxes, and the absence of philosophical reflections about the contradictory nature of the universe. The School of Names was the only one that brought up some paradoxical expressions, and this School remained an isolated moment in China's intellectual history. The Confucians in control of intellectual discussions dismissed the paradoxical expressions of the School of Names as "*bizarre expressions*" that discouraged young minds from the proper use of language and the obligation of educated gentlemen to promote "*ritual propriety and righteousness*."

Should we even include any of the major members of the Legalist school? As Frederick Mote says:

"Legalism is not a movement in philosophy. It is not concerned with truth. It is not reflective thinking on the great individual and social problems of life. It does not seek the general principles under which all facts can be explained. It is a system of methods and principles for the operation of the state, and even the state is given only the barest of ideological foundations. Legalists were content to justify their system by the single comment: 'It works' (p. 108).

So, it looks like Hsun Tzu (298-238 BC), the founder of legalism, should be taken out from this list. Confucius too, and the Taoist mystics and the not so impressive Mohists. If we include the Legalists, then we should include many other European political philosophers I left out, starting with Machiavelli, Bodin, Cicero, Thoreau, Bakunin, Hooker, Calvin, Lenin, Harrington, Blackstone, Paine, Jefferson, Burke, Godwin, Constant, Madison, Gentile, Sorel, Oakeshott—to name some. Honestly, the 50+50 list is very conciliatory.

The Transcendental West Stands above the Embedded Chinese

Some sinologists believe that Chinese philosophers came to the realization—long before Western philosophers—that thinking inevitably occurs within a context and that it is not possible to transcend the culturally-specific context from which all thinking emerges. Among the publications which have made this case, the most comprehensive is *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (1997), by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames. This book draws a fundamental contrast between the "*transcendentalism*" of European philosophers and the "*embeddedness*" of

Chinese thinkers. Early on in their history, this book tells us, Chinese intellectuals came to the “*pragmatic*” realization—well before Western pragmatism and hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—that all thinking is “*embedded*” to a time and a place. Chinese abstained from the “*naïve Western supposition*” that intellectuals could transcend with their ideas the social context from which they emerged.

I believe it was precisely the transcendental capacity of Western thinkers to reason in terms of universal concepts independent of context that gave them eventually the “*pragmatic*” or “*hermeneutic*” ability to understand the ways in which knowledge-claims are culturally embedded. The West’s transcendental capacity did not spring out of the “*human mind*” as such, but out of its unique historical experience. The Chinese mind was embedded to its particular traditions and historical contexts without being self-aware of this, because the Chinese mind lacked a transcendental capacity. The transcendental capacity of Europeans did not emerge without historical conditions, outside a particular context, but developed over time, beginning in ancient Greece. The ability to generate “*transcendental concepts*” is the product of a culturally specific mind, which can only be understood by situating it within the specific background of Western history.

Hall and Ames believe there are no “*universally human, culturally neutral grounds to which we can appeal as a basis of comparison of particular cultures*” since any account will necessarily “*presuppose something of the theoretical stance of the tradition from which the analysis and evaluation begins*” (xii). Only a “*pragmatic method*” provides us with an escape from the Western arrogance of a “*disembedded*” or detached “*I*” capable of adjudicating over different traditions. We should rely on pragmatic thinkers such as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty, for an appropriate vocabulary for understanding how the self is socially constituted. This pragmatism, they argue, fits right in with the Chinese perspective that the person can never be identified in abstraction from the social roles that define and constitute the person. Besides pragmatism, Hall and Ames mention hermeneutics and poststructuralism, as forms of thinking that allow us to overcome the dualistic thinking of the West with its separation of mind and matter, self and society, and its pretensions to a view that is objectively valid.

Don't these two academics realize that pragmatism, hermeneutics, and poststructuralism are Western products? They acknowledge this in a low-key way, stating that these schools of thought arose late in Western history; and yet their entire argument is that Westerners have been unable to understand Chinese thinking because they have relied on dualistic ways of thinking. Their pragmatic and “*historicist*” method are the best way to apprehend the meanings of Chinese words and writings, against Western-

centric readings, which judge other cultures in terms of such Western concepts as "*mind*," "*self*," "*transcendence*," "*person*," "*subject*," "*object*," which lack corresponding terms in the Chinese language or have very different meanings within Chinese culture. So, implicitly, without wanting to draw attention to the irony of it all, and perhaps without even knowing what they are doing, Hall and Ames rely on Western schools of thought to criticize Western-centric readings of Chinese culture.

