Inter-Cultural Dialogue on Globalisation

Universal Concepts in Cultural Contexts Keywords: For a Different Kind of Globalisation
(Four volumes titled **Truth, Experience, Identity, Gender)**
series editor Nadia Tazi;
Vistaar Publications, New Delhi, 2004.

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The books under review are a series of four publications, *Experience*, *Gender, Identity* and *Truth*, products of collaboration between several independent publishing houses around the world. The aim of the project is to promote inter-cultural dialogue through scholarly circulation of six different viewpoints on each of the four themes mentioned above. Each publication therefore contains six essays written by authors residing in six regions of the world, viz, Africa, America, the Arab world, China, Europe and India. (Why only these?) One learns from the series preface that one of the factors which motivated this project is growing internationalisation of research and the felt need to set free critical concepts that have gained currency across the world in recent years from the "ambiguities and globalisations that render them meaningless" (*Experience*, p 8). The series editor also states explicitly that the texts within each publication "do not aspire to being strictly representative (of a state of knowledge, a discipline, an identity)… and that they merely call for being discussed, studied and augmented" (ibid, p 11). She also states that (in the absence of attempts at standardisation) there are gaps across the texts – gaps with respect to the way the problem is mapped, ideas developed, levels of historical abstraction and temporality. Yet, she declares that the unspoken is at least as significant as what is presented.

Some of us reviewing the books felt uncomfortable about the following underlying assumptions: (1) that the four themes have the same valence in today's world and consequently they have mobilised public opinion and exerted influence on academia to the same extent; (2) that the notion 'culture' can be treated as a homogeneous entity and therefore, essays written by six different individuals are sufficient to put forth six different points of view that can be mapped on to those six regions/cultures; and (3) minor comments about 'translation problems' confined to footnotes are sufficient to convey the dilemmas faced by the authors/translators in dealing with these four critical concepts.

Gender: For a Different Kind of Globalisation *by Raja Ben Slama, Drucilla Cornell, Genevieve Fraisse, Seemanthini Niranjana, Linda Walman and Li Xiao-Jian.*

The publication of a significant number of new books on gender, both in India and abroad, in the last few years indicates a renewed interest both in the concept and its relation to feminist thought. *Gender* in the series edited by Nadia Tazi needs to be seen in the context of the widespread acknowledgement of a need to revisit this concept. This is partly because feminist thought, under pressure from queer theory, critical race studies and post-colonial theory, has needed to examine the normative character of the concept. Side by side, the delineation of gender today requires an acknowledgement of a changing global context in which the category is deployed. *Gender* offers a competent critical multi-perspectival evaluation of the term.

Gender carries six essays by writers from Africa, America, the Arab world, China, Europe and India. As the preface makes clear, the essays are not intended to be completely representative, comprehensive or standardised; nor are they positioned as idiosyncratic, free essays. In spite of the different cultural contexts and theoretical problems that they address, all these essays crucially engage with the relationship of gender with questions of sex, identity, difference and equality.

Both Linda Waldman's 'Griquatown Boorlings and Inkommers' and Raja Ben Slama's 'Gender Violence' engage with the question of gender through sharp critiques of the binary logic of gender. Waldman's essay analyses class, ethnicity and the politics of region through an examination of gendered relationships. Her study of Griquatown, a once influential but now economically depressed township in South Africa, is centred around two key terms: 'boorling' and 'inkommer'. These terms have a broad ethnic meaning: boorling refers to a Griqua man who is born to the area of Griquatown as against inkommer or settler. However, in relationships between boorling Griqua men and women, the Griqua man is cast as inkommer. Through an analysis of the Griqua coming of age ritual for women – the hokmeisie – where Griqua men are outsiders both to the physical space of 'home' and to the symbolic bearing of Griqua identity, she

shows how male claims to Griqua identity gets problematised. She argues that the relationship of boorling (men) to inkommers is in fact ambiguous, unstable and tied to the question of being female. Consequently, Waldman is able to work away from a logic that ties gender to becoming either men or women and implicates it in questions of ethnicity and place.

