

# A matter of time

Western philosophy has been the default option for too long. That must change, says Julian Baggini

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One of the great unexplained wonders of human history is that written philosophy first flowered entirely separately in different parts of the globe at more or less the same time. The origins of Indian, Chinese and ancient Greek philosophy, as well as Buddhism, can all be traced back to a period of roughly 300 years, beginning in the eighth century BC.



These early philosophies have shaped the different ways people worship, live and think about the big questions that concern us all. Most people do not consciously articulate the philosophical assumptions they have absorbed and are often not even aware that they have any, but assumptions about the nature of self, ethics, sources of knowledge and the goals of life are deeply embedded in our cultures and frame our thinking without our being aware of them.

Yet, for all the varied and rich philosophical traditions across the world, the western philosophy I have studied for more than 30 years – based entirely on canonical western texts – is presented as the universal philosophy, the ultimate inquiry into human understanding. Comparative philosophy – study in two or more philosophical traditions – is left almost entirely to people working in anthropology or cultural studies. This abdication of interest assumes that comparative philosophy might help us to understand the intellectual cultures of India, China or the Muslim world, but not the human condition.

This has become something of an embarrassment for me. Until a few years ago, I knew virtually nothing about anything other than western philosophy, a tradition that stretches from the ancient Greeks to the great universities of Europe and the US. Yet, if you look at my PhD certificate or the names of the university departments where I studied, there is only one, unqualified, word: philosophy. Recently and belatedly, I have been exploring the great classical philosophies of the rest of the world, travelling across continents to encounter them first-hand. It has been the most rewarding intellectual journey of my life. My philosophical journey has convinced me that we cannot understand ourselves if we do not understand others. Getting to know others requires avoiding the twin dangers of over-estimating either how much we have in common or how much divides us. Our shared humanity and the perennial problems of life mean that we can always learn from and identify with the thoughts and practices of others, no matter how alien they might at first appear. At the same time, differences in ways of thinking can be both deep and subtle. If we assume too readily that we can see things from others' points of view, we end up seeing them from merely a variation of our own.

To travel around the world's philosophies is an opportunity to challenge the beliefs and ways of thinking we take for granted. By gaining greater knowledge of how others think, we can become less certain of the knowledge we think we have, which is always the first step to greater understanding.

Take the example of time. Around the world today, time is linear, ordered into past, present and future. Our days are organised by the progression of the clock, in the short to medium term by calendars and diaries, history by timelines stretching back over millennia. All cultures have a sense of past, present and future, but for much of human history this has been underpinned by a more fundamental sense of time as cyclical. The past is also the future, the future is also the past, the beginning also the end.

The dominance of linear time fits in with an eschatological worldview in which all of human history is building up to a final judgment. This is perhaps why, over time, it became the common-sense way of viewing time in the largely Christian west. When God created the world, he began a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. As Revelation puts it, while prophesying the end times, Jesus is this epic's "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last".

But there are other ways of thinking about time. Many schools of thought believe that the beginning and the end are and have always been the same because time is essentially cyclical. This is the most intuitively plausible way of thinking about eternity. When we imagine time as a line, we end up baffled: what happened before time began? How can a line go on without end? A circle allows us to visualise going backwards or forwards for ever, at no point coming up against an ultimate beginning or end.

Thinking of time cyclically especially made sense in premodern societies, where there were few innovations across generations and people lived very similar lives to those of their grandparents, their great-grandparents and going back many generations. Without change, progress was unimaginable. Meaning could therefore only be found in embracing the cycle of life and death and playing your part in it as best you could.

Perhaps this is why cyclical time appears to have been the human default. The Mayans, Incans and Hopi all viewed time in this way. Many nonwestern traditions contain elements of cyclical thinking about time, perhaps most evident in classical Indian philosophy. The Indian philosopher and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan wrote: “All the [orthodox] systems accept the view of the great world rhythm. Vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession.” For example, a passage in the Rig Veda addressing Dyaus and Prithvi (heaven and earth) reads: “Which was the former, which of them the latter? How born? O sages, who discerns? They bear themselves all that has existence. Day and night revolve as on a wheel.”

