PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Eurocentrism as an epistemology of ignorance

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... even philosophical systems are facts of history.

Kwame Nkrumah (1964:3)

Why would it be surprising that the work of philosophers would be affected by their cultural and historical and national contexts? In this chapter I want to suggest that avoiding and denying the contextual influences on philosophical systems and trends is the work of an epistemology of ignorance. That is, transcendental illusions about the creation of philosophical ideas and the progression of philosophical debates must be cultivated and protected. Such illusions have been and continue to be functional for certain groups of philosophers, not to mention the empires that house them.

Perhaps the most important way in which western philosophy protects and maintains its ignorance about the effects, and limitations, of its geographical location is through the perpetuation and defense of Eurocentric practices and curricula. We should understand Eurocentrism in philosophy as the exclusive or nearly exclusive attention to a European canon of philosophical writing. Given the intellectual wealth of the world, an exclusive focus on the European tradition requires an intentionality and some manner of justification. Oftentimes justifications are quite explicit, as Amy Olberding (2015) has recently argued. Non-western philosophies have to merit inclusion by presenting distinct lines of argumentation one cannot find in the Western canon, yet they must also pass a test of intelligibility, not being so distinct that they are beyond comprehension. These demands have an air of methodological common sense about them (e.g. ‘we cannot know what we cannot make sense of, nor do we need to know from new sources what we already know’). Yet they remain forms of Eurocentrism by assuming the non-negotiable legitimacy of a Western measuring stick, holding Western judgments, sensibilities, assumptions, norms, and conventions in place as the gatekeepers for philosophical inclusion. The capacity to judge whether an idea is distinct from Western traditions is itself a philosophical task that should not be left to one side of the dialogue. Indeed, such approaches brook no dialogue: Westerners are judging whether other traditions are worthy, but not putting themselves in the position to be taught.

I want to suggest that such forms of Eurocentrism indicate that it is a species of an even larger pathology I will call the transcendentalist delusion: a belief that thought can be separated from its specific, embodied, and geo-historical source. Philosophical ideas and arguments, on
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this approach, can be discerned and assessed without attending to the location of their genesis. The genealogy of an idea is a concern of intellectual historians, perhaps sociologists, but neither appropriate nor germane to philosophy.

The transcendentalist delusion is both a cause and a symptom of Eurocentrism. It has legitimated the long persistence of exclusionary intellectual practices that were initiated in the midst of the first era of European empire building. Starting with the empires of Spain and Portugal during the Renaissance, new discursive formations had to be spawned in order to manage, explain, and justify these ambitious, and violent, projects. Conquerors such as Cortes reported in their journals of finding marvelous cities equal or greater than any in Europe, and the subsequent mandate from Christian monarchs and Church officials to kill elites, enslave populations, and build bonfires out of their intellectual and cultural products required some subterfuge. Enrique Dussel has suggested that what the Europeans did in the Americas was less of a discovery than a covering over or *encubrimiento* (Dussel 1995). Eventually, new theories developed about the existence of natural geographical hierarchies and typologies of peoples, cultures, and religions that claimed to justify and explain Europe’s domination of the world (see Eze 1997).

Central to the discursive formation emerging around the formation of European colonial empires was the idea that Europe was at the vanguard of human culture, achieving the highest successes in every domain of human inquiry and endeavor, but especially the domain of knowledge. Colonialism required such beliefs. As Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Nkrumah explains, ‘To say that each man was able to contribute to the truth would require at the social level that each man should have political rights. To say that each man was equally capable of contributing to the truth would require that each man should have equal political rights’ (1964:44). Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) has named this a form of *epistemicide*, explaining that it was a necessary aspect of conquest. The knowledges of the peoples subject to colonization had to be rendered harmless to the colonial project. This could occur in multiple ways: by denying that these were true knowledges, or by claiming that they were epistemically inferior to European knowledges, or by outright theft of a knowledge and then repackaging it as a European invention. Destroying and deriding the intellectual traditions of a people altered the sense of self for both colonizer and colonized, enabling hubris for the one and inhibiting resistance for the other. And as Nkrumah notes, thwarting demands for political democracy required incapacitating the idea of epistemic democracy, or the ability of all to contribute equally to human knowledge. Projects of conquest could then justifiably pursue non-dialogic processes of engagement, epistemic and otherwise.

