

A Politics of Philosophy since Modernity

Indian and Western Philosophies

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Modernity¹, a trigger to much opening to extra-European continents, was also the big historic rift which made translation almost impossible by making many concepts normative, and particularly that of *the political*. Concepts and terms of “european” origin, through a process of universalization (a “westernisation”), assumed a genealogical and etymological continuity, imposing a corresponding discontinuity on those originating in other regions and languages.

It was my teacher ?edomil Velja?i?, alias Bhikkhu Ñânajîvako, philosophy professor in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (before becoming a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka), who made me suspect that one antinomy of reason might hide another. He referred to two antinomies that could be in such a relation, but didn't link them although the implication of their collusion was more than obvious in his work: one was Kant's divide of pure reason into theoretical, metaphysical or speculative on the one hand, and practical or ethical/aesthetic on the other.

The other was the chasm between the “west and the rest” (“Indian” rest or, in any case, “non-western”) in philosophy, and the general spurning of the latter by the former. Velja?i? had no doubt about the philosophic value of “Indian” philosophy². His book about the *Ethos of Cognition*³ opened the comparative perspective most interestingly. In it, the author endeavoured to show that the ethics of cognition is that which, on the one hand in Kant, on the other in “Indian” (mainly, Buddhist) philosophy hints at *an undivided area of reason* as a common denominator for practical as well as for cognitive (theoretical) reason. Velja?i? was interested in cognitive justice, philosophical translation (his translations are exemplary) and in crossing borders in the mind. Ethics becomes itself a way of cognition, much as to “know” the universal principle *brahman*, within the Vedânta school, signifies merging into it. It is not the cognition that is absolute, here. This approach leaves even some space for doubt cultivated as intellect's “purity” or as “nobility” of the spirit through discipline (*yoga*). The freedom advocated by Buddhism and understood by Velja?i? (*nirvâna*) is thoroughly un-ecstatic and experiential. Which also means that the contemplation leading to it (*dhyâna; jhâna; ch'an ; zen*) is an It is about Kant's classical paradox. The critique of practical reason hosts that of pure reason or makes it possible, so the discipline of practical reason becomes formally an ontological domain. Most readers in fact operate a choice in Kant (either reason's formalism, or practical reason). Velja?i? goes for the aporia. He manages to make the two accord in his venture to highlight the “Indian”-like importance of consciousness purifying itself in yogic experience. With Kant, the discipline of practical reason with its ethical edge comes from the will or from reason. But he saw the possibility of two distinct ethics developing here, complementary and hierarchical: a first one following “archetypes”, having to do with individualised “material values”; and a second level of “metaphysical” ethics,

Kant's own, where the archetypal level would be overcome. Velja?i? works out the constitutive subsumption of the first to the second ("Scheler" to "Kant"). In "metaphysical" ethics, transcending archetypes ("Scheler"), lay Kant's general principles of a metaphysics of morals. The one discusses duties (will), the other goals to achieve (ethics). The archetypal or emotional critique, according to Velja?i?'s reading of Kant, doesn't take into account the inherent *intentionality of practical reason*. Even for Kant, there is an ideal model to imitate: the Stoic sage. The ethics of values (the goals to achieve) is neutral or indifferent with regard to existence or non-existence; or rather, there is no purpose in such ethics. But the ethics of duties (the will) is directly linked to the (non) existence of values. Will is for Kant, on the contrary, reaching beyond the emotional level to higher strata and not limited by formal ethics. Velja?i? feels it possible to found the discipline of practical reason beyond "good and evil", and to link it to pure reason. He is interested in yogic solutions, not far from Kant's second line of appreciating the figure of the sage as a norm: reason becomes practical in the coincidence of ethics and cognition – much like in "Indian" schools. He shows how *yoga*, the practical philosophy of any "Indian" school, exceeds the abyss between practical and theoretical reason and links them. But it does so also through an aprioristic ethics: on the one hand - the evidence of suffering, but on the other it is redoubled by a transcendental *a priori* that makes us overcome *avidyâ* as a primordial condition of being-in-the-world. So that all depends on the status of nescience (*avidyâ*).

