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FROM AFRICA TO ZEN
An Invitation to World Philosophy

Edited by
Robert C. Solomon
Kathleen M. Higgins



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our ancestors,
and for the memory
of all ancestors
everywhere.

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Introduction

As everyone who has recently set foot in a university or read the editorials of our more cosmopolitan newspapers knows, there is a vigorous attempt in academia to combat the ethnocentrism of the traditional ("male, white European") college curriculum and the implicit chauvinism (if not racism) it represents. In philosophy in particular, some administrations have all but mandated that as a field of study it should become increasingly conscious of and attentive to other philosophical traditions. Even a casual review of the standard course offerings and dissertation topics demonstrates an embarrassing one-dimensionality, stretching through time from Socrates to Sartre or Quine with nary a mention of Confucius or Nāgārjuna. There is no mention of African philosophy or any African philosopher (except Augustine, whose origins are conveniently ignored) and no Latin American philosophy. No matter what one's position on the politically hot, and even explosive, topic of "multiculturalism," it must be admitted that the demand for global sensitivity in philosophy is healthy for a subject that has indeed become overly narrow, insulated from other disciplines, and in many quarters oblivious even to its own culture as well as to others.

Coming to appreciate those other cultures and their philosophies is hampered, however, by the very narrow strictures on what deserves the honorific name of "philosophy." For example, the current emphasis on argumentation—often summarized as rationality—as the essence of philosophy excludes much of the more poetic and nondisputational wisdom of non-Western cultures, and even gives rise to the remarkable suggestion that these cultures are therefore nonrational or prerational. In the East and in the South, the ideas by which people guide their lives are often expressed in song, slogan, and poetry, not disputational prose—and poetry has been banned from philosophy since Plato. In many cultures, philosophy places an overwhelming emphasis on ethics and religion, often expressed in myth and allegory. Such traditions are therefore

dismissed as “not philosophy” not only because ethics and religion themselves have been relegated to second place since the onset of the obsession with epistemology that began with Descartes and “the New Science” but because myth and allegory (except for a few canonized exceptions in Plato) have also been declared to have no role in philosophy. The obsession with logical argumentation and epistemology reached its zenith only recently, with the logical positivists in the era of World War II, when virtually every concern of substance was dismissed as “meaningless.” That terrible war may have been global, but the philosophy it provoked in its aftermath became even more isolated and provincial. Indeed, as recently as 1989, one of our best and most broad-minded philosophers could write that “Philosophy has really arisen only twice in the history of civilization, once in Greece and once in India” (Arthur Danto, *Connections to the World*, p. 14).

What we call Western philosophy is studied, of course, by students from around the globe, but instead of adding new dimensions to the overly well-defined Western tradition many or most of those graduating philosophers and philosophy teachers who learned their trade in the pubs and tutorials of Oxbridge or the seminar rooms of the best American and Canadian universities returned to their native cultures and taught, in essence, the same one-dimensional Anglo-American philosophy and the supposedly “neutral” remnants of logical positivism. Local philosophies may have affected the course of instruction in quaint ways, but most culturally specific and significant ideas were dismissed as prerational, intellectually primitive, and unprofessional. Even Buddhism and Confucianism, with credentials as ancient as those of the pre-Socratics and on which we have far more substantial extant texts, have been excluded. And one still hears the claim, in not just a few philosophy departments, that the discipline of philosophy is defined, as a matter of power if not by way of tautology, as what its practitioners say it is, namely, as that emaciated subject matter which as a matter of anthropological and sociological curiosity has emerged as the standard curriculum in most of our universities and colleges.

One obvious complication with the idea of cross-cultural philosophical education is that in reading other philosophical traditions we are not only trying to understand other authors, other languages, other ideas. We are also trying to embed ourselves in another culture, engage in another life. If Hegel was right, that philosophy is the spirit of its time (and place) rendered conceptually articulate, then understanding a philosophy is necessarily understanding the strains and structures of the culture it expresses and through which it is expressed. This raises deep questions about our ability to read such philosophy. It is not enough to know the language (one can readily enough learn Sanskrit, Swahili, or Chinese if one is sufficiently motivated), or even to have something more than a tourist’s view of the land, its peoples, and customs. One must, it seems,

put oneself “in another’s skin,” to see “from the inside” a life that is as routine and unexceptional to others as our lives are to us, so defined as well as inconvenienced by technology, the notions of privacy, individual possessiveness, and the separation of the secular from the sacred. It is, therefore, not enough to show that early Indian philosophers developed an epistemology displaying remarkable similarities to that of the British empiricists or that certain Buddhists had a concept of self resembling some arguments in David Hume or Jean-Paul Sartre. In this sense one can grossly misunderstand a philosophy precisely by “understanding” it, that is, by embracing and absorbing a few seemingly familiar ideas while ignoring the surrounding mysteries and the underlying structure, which, for those who promulgated them, allowed them to make sense.

