



How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy

Julian Baggini

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In the first global overview of philosophy, Julian Baggini travels the world to provide a wide-ranging map of human thought. One of the great unexplained wonders of human history is that written philosophy flowered entirely separately in China, India and Ancient Greece at more or less the same time. These early philosophies have had a profound impact on the development of distinctive cultures in different parts of the world. What we call 'philosophy' in the West is not even half the story. Julian Baggini sets out to expand our horizons in *How the World Thinks*, exploring the philosophies of Japan, India, China and the Muslim world, as well as the lesser-known oral traditions of Africa and Australia's first peoples. Interviewing thinkers from around the globe, Baggini asks questions such as: why is the West more individualistic than the East? What makes secularism a less powerful force in the Islamic world than in Europe? And how has China resisted pressures for greater political freedom? Offering deep insights into how different regions operate, and paying as much attention to commonalities as to differences, Baggini shows that by gaining greater knowledge of how others think we take the first step to a greater understanding of ourselves.

How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy Details

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Nosemonkey says

Interesting thematic (rather than regional) overview of global philosophy, taking a comparative approach to find similarities between disparate traditions. Very much aimed at Western audiences, and relatively top level - and so an accessible, easy, occasionally thought-provoking read as a result.

Given the author is aware of and open about the limitations of such an approach, if there's an unintentional flaw it's that it starts to peter out towards the end, with some ideas seeming a bit repetitive. And the final section - an overview of key philosophical mindsets in different parts of the world - would have served better as an introduction, as with its positioning at the end of the book, all it serves to do is undermine the argument.

Still, good stuff that's got me keen to read more about Japanese, Indian, Chinese and Islamic philosophy in particular.

Max Gwynne says

A fantastically enlightening book written with great intelligence by Baggini, a man who has certainly done an impressive amount of research into the subject matter. However his writing style bogs the book down in density, unnecessarily so, and drags my rating down from a book that could easily have been a 5 star rating.

Alex G says

Excellent book - fascinating reading, well put together, clearly written and full of things to think about.

Renee says

Reading this book aloud in the car, discovering gems together over Kopi and Roti Prata, letting a stranger skim through it just before the start of a lecture, discussing it with my boss after a workshop, trying to explain its gist to a curious 7-year-old. These were my favourite memories of reading this one.

And as I travelled for work and play, through car and taxi rides, brought it from café to café, drunk cups of Caramel Latte/Kopi-C Peng/Genmaicha while I nibbled on doughnuts, woke up early to get some chapters in before starting on work, gave thanks for late turn-ups and having to wait for the little one at ballet classes that let me pore through the book, Baggini took me through East Asia, Europe, America and Africa, through the ages from the time of Confucius, Socrates and Buddha to the world of today.

I took a long time to get through this one because it kept me pausing to reflect and reexamine my own thinking and what has shaped it. Often I found myself needing to reach out to discuss with other minds. And

now, having completed it, I feel simultaneously nourished and hungry. Gratifying read

E. says

Ever since I began teaching philosophy in the 1990's I've tried to expand the canon and to include non-Western elements in my teaching. These movements have gained momentum more broadly in the academy in recent years, and so I've been trying to expand my understanding so I can be a better philosopher and a better teacher. I hadn't yet seen a good introductory text one might use for global philosophy.

And this book still isn't that, but it quite good. This is not a book one could assign in an intro class, because it requires some familiarity with philosophical traditions, but it is a fascinating exploration in comparative philosophy.

Baggini writes that the different philosophical traditions are different, with different emphases, ideas, and values. And that you can't just pick and choose from those traditions, you need to understand how the ideas hang together and have developed through history.

But he does believe that the various traditions can learn from each other and can see how one might think differently if different ideas are emphasized. Plus, he thinks this is the way the world is going anyway, with globalization bringing the various cultures into closer communication, such that in the future global philosophy will be a cross-cultural conversation with roots in the various traditions.

One feature of the book that was enjoyable was the way he discussed contemporary events--such as the election of Donald Trump or the policies of Xi Jinping--through the lens of their culture's philosophical traditions.

My only negative feedback is that some of the chapters and sections could have been edited and structured differently. And a few others could have been expanded.

But overall I found this a very helpful guide in understanding how our current world thinks and what it's primary values are.