Kant's ethics is trans-personal too. According to Velja?i?'s third thesis, the field of the discipline of practical reason (noetic) is larger than the transcendental-logical (noematic) domain (26): thought and its spiritual framework cannot be symmetrical or correspond. The same applies to ethics. It is practical reason that postulates the *noumenon* which is theoretically problematic because it is in the face of its own concept only the object of a non-sensual perception. This articulation not only introduces a split within the split (ethics within reason divided), but it acknowledges, indirectly, the *necessity* of the dividing up/sharing out of reason (*partage de la raison*) as a dialectical self-exceeding tension, or as reason's constant movement and way of being. With Kant, practical reason is abstract, formal and trans-individual, rooted beyond the personal; it corresponds to the Stoicist ideal and also to the Indian idea of *dharma*. His critics think that it cannot fail to be repressive. But at the same time, Velja?i? thinks that it is possible to find a compromise: in founding the discipline on a concrete ontological location aiming at freedom according to the latter.

He sees *philosophia perennis* as the common ground of *all* philosophy. He thinks that his own preference for "Indian" philosophy should do, regardless of the context. He proceeds as if there were no history of a *différend* between "Indian" and "western" philosophies. He refers to "Indo-European philosophy"⁵ as an ultimate imaginary receptacle or position. Who has ever proved their axioms? The "common ground" that ?edomil Velja?i? has in mind is not biologically conditioned. It corresponds to the "transcendental subject's structures having limited possibilities of conceiving creative ideas". It could be called "culture" in a broader sense, implying *avidyâ* – ignorance; a shield against ethnicisation. The way he understands it, it is not a ground for philosophical universalism, but rather a shore of "eternal motives" in the all-encompassing history of culture, appearing as generally human. We know from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reading of Kant in *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason*⁶ about geographic entrenchment. But Velja?i? thinks Kant's rationalism *saves him* inadequate anthropological warps "of those are unable to get away (...) from genealogical hypotheses" (8). As with Kant, there is here no *a priori* of a necessary, inherent connection. Velja?i?

is busy re-establishing the primacy of a universal undivided reason, as a basis for comparative philosophy.

“[...] The source [...] is, according to its *phenomenological description*, identical with the primeval characteristics of *avidyâ* (cognition’s transcendental limitation), the reason for which “Indian” philosophy as a whole is primordially oriented toward a transcendental-*critical* idealism of the *ethos* of cognition” (37). A strange loop establishes, in Velja?i? as much as in Kant, a cognitive-ethical “apriorism” that “saves” pure reason from compromise with the empirical. This “apriorism” *precedes* the practical experience in a *direct access* to pure *practical* reason. The latter is like a “state” of innocence/ignorance, an *indivision*, ethical wholeness. It is transcendental but limited: can reason encompass that which is its condition of existence (life)? That impossibility is a *lived paradox* of the human (or maybe of sheer life). The notion of *karma* bridges this twisted gap. Such is the overlooked a priori of “Indian” thought. The reason why “Indian” philosophy was not recognised in the “west” is due to the normative division of reason. Not that it should be incapable of dividing reason: any living thinking can, and does so.

Knowledge about the “origin” always appears as split and scarce. Our drifting away from the origin goes on even in the intention to re-appropriate it, producing “culture”.⁷ Sex differentiation, like any other, as the canvas of *avidyâ* (ignorance), is such a division of reason; it concerns the universal ignorance about the origin. A quest about the origin as one either about sexuality and birth or about philosophy is formulated in the Buddhist theory of dependant origination. But the starting point *avidyâ* (that which is beyond cognition; transcendental illusion) does not limit itself to the sexual sphere, its “last resort”. Forgetting the primal scene (explicit in Freudianism; implicit in Buddhism) or forgetting about pain (*duhkha*) as well as about “being” are really the same. In this sense, *avidyâ*, the “first” principle in Buddhism, signifies the transcendental limitation of cognition. Knowledge about what it (un)veils is a “parenthesis” of a phenomenologically reduced experience unable to perceive its limit. Language and thinking can’t give a thorough account of their origin and frame. Buddhism radically acknowledged transcendental limitations. Any school of “Indian philosophy” could then be called “mysticism” or “theology” by “European” philosophical courts, for a lack of translation.