What we call world philosophy isn’t a single discipline or way of thinking. It is not variations on a single set of themes expressed and speculated upon now in an African way, now in a Latin way, now in an Arabic or Persian way, now in the Anglo-American way (whatever that may be). For the embarrassing fact long submerged in the tyrannical reign of the “history of philosophy”—that exclusionary artifice invented largely by Hegel to embrace all of European philosophy in a single narrative—is that what we call “Western” philosophy isn’t really that at all. Even assuming that one wants to include Greece in what we now call “the West,” it is evident that much of the definitive influence on the great Greeks came from Asia Minor and the Orient, from northern Africa and the migrations of many tribes north and south, east and west. Judaism and Christianity were not, despite their now official designation as such, “Western” religions, nor was Islam, which produced some of the greatest medieval philosophy. In addition to the radical differences in philosophy and culture we find across the globe, we also find, almost everywhere we turn except among a few, soon-to-be-destroyed long-isolated rain forest or African bush peoples, confluences and influences, ideas swapped and shared along with foodstuffs, satins and spices, amalgamated theories evolved from once-warring myths and ideologies, global philosophy as a long-cooking stew instead of a scattering of “centers” or a worldwide intellectual “human condition.”

Of course, there is such a “condition”—all people everywhere are born into families and communities; they are vulnerable to cuts and burns, suffer pain and illness; they die. They have to eat and sleep; they fear for their lives, for their children, for a few favorite belongings. They have sex. They have parties. And more than occasionally, they think. But, of course, what they think and how they think, as well as what they do at parties, how they enjoy but also restrict their sex lives, what they fear, how they suffer, and how they die are all born of sometimes widely different strategies. How do we understand these strategies? How do we put ourselves “into another’s skin”? How do we break out of what most of us now believe to be a readily understandable but nevertheless no-

longer-justifiable ethnocentric trap to get into another philosophy and another culture? One can always suggest the standard glib solution: Seek out similarities. Appreciate differences. But how does one do this without manufacturing the similarities and glossing over (or, just as bad, exaggerating and celebrating) the differences?

In attempting comparative philosophy, it is important not to “look down” on the various masterpieces of Western and Eastern philosophy as if from a great height or an interplanetary perspective, taking them all in at a sweep. For the reader who is not yet familiar with many of the world’s great philosophical traditions, who can grasp the idea of a Chinese skeptic only by drawing some dim parallel with Hume, the idea of a different tradition—not just an incidental parallel—gets lost. One has to get “into” the other tradition, its background, its problems, and its language. The attempt will be, for most people, merely a token of appreciation and understanding; yet the effort may be enough to gain that glimmer of comprehension that makes mutual understanding and cross-fertilization possible. We have therefore tried to avoid mere high-flying observations illustrated with various bits of text in favor of chapters in which the authors try to situate themselves within various philosophical traditions. The tone and structure of the various discussions are, accordingly, quite distinct. One would not expect the oral traditions of Africa and native America to pass through the same stages and transformations as the 3,000-year-old textual traditions of China and India. It would have been a sure sign of failure if, indeed, these chapters had all come out looking pretty much the same.

One recent and now influential approach comes through the discipline of hermeneutics, an academic cocktail-party word that has come to signify mainly a certain professional affiliation but that originally meant “understanding interpretation.” It was and is a technique for understanding texts, neither from the inside nor from the outside but by a kind of immersion in which one uses already familiar concepts and categories to understand something strange and novel. Originally, it was a technique employed to understand the half-hidden messages of the Bible, the strange but wondrous word of God. In the nineteenth century, the technique was expanded to texts and nontexts—works of art, religious rituals, social activities—of all kinds. It is particularly appropriate, therefore, for understanding another culture’s philosophy, and some of our authors have made use of it in the chapters that follow. The virtue of hermeneutics, at least as practiced by its modern archetype Hans Georg Gadamer, lies in its insistence on appreciating differences as differences, but hermeneutics, by its very nature, insists on finding some common framework, albeit a comparative framework, and therein lies its promise. Ideally, this common framework emerges through extensive dialogue, in which mutual misunderstandings are corrected and overly narrow interpretations are broadened and enriched.

