

The Philosophical Colony

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The Philosophical Colony

*Writing the History of Philosophy in the Eighteenth
and Nineteenth Centuries*

By

Catherine König-Pralong

Translated by

Adrian Morfee



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Contents

Preface to the English Translation	VII
Origin	x
Introduction	1
1 The Philosophical Colony	2
2 Territorialising Cultures, Colonising Pasts	5
3 A History of Knowledge with Ideas	9
4 An Interdisciplinary History of the History of Philosophy	13
1 Modern Philosophical Reason and Its Historians (1730–1830)	16
1 The Philosophy of Historians of Philosophy	18
2 The Sense of Self of Historians of Philosophy	21
3 Judge and Ethnographer	24
4 Professor and Pioneer	31
5 Genealogist and Evangelist	36
2 The Historian’s Subjectivity in Question (1830–1880)	45
1 The Dual Nature of the Scientific Self	45
2 Historian of His Own Subjectivity	47
3 Fallibilist and Self-Analyst	53
4 A Performer, Leader of a School of Thought, and Politician	59
5 Temporalisation, Historicisation, and Self-Analysis	67
3 Otherness, Race, and Hybridisation: the Naturalised History of Philosophy	70
1 Othering Arabic Thought	71
2 Europe as Philosophy’s Biotope	74
3 The Figure of the Arab in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century History of Philosophy	78
4 The Natural and Comparative History of Philosophy	86
5 Comparing and Excluding: Arabs and Other Orientals	96
4 Philosophical and Linguistic Genealogy: from Modern French to Scholastic Latin	101
1 Classical French and Scholastic Latin	103
2 Linguistics and Nationalism	106
3 French Scholasticism Versus German Mysticism	110

4	French Modernity: Scholastic and Analytical	114
5	Analytical Syntax Inherited from Scholasticism	116
6	An Anti-German Modernity	123
7	The Prosaic Yoke of Reason	125
8	The Analytical Clarity of French	127
9	The Cultural Conditioning of the Historiography of Philosophy	130
5	Philosophy as Nature and Culture	133
1	Europe's Philosophical Nature and Culture	134
2	The Europeanisation of Philosophy	139
3	Philosophy as Historical Consciousness and Self-Examination	148
4	Acceleration and Speed	152
5	A Secularised Christian Culture	159
6	The Philosophical Province	163
6	Geography Against Psychology: Jules Michelet and Victor Cousin	166
1	From Universal History to the Spatial Turn	168
2	Cousin's and Michelet's Maps of Civilisation	171
3	Cousin: the Centrality of Philosophy	174
4	Michelet and Cousin	178
5	Late Michelet: Germanic and Eastern Decentralisation	181
6	Michelet and the History of Philosophy	184
	Conclusion	186
	Bibliography	195
	Index	216

Preface to the English Translation

For over two centuries, the history of philosophy has served not only as an introduction to philosophy for generations of German, French, Italian, Spanish, and, to a lesser extent, British students, but also as a scholarly arena in which elites have theorised the specificity of European civilisation and cultures, venerating a certain idea of ancient Greece as the cradle of art, philosophy, and democracy, and celebrating the advent of “modernity”. Since the original French edition of this book was published in 2019, the historiography of philosophy has taken up reflections and critiques formulated by postcolonial and decolonial studies. I am not speaking of the history of philosophy, but rather of the critical study of this discipline which arose in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which, over the course of its institutionalisation in academia, became a central element of European scientific policy.

In a short 2021 essay, historian of Arabic philosophy Dag Nikolaus Hasse showed how Europe became Europeanised by orientalising the East. Highlighting the political agenda of modern science, he suggests we should dismiss colonial and Romantic bodies of thought (*Was ist europäisch? Zur Überwindung kolonialer und romantischer Denkformen*, Reclam). Shortly after, Edinburgh University Press launched a new history of philosophy, *The Edinburgh Critical History of Philosophy*, intended to be reflexive, interdisciplinary, and critical. The first two volumes of this seven-volume series came out in 2025: volume 1 covers the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and volume 2 the nineteenth century. Taking the practice of philosophy today as their starting point, the authors examine the formation of the canon, while also exploring byways and offshoots from the main highways of the discipline. Feminist and gender studies, which since the 1980s have played an important role in philosophy, also suggest we should devise different ways of writing the history of philosophy: one example is the volume Eileen O’Neill and Marcy P. Lascano published in 2019 under the title *Feminist History of Philosophy* (Springer).

In the pages that follow, I view the processes of temporalisation and spatialisation as two operations by which, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, historians of philosophy defined their subject and identified it with the European spirit. I demonstrate how “European” philosophy was formed by constructing its other, Islamic thought, as its negative, which historians of philosophy located in the *Middle Ages* and the *Middle East*. While the study of Arabic literary texts was constituted as a field, forming the *Republic of Arabic Letters* studied by Alexander Bevilacqua (Harvard University Press,

2018), philosophy has belittled Islamic traditions to claim sole paternity of this discipline. Two recent works display a similar divergence concerning Chinese philosophy, this time within the field of philosophy somewhere between the history of philosophy and the study of Chinese-made philosophical products. Alexander Statman has examined Enlightenment philosophers' keen interest in China (*A Global Enlightenment: Western Progress and Chinese Science*, The University of Chicago Press, 2023); and Selusi Ambrogio has described how, during the same period, Indian and Chinese thought were excluded from the canon of the history of philosophy (*Chinese and Indian Ways of Thinking in Early Modern European Philosophy: the Reception and the Exclusion*, Bloomsbury, 2020).