Buddhist ethics starts from the facts of pain, *duhkha*, arising from the existential, though not essential, fact of “non-oneness”. Division is the normal order of becoming (while “being” is not even a category). To be one with otherness can be deadly in monotheism and where distancing seems the only escape. But under different circumstances, as in Buddhism, the gap itself – which is also within us, or between language and the reality it fails to encompass – may also be restoring. With the gap, the irrepresentable vanishes too. Ignorance and sorrow are linked. Cognition then combats the ignorance about the latter, a feature of life. Pain in Buddhism should not be identified with *Angst* in the existentialist sense. While it is the source of trauma, of a possible disaggregating or annihilation, of existential panic when facing nothingness in psychoanalysis, with Buddhism *??nya* (nothing) is hoped for. It is welcome though scary because it is stepping out of the cycle of rebirth. One must then conclude that the cultural-historic-political *context* makes all the difference. Dismantling subjectivity is valued in Buddhism. But anguish may be the ignorance about origin, the wish for a firm foundation: the “west” cultivated that strife, while schools of Buddhist and others in Asia counted with it, knowing there is no firm ground. The Buddha himself never answered ontological questions. That of course allows a philosophy of relationalism (rather than relativism), avoiding the extremes of nihilism and absolutism.

From modernity on, an unbroken genealogical origin has been constructed for “western” concepts and episteme as “universal”. That pedigree comes from European etymologies constructed as founding and universal. Hence, there has been continuity for the “west” and interruptions for other histories and epistemes, for which indeed discontinuity with their own antiquity is declared. Their past counts as “premodern”, “traditional”, and thus as belated compared with universalized modernity. The same applies to women. This is so because (“western”) modernity is normative and universalized. The projection of the notion of progress and of its *constitutive exceptions* is complicit with the hierarchy of cultures produced in time and in space. It shows the self-referential side of the split of reason as a *regressus ad infinitum*. The rift in reason appears each time that both a *rule* and its *exception* are proposed as an explanation. The exception indicates the dialectical crack and is the transcendental limit of the mind.

To a point, the linguistic turn in “Continental” philosophy has allowed for a probing of the role of language and thinking in subjectivation, while keeping the critical function of reflection. But modernity still remained very much the horizon. “Indian” philosophy, in a different history and circumstances than Europe, operated its own linguistic turn with Buddhism (6th century before our era). This is a risk for philosophy as it is understood in the “west”. “Indian” thought took several different directions from here. It is also the reason why it has generally not been recognized by standard orientations of philosophy in the “west”. But the linguistic turn authorized this, as it will allow European philosophy in the 19th-20th centuries (Wittgenstein and later), not only to doubt the ego, but also not to dwell on a metaphysics of the subject, cultivating uncertainty regarding the aptitude of language to be exhaustive. This function, relatively weak in European antiquity (though Foucault re-established it through a certain *philosophical therapeutics*⁸), allowed the mechanism of a fluid *partage de la raison*. The question of delay doesn’t arise in “Indian” philosophy. If there is no delay regarding modernity, it is because the norm of such “delay” has been established from a hegemonic position within (“western”) modernity itself. The *rules of the game* (never agreed upon) dictate who is “retarded”; they will therefore permit no political reading of “Indian philosophy”. Such apriorism is historically and geopolitically modern, the result of hegemony, and supported by comparative methods.

Many philosophical concepts have their origin in ancient Greece (and beyond in sources pumped by the Greeks). They belong to the factual history of the *polis* and are linked to the development of Greek, later “European” philosophy, as well as to “western” self-representation. The same is equally true of the concepts of “Indian” philosophy. However, for these, it is harder to cross the borders of international philosophies beyond orientalist stereotypes, since they were not carried by a universalizing movement. The real challenge might be to investigate epistemes through the test of concepts drawn from elsewhere. What does Indian (or Chinese, or Yoruba, or Maya, or Aborigine) knowledge contribute to universal use in terms of, for example, political autonomy (a notion of western genealogy) as we understand it today? On the contrary, how do such concepts as *mokša*, *nirvāna* or *karma* translate if/when even partly identified or pursued in a European context?⁹ How do you translate into political terms what has been seen as aesthetics, as mysticism or as culture? Shouldn’t we be suspicious of the repeated anti-political reading of concepts and history coming from outside Europe, or coming from those whose thought is not known or valued by the mainstream(s)?

