



## Breakthrough to Transcendence? Three Concepts of Inter-Cultural Philosophy (Leibniz, Hegel, Jaspers)

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**Abstract:** After a brief discussion of G. W. Leibniz' and G. F. W. Hegel's disposition toward Chinese philosophy, the essay addresses Jaspers' idea of a breakthrough to transcendence in the Axial cultures and questions the relevance of its contribution for the historiography of philosophy. In view of two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, Jaspers took it upon himself to reconceptualize the idea of a world-history. The Western and Christian traditions could no longer serve as the central axis and needed to be replaced by a global perspective. Historians of philosophy who were dissatisfied with the practice of putting a sole focus on the Greco-Roman tradition in European culture later adopted this idea and challenged the implicit or explicit equation of Western philosophy as being philosophy proper. However, the attempts to establish a Jaspers inspired post-Eurocentric historiography of philosophy met a problem. Jaspers' existentialist assumptions are based on the concept of a global *philosophia perennis*, which in turn constitutes a universal and unifying standard for evaluation. Any such standard reintroduces what it sought to eliminate. Moreover, Jaspers' pluralism or globalism is limited to the presumed advanced civilizations of India, China, and the West, while other traditions such as African or Native American philosophy are still not being considered. And finally, the Western tradition as a continuous refinement of these Axial beginnings remains authoritative, ironically even its late modern post-colonial subversion.

**Keywords:** Eurocentrism; intercultural philosophy; Western philosophy; Chinese philosophy; Axial Age; exoticism; universalism.

The relations between Chinese and Western philosophers are a good and promising case in point of intercultural and transcultural discourse.<sup>1</sup> When deliberating what role Chinese thinking plays in Western philosophy, one is faced with several difficulties with regard to the identification of the scope and extent of these two concepts. Different funding agencies on the part of both of China and the West support the cooperation among and mobility of philosophers.

This World Congress of Philosophy 2018 taken by itself is a strong indication of it. The interest of Western philosophers in professing their philosophy in China is great, perhaps greater than taking a genuine interest in Chinese philosophy as such. A growing number of Western philosophers regularly travel to China to discuss with their Chinese colleagues Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, or Martin Heidegger; or aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics.

Nevertheless, one can also observe a certain asymmetry in this area, inasmuch as, according to my observation, Western academic philosophers travel

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was presented at the Eighth International Jaspers Conference, Beijing, August 2018.

much more frequently to China as visiting professors and conference participants, while, conversely, Chinese philosophy professors are less present in Europe or the United States. With respect to students, this imbalance is even more prominent. While relatively few European or American students acquire a significant part of their philosophical education in China, significantly more Chinese students and postgraduates spend lengthy periods of time at Western universities. A similar asymmetry can also be observed with respect to making translations of philosophical literature. Nearly all philosophy of Western origin is available in Chinese translations, including recent and contemporary contributions. Certainly, the classical texts of Chinese philosophy are translated into most Western European languages, especially from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. But these translations almost solely cover the classical Chinese tradition. The author of the only introduction to contemporary Chinese philosophy in German seems right if he points out: "Contemporary Chinese philosophy is largely unknown even with philosophers and sinologists. If anything, ancient Chinese philosophy enjoys a certain amount of attention."<sup>2</sup> It seems as if China is listening to modern Western philosophy, whereas the West is still quite often ignoring the contributions of Chinese philosophy. In what follows, I will exemplarily discuss the reception of Chinese thought by three German philosophers: Gottfried W. Leibniz, Georg W. F. Hegel and Karl Jaspers, with the objective to contribute to a better understanding of this imbalance and asymmetry. Each one of them offers a different modality for doing intercultural philosophy that I call curious exoticism, self-confident universalism, and critical Eurocentrism respectively. Despite their merits, however, each of these modes remains within a Western framework by virtue of which they contribute to that asymmetry.