In the beginning of Europe’s rise, domination was given a decidedly Christian cast. A major example of this was in the Spanish monarchy’s doctrine of ‘Requerimiento.’ This doctrine required that the indigenous peoples of the Americas submit to religious conversion, and further declared that upon conversion they immediately became subjects of the (divinely sanctioned) crown. By such means Christianity provided not only a cover for colonialism but a bureaucracy for surveilling and managing populations. The interpretation of Christian doctrine such practices relied on was contested from within the Church, most effectively by Bartolome de las Casas. As strong secular tendencies emerged across northern Europe in the 17th century, the legitimation of colonial practices was again put to the test, and yet, interestingly, the rise of secularism did not lead to a general repudiation of empire-building except among a small minority (most notably, Denis Diderot). Instead, followers of Enlightenment ideas began to develop putatively scientific and philosophical forms of argumentation that would legitimate colonial rule on the basis of rational superiority rather than religion. Theories began to proliferate about the intellectual and moral effects of climates and the subsequent hierarchies of cultures and peoples. Yet the political utility of these new theories was just as useful: just as before, when a refusal of Christian
conversion justified force, so the rejection of European governance proved one’s backwardness and resistance to progress (McCarthy 2009).

In an impressive sleight-of-hand, these new philosophical justifications established Europe as both the vanguard of the human race and as achieving a universal form of thought. The values, epistemology, and scientific methodology that could only emerge from the cooler latitudes of the conquering societies were universally true and applicable to all (Zea 1988–89; Zea 1992; Dussel 1995; Wynter 2000; Wynter 2003). Herman Melville sets up a character in his slyly seditious 1850 novel, White Jacket, to explain that

We are the pioneers of the world, the advance-guard . . . the political Messiah has come in us, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world.

(1850:151)

Ingeniously, the origin of an idea in ‘America’, or Europe, established its ability to achieve universal scope.

What also follows from this idea is that the cultural achievements of the advance-guard reflects on the outermost capacities of the human race. Hence, what other cultures do reflects their current developmental state, while the achievements (or missteps) of the United States and Europe showcases the fundamental capacities of the human species.

With this orientation in place, modern European epistemologies had no need to consider the limited applicability of their justificatory norms or the advisability of enlarging the dialogic space of philosophical debate. Though they recognized the geographical specificity of their endeavor, they believed it to have a global reach, without need for contextual reflection. Quite obviously, such delusions emerged out of an experience of empire, which spawned several important philosophical trends and, in fact, philosophical errors. These errors included the inattention to philosophical genealogy or the relationship between ideas and their cultural contexts, as well as idealist and non-dialogic conceptions of justification and truth. A whole edifice of framing assumptions such as nature/culture, mind/body, civilized/savage, and public/private served to sequester particularist, embodied, and material issues away from the sight, and sites, of philosophers. These framing assumptions also helped to conceal the particularity, embodiment, and materiality of philosophical projects.

The transcendental delusion, then, was born out of a very specific European experience that it then had no tools to analyze, reflect upon, or correct.

Women’s studies scholars discovered more than a generation ago that one cannot simply add women and stir as a way to introduce scholarship and research on women into the academy, given the dominance of such framing assumptions and concepts as I’ve discussed, as well as naturalized ideas about families and gender that render women’s (or any non-male) experience outside of the sphere of analysis. Just so, one cannot simply add non-Western philosophy or topics such as race and colonialism to the existing field of philosophy, its canon and curriculum, without subverting the mainstream periodization, the existing canon, even questioning what is meant by ‘philosophy.’