Increasingly Conservative

Likewise, Raja Ben Slama looks at the possibilities of working beyond "the logic of the politics of gender" that supports and maintains a normative, andro-heterocentric society. He offers a nuanced and programmatic account of Islamic law in relation to homosexuals and women, to show how the practice of Islamic law has become increasingly conservative at the contemporary moment. Though the "divine order of gender is strictly binary" the Koran itself refers to two categories of the 'third gender': the eunuch and the ephebe, "a paradisiacal creature, neither woman nor man, but highly sexual" (p 59). The breach that allowed a problematisation of "the theological edifice of binary sexualiy" (p 59) in part made way for a plural and equivocal tradition of a third gender during the first centuries of the Hegira. Despite the occasional harshness of the 'punishment', Ben Slama demonstrates that homosexuality was widely tolerated and subject to more clement juridical opinions in this period in contrast with the stringent punishment meted out for homosexuality in the Arab world today. However, Ben Slama argues that in the case of women, punitive violence was often unleashed when they were seen as transgressing the boundaries of gender. He elucidates the case by drawing parallels between a young horse woman killed for her expression of female desire in earlier times and state action in 1990 against 47 Saudi women who were punished for their assertion of their right to drive cars. In both cases, he says, women were disciplined by the sharia that has come to be infallible and transhistorical. He argues that the ahistoricity of the sharia or Muslim personal law sustains the inferiorisation of women, contradicts social reality as well as the majority of Arab constitutions which tacitly or expressly recognise the equality of men and women in the same way as they oppress homosexuals. Therefore, he argues, instead of making exclusivist or culturalist claims as some strands of Arabic feminist thought are wont to do, it is more crucial to work away from the ontologisation of gender differences towards a critical examination of th contemporary uses of the sharia in Arab society today.

Drucilla Cornell, in her essay 'Gender in America', acknowledges the challenge of queer theory to an essentialist understanding of gender to offer a critical account of the manner in which gender has entered legal discourse in the US. She argues that the concept that emerged as a key word during second wave feminism is now under attack for its hegemonic heterosexist normativity. She shows how the incorporation of gender into the US legal system resulted in "heterosexism being given the imprimatur of law" (p 40). She elucidates this by citing the position taken by Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin on the issue of pornography, which she shows, is premised on a universalist logic that inheres in their contention that pornography is "the ultimate symptom of what it means for women to be the sex for men" (p 45). This enables generalisations about women's position as a gender in society; yet it does not allow place for differences between women based on race, class and ethnicity. Further, gay men and heterosexuals can claim legal redress for the harms caused by pornography only if they are positioned as women. Yet, Cornell is not completely sceptical about the future of gender: even as she acknowledges that gender is inadequate and conservative both in law and as a critical category of analysis she holds out the possibility that it can be rethought and deepened as well as challenged as it gets deployed in political movements.

Women's Participation

Genevieve Fraisse is, however, more sceptical about the value of gender as an analytical category. In her essay, 'Gender, in Profile' she weighs the many theoretical possibilities of understanding the parity movement in France which questioned why "more than 50 years of voting rights had not changed women's participation in public life" (p 115). Gender, she argues, is historically layered onto an intellectual schema that contrasts sex and gender and embodies a binary vision of the world. She argues that 'classical' concepts such as equality, identity and representation might be more helpful in understanding the issue. She points out that the argument that pits equality against difference is misleading: "the opposite of difference is identity: we are same or different, not equal or different" (p 113). Like Cornell, she rejects equality as a universal principle of law. Only insofar as men and women are identical as in their use of reason, equality applies; for example, in the fields of education and citizenship; where they are different, as in the case of maternity, the equality principle becomes impossible to sustain. The parity question cannot be understood through an invocation of equality since both men and women have equal access to citizenship rights. Rather, this debate forces the recognition that "although neutral, social policies can be discriminatory" (p 125); this has led to ever greater mainstreaming of women's issues while, contradictorily, retaining the need for special approaches and agendas.