### The Curious Exoticism of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

The encounter with Chinese thinking in German philosophy evokes different forms of exotic curiosity and open-mindedness to the foreign. This friendly curious openness can be well illustrated by using the example of Leibniz, who over several decades has

expressed his strong and lasting interest in China in numerous letters and writings. A significant upshot of this interest is his *Novissima Sinica Historiam Nostri Temporis Illustratura*.<sup>3</sup> As the title implies, this annotated edition of his correspondence with various Jesuits offers a rich and illustrated collection of news received from and about China. David Mungello elaborates that, in 1689, Leibniz used the opportunity to communicate with the Jesuit priest, and China expert, Claudio Filippo Grimaldi, whom he had met in Rome and with whom he henceforth continued an exchange of letters. Leibniz is interested in the peculiarities of Chinese language and scripture, as well as in mathematics and logic. He knew an abbreviated version of the *Book of Changes* having read its first translation into Latin by the Jesuit Richard Couplet in 1687. In the hexagrams of this book, he sees an anticipation of his binary number system and therefore concludes, probably incorrectly, to be confronted with a highly developed ancient Chinese mathematics.<sup>4</sup> Due to China's long and continuous history, Leibniz assumed that its treasure of experimental and empirical knowledge must be much larger than the European one and he reacts – quite philosophically – with curious enthusiasm by rhetorically asking: "What could be more desirable to an interested person than to see and hear a man, who can open to us the hidden treasures of the far East and the remote secrets of so many centuries."<sup>5</sup> Leibniz continues by asking thirty questions, including, "What can we hope for from a key to the Chinese characters?" Or, "How do the Chinese distill alcohol equivalent to ours from rice?" However, his open curiosity is embedded within a universalist framework, as becomes obvious from a later note, he wrote in Summer 1689 after his conversations with Grimaldi. The Chinese people, he notes, are a "profit-oriented type of people" who observe "heaven only for

<sup>3</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica Historiam Nostri Temporis Illustratura*, 1697, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek digital <https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/resolve/display/bsb11098678.html>.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Mungello, "How Central to Leibniz's Philosophy was China?" in *Das Neueste über China: G. W. Leibnizens Novissima Sinica von 1697*, eds. Wenchao Li and Hans Poser, Stuttgart, DE: Steiner Verlag 2000, pp. 57-67, here pp. 59 f.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried W. Leibniz, "Leibniz an Claudio Filippo Grimaldi S. J., Rom, 19. Juli 1689," transl. Malte-Ludolf Babin, *Digitale Edition, Faksimile 3*, <http://dokumente.leibnizcentral.de/index.php?id=376>. [Henceforth cited as CFG]

<sup>2</sup> Fabian Heubel, *Chinesische Gegenwartsphilosophie zur Einführung*, Hamburg, DE: Junius 2016, p. 11 (my translation).

the sake of earning a living, not for the sake of the glory of truth" (CFG 377). Leibniz' philosophical universalism implies that Chinese thought either contributes to a unified human quest for the glory of truth or it remains ultimately insignificant. In their attitude to the European astronomers, Leibniz writes, they displayed

a malevolent attitude, and as soon as they see that the calculations [of the fathers] are in any tiny contradiction to the findings in the sky, they immediately exclaim: The astronomy of the Europeans is deceptive, let us return to our own. They see the splinter in the eye of others and do not care about the beam in their own. [CFG 377]

Similar remarks can be found in Leibniz in support of the assumption that he regarded China as being inferior to the West in theoretical-philosophical issues, yet nevertheless he aimed to promote intellectual and scientific discourse in addition to the merely economic exchange with that foreign, ancient, and technically equal civilization. His curious exoticism appreciates alterity and he is eager to learn, but only in relation to the unquestioned standards of his own tradition, because he ascribes universal validity to these standards. If truth is universal, global human achievements either contribute to its glory or they do not, and Leibniz never doubts the superior significance of the occidental thought on a trajectory to unified knowledge of truth. Leibniz is not only universally interested; he is also a convinced advocate of philosophical universalism, epitomized in the religious and philosophical tradition of the West.

