

AFRICA, ASIA, AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

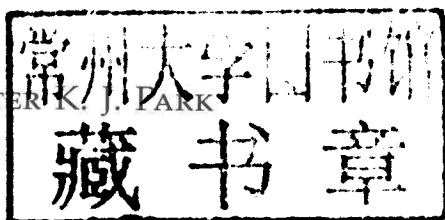
**RACISM IN THE FORMATION OF
THE PHILOSOPHICAL CANON,
1780–1830**

PETER K. J. PARK

Africa, Asia, and the
History of Philosophy

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Preface

When I began this project more than a decade ago, I did not consider that racism could have been involved in the formation of the modern canon of philosophy. Having paid little attention to Christoph Meiners, I could not have suspected that the racist arguments of this half-forgotten anthropological writer of the late eighteenth century lay at the origin of the exclusion of Africa and Asia from modern histories of philosophy. Two developments since the completion of my dissertation in 2005 affected my thinking. The first was that I read the dozen articles by the philosopher Robert Bernasconi on race concepts and racism in the thought of Kant and Hegel. The second was that I read more extensively in Meiners's corpus.

Christoph Meiners (1747–1810) was a professor of philosophy at the University of Göttingen and the author of more than forty books and one hundred and eighty journal articles on psychology and aesthetics; the history of science, philosophy, and universities; and early anthropology. Meiners is included in Johann Gustav Droysen's account of the "Göttingen Historical School," which is credited with the development of the modern historical sciences. There is evidence to suggest that Meiners shaped the human sciences in Germany and France through his numerous publications and that he continued to influence historical and anthropological thought in the nineteenth century.¹ In this book, I argue that Meiners was the first agent of a successful campaign to exclude Africa and Asia from the history of philosophy and that this campaign was carried forward by Wilhelm Tennemann, who was the most important Kantian historian of philosophy at the turn of the nineteenth century, and Hegel. Meiners's direct influence on them is evident in their arguments for excluding the Orient from the history of philosophy. The central arguments that cut across both Kantian and Hegelian histories of philosophy were racial-anthropological ones, imported from Meiners's publications and repeated without much change. Kant never produced a work of

history of philosophy, but he sketched the outlines of one in his logic lectures. There, one can behold Kant's own words authorizing the exclusion of the Orient from the history of philosophy. His reasons for the exclusion were ones he got from Meiners, whose influential *Geschichte des Ursprungs, Fortgangs und Verfalls der Wissenschaften in Griechenland und Rom* (*History of the Origin, Progress, and Decline of the Sciences in Greece and Rome*) appeared in 1781.²

I should note that Meiners remains a conspicuously under-researched *Aufklärer*. The exact nature of his contribution to the human or social sciences, the kind and degree of his influence on his contemporaries and on posterity is still mostly unknown. Historians, including literary historians, of the German Enlightenment either have completely passed over him or have discussed him without addressing his racism.³ A couple of historians have described his work just enough to denounce it as racist.⁴ More recently, one historian of the German Enlightenment has attempted to treat Meiners's "science of culture" without discussing his science of race.⁵ Studies that confront his racism with analysis are few.⁶ I believe that the position of Meiners, always on the periphery of historical accounts of the eighteenth-century "science of man," is a result of the shock and revulsion that historians in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust have felt for his racist ideas. Meiners is not the face of the German Enlightenment that the historians can countenance.

The present work is not a history of scientific racism in the German Enlightenment. That history still awaits to be written. And when that history comes out, it will provide a vital context for readers of my work. That history will show that racism of the modes or types identified by our contemporary social scientists existed in the eighteenth century. According to the sociologist Michael Banton, there are three types of racism: racist ideology, racial prejudice, and racial discrimination.⁷ All three describe eighteenth-century phenomena. It was racial prejudice that animated David Hume to write the footnote to his essay "Of National Characters" (1753), where he states that non-whites, especially negroes, are naturally inferior to whites.⁸ Racial prejudice is the substance of Kant's comments about blacks in "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" (1764).⁹ Racial discrimination was embodied in the electoral laws in France (before and after the Revolution), the Dutch Republic, and much of the rest of Europe, which denied political rights to persons with the slightest trace of African blood.¹⁰ Finally, eighteenth-century racist ideology is exemplified by Meiners's anthropological work.