The equality question figures in a significantly different manner in Li Xiao-Jian's 'Xingbie or Gender'. She contends that the relationship of Chinese women to the question of equality has been structured by Mao Zedong's dictum that "men and women are the same" (p 94): their lived equality in social activities, in sharp contrast to the western experience, has led to women's self-effacement at another level. She argues that homogeneity in the name of equality placed such demands on women's lives that "few Chinese women think that they can afford to subordinate their physical/biological distinctions to the idea of social equality" (p 94). Alongside, she argues that the use of gender (translated as *xingbie*) as an analytic category in the Chinese context is also problematic. She notes, as Cornell and Fraisse do, that the 1970s concept of gender that differentiated itself from sex (*xing*) as a counter to biological determinism overrides, through its discursive hegemony, more fluid and productive concepts that are wider in scope and more abstract, such as *yin* and *yang*, in use by the Chinese.

Though Seemanthini Niranjana does not subscribe to the somewhat cultural nationalist position of Li, she too argues that the relationship between gender and questions of equality is not isomorphic with the historical experiences of the west. Niranjana argues that in the west, gender identity and gender equality are inseparable from the ideology of rights, liberty and equality predicated on the individual; in India, however, the idea of personal identity is tied so closely to the group, that the equality-inequality framework would need to be conceptualised not only in terms of gender but also of group. Therefore, she argues that gender needs to be contextualised by caste and community, for example: it would be "more fittingly rendered in relational terms, rather than a purely oppositional category where one is defined against another" (p 142). Such an analysis, she suggests qua Fraisse, might be able to account for the substantive inequalities

that structure women's lives despite the granting of individual rights.

This small format collection of essays is engaging, informative and theoretically sophisticated. The range of positions through which gender is examined allows the reader to get a nuanced understanding of the issues involved. The volume not only gives the lay person an entry into the concept but also offers insights into the urgencies that have directed a re-evaluation of gender.

Experience: For a Different Kind of Globalisation *by Nader el-Bizri, Jean-Pierre Cléro, Martin Jay, G K Karanth, Achille Mbembe, Ye Shu-Xian.*

D VASANTA

The individual essays on the keyword 'experience' were written by authors belonging to the disciplines of history, literature, philosophy, politics and sociology. The lenses through which the authors chose to comment on 'experience' ranged through discourses (Africa); culture (America); religion and language (Arab world and China); philosophy and psychoanalysis (Europe) and social anthropology and ancient Indian philosophy (India). If we abandon the question of representativeness of each text to the culture it purports to represent, the texts together provide the reader with a rich canvas to think through the concept and perhaps ponder its 'researchability'. For instance, Nader El-Bizri's scholarly comments on the etymological dimensions of 'experience' in Arabic, and Ye Shu-Xian's highly readable essay on `jingyan', the Chinese term for the English word 'experience', allow the reader to think about how languages differ in their capacity to evoke the many senses of a given concept. Since the essays draw on a wide range of disciplines, doctrines, and systems of thought, I have chosen to comment on only two of the six essays and mention a list of 'experiences' that did not find any place in the discussions included in this publication.

Achille Mbembe who writes about 'subject and experience' with reference to Africa offers an insightful critique of the two dominant discourses about Africa and Africans, viz, Afro-radicalism and nativism. He argues that the 'truth' disclosed by both these discourses only served to limit African thought and the philosophical inquiry concerning this region. By asking wrong questions about three of the most highly traumatic events about Africa, slavery, colonialism and apartheid, these discourses perpetuated a culturalism that is preoccupied with questions of identity and authenticity. He goes on to point out that the geographical accident called Africa was invested with a multitude of significations, imaginary contents and even fantasies that claimed to possess certain authority. Dating back at least to the 15th century and originating along the Atlantic, these contents revolved around stories, mostly fictions and legends, that somehow became authentic experiences. However, he says that there are local reappropriations of these 'authentic experiences' and one needs to engage in a historical reading of them. The need of the hour, the author argues, is to develop a technique of reading the 'archive of the present' – not just philosophy, history, politics but an entire body of visual, chanted, painted, imaged and spoken texts which are part of the recent memory of African societies. In the absence of such a reading, it is impossible, declares the author, to witness the experience that the contemporary African subject has of power, language and life. The genius of this essay in my opinion lies in the challenge posed by Mbembe to the 'African subject', the bearer of 'African experience' in the Anglocentric academic discourse. To cite his words: "In order *to reflect for oneself and for the world* (emphasis in the original), one must escape the effort that reduces thought to the repression of a fantasy of which one is not the author" (p 12).