In some respects the challenges posed by race and colonialism are even more intransigent than those posed by gender and sexuality. As Genevieve Lloyd wrote in 1984, feminism has required (and still requires) attending to the Other of reason, that is, to the abjected realm of bodies, desires, and particularities of affective commitments that have been positioned as outside of, and obstacles to, the rational faculties of judgment. Feminism cannot simply be included alongside
without refiguring some of the central features of the existing discipline and its ideas about its best practices. Both feminism and decolonial theory call out for dismantling such basic terms of identity as ‘man’ or ‘human.’ Yet some have imagined feminist philosophy itself as transcendent of its own time and place, able to stay within the domain of Eurocentric theoretical resources without attending to their geographical genealogies. On such a view, only part of the transcendental delusion would require reform for such feminist philosophy to carry on. Such a partial reform is not possible for the work of decolonial and critical race philosophy, since it would not mandate an expansion of the geographical boundaries. Eurocentric theory is going to be called out, and worse, put in context as a limited, partial, often delusional perspective, and not in any sense the underlying key to the riddle or the mainspring of critical and liberatory philosophy.

Critical race and decolonial theory forces us to attend to the colonial context in which the European canon of rational thought has been and continues to be produced. This project involves uncovering the Eurocentrism embedded in the way in which philosophy is defined, conceptualized, and taught, and this requires placing Western philosophy, most of which occurred in what the discipline defines as the modern period beginning in the late Renaissance, squarely within its context of the long *duree* of European and U.S. global empire building. The societies that spawned our modern philosophers were not inessential backdrop but constitutive of the available meanings and conceptual repertoires, the reaches of intelligibility, and the central problematics of this tradition. Examples include debates over freedom and individual sovereignty, the sphere of legal rights and property rights, and the nature of human understanding (Mehta 1999; Bernasconi 2003). And this is just as true for the liberatory and radical tracks of European modern philosophy, such as Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Marx, Mill, and others, as it was for the more conservative thinkers. Both groups had intra-European debates and social struggles in mind, but these were themselves formulated against a contrast class drawn from ‘new world’ indigenous cultures, Asian cultures, African cultures, and non-Christian societies, all of which were constructs sometimes fashioned by little more than travelogues (Coronil 1996; Mignolo 2011).

Modern European philosophy emerged from a context of epistemic injustice toward non-European societies, and this injustice is perpetuated by legitimating ideas about intellectual superiority of European-American philosophy. To correct this injustice, and avoid its repetition, philosophy must develop, as Zea, Dussel, Nkrumah, and so many others have argued for more than half a century, greater reflexive capacities as a part of its normal work. It must come to be understood as deeply connected to its context, and this requires working from and within the decolonial studies now emerging in geography, history, anthropology, sociology, and so on (i.e. the assortment of derided social sciences that too many philosophers, from all persuasions, have summarily ignored) that explore the intellectual contours and effects of the context of European colonization (e.g. Gordon 1995; Maldonado-Torres 2006). Perspectivism, as I will argue, will prove insufficient if it implies a setting of philosophies alongside one another, as if Anglo-European philosophy must simply begin to make way for others, or make a space for other philosophical traditions alongside itself, to the side, if not to the back. Rather, instead of a pluralist perspectivism, what is required is a decolonizing of the way in which we interpret, and teach, Western philosophy and, indeed, every form of philosophical thought.

In what follows I will focus on the need to think through the geography of epistemology, or what some have called shifting the geography of reason.

The geography of epistemology

The idea of geography here involves the practice or orientation of *spatialization*. What geographers study is not simply the coordinates of entities in a domain, but the constitution of the
domain itself, including its borders and its internal and external relations. In order to observe the workings of European meaning systems, we must rethink the imagined ground upon which Western philosophy locates itself. Here is how Walter Mignolo puts this point:

The important observation to make here is not simply whether there are other perspectives about the ‘same event’ but that another paradigm emerges across the epistemic colonial difference. The dominant theo- and ego-politics is being contested by the emerging shift to the geo-politics and body politics of knowledge: knowledge produced from the geo-historical and bio-historical perspective of racialized locations and people. (Mignolo 2005:48)

What Mignolo makes clear is that the solution cannot be an ‘add alongside’ or happy multiculturalism. Perspectivism may imply contrasting points of view and the capacity to access different sorts of empirical evidence, lending support for aggregation models of knowledge that would build from the acknowledgement of multiplicity and difference to a more expansive, comprehensive account. Yet Mignolo and others have argued that the overarching frames of Eurocentrism are intrinsically imperialist and insusceptible to compatibilism or an adequate inclusivity. This does not entail or imply that every single claim or theory in the traditional European canon of philosophy is untrue and unusable, but that the overarching framework constitutes its domain via a paradigm that cannot play well with others.

