

A global view on the histories of philosophy

★ Since the 2018 World Congress of Philosophy it has become more evident than ever that the field of Philosophy has globally transformed itself, yet this is not currently reflected within the historical framework. We spoke to **Professor Rolf Elberfeld** about his work in developing a global framework on the history of philosophy, which will help pave the way for doing philosophy in a global perspective in future.

While many nations and cultures across all the world have their own traditions of thinking, philosophy came to be conventionalised as a purely European project by the late 18th century. Now Professor Rolf Elberfeld and his colleagues in a new DFG-funded project aim to develop a more inclusive picture. "We aim to find a new framework for the history of philosophy, which includes different traditions," he outlines. While European philosophers have made important contributions to the field, Professor Elberfeld believes it's important not to neglect traditions from other parts of the world in the wider historiography. "One of the main aims of the project is to put the history of philosophy in global perspective," he says.

Global perspective

This means moving away from the euro-centric viewpoint that emerged around the middle of the 18th century. Johann Jakob Brucker's *Critical History of Philosophy*,

written around 1730, documented the history of Persian, Egyptian and Chinese philosophy among several other traditions, yet the field later narrowed, partly in response to the ideas of Immanuel Kant. "Kant said; 'within the history of philosophy, only one philosophy can be true, and represent the truth,'" outlines Professor Elberfeld. Other philosophers subsequently made important contributions to the history of the field, notably Georg W.F. Hegel. "In some respects, Hegel pluralised philosophy. He said; 'there's not just one true philosophy, but there was a development within the history of philosophy, which started with the Chinese,'" explains Professor Elberfeld. "But then he created a line of philosophical development in which European Philosophy is the final and highest end of the History of Thinking."

Against this linear process, the project wants to stress that the history of philosophy is inherently multi-polar and inter-connected. One example among many others are the

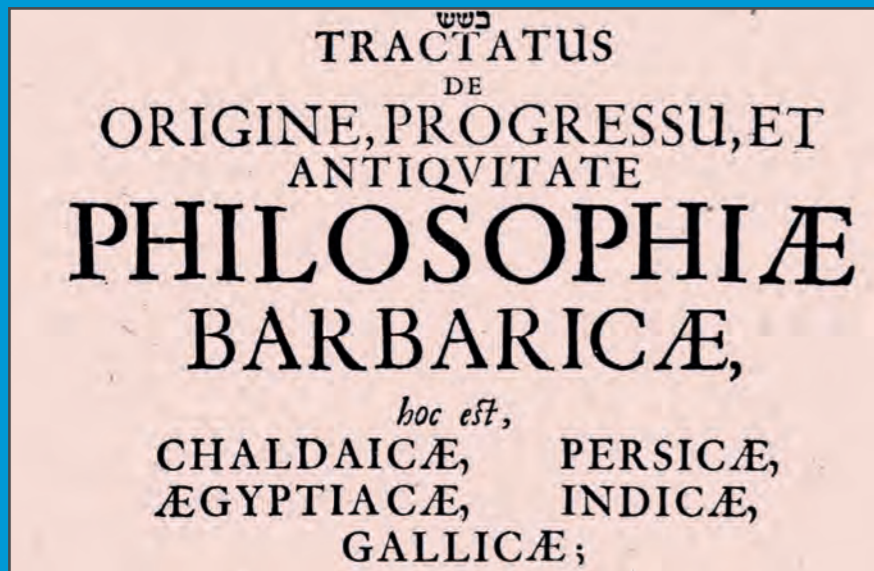
Arabic and Jewish traditions which are integral parts of European philosophy. However, some scholars have taken a European-centered viewpoint, notably the 19th century philosopher Albert Schwegger, who argued that up to classical antiquity philosophy existed only in Europe. "Schwegger had a very narrow view on philosophy. He defined philosophy in connection to science," says Professor Elberfeld. A key part of the project's agenda centres around re-analysing the exclusion mechanisms through which philosophy was conventionalised as a purely European project, work which involves considering the nature of the subject itself. "It depends on the definition, on what is considered to be part of philosophy," continues Professor Elberfeld.

This is a complex question, and perceptions of what the subject involves have evolved over time. During his lifetime Isaac Newton was considered to be a natural philosopher for example, yet he is now thought of primarily as

哲学の庭，哲学堂公園

"Garden of Philosophy" and "Hall of Philosophy Park" in Tokyo - © panoramio
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Christian Kortholt (1632–1694), Treatise on the origin and development of the ancient barbaric philosophy of the Chaldeans, Persians, Egyptians, Indians and Gauls, Jena 1660.

a physicist. Moreover, the importance of religion and theology within the field has been the subject of debate. "If philosophy is narrowly defined as a science, then topics related to religion will not belong to it," says Professor Elberfeld. For his part, Professor Elberfeld aims to open up the debate by developing a global perspective on the history of philosophy. "We have a pluralised picture of the history of philosophy. We see many different traditions in China, Japan, India, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world," he outlines. "Since the 2018 World Congress of Philosophy in Beijing it has become evident that Philosophy is already a global project which is taught at universities all over the world."