Materialistic Individualism

In his essay titled 'Experience in America', the philosopher Martin Jay sketches the history of the way this concept was thought of in a wide range of writings. He points out that the American valorisation of experience has something to do with its materialistic individualism upheld by the Lockean tradition. It is materialistic in that it comes through bodily sensations and it is individualistic in that each one of us has a unique sensorium that imprints external stimuli on our minds. This notion of the self he says has resulted in severing its link from the idea that one learns from the wisdom of the community as stored in its institutions, narratives, proverbs and myths. The other major impulse in American thought is to conceptualise experience as resistance to abstract theory. This resistance was supported by political conservatism and evangelical religion. He traces briefly many interesting debates about this concept starting from the pragmatism of the last quarter of the 19th century to the linguistic turn in 20th century thought, and further on to the more recent arguments

of feminist historians who opined that recovery of the experience of past actors should not be the primary objective of historical inquiry.

The author makes an argument based on the writings of several other thinkers that the valorisation of experiential exclusivity of blacks, minorities or women can give rise to problems. On the basis of these readings, he states (p 40) that Americans seem in the 21st century to be more reflexive and self-critical about what exactly the term 'experience' may mean and how it can be used to legitimate normative positions. One is not sure how to understand this. To illustrate with an example, in recent times, the building of public housing, community libraries, community owned/ managed cooperatives, cultural centres and schools is reportedly subordinated to shopping malls and private home ownership ostensibly to sustain 'stable communities' or for 'social upgradation of a neighbourhood' [Haymes 2003]. In the face of such withdrawal of public space, urban blacks are less able to sustain the networks of family and friends necessary for organising their experiences into a collective identity. The pervasiveness of such a culture of consumption is said to be undermining black people's capacity to experience community (bell hooks, cited in Haymes (2003)). Clearly, such strategies of distancing will undercut African American experience of the mainstream. Martin Jay acknowledges this but continues to support the normative notion of a common American experience. He ends his essay by talking of the commodification of experience that is unable to discern the experiences that underlie the production of commodities. If we have to understand what 'experiencing a community' entails, we have to pay attention to the discourses about culture – perhaps that is what the author is alluding to in his closing statement about the need for an entirely different keyword, theory.

'False Generalisation'

Finally, my own reading of these six essays left me wondering why all the authors treated experience only as something that has been interpreted and talked about by the subject (or from a subject position) and not as something that relates to the pain and anguish felt but not articulated sufficiently and hence has not become part of dominant discourses of communities around the world. I have in mind the experiences of pain from phantom limbs, the flashbacks experienced by trauma victims referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, the silences surrounding child sexual abuse, rape, serious life-threatening illnesses etc… are all these immune to the influence of cultures? If not, shouldn't such culture-specific experiences be treated as a knowledge base of the newly configured social sciences? Wouldn't that offer resistance to the trivial internationalisation of research this project appears to problematise?

Societal discourses on disability are also never in consonance with the experiences of a particular group of disabled persons. Very often disabled persons' reduced contribution to society has more to do with the disabling environments than the physical impairment that they are suffering from. Imposing universal discourses about experience (without being aware of the restrictions required for its use) can lead to what the author representing Europe in this book called 'false generalisation of experience'. To avoid that happening we may need to reflect on more keywords and make more sustained efforts to fill the gaps across discourses.

Reference

Haymes, S N (2003): 'Towards a Pedagogy of Place for Black Urban Struggle' in A Darder, M Baltodand, R D Torres (eds), *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, Routledge Falmer, New York.

Identity: For a Different Kind of Globalisation *by Aziz Al-Azmeh, Wang Bin, David A Hollinger, N Jayaram, Mahmood Mamdani and Emmanuel Renault.*

A S R V Suneetha

This collection of essays interrogates the notion of *identity* from historicist, culturalist, theoretical, and social-anthropological perspectives. Should identity be understood in terms of 'presence as being', a social presence with 'given' markers, 'identifications'? What is involved in the making of identity of a subordinated group and people? When does a group's cultural identity become a political identity? What sort of loyalties do they mobilise and what is the nature of 'exclusion' that they seem to require? What does it mean when a people's identity is constructed in terms of their 'culture' and what sort of denials would that entail? How does one understand the presence of identity struggles in the European societies that have instituted universal rights regimes?