The subject is usually evoked with the quest for “god” within ethics of heteronomy. The interrogation is “which is the god we should serve?”¹⁰, and is acknowledged in modern times by Max Weber, who calls it a “war of the gods”¹¹. The war of the gods is really that of men who, while enquiring about their *origin*, fight a “war of/for values”. The suspicion of a *split origin* usually “legitimizes” “restoring wars” or nationalism with the aim of overcoming the initial split in view of a reconfigured whole¹². Wars are circularly waged to stop wars, an aim that “justifies” them. In the Rg-vedic hymn (RV X, 121), the original unity is restored in the “golden germ”, but soon a *regressus ad infinitum* to ever new starting points is necessary, since the origin itself is originated. The war of gods and values corresponds to social and political practices at a given time and place. The philosophical question behind this problem is that of the split in reason. It is also about the *limits of the philosophical and political horizon*. Is the problem resolved within, or outside those limits?

Kant pushes for the division of reason: from that of theoretical/practical reason to that of the cooked/the raw, of “cooked nature” and “raw, savage nature”¹³ or to the gap between the subject and the not—yet—subject” (Chakravorty Spivak, p. 14). Culture deals with this, but there would be no reason without culture producing the rift through its distancing from the origin. G. Chakravorty S. shows how Kant’s concept of culture, supposed neutral and universal, is *geographically located*, and consequently how the subject is differentiated. This is part of modernity - Sarah Kofman shows it with regard to women. The history of colonialism doesn’t correspond to the typology of reason and its progression imagined by Kant. Kant had admitted the self-referentiality of reason, but was nevertheless complicit with its normative use. It is his antinomy: if the solution lies outside philosophy (leaving both the “polytheism” and theoretical reason out), we either need to adopt an axiomatic divine approach and close the narrative (at one particular origin, god, or value); or else, we can think of some “axiological and non theoretical neutrality”, supposed to lead to relativism, for which Weber was criticised.

Practical theory of contemplative, therapeutical, feminist, non-self-centred philosophy as an ethical-aesthetic and politically engaged art of living may help in understanding the functioning of the

Postmodernity, a mode of modernity, theorized the subject’s crisis, already claimed in literature and philosophy by great names, and in politics by the phenomena of totalitarianism. This has been furthered by globalization and by the crumbling of the Welfare State. The perturbation of the subject is a serious blow to *the* political and to public space. Biopolitics now steps in to deal directly with the bodies and with “bare life”, with sheer surfaces - even before any political socialisation. And while some contemporary philosophers, each in their own way, weaken *the political by unwittingly* introducing a limit or a determination, this dimension was laid open by Foucault and is “saved” by some for an ever possible “alternative history”.

Besides leaving a gap between speculative and practical reason so that no link can logically be proven between them through the former (which is the problem), Kant also assumes an external authority, “god”²¹. In his *Critique of Judgement*, the division of reason is itself situated within (“western”) reason. As for “Indian” philosophy, it ejects the question of any *partage* of reason outwards. This is because of a precocious linguistic turn. Indeed, most schools, both *âstika*

("orthodox") and *nâstika* ("heretical"), especially since Buddhism (and even earlier, in the Upaniṣads), don't construct on the separation of reasons but, on the contrary, on an "as if" there were a foundation or a credible axiom although it is understood that it is void. It is thus "European" and, subsequently "western" philosophy that cancels out the "Indian", and makes the fissure run *between* the two. In Kant, this slash passes through the *innerside* of (his own) philosophy. Practical reason, *to which Kant as much as "Indian" philosophy gives the priority*, is in a double-bind since it functions by analogy and not through cognition (Chakravorty S. 25). The separation between, and the non recognition of, philosophies "east" or "west" cannot be revoked from *within* "western" philosophy as such. There needs to be a radical shift and contamination, or *translation*. Comparison will not do.

This is not made any easier by Kant's blurring of levels. He calls both the all-encompassing reason, as well as the particular, individuating reason by the same word - *Vernunft*. We know from other mechanisms of universalization that when there is a direct link – and a coincidence in name – between the particular and the universal, *there is also a hegemonic construct*. In the injunction to know oneself, reason is split between the side of the object and the side of the subject. Descartes' *cogito* comes to mind first, but the story is as old as *logos*, fractured in itself through the injunction to know thyself (*gn?thi seautón*) and reproducing further interruptions in continuity through the intersection, for example, of male and female genealogies in the vertical patriarchal projection. This mechanism also produces the "*virginity*" of Mary who, while giving birth to *logos*, has no Gospel. She is no subject, yet no simple object: she is a missed object and an *instrument* for the self-fulfilment of the other.