Mignolo’s reference to ‘theo-politics’ has to do with the way in which, as I described earlier, 15th and 16th century Christianity began to systematically destroy all of its competing sign-systems, expelling peoples, committing genocide, burning temples and books en masse, and redrawing universal maps of location, history, and value in its own terms. The people of Africa came to be viewed as the descendants of Ham, the disobedient son in the Bible who, by his disobedience, deserved his fate of being made a servant to his brothers. And so all peoples who remain ignorant of the word of God became classified as heretics and, for that reason, barbarians (a word continually in use in public discourses today). For the Greeks the term barbaros was used to designate non-Hellenophones, though in the Christian era the contrast class came to be predictably defined as one who is heathen, meaning non-Christian. In both cases the concept designates by negation without identifying any substantive alterity. Thomas Aquinas defined the barbarian as one whose manner of life defies common sense (what later came to be called natural law) and, as such, their lives do not accord with human nature (Las Casas, quoted in Mignolo 2005:18) But this again works via negation, denying the Other a substantive difference. One needs to know nothing about them, their beliefs or practices, except what they are not. Hence, the contrast class for establishing the boundaries of civility or humanity is defined in terms not of self/Other, but in terms of self/not-self. Difference is reduced to a question of one’s relation to the norms and belief systems of the dominant Christian European society. Barbarians are those who have repudiated Christianity, and their own belief-systems and ways of life have no bearing on this judgment. Unlike the Inca and followers of Islam, for example, who recognized an overlap between their own belief-systems and those of other theists, the Christian Church could tolerate no commonality.

The division of the Iberian peninsular and subsequently the entirety of the Americas into binary maps of Christian/Heathen or Christian/not-Christian produced this binary of Self/not-Self in which the other is reduced to a negative, comparative feature. This is what spurred debates about whether the indigenous were human beings, capable of personhood, endowed with even a modicum of rationality or even self-regard. Such a construction constitutes a radical form of epistemic injustice, as it follows from one’s very identity or being. This is what José Medina...
(2017) has called ‘epistemic death’: when one experiences both testimonial and hermeneutic exclusion and thus shut out completely from contributing to the production of meaning and knowledge. In reality, of course, productions of meaning and knowledge never stop occurring, even among the most abject conditions, yet will be unacknowledged by the Masters, or appropriated without attribution.

Such a construction of barbarian identity removes any motivation to learn other ways or creeds. The claim that those designated are inferior and inadequate thinkers is not justified by a study and evaluation of different practices, customs, forms of religiosity, institutions, beliefs, and the like, but simply on the observation that a group is not-Christian or not-rational or not-self. This is an epistemology of ignorance born of imperial and colonial projects of plunder that legitimates a lack of investigation and study beyond one’s own domain. Hence Eurocentrism has no need to apologize, much less correct itself. On the contrary, Eurocentrism has a need not to know, a motivation not to learn, in the service of its material and discursive conquests.

The language of ‘human nature’ has an implicit normativity and capacity for comparison built into it, since if there is a human nature, then there is at least the possibility of an inhuman nature. Such inhuman natures are continually attributed to differently abled bodies as well as different cultures and practices. If we want to ward off the possibility of this kind of conclusion, or, in other words, if we wish to maintain a normative idea about human nature without thereby producing a class of sub-humans, we will need to develop a capacity for the sort of reflexive analysis that decontextualizing philosophical thought makes all but impossible.