In the 1780s and 1790s, Meiners published several essays in which he argued against the abolition of slavery, defended aristocratic privilege and rule, and gave moral justifications for European colonialism. He argued from racial-anthropological grounds. If, according to Banton, racist ideology is "the doctrine that a man's behavior is determined by stable inherited characters deriving from separate racial stocks having distinctive attributes and usually considered to stand to one another in relations of superiority and inferiority," then what we have in Meiners's publications is racist ideology. Indeed, Georg Forster was able to recognize the ideological function of Meiners's anthropology. One of the most effective arguments that he could bring against Meiners was the charge that the latter abetted the pro-slavery camp with his claims about the "nature" of black Africans.

Racist ideology presupposes a theory of races.¹¹ What we know about the eighteenth century is that the thesis of naturally distinct races was being theoretically and empirically elaborated by some of the most prominent natural historians and medical and anthropological thinkers of the European Enlightenment. Their names were Linnaeus, Buffon, Voltaire, Henry Home, Kant, Blumenbach, Georg Forster, and Meiners.

It is not so problematic for my claim of racism in Kantian and Hegelian histories of philosophy that the words *race* and *racism* do not appear in them. (It is a fact that the word *racism* does not appear in any European language until the early part of the twentieth century.¹²) But as Pierre-André Taguieff notes, racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racist ideology do quite well without the word *race*.¹³ The German Enlightenment's most notable racist, Meiners, seldom used the word. Herder explicitly rejected the word, but it would be a mistake to conclude from this that there is nothing racist in his thought. Taguieff is right that "the word *race* can no longer be taken for the exclusive (or best) indicator of the modes of racialization."¹⁴

The decisive role that Meiners played in the exclusion of Africa and Asia from modern histories of philosophy is documented below. Historians would do well to investigate the extent to which Meiners is also responsible for the exclusion of Africa and Asia from modern histories of the sciences—astronomy, mathematics, and medicine or biology in particular—and from modern histories of the arts. The results of such investigation may well challenge the opinion of some historians that the eighteenth-century science of man dissipated and left no epistemic foundations for the human and social sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁵

Abbreviations

- AA *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by the Königliche Preussische (later Deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften. 29 vols. to date. Berlin: Georg Reimer (later Walter de Gruyter), 1900–.
- KFSA *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Edited by Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner. 35 vols. projected. München: F. Schöningh, 1958–.
- Vorlesungen* Hegel, G. W. F. *Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*. Multiple editors. 17 vols. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983–2007.

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Introduction

In the modern university, courses on the history of philosophy introduce students to philosophy as a discipline.¹ History of philosophy courses alternate with logic courses as ways to teach students the canon of philosophy in more than one sense of the word *canon*. By recounting philosophy's past (what philosophy was), the history of philosophy teaches what philosophy is (the concept of philosophy). The history of philosophy teaches the goals, rules, and language of proper philosophical reasoning. Teachers of philosophy do not merely recount the history of philosophy, they use it to define philosophy in exact terms and set its epistemic boundaries, differentiating it from other fields of knowledge such as mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and theology. Philosophers use the history of philosophy to reaffirm the canon of philosophy in the sense also of the authors and texts that define the discipline and to show philosophy's coherent and progressive development. "History of philosophy research reveals clearly that its ultimate goal is never only a historical knowing, but always at the same time an understanding that puts itself in the service of philosophy."² The history of philosophy can do all this work, however, only by performing massive exclusions.

The present work is a historical investigation of the exclusion of Africa and Asia from modern histories of philosophy. It is an account of the events that led to the formation within German philosophy of an exclusionary, Eurocentric canon of philosophy by the first third of the nineteenth century.

The exclusion of Africa and Asia from histories of philosophy is relatively recent. It was no earlier than the 1780s that historians of philosophy began to deny that African and Asian peoples were philosophical. Also beginning at that time, they segregated religion from philosophy and argued that Africans and Asians had religion, but not philosophy.³ Stated more simply, historians of philosophy

began to exclude peoples they deemed too primitive and incapable of philosophy.