The history of the historiography of philosophy did not come to a halt with the nineteenth century; its contours continued to evolve in this century that venerated history. In the twentieth century, scientific institutions and policies were transformed as Europe, devastated by two so-called "world" wars, saw its intellectual leadership in the sphere of Western influence eclipsed by the United States of America: old disciplines were now challenged by the many new types of "studies". The investigation conducted in this book calls for further exploration. Specialists in the historiography of philosophy, such as Iva Manova, have recently turned their attention to how the histories of philosophy produced in western Europe relate to those produced in soviet countries. On another front, much remains to be done studying the interactions between European and American histories of philosophy, and on the reciprocal conceptions of European philosophy and American philosophy that these two traditions have produced.

Lastly, since the nineteenth century, history of philosophy books and courses have sprung up in other regions of the world, with connections to the European tradition: in the Middle East, Turkey, Japan, and Latin America to speak in broad terms. Alongside other specialists of Islamic thought, Anke von Kügelgen has studied the philosophy and history of philosophy of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian lands. The *Histories of Philosophy in a Global Perspective* project, coordinated by Rolf Elberfeld at the University of Hildesheim, has plotted a course that runs directly counter to that taken by nineteenth-century historians of philosophy. By studying the diverse traditions of history of philosophy around the world, together with their formation, overlaps, and interweavings, this research programme seeks to re-conceptualise the history of philosophy from a global perspective, calling on us to move beyond Eurocentrism – a nineteenth-century European project that was challenged from its earliest formulations and never became fully established, as I hope I demonstrate in this book.

As an autopsy of a discipline, this book views the history of philosophy as part of the great body of European modern science. The historiography of philosophy, an organ to regulate philosophy, needs to be understood in its relations and exchanges with other bodies of knowledge, with which it constantly negotiated the boundaries of philosophy – both its definition and its position. An autopsy is carried out on a dead body, in this instance, written sources which may of course reflect oral practice. I assume the full implications of this metaphor of an autopsy, for this book is not about eternal ideas, but about embodied practices and historical enterprises, whose concrete political dimension I emphasise. The history of philosophy as a celebration of European grandeur that studies and updates concepts and theories formulated in the past still has many adepts today, and is not without its interest. In these pages I have anaesthetised it so as to examine it without triggering cries of polemic from certain defenders of European – now become “Western” – civilisation, who are beginning to attack postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, gender, and queer approaches, among others, stigmatising them as “woke”. The resulting enquiry aims to be partially objective, limited, and situated. It is based on a corpus which is described in such a way as to enable readers to assess its subjective constitution and thereby critique my findings.

I wish to thank the editors of *Brill's Series in Philosophical Historiographies*, Cecilia Muratori and Mario Meliadó, for initiating and supporting this project, and Andrés García-Rengifo, for adapting the footnotes and bibliography. My warmest thanks also go to Adrian Morfee for his attentive and accurate translation. This would not have been possible without the financial support of the translation fund of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Centre Alexandre-Koyré; the Éditions de l'EHESS have facilitated this work.

Paris, 1 June 2025

Origin

This book results from work conducted as part of the ERC-2013-CoG 615045 project on “Medieval Philosophy in Modern History of Philosophy (MEMO-PHI)” hosted by the Albert-Ludwigs Universität Freiburg im Breisgau. I thus wish to thank, first and foremost, my colleagues Mario Meliadó and Zornitsa Radeva for their intellectual finesse, thoroughness, and commitment. In 2014 I and a few colleagues in the Upper Rhine region – including Nadja Germann and Silvia Negri in Freiburg, Gianluca Briguglia and Isabel Iribarren in Strasbourg, and Ueli Zahnd in Basel – set up a working group called “Conceptions of Medieval Thought” (COMETH). Though all from a mediaevalist background, we had developed interests extending beyond this field to embrace Arabic philosophy, Protestant theology and historiography, the intellectual history of the church, political philosophy, and, in my case, eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries ideas about the history of philosophy. In keeping with its function as a mediator or medium, the Middle Ages, with no frontiers to speak of, had led us to varied fields. In March 2018, thanks to an invitation from the EHESS, I discussed the topics I broach in the following pages before various audiences, particularly researchers working on the modern period. I was able to refine my theses and ideas thanks to Étienne Anheim and Sylvain Piron, who had extended the invitation, and to the other researchers who welcomed me in their seminars – Béatrice Delaurenti, Bruno Karsenti, Maurice Kriegel, Anne Lafont, Antoine Lilti, and Jean-Frédéric Schaub. It remains for me to thank those whose invitation to present my research and explore new lines of enquiry enabled me to write these pages about the history of modern philosophy as an intellectual practice and academic discipline: Julie Brumberg-Chaumont, Alain de Libera, and Antonella Romano, as part of the “Europe of logic” project; Wolf Feuerhahn, and Rafael Mandressi at the Centre Alexandre Koyré; Anne Eusterschulte at the Freie Universität in Berlin; Rolf Elberfeld in Hildesheim; Janette Friedrich and Laurent Cesalli in Geneva; Delphine Antoine-Mahut in Lyon; and Henrike Manuwald and Frank Rexroth in Göttingen; as well as all my medievalist friends.

Freiburg im Breisgau, 30 July 2019