East Asian philosophy is deeply rooted in the cycle of the seasons, part of a larger cycle of existence. This is particularly evident in Taoism, and is vividly illustrated by the surprising cheerfulness of the fourth century BC Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi when everyone thought he should have been mourning for his wife. At first, he explained, he was as miserable as anyone else. Then he thought back beyond her to the beginning of time itself: “In all the mixed-up bustle and confusion, something changed and there was qi. The qi changed and there was form. The form changed and she had life. Today there was another change and she died. It’s just like the round of four seasons: spring, summer, autumn and winter.” In Chinese thought, wisdom and truth are timeless, and we do not need to go forward to learn, only to hold on to what we already have. As the 19th-century Scottish sinologist James Legge put it, Confucius did not think his purpose was “to announce any new truths, or to initiate any new economy. It was to prevent what had previously been known from being

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lost.” Mencius, similarly, criticised the princes of his day because “they do not put into practice the ways of the ancient kings”. Mencius also says, in the penultimate chapter of the eponymous collection of his conversations, close to the book’s conclusion: “The superior man seeks simply to bring back the unchanging standard, and, that being correct, the masses are roused to virtue.” The very last chapter charts the ages between the great kings and sages.

A hybrid of cyclical and linear time operates in strands of Islamic thought. “The Islamic conception of time is based essentially on the cyclic rejuvenation of human history through the appearance of various prophets,” says Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor emeritus of Islamic studies at George Washington University. Each cycle, however, also moves humanity forward, with each revelation building on the former – the dictation of the Qur’an to Muhammad being the last, complete testimony of God – until ultimately the series of cycles ends with the appearance of the Mahdi, who rules for 40 years before the final judgment.

The distinction between linear and cyclical time is therefore not always neat. The assumption of an either/or leads many to assume that oral philosophical traditions have straightforwardly cyclical conceptions of time. The reality is more complicated. Take Indigenous Australian philosophies. There is no single Australian first people with a shared culture, but there are enough similarities across the country for some tentative generalisations to

be made about ideas that are common or dominant. The late anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis suggested that time in Indigenous Australian culture is neither cyclical nor linear; instead, it resembles the spacetime of modern physics. Time is intimately linked to place in what he calls the “dreamtime” of “past, present, future all present in this place”. “One lives in a place more than in a time,” is how Stephen Muecke puts it in his book *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*. More important than the distinction between linear or cyclical time is whether time is separated from or intimately connected to place. Take, for example, how we conceive of death. In the contemporary west, death is primarily seen as the expiration of the individual, with the body as the locus, and the location of that body irrelevant. In contrast, Muecke says: “Many indigenous accounts of the death of an individual are not so much about bodily death as about a return of energy to the place of emanation with which it re-identifies.”

Such a way of thinking is especially alien to the modern west, where a pursuit of objectivity systematically downplays the particular, the specifically located. In a provocative and evocative sentence, Muecke says: “Let me suggest that longsightedness is a European form of philosophical myopia and that other versions of philosophy, indigenous perhaps, have a more lived-in and intimate association with societies of people and the way they talk about themselves.”

Muecke cites the Australian academic Tony Swain’s view that the concept of linear time is a kind of fall from place. “I’ve got a hunch that modern physics separated out those dimensions and worked on them, and so we produced time as we know it through a whole lot of experimental and theoretical activities,” Muecke told me. “If you’re not conceptually and experimentally separating those dimensions, then they would tend to flow together.” His indigenous friends talk less of time or place independently, but more of located events. The key temporal question is not “When did this happen?” but “How is this related to other events?” That word related is important. Time and space have become theoretical abstractions in modern physics, but in human culture they are concrete realities. Nothing exists purely as a point on a map or a moment in time: everything stands in relation to everything else. So to understand time and space in oral philosophical traditions, we have to see them less as abstract concepts in metaphysical theories and more as living conceptions, part and parcel of a broader way of understanding the world, one that is rooted in relatedness. Hirini Kaa, a lecturer at the University of Auckland, says that “the key underpinning of Maori thought is kinship, the connectedness between humanity, between one another, between the natural environment”. He sees this as a form of spirituality. “The ocean wasn’t just water, it wasn’t something for us to be afraid of or to utilise as a commodity, but became an ancestor deity, Tangaroa. Every living thing has a life force.”

David Mowaljarlai, who was a senior lawman of the Ngarinyin people of Western Australia, once called this principle of connectivity “pattern thinking”. Pattern thinking suffuses the natural and the social worlds, which are, after all, in this way of thinking, part of one thing. As Muecke puts it: “The concept of connectedness is, of course, the basis of all kinship systems [...] Getting married, in this case, is not just pairing off, it is, in a way, sharing each other.”

The emphasis on connectedness and place leads to a way of thinking that runs counter to the abstract universalism developed to a certain extent in all the great written traditions of philosophy. Muecke describes as one of the “enduring [Indigenous Australian] principles” that “a way of being will be specific to the resources and needs of a time and place and that one’s conduct will be informed by responsibility specific to that place”. This is not an “anything goes” relativism, but a recognition that rights, duties and values exist only in actual human cultures, and their exact shape and form will depend on the nature of those situations.