The very academics who claim that we need to contextualize our thinking, because it is impossible to have a view from nowhere, fail to contextualize the particular historical roots of their way of thinking. What Hall and Ames fail to realize, and this includes every Western academic condemning Western logocentrism, is that the Chinese have never self-consciously thought about the way knowledge is context-bound, the way the consciousness, will, desires, and ideas of individuals are culturally situated. The Chinese mind has been unable to stand back from its cultural surroundings to reflect upon the ways it has been culturally situated. In contrast, the Western mind was able to develop methodologies to understand texts from different eras and different cultures, because this is the only culture that learned how to draw ontological distinctions between mind and matter, individual and society, the three parts of the soul, and so on, in the course of which this mind eventually developed particular sciences—physics, chemistry, biology, botany, sociology, economics, etc.—to explain different aspects of reality, and newly emerging properties, while also realizing that the concept of "*man in general*" is limited by historically determinate factors. The prior ability of ancient Greek philosophers to discover the distinctiveness of the faculty of the mind, the distinction between *physis* (nature) and *nomos* (law or custom) nurtured a transcendental outlook that allowed Western thinker to stand back from their context and view other cultural contexts in their own terms.

Therefore, it is not enough to say that all knowledge is historically situated, the expression of a particular people. If all knowledge is contextual, then all knowledge claims are equally valid. We have to ask why the West developed all the theories about how knowledge is context-bound, and why the West produced all the modern sciences. Self-conscious cultural relativism—a relativism in which subjects are not completely absorbed by their culturally specific world views—presupposes a subject that has come to a transcendental understanding of the relativistic views of other cultures, and is thus able to understand its own relativism, and in this way transcend it.

From a Piagetian perspective, as I argued elsewhere, we can say that the Chinese mind did not rise above the concrete operational stage, that is, above the third stage in Piaget's theory of cognitive development. While the Chinese mind showed signs of formal operational thinking in some of its

mathematical operations and rationalization of state bureaucracy, it did so only at an elementary level. In stark contrast to Hobbes, who conducted a thorough study of Euclid's Elements and the mechanistic science of Galileo in order to reach generalizations about the nature of political power, the ideas espoused in *The Analects* of Confucius, for example, are tied to actual historical times and personalities. As Burton Watson [notes](#): *"In the Analects, therefore, the reader will find no lengthy discussions of terminology or expositions of ideas. Instead, moral and political concepts are presented in terms of particular individuals, the teacher Confucius and the disciple or other persons with whom he is conversing and the particular circumstances under discussion"* (2007: p. 7). Like the concrete operational mind, the Confucian mind was limited to thought concerning things that were available to immediate perception about past virtuous rulers; it did not seek to reach general rules, or understand cause-effect relations detached from particular contexts. The writings of Confucius consist of aphorisms advising future rulers and officials how the ideal gentleman should comport himself if he is to meet the established conventions set in the past, the roles and rituals the ideal gentleman must follow in order to rule properly according to the Way.

In conclusion, if I may end on a realistic-pessimistic note on the current situation in the West: as immigration replacement accelerates, and as the populations of Britain, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, United States and other European nations, become thoroughly diverse, and the universities fulfill their current mission for *"inclusiveness, diversity, and equity,"* the teaching of philosophy will include as equally substantial names from all over the world. Already, as it is, research on the racism of [Kant](#), [Hegel](#), [Heidegger](#), [Aristotle](#), and many other philosophers, is one of the most lucrative, grant collecting activities in academia. These philosophers will be taught less for their philosophies than for their sins in racism and their threats to an open, tolerant, and inclusive Western world. As Karl Popper had [already insisted](#), *"we should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."* While Popper did not call for the intolerance of these thinkers, he condemned and dismissed the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel as nationalistic, xenophobic and intellectually worthless. It was only a few steps for Herbert Marcuse to construct his argument that any views that don't accept the spread of cultural Marxism should be suppressed and outlawed.

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***Featured:** "Seven Sages of Greece," or "Plato's Academy." Roman mosaic, from the Villa of Titus Siminius Stephanus, in Pompeii; ca. 100 BC to 79 AD.*