A similar disposition toward Chinese philosophy can also be noticed in the writings of Christian Wolff who became acquainted with classical texts of Chinese philosophy through Jesuit sources and who thereafter generously cited these sources. His 1721 speech at the University of Halle on the practical philosophy of the Chinese (*Oratio De Sinarum Philosophia Practica*) triggers a fierce opposition to it by pietist-religious adversaries and eventually leads to his expulsion from the city. This reaction is not based on an anti-Chinese furor of the people of Halle, but is caused by the rejection of Wolff's central idea: With the help of Confucianism, Wolff sought to show that the basic concepts of morality are not based in Christian religion, but that they rather derive from universal, and therefore also globally unifying, sources of reasoned philosophizing. This implies an appreciation of the concepts of dignity and virtue in Confucius' philosophy, and at the same

time challenges Western, especially Christian notions of singularity. However, the underlying universalist rationalism seems to assume that whatever is good and right in the intellectual endeavors of the most varied times and cultures is being absorbed in the unity of reason, while the highest revelation of this reasoning is expressed in Wolff and his understanding of his contemporary philosophy. In this regard, Leibniz' and Wolff's curious exoticism refer to a position which is detailed in Hegel.

### The Self-Confident Universalism of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

With the institutional consolidation of philosophy in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century, one can observe an increased systematic interest in the history of philosophy as a discipline. Ulrich Schneider observes that until the second half of that century, philosophy-historical books were introduced with great regularity "through a section on philosophy among the Chaldaeans, Persians, Arabs, Indians, Chinese, Egyptians, Celts, and Jews (also Phoenicians, Ethiopians, and Japanese occasionally)."<sup>6</sup> Yet with the beginning of a disciplinary organized and institutionalized philosophical historiography in the nineteenth century, this pluralism came to an end. The history of philosophy is being represented increasingly as a continuous development, starting from the exceptional Greek beginnings and leading to a development of philosophy in Europe in the presumed proper meaning of the term solely as the consequence of historical progress. Since that time the idea dominated in Europe that true philosophy only emerged once, namely in Greece, and is even now still being based on that ancient Greek transition. Ancient Chinese philosophy either plays no role or at most a marginal role in this narrative. Furthermore, contemporary philosophy in China is being considered only to the extent, as it seems thematically, argumentatively and disciplinarily linked to the current discourses developed within the Greek-European-Western tradition.

In this context Hegel exerted considerable influence. His widely reproduced lectures separate early Greek philosophy from even earlier mythical-religious modes of thought, from the practical teachings of the

<sup>6</sup> Ulrich J. Schneider, *Die Vergangenheit des Geistes. Eine Archäologie der Philosophiegeschichte*, Frankfurt/Main, DE: Suhrkamp 1990, p. 72 (my translation).

traditional sages, and from the cultural and cognitive achievements of the adjacent Egyptian or Babylonian civilizations. According to Hegel, the emergence of philosophy in ancient Greece was neither substantially influenced by other cultures, nor did real philosophy emerge and flourish in other cultures such as China:

Only with Greek philosophy do we make our beginning in the proper sense, for what went before was just a preliminary. We refrain from speaking of other philosophies – of Mongolian, Persian, or Syrian philosophy; to talk about such things is only a display of erudition.<sup>7</sup>

Only a small part of his lectures is dedicated to Oriental philosophy, for

Oriental philosophy is only preliminary, and we speak about it only in order to provide the justification for not occupying ourselves with it more extensively, and to explain the relationship in which it stands to thought, to authentic philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Even though Oriental religions "come closer to" philosophy when compared with the Roman or Greek religions (*LHP* 103) [the last sentence on the page that you had sent, does not support the original wording], nonetheless, The intellectual achievements of the Orient are of no importance in a history of philosophy since "what goes by the name of Oriental philosophy is...the Oriental's religious mode of representation as such" (*LHP* 103).

In his *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* Hegel elaborates on the reasons he sees for the backward character of Oriental thought: In addition to the allegedly religious character of these ways of thinking, the essential prerequisites for true philosophy are not given in what he calls "the Orient." Especially, the Orient is being considered as lacking in a proper consciousness of freedom.