There is, however, an older tradition of history of philosophy writing. From the time of Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) to the death of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–80), the prevailing convention among historians of philosophy was to begin the history of philosophy with Adam, Noah, Moses (or the Jews), or the Egyptians. In some early modern histories of philosophy, Zoroaster, the “Chaldeans,” or another ancient Oriental people appear as the first philosophers. The great majority of early modern historians of philosophy were in agreement that philosophy began in the Orient. It was in the late eighteenth century that historians of philosophy began to claim a Greek beginning for philosophy.⁴

Historians have established that from the eighteenth century onward Europeans had ever greater access to the languages and literatures of Asia and that the stream into Europe of manuscript sources and source-based information on Asian philosophies only increased over the course of the modern centuries.⁵ Prominent names in European cultural and intellectual history are associated with the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century “Oriental Renaissance.”⁶ Some historians pinpoint this rebirth to the time when officials of the British East India Company acquired the knowledge of Sanskrit and then intensified the collection and transport of Sanskrit manuscripts to Europe. A key activity of the Oriental Renaissance was the translation of Asian texts into European languages, which cleared the way for their literary and scientific appropriation by Europeans.⁷ This led to reevaluations—even radical reorderings—of the perceived historical origins of European peoples and civilization. In 1786, the Chief Magistrate for the Supreme Court of British Bengal, Sir William Jones, spread the news that Sanskrit and Persian appeared to be descended from the same mother language as that of Greek, Latin, Gothic, and Celtic languages.⁸ Jones formulated the thesis of the family relation between these languages. The names Indo-Germanic, Indo-European, and Aryan were coined in the nineteenth century to signify this relation.

The excitement generated by the European discovery of Sanskrit and Persian literatures led to efforts in Europe to establish institutions for the study of them. The first professorial chair of Sanskrit in Europe was created at the Collège de France in 1814.⁹ Paris in the early nineteenth century was Europe’s center of Oriental philology. The Schlegel brothers traveled to Paris to learn Sanskrit. The older brother, August Wilhelm, went on to become the first professor at a German university to offer courses in Sanskrit language and literature,

which he did starting in the summer of 1819 at the newly founded Prussian university in Bonn.¹⁰ The Prussian government provided the funds for the manufacture of the printing press that August Wilhelm used to produce his Sanskrit-Latin edition, with commentary, of the *Bhagavadgītā* in 1823.¹¹ Also in 1819, the Kingdom of Bavaria sponsored two of its subjects to study Oriental languages in Paris. One of them, the exceptionally talented Franz Bopp, acquired enough technical expertise to establish the Indo-European linguistic relationship on hard grammatical evidence. In 1821 he was given a professorship in Oriental languages at the University of Berlin. His efforts culminated in an extensive comparison of the grammar of Sanskrit, Persian, and several European languages. His work was published as *Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Litthauischen, Gotthischen und Deutschen*, appearing in six volumes between 1833 and 1852.¹² Intellectual historians as well as practicing linguists of today regard Bopp as one of the founders of modern linguistics.

Sanskrit philology and comparative grammatical studies spread to other German and Central European universities. By 1903, there were forty-seven professors, including twenty-six full professors, of Sanskrit and comparative Indo-European philology in German-speaking Europe.¹³ The multiplication of professorial chairs resulted in piles of journals, philological treatises, grammars, dictionaries, and translated editions of Asian texts. In the nineteenth century, German scholarly production in these fields exceeded that of the rest of Europe and America combined.¹⁴ By the second half of the century, the overproduction of German, university-trained Orientalists led to their exodus. Some were able to find work in the British Empire.¹⁵

Given this history, one may suppose that Asian philosophical ideas had a presence in modern German thought and that some German philosophers may have regarded Indian philosophy as part of their Indo-European or Aryan heritage. Certainly, Friedrich Max Müller, the famous Sanskritist and comparative philologist at Oxford, thought precisely in these terms. In the introduction to his English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he states, "While in the Veda [Hindu sacred scriptures] we may study the childhood, we may study in Kant's *Critique* the perfect manhood of the Aryan mind."¹⁶ Müller was not a professor of philosophy, and so one cannot say that he represented the view of the academic philosophers. What then did academic philosophers think of Asian philosophies?