This means that we must be wary of the interplanetary perspective that is the aspiration of most global philosophers. Those high-flying observations allow clear vision of only those markings and ideas that are already expected or so generic that they are all but uninformative, like touring Paris, Nairobi, and Delhi from a Boeing 747. Most of us cannot expect to get wholly within another philosophical tradition, and we will be tourists, at best, in a culture we are merely visiting. What is wrong with much of the world philosophy and multicultural movement today is that it clings to the idea of confrontation rather than conversation, one person or culture lecturing to (or at) another rather than questions and answers, anecdotes and personal stories, honest disagreements and arguments. Global understanding is a noble aspiration, but respect for another culture is not the same as uncritical acceptance.

It is too often thought that world philosophy is simply sampling a taste of China, a taste of Africa and Latin America, perhaps taking a slightly fuller serving of India, because it is the most developed and thoroughly studied alternative culture, but not engaging with them. That is a mistake. There is nothing wrong with preferring one system of philosophy to another; indeed, one would be hard put not to, even if, as is natural, that preferred system is usually one’s own. But there is much to admire in other cultures, and what we learn can sometimes serve as a basis on which to judge our own. The Native American philosophy of the environment is a popular case in point. There is much to criticize in other cultures too, and it is no sign of respect but rather a sign of intimidation or moral sloth when one wholly abstains from judgment. One must always be careful, of course. What looks like a fallacy in the context of an alien argument may in fact be a legitimate piece of reasoning within an alternative mode of practical reasoning, and what at first appears to be nonsense in another culture may well make sense in the context of a large problem or way of thinking. (What do first-time philosophy students think of such astounding yet standard claims in European philosophy as “perhaps I am dreaming right now” or “I don’t see how matter can exist”?) It is only by way of engagement, not by a high-flying tour, that one will gain some sense of another philosophy.

The best way to learn a new kind of philosophy, accordingly, is through dialogue, asking questions, raising challenges, requesting more details, making comparisons and contrasts. There are limits, of course, to what a book can provide, but one of the most important skills taught in Western philosophy is of particular value here, namely, the ability to read other cultures critically as well as appreciatively. It is a mistake simply to dismiss other philosophies, to reduce them to familiar Western themes, or to glorify the differences and place them beyond criticism and evaluation. Whether a lecture or textbook is traditional “white male Western” philosophy routinely promulgating its ways in Oxbridge-type universities in Africa or Asia or the new demand for “equal time” so that Third World

societies can lecture white American students on the virtues of alternative cultures and the horrors and guilt of oppression, the problem remains the same. It is through dialogue and differences that the philosophies of other cultures will emerge. Part of these conversations, of course, will involve readings from the great texts of each culture and its past. These are not scriptures but influential voices. They can be disputed not only by foreigners who do not share their framework but by natives who do. Indeed, that is what philosophy ultimately comes to in any culture, not great texts or even great teaching so much as the will to disagree, to question, to seek understanding in place of mere acceptance.

In the chapters that follow, we have tried to allow the voices of world philosophy to speak for themselves. There is no prearranged order or structure imposed, which would distort or in some cases eliminate a philosophical appreciation of how various cultures see and think about the world. There has been no attempt to map Confucian, Buddhist, and Arabic traditions of philosophy onto (or against) the Western tradition, and we have taken great pains not to take the Greek-medieval-European tradition of Socrates through Sartre as the prototype of what philosophy should be. Such biased comparisons too readily lead to the wholesale dismissal of oral traditions such as we find in Africa and in America before the arrival of the Europeans, for example, and more subtly condemn the very different approaches to reasoning and dialogue that are to be found even in the most sophisticated philosophical traditions. One of the recurrent and often destructive arguments we find within these traditions, in fact, concerns what is and what is not philosophy. The professional philosophers of Europe and the United States have long pummeled each other and interrupted conferences with this accusatory concept, and African philosophers, to point to a very different instance, have spent much of their time debating the question whether Africa has any philosophy at all. In some of the traditions discussed, religion encompasses virtually the whole of philosophy. In others, it plays a relatively modest role. In some of the traditions, ethics is the focus, while in others it will be logic or metaphysics or art or the environment.