In the Oriental world *one* is free, namely, God or the despot. The Greek principle embodies the extension

<sup>7</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6, Volume 2: Greek Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown, transl. Robert F. Brown and J. Michael Stewart, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2006, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6, Volume 1: Introduction and Oriental Philosophy, Together with the Introductions from Other Series of these Lectures*, ed. Robert F. Brown, transl. Robert F. Brown and J. Michael Stewart, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2009, p. 103. [Henceforth cited as *LHP*]

that *some* are free...In the third stage *the human being as such is free*. [*LHP* 195]

This is how Hegel justifies his verdict without doing any further investigation that Chinese thinking is not philosophy, but at most wisdom or general thought. It does not, according to Hegel, result from free, systematic, and critical use of reason and therefore does not enable any conscious intellectual progress. This is said to apply to India as well as to Egypt. Accordingly, Hegel concludes: "The Asian worldview therefore remains in the background, and we start where free thought emerges on its own account, grasping its object as thought. Anything else does not deserve to be called philosophy" (*LHP* 200).

After Hegel, historians of philosophy of the most diverse traditions, including several outspoken Anti-Hegelians, have essentially followed this assessment. The history of philosophy – at least in Germany – is still usually seen as a history that begins in Greek antiquity and leads in a roughly continuous and progressive sequence of European thinkers into the most current present. For example, at the end of the twentieth century Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, "there is no doubt that it was the Greeks who instigated a world-historical decision with their own thinking and decided the path of modern civilization with the creation of science."<sup>9</sup> This world-historical transition is regarded as being unique, for in contrast to the "great hieratic cultures of the Asian countries" only ancient Greek culture enabled "this new awakening of the desire to know" (*BK* 119). According to the understanding of Hegel, Gadamer and others, only the Western tradition experienced the intellectual freedom manifesting itself in open and institutionalized curiosity, independent of religious or dogmatic restrictions. Only this spirit enabled a special mode of thinking that is still considered as being the basis of modern philosophy and science. Against the background of such convictions it is not surprising that none of these philosophers, Edmund Husserl, Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Karl Popper, Jürgen Habermas upheld a serious, lasting, and genuine interest in Chinese philosophy. I therefore suggest that the general lack of interest in Chinese philosophy in Germany is not only being based on ignorance but on fundamental

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Beginning of Knowledge*, transl. Rod Coltman, New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing 2002, p. 119. [Henceforth cited as *BK*]

convictions, which are already present in Leibniz and in Hegel.

Many German philosophers are convinced that Confucius and Lao Tzu might be thinkers of considerable wisdom and depth, yet they do not play a decisive and sustainable role in the history of philosophy. For even if these two are put on a par with Plato and Aristotle, ancient Chinese thought, so it is said, has not triggered this afore mentioned "awakening of the desire to know." Where is the Chinese Augustine of Hippo or Thomas Aquinas, the Chinese Descartes, Bacon, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Hegel or Nietzsche? Ancient Chinese thought has not initiated a dynamic and progressive sequence of creative new beginnings that distinctively characterizes philo-sophia as a search for wisdom. In the light of Socrates' critical ignorance as a role model, philosophy is understood as being an activity, which turns away from tradition and instead strives for truth and universality exclusively by means of reason. In this objection, Hegel's thesis re-sounds that Chinese philosophy, after its brilliant beginnings, did not advance any further and dissolved into various schools of dogmatic exegesis without any further contributions to the global quest for universal truth. Such a judgment, however, does not render obsolete a solid knowledge of nearly three thousand years of intellectual debate in Chinese culture, but rather presupposes it. Moreover, Europe's development is thus made the standard of development by privileging a typically Western pathos of critical new beginnings over a typically Eastern culture of careful exegesis and actualization of classical texts. Against such a philosophical universalism, however, both historical and systematic objections have been raised.