This should be clear enough. But the tradition of western philosophy, in particular, has striven for a universality that glosses over differences of time and place. The word “university”, for example, even shares the same etymological root as “universal”. In such institutions, “the pursuit of truth recognises no national boundaries”, as one commentator observed. Place is so unimportant in western philosophy that, when I discovered it was the theme of the quinquennial East–West Philosophers’ Conference in 2016, I wondered if there was anything I could bring to the party at all. (I decided that the absence of place in western philosophy itself merited consideration.)

The universalist thrust has many merits. The refusal to accept any and every practice as a legitimate custom has bred a very good form of intolerance for the barbaric and unjust traditional practices of the west itself. Without this intolerance, we would still have slavery, torture, fewer rights for women and homosexuals, feudal lords and unelected parliaments. The universalist aspiration has, at its best, helped the west to transcend its own prejudices. At the same time, it has also legitimised some prejudices by confusing them with universal truths. The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that the complaints of anti-universalists are not generally about universalism at all, but pseudo-universalism, “Eurocentric hegemony posing as universalism”. When this happens, intolerance for the indefensible becomes intolerance for anything that is different. The aspiration for the universal becomes a crude insistence on the uniform. Sensitivity is lost to the very different needs of different cultures at different times and places.

This “posing as universalism” is widespread and often implicit, with western concepts being taken as universal but Indian ones remaining Indian, Chinese remaining Chinese, and so on. To end this pretence, Jay L Garfield and Bryan W Van Norden propose that those departments of philosophy that refuse to teach anything from non-western traditions at least have the decency to call themselves departments of western philosophy.

The “pattern thinking” of Maori and Indigenous Australian philosophies could provide a corrective to the assumption that our values are the universal ones and that others are aberrations. It makes credible and comprehensible the idea that philosophy is never placeless and that thinking that is uprooted from any land soon withers and dies.

Mistrust of the universalist aspiration, however, can go too far. At the very least, there is a contradiction in saying there are no universal truths, since that is itself a universal claim about the nature of truth. The right view probably lies somewhere between the claims of naive universalists and those of defiant localists. There seems to be a sense in which even the universalist aspiration has to be rooted in something more particular. TS Eliot is supposed to have said: “Although it is only too easy for a writer to be local without being

universal, I doubt whether a poet or novelist can be universal without being local, too.” To be purely universal is to inhabit an abstract universe too detached from the real world. But just as a novelist can touch on universals of the human condition through the particulars of a couple of characters and a specific story, so our different, regional philosophical traditions can shed light on more universal philosophical truths even though they approach them from their own specific angles.

We should not be afraid to ground ourselves in our own traditions, but we should not be bound by them. Gandhi put this poetically when he wrote: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people’s houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.”

In the west, the predominance of linear time is associated with the idea of progress that reached its apotheosis in the Enlightenment. Before this, argues the philosopher Anthony Kenny, “people looking for ideals had looked backwards in time, whether to the primitive church, or to classical antiquity, or to some mythical prelapsarian era. It was a key doctrine of the Enlightenment that the human race, so far from falling from some earlier eminence, was moving forward to a happier future.”

Kenny is expressing a popular view, but many see the roots of belief in progress deeper in the Christian eschatological religious worldview. “Belief in progress is a relic of the Christian view of history as a universal narrative,” claims John Gray. Secular thinkers, he says, “reject the idea of providence, but they continue to think humankind is moving towards a universal goal”, even though “the idea of progress in history is a myth created by the need for meaning”.

Whether faith in progress is an invention or an adaptation of the Enlightenment, the image of secular humanists naively believing humanity is on an irreversible, linear path of advancement seems to me a caricature of their more modest hope, based in history, that progress has occurred and that more is possible. As the historian Jonathan Israel says, Enlightenment ideas of progress “were usually tempered by a strong streak of pessimism, a sense of the dangers and challenges to which the human condition is subject”. He dismisses the idea that “Enlightenment thinkers nurtured a naive belief in man’s perfectibility” as a “myth conjured up by early 20thcentury scholars unsympathetic to its claims”. Nevertheless, Gray is right to point out that linear progress is a kind of default way of thinking about history in the modern west and that this risks blinding us to the ways in which gains can be lost, advances reversed. It also fosters a sense of the superiority of the present age over earlier, supposedly less advanced” times. Finally, it occludes the extent to which history doesn’t repeat itself but does rhyme.

The different ways in which philosophical traditions have conceived time turn out to be far from mere metaphysical curiosities. They shape the way we think about both our temporal place in history and our relation to the physical places in which we live. It provides one of the easiest and clearest examples of how borrowing another way of thinking can bring a fresh perspective to our world. Sometimes, simply by changing the frame, the whole picture can look very different.

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