Women are referred to the order of *seeing* (being objectified). Something escapes the order of seeing (*dar?ana*), and that may be of the order of the voice (*v?k*) or of hearing (*?ruti*), which also means that the image presupposes hearing or that it is consistent with itself only as traversed by the voice. Or maybe, as inexplicably pregnant with meaning and symbolisation. Already the "undivided" itself, the beginning – is split. Isn't identity – sameness with oneself – always also the crack within oneself that refers to the constitutive two, simple form of the plurality inhabiting us? The Roman actor's *persona*, mask, indicates that the person is more than one. Appropriately, in French, *personne* means both a "person" as well as "nobody".

The epistemological revolution which is to reciprocally open up worlds overcoming the rift of modernity will proceed through *translation*, beyond comparison, respecting multiple genealogies of concepts and worldviews, and traverse them.

Notes

¹ This paper comes partly from my unpublished book *The Politics of Philosophy* (manuscript in English).

² Cf. Rada Ivekovi?, "Nasljedje ?edomila Velja?i?a. O nekim problemima komparativne filozofije", in:

³ ?edomil Velja?i?, *Ethos spoznaje u Evropskoj i u indijskoj filozofiji*, Belgrade, BIGZ 1982.

⁴ Bhikkhu Ñānajiṅvako, *Schopenhauer and Buddhism*, Kandy, Sri Lank, Buddhist Publication Society,

1970.

⁵ Veljažič, *op. cit.*, p. 15. For which, I am afraid, I had criticized him too soon in my early work, shifting the implications to a vaguely “civilisational” and thus possibly “racial” field, without fully understanding the context, and his main goal of overcoming reason’s antinomies.

⁶ *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard UP 1999.

⁷ Fethi Benslama, *Une fiction troublante. De l’origine en partage*, Paris, Aube 1994.

⁸ M. Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982*, Paris, Hautes Etudes - Gallimard – Seuil 2001.

⁹ R. Iveković, « Subjectivation, traduction, justice cognitive », *Rue Descartes* n° 67, 2010.

¹⁰ Rg-veda X, 121 (Hiranyagarbha Prâjâpatya).

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, transl. Ephraim Fishoff, Beacon Press new ed. 1993; cf. Michael Löwy, *La guerre des dieux. Religion et politique en Amérique latine*, Paris, Félin 1998.

¹² Tetsuya Takahashi, *Can Philosophy Constitute Resistance?*, Tokyo, UTCP 2008.

¹³ G. Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 12-13; 34 ff.

¹⁴ Krishna Chandra Bhattacharya (1875-1969).

¹⁵ E. Balibar, *La crainte des masses. Politique et philosophie avant et après Marx*, Paris, Galilée 1997, p. 45-46.

¹⁶ E. Balibar, in Balibar-Wallerstein, *Race Nation Classe. Les identités ambiguës*, Paris, La Découverte 1991, p. 19.

¹⁷ Derrida, *La Dissémination*, Paris, Seuil, 1972 ; Derrida, Platon, *Phèdre : Suivi de La pharmacie de Platon*, Paris, Flammarion 2006.

¹⁸ D.P. Chattopadhyaya, “Love and Expression”, in *Communication, Identity and Self-Expression. Essays in Memory of S.N. Ganguly*, ed. by S.P. Banerjee & Shefali Moitra, Delhi, OUP, 1984, p. 160.

¹⁹ K. Bhattacharyya, « Sachin Ganguly as I knew him », *Communication, Identity and Self-Expression*, *op. cit.*, p. 2. Voir également “Different Notions of Freedom Compared and Evaluated” dans la même collection, pp. 101-116; *Alternative Standpoints in Philosophy*, Calcutta, Das Gupta & Co. Ltd. 1953; Shefali Moitra, “Alternative Standpoints: At the Foundation and Culmination of Kalidas Bhattacharyya’s Philosophy”, in *Freedom, Transcendence and Identity. Essays in Memory of Professor Kalidas Bhattacharyya*, ed. by P.K. Sengupta, New Delhi, ICPHR and Motilal Banarsidass, 1988, pp. 1-14.

²⁰ J.F. Lyotard, *Le Différend*, Paris, éditions de Minuit, 1983.

²¹ Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, Paris, PUF, 2004, p. 110 ff.

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