### The Critique of Eurocentrism by Karl Jaspers

In recent accounts of the history of philosophy, the traditional perspective is problematized as being Eurocentric, a term meant to blend the phrase "Western ethnocentrism" or "European ethnocentrism" into a single word.<sup>10</sup> Eurocentrism, like every ethnocentrism, has the function of contributing to social self-assurance and to the construction of cultural identity through the exclusion of others. It differs from ethnocentrism in that it does not refer to an ethnic group and its habits, but

rather to a set of cultural characteristics. Beyond the sheer narrow-mindedness of quasi-normal ethnocentrism, which is about regarding one's own customs as being the best ones, Eurocentrism is characterized by its claim of universal validity. In this context, Western thought and culture is being taken to be not merely one of the many possible forms of intellectual arranging and conceptualizing the world, but that it is being posited as being superior to all other approaches due to its power of arriving at justifiable truths. The missionary ambition and the expansive potency of the West are regarded as being a consequence of this self-understanding. With the decline of European imperialism and in the context of post-colonial studies, Eurocentrism has become the subject of criticism by showing "that the chronology of Greece-Rome-Europe is wrong; that this is already a later ideologically determined conceptual transformation"<sup>11</sup> as well as by showing that claiming Western thought to be an expression of universal validity is an unjustifiable instance of colonialist mentality. Overall, the opposition against Eurocentrism combines normative arguments that are being directed against a presumed arrogance when empirical objections against the superiority of Eurocentric beliefs are being discussed.

A third perspective with regard to Chinese thought is often being associated with Jaspers. His understanding of the cultures that were at a comparable level during a presumed Axial Age marks a decisive step toward overcoming Eurocentric perspectives. Given the political catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century, Jaspers sees the need for a new model of world history:

Gone is the European arrogance, the self-confidence from which the history of the West once was called the history of the world.<sup>12</sup>

Such moral demand to replace European haughtiness with a more modest attitude based on factual criticism of the idea of general superiority of the European tradition can also be noticed in Jaspers. He argues that although Christian revelation had been regarded

<sup>11</sup> Enrique Dussel, "Europa, Moderne und Eurozentrismus. Semantische 'Verfehlung' des 'Europa'-Begriffs," in *Das geistige Erbe Europas*, ed. Manfred Buhr, Napoli, IT: Vivarium 1994, pp. 855-67, here p. 855 (my translation).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Europäischen Geist*, München, DE: Piper 1947, p. 7 (my translation). German National Library access <https://portal.dnb.de/bookviewer/view/1053927835#page/6/mode/2up>.

<sup>10</sup> Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, And Democracy*, transl. Russell Moore and James Membrez, New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1989.

as being the axis of world history, after the collapse of civilization in Europe, one must find a new, cross-cultural, and empirical linchpin for interpreting the historical development of humanity. Jaspers writes,

It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 BC, in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being.<sup>13</sup>

Jaspers acknowledges three cultures in which this cultural breakthrough occurred simultaneously and yet independently of each other: India, China, and the West (including Greek philosophy, Hebrew prophecy, and Persian Zoroastrianism). The preceding Babylonian and Egyptian cultures do not count among the cultures of the Axial era, even less so other cultures such as African, Native American, and the so-called primal societies only represent "the residue of prehistory" for Jaspers (*OGH* 8). If philosophical historians follow him concerning this view, their culture-inclusive perspective remains limited to the recognition of these three cultures. This restriction is evident in the way influential books on the history of philosophy, explicitly influenced by Jaspers, are being written. Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, for example, point to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, and Jewish monotheism in order to argue that "philosophy, broadly conceived, came into the world, not once but a number of times, in various places."<sup>14</sup> Yet even in regard of these three cultural spheres they struggle to realize their ambition of presenting the philosophy of the Axial period on an equal footing. Of the seventy-seven pages on Ancient philosophy, only seven are devoted to philosophies other than Greek philosophy, and these only cover only Indian thought. Chinese philosophy is being lumped together with scholastic-Christian philosophy, effectively confirming the Hegelian view that ancient Chinese thought is a form of religious wisdom rather than philosophy proper. In the concluding chapters devoted to modern and contemporary philosophy, non-European thinkers are being referred to only on

the last few pages, in the context of discussing scholars such as Edward Said or Gayatri Spivak, both of whom were trained in Western philosophy and contribute to a Western-dominated global discourse.