The essays foreground the 'political' nature of identity construction and formation in each of the contexts that they refer to. While the nature of the 'political' that they invoke differs considerably from that of law and international politics, to what is termed culture, what is most interesting is that three of the essays (those of Mamdani, Aziz Al-Azmeh, and Wang Bin) are engaged in understanding the implications of living with the presence of the west in their midst – in law, in culture, in politics, in academia, in modernity, and in development, apart from their everyday lives. There is a double-sidedness to their engagement: dealing with the dominance of the west and with the critical tools that again are predominantly developed in the west. The other three (by Renault, Jayaram and Hollinger) are non-historicist exercises in understanding the formation of identities. Here, we choose three essays for review because of the constraints of space.

Jayaram, in his essay on identity in India, adopts a perspective in which the multiple caste, linguistic, and regional markers that people use in their everyday lives to recognise each other are taken as their 'identities'. These various identities are to be understood as the basis of the plurality and multiplicity of Indian society and as such the bearers of a broad 'social consensus'. While certain conflicts of identity are inevitable in the process of social change through modernity and challenges to caste norms, constructions of meta-identities, especially those on the lines of religion, turn out to be undesirable.

What is interesting about the essay is the way it lays out in excellent detail the intractability of thinking about an 'individual' identity in the Indian context, given the social primacy of a group identity in everyday life. His caution that historically, the primacy of a singular identity, whether legal, traditional, or political, on women, dalits and minorities has always led to depriving the individual of agency, rights and respect also needs to be taken seriously. However, the author's comfort with a functionalist understanding of social consensus around group identities is a little surprising. Given the author's evident knowledge of the ways in which the colonial and post-colonial states have played a role in the construction of 'group' identities in India through law, census and developmental policies, one only wishes that he had probed more systematically into the implications of these processes for identity formation in contemporary India; and the ways in which at least some of the identity struggles such as those of dalits and women

have offered considerable challenges to existing power inequalities.

Race and Ethnicity

Mamdani's essay on 'Race and Ethnicity as Political Identities in the African Context' takes on precisely this task of understanding the current ethnic and racial identities in Africa in the context of state formation in the colonial and post-colonial periods. He begins through an examination of the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda. He argues that the creation of 'political identities' of race and ethnicity during the indirect rule of European colonisers, where settlers are categorised as races and natives as ethnicities, irrevocably connected the rights of people to the question of their origins. As such, in the African context, he notes, 'the real distinction between race and ethnicity is not between biology and culture', as both are equally political – created through legal recognition.

In the specific context of Rwanda, the culturally fluid pre-colonial distinction between Tutsi elites and Tutsi and Hutu masses was given a legal status, thereby creating two specific political racial identities of Tutsis and Hutus. The Rwandan nationalist movement took on a Hutu native character against Tutsi settlers. Nearly four decades later, when Tutsi refugees who had migrated to neighbouring Uganda were returned to Rwanda, because of similar considerations of origins there, the Hutus of Rwanda, fearing a resurrection of Tutsi power, responded to the call of the state elites to put an end to this perceived threat from Tutsis, asserting their identity, once and for all.

Mamdani argues at two levels: one, that we should always distinguish between the cultural identities, which are fluid and multiple, and the political identity that comes through legal recognition, which is singular, essentialist and exclusive. However, these two are not unrelated. The political (legal) identities are of course moulded out of the pre-existing cultural identities. But in the process they lead to the institutionalisation of ethnicities, races and cultures and get deeply ingrained in the social imagery of peoples. Second, consequent to the above process, while working with these identities, whether politically or theoretically, one should always take them as categories that have historical limitations. The political identities of Tutsi elite and Hutu victim, in Rwanda, remained in the social imagery, despite the change of conditions, as they were only built upon, but not reworked by the nationalist movement there. He strongly urges the scholars from a subaltern studies perspective, who have dominated the theorising of the elite/oppressed relations in historiography, to historicise the category of 'subaltern'.