Decolonial theory by figures such as Mignolo, Dussel, Wynter, Grosfoguel, Coronil, and Nkrumah provide the tools to begin such philosophical reflection on Western philosophy and in particular Western epistemologies, although they are almost completely absent from required curricula, and even optional curricula. An important piece of this reflection must be the way in which the domain of the ‘secular’ is understood, in order to draw the links between the foundations of European colonialism, the Enlightenment, and conceptions of modernity. This is the point of Mignolo’s concept of ‘theo-politics’: that the teleological and exclusivist conceptions of intellectual, cultural and scientific development that are used to rank varied global achievements and contributions are still operating within a political world view with significant elements of theology. Thus, the transition from Spanish-Christian discourses of colonialism to Enlightenment secular ones, referenced earlier, should be understood to be at least in some important respects superficial, since the overarching framing assumptions and teleology remained operational. Whether it has an associated God or not, there is a theological resonance in a teleological frame that moves from a state of grace (or state of nature); a fall (into mob democracy, for example, or authoritarian scholasticism, or submission to tyranny); a developmental trajectory of salvific, philosophical enlightenment (or scientific progress alongside industrialization); and a period of divine or transcendental punishment and judgment (which could become the task, of course, of the philosophers). Western philosophy is imagined always as a light or gift brought to the hoi polloi by a talented and profound individual or small group, never as something emerging from the mass. If the mass rejects the gift of philosophy, or doesn’t value its contributions, this act alone is often sufficient to define them as barbarians. Hence, there are those who can cohabit the garden of ethical life, if they willingly follow the Teacher, and those who must be shunted out. For those inside the garden walls, there is a set of political protocols for the protection of rights, and altogether different treatment for those outside the walls.2

Mignolo’s point is that secularism simply adopted and adapted a prior Christian theological mapping with all of its trappings of a universal system of truth that judged resisters blameworthy for their exile and suffering. If Christianity organized the peoples of the world fundamentally
into those who see the light and are saved and those who are unwilling or incapable of salvation, current ideas about modernity continue this schema. What is new in the modern period is that the categories of demarcation between the self and the not-self become racialized and associated with land mass.

There is a wonderful geographical doublespeak in the philosophy profession, where the salience of location is both avowed and denied. On the one hand, it is bad form to locate a philosophical idea as having a national lineage. We don’t speak in polite society of French ideas or German theories: this would sound too much like Nazism’s idea of Jewish science and art. Yet the principle reason given for rejecting the relevance of lineage is methodological: because this would obviate the distinction between philosophy and intellectual history, and reduce ideas to arbitrary features of their formation that cannot sustain causal claims. Even if it can be established that an origin of an idea played a causal role in its formation, philosophers are said to be interested in reasons, not causes. Neither the meaning nor the validity of an idea is determined by its genealogy.

On the other hand, our curricula continue to operate with implicitly colonial historiographies that organize the canonical periodizations of western philosophy and its geographical borders. The canon periodization we use misnames particulars as universals. Still today the history of philosophy is grouped within the following categories: Ancient (meaning 4th century Greece), Early Modern (meaning 17th century northwestern Europe, excluding Spain and Portugal), Modern (meaning the same area in the 18th century), and Nineteenth and Twentieth Century (including here England, Scotland, Germany, Austria, France, and the U.S. and Canada). These time-maps represent modernist frames about the progression of reason. If anything, the last few decades have witnessed a further narrowing of the field, cutting out Chinese and Indian philosophy from so-called top departments. The history of philosophy is itself on the ropes in many analytic departments, losing its market share of courses and faculty lines, so one may imagine that this solves the problem of the colonial narrative, but in reality it only further ensures a decontextualization of thought. The canon at least gives us a historical trajectory for current debates and preoccupations.

The idea here is not that philosophies are reducible to their context, and dismissable on those grounds, but that without understanding philosophical systems and trends in their context we cannot hope to adequately interpret or assess them. It is not that the origin of an idea is all-determinative, but that we should stop assuming it has no effect without exploration. Context can explain why a weak argument gained favor and came to be representational of a sub-field, but it also can explain why the question was formulated just so, even if the answer given was rather brilliant. Thankfully, the situation is beginning to improve in the history of philosophy, where a larger range of contemporary interlocutors are taken up alongside canonical figures, as well as historical, social, and political events (good examples: Solomon, Beiser, O’Neill, Potter). And such work is helping to reshape periodization and geographical boundaries, as we come to understand, for example, the influence of the learned Arab world on early Modern philosophers. It is not simply that they helpfully kept Aristotle in their libraries for us, but that their disputations on numerous topics set the terms of discussion. I’ll shortly give an example related to this point.