The practical problem of assigning a suitable space to Chinese thought in the Occidental historiography of philosophy evidences the need to address the question of the nature of philosophy. At a minimum a working definition of philosophy is required to write its global history. This issue is already present in Jaspers' approach when he defines the common feature of axial cultures as an existential "struggle for the transcendence of the One God against non-existent demons" (*OGH* 3). For Jaspers, this struggle expresses the essence of a human being.

It is the specifically human in man which, bound to and concealed within the body, fettered by instincts and only dimly aware of himself, longs for liberation and redemption and is able to attain to them already in this world. [*OGH* 4]

Philosophy emerges when this human condition is being realized. But one may wonder whether this definition of human action either implies the universalization of a modern, namely existentialist Western perspective, or whether it leads to a nearly void conception of philosophy. Both possibilities are being endorsed by historians of philosophy known to be following Jaspers. Some of them make mortality the fundamental theme of all philosophy in India, China and Europe: "The thought of transcendence is born of the urge for eternity,"<sup>15</sup> for variability and mortality are "the basic riddles of history" (*CIE* 26). It is questionable whether such an existentialist concept of philosophy can provide a key to the understanding of Aristotle, Zhuangzi, Kant, or Youlan Feng. For others, philosophy is little different from general curiosity and a lust for profundity: "That after all, is what philosophy has always been about, the effort to reach 'beyond,' beyond our own limitations, beyond our necessarily biased views of the world and other people" (*SHP* 305). If one understands philosophy this way, it becomes difficult to demarcate philosophy from religion or poetry.

In order to avoid this alternating between too narrow and too empty concepts of philosophy, research on the Axial Age cultures increasingly focused on the

<sup>13</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, p. 1 [Henceforth cited as *OGH*].

<sup>14</sup> Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1996, p. 5. [Henceforth cited as *SHP*]

<sup>15</sup> Ram Adhar Mall and Heinz Hülsmann, *Die drei Geburtsorte der Philosophie: China, Indien, Europa*, Bonn, DE: Bouvier 1989, p. 25 (my translation). [Henceforth cited as *CIE*]

differences within the similarities. Shmuel Eisenstadt notes,

the general tendency to reconstruct the world with all its symbolic-ideological and institutional repercussions was common to all the Axial Age civilizations. But their concrete implementation, of course, varied greatly.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding these different ways, however, it is informative to note that contributions dealing with axial progress in ancient Greece single out once more a peculiar development. Yehuda Elkana argues that "second-order thinking," namely, reflections on the nature of thinking, has slowly developed in Greece and in no other place. Their systematically self-reflexive mode of thought, he asserts, has been taken up in the Western tradition and became decisive for the emergence of modern (that is, Western) science.<sup>17</sup> Stefan Breuer, who critically summarizes axial research, also sees China, despite an "unprecedented intellectual awakening," as an "example of an unfinished transcendental breakthrough in which the structures overcome by the breakthrough later regain the upper hand."<sup>18</sup> Both Breuer and Elkana thus rehabilitate to a certain degree the classic view as explicated in Hegel. In this context Ernst Sandvoss suggests that even historians of philosophy who explicitly strive for a "dissolution of the Eurocentric world view,"<sup>19</sup> ultimately assume that Western peculiarity begins with the Greeks and their "creative responses to the challenges of their environment, which, in contrast to the conditions in India and China, did not overwhelm the challenged ones" (SGP 221).

<sup>16</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "The Axial-Age Breakthroughs – Their Characteristics and Origins," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, New York, NY: SUNY Press 1986, pp. 1-25, here p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Yehuda Elkana, "The Emergence of Second-Order Thinking in Classical Greece," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, New York, NY: SUNY Press 1986, pp. 40-64.