There is and will be, of course, considerable room for debate about what is included and what is not in a book brazenly subtitled *An Invitation to World Philosophy*. There is, as always, a space problem, and the respect for the endurance, patience, and pocketbook of the reader. There are also questions of priority and discretion. We have not included a chapter on Jewish philosophy, for example, despite a rich history of nearly 5,000 years. Our view, with which we remain somewhat uncomfortable, is that Jewish philosophy and such philosophers as Spinoza and Maimonides have been so often studied and written about and are interwoven so tightly into the fabric of what is usually called Western philosophy that they did not require a separate chapter here. So, too, Russian philosophy borders on and borrows from Europe throughout its

history but nevertheless has undergone a fascinating, if sometimes tragic, intellectual odyssey of its own. It is, accordingly, with some hesitation that we do not include it here. One might make innumerable distinctions within Africa and Latin America, of course, and so too with Native American philosophy, where there are, in a sense, as many philosophies as there are tribes and nations. But we have tried, in each case, to be as comprehensive as possible while acknowledging the differences and variations. In the Middle East, on the other hand, we have included both Arabic and Persian philosophies, despite the obvious overlap of boundaries and influences. Again, our only justification is that lines have had to be drawn somewhere, sometimes here and not there, but the overall scope of the book, we hope, will provide a rich global portrait of the ideas and traditions that are just beginning to be understood together as the philosophies of the world.

The reader might well be taken aback by the fact that there is no chapter on Western philosophy. Is it not part of world philosophy? Or are we bowing to the most ridiculous voices of the recent multiculturalism, who dismiss the West, its ideas, and masterpieces as nothing more than the imperialism of "Dead White European Males"? The answer, of course, is that so-called Western philosophy, that is, the allegedly linear tradition that starts with certain Greek ontologists and builds from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to the Hellenistic and early medieval philosophers and then shifts abruptly from the Mediterranean to France and then England and Germany and on to modern times, is no doubt the dominant philosophy of the world. (American philosophy, interestingly enough, is virtually omitted from most accounts of this tradition, except, perhaps, for a late, passing, and often perfunctory reference to William James or John Dewey.) The Western tradition is often the subject (even the sole subject) of philosophical study even in all those countries with philosophical traditions of their own and is so often summarized and analyzed that the last thing that this book needs is one more survey of "Socrates to Sartre." Its place in the philosophical world is well established, and if the reader wants to supplement the chapters in this book with a slim volume on Western philosophy, there are any number of such readily available. What we have tried to do here is to give pride of place and a proper voice to those traditions that are usually excluded from the study of philosophy, because they do not seem appropriate for philosophical study, because there are so few extant texts and so little evidence about them, or simply because, despite a rich written history, they seem too foreign or remote.

As an exercise, one might ask, however, what the schematized linear philosophical tradition of the West would look like from a foreign shore, encapsulated in thirty to fifty pages as are the traditions covered in this book. It would no doubt seem as strange and confusing as any other exotic tradition of ideas. Premises and logical inferences would appear not only less than self-evident but suspicious or downright dubious.

Indeed, the very emphasis on logic and proof that has characterized so much of the philosophical discipline of the West will itself seem like a curiosity at best, or perhaps—for instance, to a Taoist sage—like vulgar foolishness. Western ethical rules and social practices may seem arbitrary, if not foolish or politically manipulative, and, again, the relatively low status and high abstraction of ethics since the seventeenth century or so would also seem peculiar or even perverse. Our most fundamental, though often embattled, religious beliefs, needless to say, would seem to be superstitions if not hallucinations and much of what is considered most spiritual in other parts of the world would be deemed missing. Montesquieu once tried to take on the intellectual traditions and practices of his countrymen in his *Persian Letters*, and his later Enlightenment followers Voltaire and Diderot similarly tried to gain some perspective by envisioning some South Sea or Oriental philosopher contemplating the inscrutable curiosities of the West. In this book, several of our authors have tried to come to grips with the Western tradition in philosophy by way of contrasts not always flattering to the West. What that tradition has gained in clarity and power it has often lost in other dimensions, many of them systematically ignored. The power of reason has marginalized or vilified the passions. The success of science has eclipsed the importance of art and religion. The emphasis on control and domination has endangered and sometimes destroyed the environment. Sometimes, to see oneself from the outside is essential to one's own salvation.