Yet in other sub-fields of philosophy, there has not been as much methodological progress, and questions continue to be portrayed as timeless and transcendent of their context. Such approaches leave intact and unchallenged the geographic imaginary that privileges the West as the origin and principal location of Philosophy. In this imaginary, which is regularly reinforced, if not policed, by our departmental curricular requirements, philosophy is a practice invented by the ancient Greeks, re-emerging (as if from a dream) in modern Europe, and primarily flourishing in those
countries influenced by the West. This is a time-map, and it allows those of us who locate ourselves in the western tradition to rest assured that those behind us, even if they start on the path we have charted, will never catch up.

Thus, the idea of ‘theo-politics’ helps name the teleological framing of philosophical history that legitimates geographical narrowness. Just as once the world was divided between Christians and non-Christians, today there are those who do philosophy (or who do philosophy properly) and those who don’t, and these divisions correspond to geographical locations. Next I want to turn to the other term Mignolo refers to in the passage above, which is the idea of ‘ego-politics’. This is a reference to René Descartes, and in particular, to Enrique Dussel’s analysis of the role Descartes played in the formation of western epistemology’s colonial narrative about its own emergence as an uncaused cause. The philosophical scholarship on Descartes has taken some very productive turns of late, benefitting from the newly expansive contextual trends in the history of philosophy, as I noted. This has helped to place Descartes’ work in relation to earlier periods, and there have also been multi-layered readings of his nightmarish meditations (see e.g. Bordo, Scheman, Brown, Lee). But what remains too often neglected is the link between Descartes and the Jesuitical tradition in which he was educated. Understanding this link challenges received ideas not only about the development of early modern European epistemology but also about how modernity is continually defined today.

The Jesuit order, or Society of Jesus, was founded only in 1536, 60 years before Descartes’ birth. The order was quickly distinguished by its willingness to proselytize under difficult conditions, including as one of its four vows the promise of engaging in missionary work, and they soon became some of the most active missionaries in the New World. In some cases Jesuits sought to protect indigenous populations from abuse, but they also operated as overseers of indigenous labor in the mines and plantations and owned significant numbers of African slaves. As early as 1549, Jesuits began missionary work in the wide expanses of the New World. Thus the evolution of the order tracked their colonizing projects in the service of Spain and France as they began to develop the institutions and practices that would help them manage the populations under their patronage throughout the Americas, including the job of efficiently extracting labor. The innovation of the Jesuits was to proselytize not primarily by forced memorizing of the catechism but, rather, by inviting others to join in their personal relationships with Christ by performing self-examination as individuals and developing a capacity for reflection on their beliefs, meanings, values, and the relation of these with the divine purpose.

From the age of 10 until he graduated at 17, Descartes was enrolled in the Jesuit Collège Royal Henry-Le-Grand at La Flèche. He then went onto the University of Poitiers, where he earned a degree in Canon Law, or the body of Christian laws. His subsequent quite numerous travels took him to the papal nuncio in Italy, where it was Cardinal Berulle who first urged Descartes to write philosophy.

Descartes’ association with the Jesuits links him securely to Spain (whose philosophy in this period is too often ignored) but also to the New World. The flow of people and of intellectual influences across the Atlantic was intense starting in the 16th century, and so it was not at all odd that Descartes studied logic from a work written by the well known Mexican philosopher of that period, Antonio Rubio.

The Jesuit belief in a thorough and sustained ‘examination of conscience’ maps easily onto the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, first published in 1641, in which Descartes (1993) provides an uncanny reportage of his innermost doubts and debates. Such self-examination is also clearly evident in his *Passions of the Soul*, published in 1646 (see Descartes 1990). Dussel and other historians of philosophy have traced Descartes’ formative influences also back to Fonseca, the Portuguese philosopher who influenced a generation of Jesuits known as the Coimbrian school. Here
the principal topic of discussion was the concept of method, identified as ‘the art of reasoning about whatever probable question’ (quoted in Dussel 2014:15). Another Portuguese influence on Descartes that Dussel tracks is Francisco Sanchez, who proposed a means to arrive at certainty through a process of doubt.

