GENERAL RATIONALITY TYPES AND CONCRETE PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURES: FROM HEGEL TO MAX WEBER

Abstract

The paper deals with the problematic antinomy which seems to exist between the universality of reason on the one hand, and the many concrete forms of philosophical cultures on the other. To proclaim an irreversible plurality of philosophies would be too easy a solution. Instead, the idea of Hegel of a concrete totality, where different philosophies are seen as moments of a more or less organic whole, is examined. Although Hegel’s concept of totality offers fruitful insights, it suffers from finalistic and teleological assumptions. Max Weber’s concept of rationality can here be seen as a necessary correction to Hegel’s views. Both Hegel and Weber see Reason as the idée-maîtresse of modernity. Modern rationality means an epochal breach in the development of philosophy, and it is thus not justified to treat modern philosophies on equal terms with traditional philosophies. It should be noted that from this point of view even pre-modern Western philosophy belongs to the “traditional philosophies.” Finally, the interaction between modern and traditional philosophy is examined briefly, analyzing the case of Russian thought.

Key words

Philosophical culture, Modernity, traditional philosophies, Hegel, Max Weber, rationality

1. Introduction
In this paper, I will argue for a position, according to which it is not sufficient to compare different philosophical cultures on the ‘one-dimensional’ level of cultures only. There is another dimension, which must be taken in account, too, namely the chronological axis of ‘traditional vs. modern’. In other words, if philosophical thought is defined as a pursuit of rationality, a self-reflection of what ‘rational’ could mean in given circumstances, then a purely comparativistic view is not sufficient – one should not only take into account the different, culturally specific forms of rationality in the Greek, Indian, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, etc. philosophical cultures, but it is, in addition, necessary to define the relation of all these more or less local philosophical cultures to the general patterns of Modernity such as it emerged for the first time in Western Europe from the seventeenth century onwards. While the other philosophical cultures are, so to say ‘normal cases’, Western philosophical culture is the exceptional case: the other philosophical cultures reflect (or at least express, if the concept of ‘reflection’ is too demanding) the peculiarities of their own civilizations, whereas Western philosophy tends to be universal, i.e., its ‘specificity’ lies precisely in its universality. The view that I defend here is an application of Weber’s thesis that Modernity emerged, historically, as a Western Sonderentwicklung, despite its universal validity.

2. Philosophical Cultures – A Babylonic Library?
In De civitate Dei, St. Augustine cites a now lost work by Varro, where the latter had calculated that there are at least 228 possible viewpoints as regards the summum bonum. This may be the earliest example of what I would call the ‘mechanistic’ or ‘computatory’ view on possible philosophical positions. According to this viewpoint, philosophy is a field of different topoi to be occupied (i.e. realized, formulated in propositions) in different ways, so that a large (maybe even infinite) number of possible positions emerge, although in a given historical and cultural situation always only some of them are materially represented by some existing philosophers or philosophy schools.

Actually, this view is nothing but an application of the well-known ‘Principle of Plenitude’ (as presented by the English historian of ideas Arthur Lovejoy already in the 1930s) on the material provided by the history of philosophy. The principle states, that every possibility must, in order to be a real possibility, at some time become a reality. I will not here expound the history of this famous principle, which bases on an erroneous conclusion, but I nevertheless cannot resist the temptation to mention the short story The Library of Babylon by the renowned Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. In that li-

2. “... alii in animo, alii in corpore, alii in utroque fines bonorum ponerent & malorum. Ex qua tripartita veluit generalium distributione sectarum, M. Varro in libro de Philosophia tam multam dogmatum varietatem diligenter & subtiliter scrutatus advertit, ut ad ccxlviii. sectas non quae jam essent, sed quae esse possent, adhibens quasdam differentias facillime perveniret” (Augustinus, De civ. Dei, Lib. XIX cap. 1); I thank Evert van der Zweerde for drawing my attention to this most interesting passage.