Modern Universalism

Emmanuel Renault, in 'European Conceptions of Identity', attempts to offer a theoretical defence of identity struggles in European democratic societies characterised by universal rights guarantees. While the classic liberal position, best represented by Rawls, would deny privileging of any specific identity to preserve the plural character of modern democratic societies, communitarians such as Charles Taylor offer defence of cultural identities as necessary grounds for realisation of universal rights. However, both regard cultural identity as a fixed category and therefore, the author argues, neither the erasure nor the defence of ossified cultures can even begin to address the questions posed by identity struggles. Should one take the Habermassian route by arguing that only those identities that stand the test of modern universalism should be recognised as valid? But then, it would still mean that universal rights assume priority over other articulations of injustice that have occurred precisely because of the failure of modern institutions. Similarly, one should not assume identities to be pre-political, because "they are capable of being altered in the struggle to be recognised and in their entry into public sphere" (p 108).

Perhaps, a better way would be to see whether attention to the formation of an individual's personal identity offers a way out of this impasse. For Renault, it is possible to begin here because a person's sense of self-worth and positive self-image "is the basis of ethical moral normalcy". It is possible to argue that when socialisation processes do not produce individuals with self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, 'social struggles' for identity can be "interpreted as the conflicts instituted by socially despised individuals who wish to restore a positive relation with the self" (pp 109-10). However, apart from this 'normative deficiency', there is the train of thought (beginning with Adorno and Horkeimer but taking a firm grounding in Foucault) that sees the occupation of identities as instituted by power/governments as meaning 'subservience'. Renault points out here that one should distinguish between affirmations of identity and the 'demands' of identity. It is this wedge between the processes of identification with a given identity and one's working through within it that ensures that identity formation is always an unstable process, especially at the individual level. As such, any social struggle for identity is always a political one. However, such social struggles may not necessarily be emancipatory. While some may lead to the forging of unifying identities that seek to erase other identities, some may challenge the injustices adhering to the identities given to them.

Truth: For a Different Kind of Globalisation *by Deborah Posel, Douglas Patterson, Ali Benmakhalouf, Yang Guo Rong, Bertrand Ogilvie and Ganesh Devy.*

R Srivatsan

What is involved in speaking the truth? The need to insist that a statement is/should be true marks an exception, a special situation. To take an elementary example, the father's command "Speak the truth!" conjures an aura of threat. The child experiences it as a physical force. When we think about different instances where truth becomes an issue, like the constitution of a fact-finding committee, a witness's oath to testify the confession of a crime or a sin, a declaration of love, or even scientific investigation, an aspect of political force always structures it. As the book under review will show, the command to reflect on truth releases a dense traffic between philosophy and politics.

The seemingly innocent invitation "What is truth in your culture?" already loads the dice. This 'loading' or normativity betrays its presence in the ventriloquism that organises a worldwide web to write about the truth through an apparently 'multicultural' agenda: there may be many frameworks of truth, but the western abstraction called truth establishes a value that remains transcendental, beyond any specific culture's grasp of its sense and importance. In their turn, even though the essays in this volume contest and engage with their own specific culture of truth, some of them respond to the challenge of the invitation with a dissonance: "Our truth does not dominate like yours." There is a muted and subtle agenda of contradiction and assertion that pulls against the polite dialogue of multiculturalism. However, marginally, these essays begin to provincialise the hitherto inescapable, normative Western discourse of truth.

The Question in South Africa

Deborah Posel's sociological study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa

describes the historical paradox of the commission's work. In spite of a contemporary weakening of truth's normative value in Western philosophy, South Africa's need to build its democracy after apartheid demanded a reconstruction of the truth. The new nation did not insist on justice through law – it only demanded reconciliation with a past through televised confession, sociological investigation and rigorous historiography. (Reconciliation – accounting for, ensuring agreement, truing, getting used to, accepting, coming together, making up.) Posel describes in detail the trajectory of each of these projects. While sociological investigation brought out the healing power of local truths in stories of grief, the historiographic exercise had weak terms of reference excluding a rigorous truth of apartheid. In contrast, the televised hearings of the TRC tended to be a theatrical confirmation of the grand model of human oppression, flattening the labyrinthine detail into truths of universal scope.