Researchers in the project now aim to collect materials from histories of philosophy written in several different languages to try and build a fuller picture. Language is an important window into a nation's culture and its philosophical traditions. "Within a language, your way of life and the structure of

the world will be culturally biased," Professor Elberfeld points out. While it's clearly not possible to cover every global language, researchers are looking at materials and texts across a diverse range. "We're looking at different histories of philosophy, written in Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Latin, German, English, and other languages. What kinds of histories of philosophy do we have already in these languages?" asks Professor Elberfeld. "We will analyse the material, and look at what is excluded from these histories and what is included. In the first year of the project we want to establish an overview of the different materials."

A detailed analysis of these materials can reveal a great deal about what is considered to be important in certain philosophical traditions and what is not. Professor Elberfeld points to a very interesting example from Japan. "Some Japanese scholars wrote a history of the western tradition of philosophy, starting with Thales of Miletus - so pre-Socratic philosophy - and ending with Derrida.

They did not include modern Japanese philosophy, even though it can be considered to some degree as an offshoot of European philosophy. Modern Japanese philosophers have built on those foundations to create new philosophy," he explains. Chinese historians of philosophy by contrast typically take a different approach. "Chinese philosophers include their whole tradition within their history of philosophy. So philosophers from different countries take different things into account when writing a history of philosophy," continues Professor Elberfeld.

Inter-cultural dialogue

A global perspective on the history of philosophy could support deeper dialogue between these different traditions and enrich cultural understanding. Dialogue on aesthetics could open up new perspectives on art for example. "If you look closely at paintings in Chinese art galleries, sometimes they relate to their own tradition of painting and the arts. That makes the paintings different," says Professor Elberfeld. These works cannot be fully understood purely on the basis of European aesthetics. This underlines the importance of inter-cultural dialogue, which can also lead to new insights into more familiar artworks, Professor Elberfeld explains: "For example, we are starting to look at European artworks with aesthetic theories from China. It is quite fruitful to look at these artworks on the basis of Chinese aesthetic theories. It opens up new perspectives, and new ways of paying attention."

An aesthetic theory by nature makes distinctions, and those distinctions will draw the viewer's attention to specific aspects of the painting. One very fundamental distinction is between nature and culture, and the nature of this distinction varies across different philosophical traditions. "In the European tradition, we consider everything

that is made by human beings as culture," outlines Professor Elberfeld. There is however a growing trend in urban architecture to design buildings to fit in with the landscape, which to a degree reflects the influence of Japanese aesthetics and ideas. "Many Japanese architects create buildings which essentially meld architecture with nature. For example, the Church of Light and the Church on the Water in Japan, which were both designed by a famous Japanese architect called Tadao Ando," says Professor Elberfeld.

A visitor to the Church on the Water is able to look out of the building over the adjacent pond directly into the natural world, so from this viewpoint it is nature itself that is holy. This represents a different perspective on religion to that commonly held in Europe, which reinforces the importance of inter-cultural dialogue. "We can only be aware of

different traditions and ideas. This does not mean neglecting a nation's own philosophical traditions, but rather placing them within a wider context. "A global perspective means that you look from your own tradition into the plurality of different traditions, on a global scale," explains Professor Elberfeld. This includes philosophical traditions that were excluded from the history of ideas due to social and political circumstances such as colonialism. "Particularly, in India, Africa and Latin America there are strong movements to decolonize philosophy, that is to 'provincialise Europe', as the Indian scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty calls it, and to include indigenous philosophical traditions into the canon of philosophy," outlines Professor Elberfeld. "The project would also like to include ideas and viewpoints from these philosophical traditions."

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these different ideas if we have a broad view of the history of philosophy," points out Professor Elberfeld. Having spent part of his career abroad, Professor Elberfeld is well placed to develop this broader picture. "The first point in the project is to collect all the materials, in different languages and from different histories of philosophy," he says. "We'll also look at how philosophy is studied in different countries and universities. Students in Taiwan start with a full semester of philosophy on a general level for example, then they have to decide between studying the Western tradition or the Chinese tradition."

The hope is that the project's work will encourage philosophy departments to extend their teaching programmes to

This represents a paradigm shift within philosophy itself, towards a more entangled, globalised perspective. While the 2018 World Congress of Philosophy was the biggest ever, with around 3,000 papers presented, Professor Elberfeld says there was a recognition at the event that the field needs to evolve: "The President of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies, Luca Scarantino, said in his final speech at the Congress that the field had to change." The project will make an important contribution in these terms. "We would like to support, and to enhance, inter-cultural dialogue between different traditions – within epistemology, aesthetics, and different fields of knowledge," continues Professor Elberfeld.

HISTORIES OF PHILOSOPHY

A History of Philosophy in Global Perspective

Project Objectives

In the age of globalization it is necessary for the future of philosophy, to draw up a history of philosophical thought in a global perspective, in which the Eurocentric narrowness of Philosophy is overcome. The result of the project will be a new, globally oriented picture of the history of philosophy.

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Professor Rolf Elberfeld studied Philosophy, Japanology, Sinology, History of Religion in Wuerzburg, Bonn and Kyoto. He received his PhD from the University of Wuerzburg and did his Habilitation at the University of Wuppertal. He is Full Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hildesheim. His fields of research are Intercultural Philosophy, Phenomenology, Japanese Philosophy, global History of Philosophy



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The Toledo School of Translators is the group of scholars who worked together in the city of Toledo during the 12th and 13th centuries, to translate many of the philosophical and scientific works – translated before from Greek into Arabic or written in Arabic – from Classical Arabic into Latin.