But, of course, the term *Western* is already a problem, standing for a mixed salad of traditions too readily disguised by the simplicity of the traditional linear summaries, incorporating but not embracing Jews, Arabs, immigrants from all sorts of places, and displaced natives, whether Indians or Gypsies, or "guest workers" or foreign subversives plotting their own revolutions. And even with the supposedly linear development of philosophy, one can distinguish any number of threads and conflicts and discontinuities. Socrates, for example, was on the one hand the seeker after absolute truth, the crafter of definitions, and the precursor of the analytic and linguistic thrust of later philosophy. On the other hand, he was the great conversationalist, a dialectician who loved the exchange, the witty comeback, the subtle put-down. He was a jovial skeptic, a personality, a celebrity, and there is a history of Western philosophy that could be written focusing only on that very different influence. Plato and Aristotle in turn mark off two very different paths in philosophy, and the absorption of philosophy in theology during the Middle Ages could be interpreted either as the further development of the tradition or as a detour, depending on where (if anywhere) one thinks that philosophy was or is going. About forty years ago, Hans Reichenbach, one of the logical positivists, celebrated what he called "the rise of scientific philosophy," dismissing most of ancient and medieval (and much of modern) philosophy as an unfortunate detour. About the same time, the German philoso-

pher Martin Heidegger was bemoaning the sacrifice of "Being" to science and scientific thinking, and according to whom the ancients and many medieval thinkers had it right and scientific philosophy was the detour. It is no longer wise to think of Western philosophy as a single tradition or even as a fabric of interwoven threads stretching from the ancient Greeks, and as one probes deeper into the origins and influences of the so-called Western tradition, many other voices begin to be heard.

In many of the chapters that follow, it will be clear that there is no distinctive discipline called "philosophy" just because there is no way of divorcing the ideas that order a culture from the life of that culture as such. Indeed, even where philosophy is a well-established discipline, as in China, it cannot be understood apart from the life of the people, and sometimes it explodes in the most dramatic or devastating events. David Hall and Roger Ames thus begin their account of Chinese philosophy with the 1989 massacre of students and workers at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Such events are not irrelevant but are manifestations of philosophy, the culmination of a way of thinking that we may not understand. So, too, Graham Parkes makes it clear that Japanese philosophy is intricately interwoven with the arts and rituals of Japanese culture—theater, arts, the training of a warrior, the delightful spirituality of the Japanese tea ceremony. Native American philosophy, according to J. Baird Caldicott and Tom Overholt, is intimately connected with the natural environment in which the Indians found themselves and so what we today call "environmentalism" is quite naturally a central part of their thinking.

Latin American philosophy has a long and rich but often buried history, according to Jorge Valadez, who traces the origins of American philosophy from the ancient civilizations of the Maya and the Aztecs to contemporary Marxism and liberation theology. Eric Ormsby discusses the rich heritage of Arabic philosophy, and Homayoon Sepasi-Tehrani and Janet Flesch trace the sometimes parallel development of Persian philosophy from the ancient Zoroastrians to Shi'ite Islam under the Ayatollah Khomeini. African philosophy is as varied as the many cultures and climates of that great continent. Much of it is embodied in rich oral traditions of storytelling and practical wisdom, and most of it has been destroyed by colonialism, the slave trade, and the political and social catastrophes that have dominated African life for much of this century. Jackie Trimier takes a philosophical look at one African culture and its legends in order to get a grasp on the most troublesome question in African philosophy today, namely, what is it to be an "authentic" African? Steven Phillips then examines the long and logically complex history of Indian philosophy, from the ancient texts of the Vedas to the militant pacifism of Gandhi. Finally, Robert McDermott brings us back to our own "Western" tradition, beginning with Plato, to bring out themes and schools that have not usually been recognized as part of that tradition, a secret or "esoteric" tradition that has life of its own.

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