In standard intellectual histories, Descartes’ influences are listed as the late works of Aristotle, the Stoic school of Greek philosophy, and St. Augustine. Augustine’s influences on Descartes are thought to be less theological than involving his self-examining, reflexive practice and his logical approach to questions of time and reality. Hence all of Descartes’ influences are taken to be secular. One of the interesting implications of this new contextualization of Descartes’ ideas is that the move from religious to secular philosophy is not as sharp a break as it is often made out to be. Nor is secularism a necessary component of the self-critical reflections associated with rational modernity.

Dussel suggests, in fact, that we should locate the emergence of modern thought with Las Casas rather than with Descartes. In this shift, modernity is the emergence of a critical reflection on difference and material conditions rather than a conquering and isolated ego. It is a reflection directed toward the ideas and practices that inhabit one’s social and historical context, and not simply directed at one’s self or one’s own personal beliefs. As Mignolo suggests, the differences between such definitions of modernity are not compatible: we cannot place such perspectives alongside one another but must shift registers. Descartes’s aim is for each individual to achieve absolute or indubitable certainty, just as the Jesuits aimed for. Hence, he finds the route of perceptual sensation too defeasible for this purpose, nor can it disprove his eventual conclusions. By contrast, Las Casas works through a direct perception of his material surroundings, the real world conditions of the Indians and their cultural achievements, using this to test dogmatisms of Church interpreters and their use of syllogistic reasoning. But unlike traditional empiricists, Las Casas recognizes the particularism and thus perspectivism of his own location — a perspective that provides the criteria necessary to identify the strange and barbarous. Because he recognizes it as a perspective, he is able to see the Other as having a substantive difference, and not simply as a ‘not-self.’ Las Casas then goes on to engage in reflective social critique of his own society’s doxastic conventions.

Descartes’ habitus was very much unreflectively informed by the theo-politics of Christian conquest, producing an ego-politics with the imperialist mind-set that rejected all external influences out of hand. The progress of Western philosophy continues to be hobbled by this approach, insistently ignorant of potential interlocutors. Las Casas, by contrast, is visibly groping toward a different self-understanding, in which one’s own inclinations are analyzed in relation to their social context. With this approach, dialogic models of philosophical thought, especially those that can span cultures and belief-systems, are non-negotiable necessities for the achievement of understanding.

What theo- and ego-politics have in common is an imperial design on time and space. Where theo-politics proposes a singular historical developmental trajectory of progress and redemption, ego-politics proposes a spatial mastery from a singular nodal point. Descartes’ procedure requires no dialogic interlocutors, no collective process, and yet can achieve a truth for all. Without speaking to all, it is a truth that speaks for all. Against these Mignolo proposes ‘a geo-politics and body politics of knowledge: knowledge produced from the geo-historical and bio-historical perspective of racialized locations and people.’ This is not a reversal but a decentralization: in place of a singular trajectory of successive events in which every culture can be located as either ‘ahead’ or ‘behind,’ he and others propose a pluriversality of heterogeneous historico-structural nodes. Las Casas moves us closer to this ideal by deflating the concepts that would legitimate hermeneutic closure, turning away from dialogue.
Conclusion

My argument has been that Eurocentrism is more than simply a preference for a particular tradition of philosophical thought, but a practice of ensuring ignorance that perpetuates the sort of epistemic injustices that came to be consolidated in many European intellectual trends during its extended efforts to colonize the globe. Continuing to separate philosophical practice from its context obscures this fact, disabling critical reflexivity, justifying exclusivity, indeed, justifying a rather appalling ignorance about others and other intellectual traditions.