We can do little justice in this brief review to the texture with which Posel's study excavates the working of truth in ambiguous registers – as personal observation, as a healing force, as objective, as social value. As with the essays to follow, this one is a feast for the thoughtful reader.

American Thought

Douglas Patterson's essay on truth in America is an investigation in ordinary language of the practice of claiming the truth. Patterson observes, on the basis of his experience, that the claim that a statement is true, made easily by ordinary Americans, is more difficult for students of philosophy. He elaborates the suggestion that the students' hesitation to claim objective truth for their personal observation arises from reflective humility: "We think this has happened, but something else may indeed be true". Tracing the philosophical roots of their hesitation to cultural relativism, Patterson argues that this hesitation becomes a potential hazard for American philosophy and culture, because those who are trained to think backpedal when they have to assert their thinking in society. Patterson establishes his allegiance to Rawls's political liberalism and argues that it is necessary for trained philosophers to exert their force in the conflict of competing notions of truth and the good so that the best stands a chance. Patterson asserts that the common ideals of America have to enter the arena of debate to remedy current actuality in American society and politics.

This essay is an implicit call to break from within the structure of American universities as intellectual ghettos of an estranged elite. It explicitly argues for a philosophical stake in, and responsibility to, a community (desperately – one almost hears) in need of ethical direction.

Medieval Arabic Philosophy

Ali Benmakhalouf's essay on the Averronian project of truth sheds light on the historical relationship between law and the truth in medieval Islamic thought. How does one reconcile the three vectors of law: the truth according to the Koran, the truth from the Prophet's life, and the truth as sanctioned by community practice?

Benmakhalouf traces the history of ethical and legal thought in Islam, through the writings of al-Farabi, Ibn Taymiyya and al-Ghazali. Problems of the survival of the thinker in a hostile milieu; the need to have different criteria and methods of conveying the truth when dealing with different segments of society; and the philosophical problem of accounting for the divine revelation of the laws of living: these are some of the diverse issues discussed by the essay in the work of these great thinkers. According to Benmakhalouf Averroes criticised consensus as dogmatic and stressed the pedagogic importance of public conflict and demonstrative argument in theological and ethical thinking. Averroes was also prescient in recognising the need for, and applying Aristotelian syllogism to, creative extension of a small set of original legal precedents to increasingly transformed social practices.

There is an anachronistic echo between Averroes and Patterson (this volume) in the implicit recognition that the truth and the good often reveal themselves fully only to trained thinking. But while the truth telling strategy for Averroes is a difficult and humble negotiation with community, it seeks a subtly more authoritative voice in Patterson, reflecting the changed historical legacy of truth as an 'imperative' after the European Enlightenment, and its 20th century critical renewal in Rawls.

In another register, Benmakhalouf excels in the modern Sisyphean task of proving the worth of Islam, unleashed by the innocent question "What is truth in your culture?" He demonstrates the maturity and depth of ethical and legal reasoning in Islamic thought in periods of history when Christianity was steeped in mystical obscurantism.

Zhen in China

Yang Guo Rong's essay starts off on an intellectually aggressive note by differentiating the concept of Zhen from Western truth. Zhen, signifying true, real, sincere, and authentic, is a term that has through its history been used "to structure and restructure Chinese life".

If the western concept of truth is related to the cognitive faculty, Zhen is about a general attitude towards what one wishes to know, following Confucian maxims: avoid arbitrariness, dogmatism, obstinacy, and egotism, and seek down-to-earthness. Zhen's local pragmatism suggests why Chinese culture succeeded in technology rather than science. In Zhen hermeneutics, the Confucian classics ground a knowledge guaranteed true, to help criticise a way of life. Thus Zhen in this register is a political encounter.

Lao Zi's concept of Zhen as a move away from hypocrisy and back to nature is a foil to the Confucian concept of Zhen as culture and refinement. Practice shifts opportunistically from Confucius to Lao Zi, always obeying Zhen!