The following quotations are taken from histories of philosophy published during the last two centuries. Julius Bergmann states in his *Geschichte der Philosophie* (1892): "Just as its name, so philosophy

itself is originally Greek."¹⁷ Friedrich Michelis states in his *Geschichte der Philosophie von Thales bis auf unsere Zeit* (1865): "No Asian people . . . has lifted itself to the heights of free human contemplation from which philosophy issues; philosophy is the fruit of the Hellenic spirit."¹⁸ Albert Schweigler's *Geschichte der Philosophie im Umriss* (1863) states: "When and where does philosophy begin? . . . Obviously at that point when the first search for the final philosophical principle, for the ultimate reason for Being, was made in a philosophical manner. In other words, with Greek philosophy."¹⁹ In the fifth edition of his history of Greek philosophy (1892), Eduard Zeller offers this comment: "All the same, we do not need to search for any foreign sources: the philosophical science of the Greeks may be completely explained by recalling the spirit, the devices, and the educational status of the Hellenic tribes. If there has ever been a people which was suited to generate its sciences on its own, it was the Greek."²⁰ In the eighth edition of *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1894–1902), Friedrich Ueberweg claims that neither the Nordic peoples nor the Orientals, but only the Greeks had the capacity to invent philosophy: "Philosophy, as a science, could not originate among the Nordic peoples, who are distinguished through their strength and courage, but do not have culture, nor among the Orientals, who are indeed capable of producing the elements of a higher culture but who tend more to passively preserve such elements rather than improve them through mental activity, but solely among the Hellenes, who harmoniously unite mental power and receptivity within themselves."²¹ *The History of Philosophy from Thales to Comte* (1871) by George Henry Lewes similarly states: "It is the distinguishing peculiarity of the Greeks, that they were the only people of the ancient world, who were prompted to assume a scientific attitude in explaining the mysteries which surrounded them."²² Seymour Guy Martin et al. in *A History of Philosophy* (1941) is more terse: "Philosophy originated in the ancient world among the Greek people."²³ Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945) states, "Philosophy begins with Thales."²⁴ Martin Heidegger said in a lecture at Cerisy-la-Salle, France, in 1955: "The often heard expression 'Western-European philosophy' is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature; Greek, in this instance, means that in origin the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold."²⁵

Reflecting the disciplinary opinion, the great majority of nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of philosophy either completely pass over non-European thought or relegate it to the "pre-history"

of philosophy, in which case it still was not accorded the status of "philosophy." Moreover, some of these histories present no reasons for the exclusion of Asia and Africa, taking a Greek origin of philosophy for granted.

The development of the modern discipline of philosophy and the exclusion of non-European philosophies from the history of philosophy are related phenomena, but scholarly inquiry into their connection so far has yielded little explanation. The history of the history of philosophy (historiography of philosophy) is already a small field occupied by a handful of scholars. In the classic works of historiography by Lucien Braun and Lutz Geldsetzer, passing reference is made here and there to debates on the origins of philosophy, but that is all.²⁶ Martial Guérout's three-volume *Histoire de l'histoire de la philosophie*, which was to be part of a larger philosophical project called *Dianoématique*, does not thematize the historical origin of philosophy, but does assume that it is Greek.²⁷ More recent research by the team of scholars led by Giovanni Santinello and the "archaeology of the history of philosophy" by Ulrich Johannes Schneider investigate the theory and practice of history of philosophy but without investigating its Eurocentrism.²⁸

I am aware of only three philosophers who have published essays on the exclusion of non-European thought from the history of philosophy as a problem for philosophical and historical inquiry. They are the U.S.-based philosophers Wilhelm Halbfass and Robert Bernasconi and the British scholar Richard King.²⁹ Halbfass surveyed two dozen works of history of philosophy and found that, starting in the late eighteenth century, historians of philosophy tended overwhelmingly to exclude Asian philosophies.³⁰ His explanation was that a restrictive definition of philosophy came to narrow the scope of the history of philosophy with the result that Indian and other non-European philosophies fell out of this scope. Although most of the historians of philosophy that Halbfass surveyed viewed reason as a universal human faculty, they seemed to regard the proper development and use of reason as something else—indeed, as something *not* universal. Criteria were established for what counted as "proper," "actual," or "real" philosophy.³¹

Bernasconi has called the dual claim of the universality of reason and the Greek origin of philosophy "the paradox of philosophy's parochialism." He asks, "What is one to make of the apparent tension between the alleged universality of reason and the fact that its upholders are so intent on localising its historical instantiation?"³² When and how did the history of philosophy become the story of Europe, of