<sup>18</sup> Stefan Breuer, "Kulturen der Achsenzeit Leistungen und Grenzen eines geschichtsphilosophischen Konzepts," *Saeculum, Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte* 45/1 (June 1994), pp. 1-33, here pp. 4, 12 (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> Ernst R. Sandvoss, *Geschichte der Philosophie, Band I: Indien, China, Griechenland, Rom*, München, DE: Dtv 1989, p. 11 (my translation). [Henceforth cited as SGP]

After having scrutinized the critique of Eurocentrism more closely I suggest that it hardly differs from Hegel's stereotypical reception of non-Western philosophy. To some degree this can also be said of Jaspers' approach. The postulated commonalities between Greece, India, and China within the overarching concept of an axial era are being weakened by two drawbacks: Firstly, the varied history of global philosophies is being reduced to a reflection on the finitude of human life. By speaking of the actual man and the basic riddles of history, Jaspers expands a modern, existentialist thesis on highly disparate historical spaces. Moreover, his sole focus on these three cultures and their presumed inclusion of transcendence into their reflections about the human condition, in the perspective of Aleida Assmann still devalues other cultures: "The 'European arrogance' expressly rejected by Jaspers is obviously at work in his project to evaluate all cultures and societies to a single rationality standard."<sup>20</sup> The second drawback of Jaspers approach is that this form of anti-Eurocentrism might paradoxically lead to a strengthened rehabilitation of a Western-style universalism. Insofar as Jaspers' critique of Eurocentrism appears to be morally motivated rather than factually necessary, he gives the impression of arguing that the claim on European superiority in the domain of philosophy may be arrogant, but not unfounded. This impression invites opponents to associate the debate about Eurocentrism with a morally driven and misleading strife for political correctness. Despite his impressive achievements in the field of an anti-Eurocentric historiography of philosophy, especially in regard of mutual recognition, understanding of, and sensitivity for diverse cultures, Jaspers version of inter- and transcultural philosophy – counter to his intentions – perhaps underpins the assertion of Western philosophy's fundamental superiority. Moreover, it might contribute to a development, that externalizes the issue of Eurocentrism into

<sup>20</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Einheit und Vielfalt in der Geschichte. Jaspers' Begriff der Achsenzeit neu betrachtet," in *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II, Ihre institutionelle und kulturelle Dynamik, Teil 3*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, Frankfurt/Main, DE: Suhrkamp 1992, pp. 330-40, here p. 336 (my translation).

the domain of cultural studies, a field many academic philosophers hold in low regard.

### **Beyond Identity-Politics: Philosophy as a Global Task**

Jaspers' answer to the Hegelian universalism ultimately seems unsatisfactory to me, and yet his question about the state, the self-understanding, and the future of philosophy in a globalized world has lost none of its relevance. It leads directly into the philosophical and not infrequently also the political discourse of global modernity. Considering the very different manifestations of modernization and the richness of philosophical opinions not only between, but also within the various cultural spaces and traditions, the discussion between Eastern and Western philosophy will invariably also have the character of agonistic disagreement. It seems impossible to settle this dispute easily, though perhaps that is neither necessary nor expedient. But it is certainly helpful to separate philosophical dialogue as much as possible from the identity-political needs of both sides. For this purpose, neither a Hegelian universalism nor an anti-Eurocentrism in the style of Jaspers is particularly well suited. Instead of advocating questionable constructions that speak of German, American, or Chinese philosophy, neither the commonalities nor the

inter-cultural differences alone must be considered. But rather, one ought to acknowledge the intra-cultural differences within traditions and cultures.

To this end, acquiring detailed knowledge of the respective philosophical works will be necessary. For example, Western philosophy would benefit from the study, translation, and discussion of contemporary Chinese philosophy. However, I find it unproductive to assign Chinese thinking a clearly defined province on the philosophical map and to make it a specialty of comparative cultural philosophy. My worry with this way of proceeding is that it will mainly strengthen a sub-branch in philosophy, which could all too easily be neglected by those who do not see any value in this methodological expansion. Mutual knowledge and recognition are indispensable and a prerequisite for open-minded dialogue. But in addition to such good intentions, effective cooperation only arises where scholars with different backgrounds join to work on common philosophical problems, such as recent issues in ethics, aesthetics, anthropology, metaphysics, or epistemology. The relationship of Oriental and Occidental philosophers will therefore, if this prognosis is permitted, depend on the practical insight that it is wise to address interesting and important philosophical questions together.