Jelger Beltman says

Capturing the wisdom of this book in a review is next to impossible. The mind-expanding collections of philosophies really paint a beautiful picture of the world. The differences between individual freedom and social harmony explain the shortcomings of the western ways of thinking. The idea of total responsibility of the self that is becoming more common around the world is broken down. For it is ignorant to assume that the self is something independent. This book is one of the best summaries of the different ways of thinking I have ever read!

Anri says

He elaborates seemingly-indifferent concepts of different parts of the world together under certain blanket

words (as in index), and it works.

I found some chapters boring, as they seem to be a mere array of thoughts by using the corresponding words in foreign languages. Sometimes I could hardly follow what he says because they were too foreign to me, both the styles and the concepts. However, I was fascinated most of the time and especially by his explanations of Japanese philosophy. Although almost all the ideas he introduced as Japanese philosophy were something familiar to me as a Japanese person raised in Japan for twenty-something years, he shed new light on them, and it was really exciting to come in touch with them.

Some of his attempts still looked like he is trying to present 'culture' as 'philosophy' for me, but his way of shaking my definition of philosophy, which recognises only the western philosophy as philosophy, was enjoyable. I especially liked him mentioning Bertrand Russell at the end of 'ineffable' chapter.

Mike Steinharter says

I so wanted to learn from this book; Understanding philosophies from around the world sounded quite interesting and it grabbed my attention at the bookstore and no doubt the author's experience is extensive, but the writing just didn't invite me in to learn and understand. To be fair, I enjoyed a number of parts of the books, such as the chapter on Japanese relational self and the anecdotes that illustrate it. But he jumps around way too much for me and I found myself skimming more often than I prefer.

Indrani Ganguly says

It would have been more appropriate to name this book 'How Some People Think' given it's largely the viewpoint of a middle-class Anglo-Saxon male. Women are dismissed with a summary comment "women's voices are almost entirely absent from the world's classical traditions". This is true but doesn't warrant leaving out the contributions of Indian women like Gargi, Maitreyi and Lopamudra who were well known for their learned and spirited debates with men and Greek women like Hypatia. It would have been interesting if Baggini had compared their thinking with the males.

The term 'Indian philosophy' is misleading, though to be fair it is also used by many Indians. The correct term is Vedic philosophy, for two reasons: it is found in many other countries in South and South-East Asia. Secondly, there are other philosophies in India including Buddhist, Jain, Muslim, Sikh etc.

Baggini presents Marx as influencing Gandhi by leading him to 'balance the traditional emphasis on spirituality with concerns for social justice'. It is more appropriate to say Marx might have influenced Gandhi through his trenchant criticism of the 'barbarity of British colonial rule, its loot and torture, clearly acknowledging that "the misery inflicted by the British on Hindustan is of an essentially different and infinitely more intensive kind than all Hindustan had to suffer before'.

And Gandhi is unlikely to have supported the violent methods propagated by Marx and his followers.

The 'fabled spirituality' of which Baggini and countless others before him have highlighted is very much that: a fable. This is a myth which helps Westerners hide the fact that it was the fabled material wealth of India that has attracted traders and invaders from the West and elsewhere.

The book is replete with facile generalisations, e.g. the reference to extreme deference by Indians to authority which is contrasted with Western notions of argument and debate, all based on his experience in one conference. If Baggini had looked beyond his narrow view to the writings of historians and sociologists, it is the argumentative nature of Indians that has led to its amazing diversity. Amartya Sen, the Nobel-prize winning Indian economist, illustrated this in his book 'The Argumentative Indian'.

Baggini also refers to the 'resistance to secularism in the Islamic world'. There is no single Islamic model of government. Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Turkey and others were historically secular states though there have been infringements in recent times.

Conversely, Western countries are not as secular as they claim to be. Western missionaries still invade other cultures seeking to buy converts under the guise of altruism and the only public holidays are those dedicated to Christian festivals.

True to form Baggini refers to the poverty of the part of India he visits. Equally true to form is the failure to discuss if he and others like him would be willing to pay fair prices for the goods and services extracted from India, Africa etc.

There are some moments of insight such as the quote that philosophers live in two times and two places. But they are lost in a morass of unstructured arguments peppered with many irritatingly predictably generalisations and stereotypes.

The book definitely required a good editor who has some knowledge of the content and the ability to cull ruthlessly!