Yang argues that Zhen reinvents itself to support different actions even in communist China, e g, the party leader Liu Shao-qi who reformulated the Confucian maxim "The superior man is watchful over himself when he is alone" by substituting the term "The party man…"

Yang Guo Rong's essay shows the way in which an ethical stance may be structured by an engaged, practical concept of "truth". In addition (though only liminally) it suggests to us ways of thinking about the truth through a genealogy foreign to Kant, Hegel or Nietzsche. The result is a sense of historicity and ethics with a different, less ponderous, more practical, down-to-earth feel.

European Project

Bertrand Ogilvie argues that the European project of truth today seeks not a universal, but a closed, regime of symbolic-technical construction in which specific and limited truths are exploited for systems of gain.

Alongside the development of this technico-truth, the pluralisation of ethical truths has occurred, inevitably due to the failure of the normative model. Ogilvie argues that oppressive practice flouts the theoretical norm at every step: e g, colonialism and the elimination of different cultures even as institutions like the UN call for more human(e) systems.

And yet, the most radical critiques have, according to Ogilvie, emerged within the European tradition: Levi-Strauss, Pascal, Nietzsche, and Foucault… In Hegel's philosophy, truth is not substantive, but

is the ascending process of seeing the error of present truths. In opposition, Deleuze stressed that the search for truth consisted in trying to find the "imperative prompting emanating from things in the wild state". In Pascal, truth is the "thought at the back" that prompts the (social) phenomenon, and for Ogilvie this is related distantly to the Freudian dream/ symptom whose function is precisely to speak the truth.

Ogilvie's narrative foregrounds the political difficulty presented by this concept of 'tradition'. If the normative European tradition returns eternally to fatten itself on the most radical breaks established by thinkers (Pascal, Hegel, Deleuze, Foucault, etc), is not that concept of tradition a narrative that exterminates any attempt to reconfigure the discourse of truth in a broader, globalised framework? Can the hypostatised concept of a tradition of truth, such as the one organising this brave little book, escape this spectre of the death of change? Is it possible to probe such a concept of tradition 'under erasure' and detach future possibilities from their past Eurocentric (and *other-centric* – see Devy, next section) moorings? Can a Foucault or a Derrida be structurally non-European in a Deleuzian, nomadic sense?

Indian Epic

Ganesh Devy's 'Prahladic' essay starts with Nachiketa's quest for the truth of life and death. Devy browses through the Katha and Isha Upanishads, leading on to the Upanishadic truth, tat twam asi (thou art that), which later became the cornerstone of Brahmana thinking. The Vedas, and later the Mahabharata too, brought forth a notion of truth that is more akin to the Kshatriya philosophy of dharma. The consolidation of society into caste hierarchy depended on these frozen notions of truth that evaded reality: "The world is an illusion". Originating a different strand, Gautama Buddha taught the world to face the truth of suffering.

Devy explores the idea of truth in Hinduism using Kalidasa. King Dushyanta forgets that Shakuntala is his pregnant lover in an accursed failure of memory, which is ultimately rectified by destiny. Devy asserts that falsehood (non-recognition of the true lover) is always seen as a temporary aberration of Dushyanta's mind and never as a mortal sin. He argues that this asymmetric concept of truth in Hinduism, having no absolute opposite in the lie or falsehood, is very different from the one in Western philosophy.

Devy then traces bhakti after the 11th century as the truth of a passion for the divine, overturning in its wake the caste supremacy of both dharma and 'gnyana' as the paths to salvation. Devy then touches down in the 20th century where Gandhi's truth links itself to non-violence. Devy ends lamenting the failure of Indian society (seduced by the entertainment industry!) to take on the challenge of the Gandhian notion.

Devy's history of truth in India is a difficult enterprise. This is because 'Indian thought' even in his account seems neither to have a convincing practice of reflection on truth-as-such (as opposed, e g, to telling stories about the truth of god, love, life after death, of the yuga of truth, etc), nor even a proper equivalent to the Western concept. He tries to demonstrate a culture of truth that measures up to the transcendental value of the European concept without submitting to its normative form. To us, his attempt to create a cogent tradition of Indian thinking on truth seems to be futile, and perhaps also unnecessary? EPW