There has always been a resistance both within and outside the philosophical traditions emerging from Europe. Within the West, feminist and postcolonial and critical race and decolonial philosophies have recently increased in scope and vigor, but they are not entirely new. Outside of the West, the critique has been persistent. Decolonial thought emerged to contest European intellectual mono-lingualism as soon as the Conquest began; it’s just that this rich tradition of counterpoint has been all but excluded from the Western curriculum. Western philosophy’s long overdue engagement with its non-Western critics is the only solution to the epistemology of ignorance.

In his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ Michel Foucault (1984) makes an interesting observation about Kant’s own writings on the French Enlightenment. He looks at two of Kant’s essays, the 1798 essay on the French Revolution, ‘Contest of the Faculties,’ and his 1784 essay whose title Foucault unabashedly stole. Rather than considering Kant’s characterization of the content of the Enlightenment, Foucault notes another interesting feature of these texts. He points out that Kant is venturing to make a commentary on his own present moment, a rare move for a philosopher. This has the effect of positioning philosophical reflection in a specific temporality, as emerging in a here and now, in relationship to the present.

Both the French revolution and the Enlightenment were events in space and time, often given starting dates and geographical locations. Thus, Foucault suggests, in commenting on such events, ‘the philosopher presenting his philosophical discourse cannot avoid the question of him being part of this present . . . about his membership of a particular ‘we,’ if you like, which is linked to a greater or lesser extent to a cultural ensemble characteristic of his contemporary reality. This ‘we’ has to become, or is in the process of becoming, the object of the philosopher’s own reflection’ (2010:13). I suspect that for Foucault, the ‘cultural ensemble characteristic of his contemporary reality’ is a reference to the particularity of a group identity, as German or European, for example.

Kant’s commentary, and Foucault’s perception of it, is a small opening to contextual self-reflection, and, as Foucault points out, for Kant it is an opening as yet unfulfilled. Contrast this with Dussel’s reading of Las Casas as a better candidate for the paradigm shift of European modernity in philosophy. Las Casas is also taking note of his surroundings, his present, the ‘we’ of which he is a part, but he is also attentive to his material surroundings in the context of peoples and labor and the uses to which these are put, and thus he is not only cognizant of the elite ‘we’ at the upper strata. Las Casas is mostly considering the philosophical justifications (what Foucault might call the matrix of rationality) that operate in regard to this organization of the material field. Against this, Las Casas offers assessments and criticisms, considering the ‘we’ and ‘them’ of Europeans and Indians (or indigenous) in relation to the concept of barbarism. For this reason, Dussel suggests retaining ‘modernity’ as a normative ideal in the sense of reflective critical engagement with the material context of thought, despite the fact that he vigorously contests the usual teleology of modernity. For Dussel, this is the sort of philosophical practice that might resuscitate the moribund philosophical traditions that remain willfully ignorant of their transcendentalist delusions. 6

Related chapters: 1, 3, 9, 10, 11, 13, 25, 34
Notes

1 We could understand the self/Other distinction as inclusive of, or even identical with a self/not-self distinction, but Mignolo's point is that there is a conceptual distinction between being an Other, and being simply defined in terms of a negation.

2 This intellectual and secular bifurcation maps onto older Christian ones, but its characteristic megalomania is not found everywhere. The ancient Chinese under the long Zhou dynasty defined themselves as the Middle Kingdom, a form of jurisdiction that acknowledges boundaries and neighbors. Islam understands itself to have a constitutive relationship with Jews and Christians, distinct religions practiced by the people of the book, whose teachings Muslims must respect. Numerous indigenous groups describe their genealogy as place-based rather than as deriving from a source or value that transcends place (which is why their displacement can destroy identity). Group names (e.g. Murrawarri people of what is today called Australia) are often identical to place names. It is a mistake to jump to the conclusion that Eurocentrism is a universal problem or innate human tendency.

3 Some of the following borrows from Alcoff (2013).


5 Descartes engaged in vigorous dialogues with others, as we know, and yet the ‘Method’ he propounds requires no such dialogues nor does it even encourage them.

6 My sincere thanks to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr., José Medina, and Ian James Kidd for their thorough critique and fruitful suggestions.

References


