

## Europe and Eurocentrism

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### Abstract:

In this article I explore how philosophical thinking about God, reason, humanity and history has shaped ideas of Europe, focusing on Hegel. For Hegel, Europe is the civilisation that, by way of Christianity, has advanced the spirit of freedom which originated in Greece. Hegel is a Eurocentrist, whose work indicates how Eurocentrism as a broader discourse has shaped received conceptions of Europe. I then distinguish ‘external’ and ‘internal’ ways of approaching ideas of Europe and defend the former approach, on which Europe’s self-understanding is not a phenomenon purely internal to Europe but has always been shaped by Europe’s relations with non-European cultures. I note Egypt’s influence on the ancient Greeks and the role of Europe’s colonisation of America, and suggest that European civilisation could be rejuvenated by more open acknowledgement of these relations with others.

*Introduction.* I very much welcome Simon Glendinning’s proposal that philosophers contribute to thinking about Europe.<sup>1</sup> Given the political importance of the topic, it is regrettable that few recent philosophers have taken part in discussions about the ideas and institutions of Europe which have

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Guy Longworth for his careful comments on an earlier version.

been taking place amongst sociologists, political scientists and intellectual historians.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the subject of these discussions is not Europe as a physical continent but as a civilisation and set of cultures, its social and political institutions, the history of thinking about the idea of Europe, and the bearing of all this on people's identities.<sup>3</sup> What can philosophers say about these matters? Glendinning's answer is that the idea of Europe has *already* been deeply shaped by the history of philosophy — not only the history of philosophical thinking about Europe specifically, but also the broader history of philosophical thinking about humanity, God, and history itself. As such, one contribution that contemporary philosophers can make is to reconstruct this history of ideas and consider what it has meant for, and where it has left, the idea of Europe.

Initially Glendinning sketches the key contours of this history as follows. The Greeks originated the idea that humans are 'rational animals', beings that are not merely natural but also capable of developing themselves in accordance with norms of rationality. That development came to be seen as unfolding historically, along a single historical line ('*universal*' history), since rationality leads to the same conclusions whenever and wherever it is exercised. For the same reason the historical trajectory has a single goal: universal peace, freedom, and happiness, which are to come about through the realisation of reason. This is *Europe's* promise, Glendinning says (2016, p. 1): this historical line begins in ancient Greece, runs through Graeco-Christian Europe, and will come to fulfilment in modern Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these discussions, see Wintle (2013), and, for two philosophical contributions, see Glendinning (2014), Meacham and Tava (2015).

<sup>3</sup> In any case, political and cultural factors affect where we draw the boundaries of continents and which physical features we pick out in doing so (for example, the Caucasus and not the Pyrenées). Moreover, as a civilisation Europe extends well beyond the geographical boundaries of the European continent, to include the U.S., Canada and Australia as societies whose character has been principally shaped by people of European descent.

Glendinning then expands further on this sketch. He begins by suggesting that around 1800 Europeans had much more confidence than they do now in the meaningfulness of the world – that it exhibits an orderliness and purposeful organisation that provides empirical evidence of God’s organising role in the cosmos, and, flowing down from it, of the central position of humanity as being made in God’s image. Human beings were assumed to be not merely natural but, in part, ‘above’ nature, creating civilisations and developing historically, where being historical was understood as being unique to human beings and history and nature were set in opposition to one another. Glendinning concludes, then, that ‘the significance to Europeans of the a posteriori conception of God emerges in the space of a self-understanding — a conception of ourselves as Man — that is rooted in Greek philosophy as it is drawn into Christian theology’ (2016, p. 5). Greece provided the idea of the ‘rational animal’; Christianity re-interpreted this status in terms of our being made in God’s image and standing at the centre of the universe, so that God’s plan for the universe becomes realised through our rational, cultural, historical self-development. ‘In summary, then’, Glendinning says, ‘the invocation of an a posteriori conception of God belongs to an originally Greek a priori conception of Man as that conception makes its way into a world that is increasingly Christian. That world is the world that calls itself (to be) *European*’ (p. 6). To inhabit this universe of meaning was what it used to mean to be European, for Glendinning.

Europeans today are left in a rather bleak position, on Glendinning’s account, since we can no longer have confident belief in any of these ideas. Yet neither can we simply abandon those ideas, partly because they have constituted what it means to be European in the first place, partly because we remain inevitably located amongst the ruins of our earlier frameworks of belief — within ‘a world we no longer quite inhabit, or inhabit without inhabiting’. Glendinning’s diagnosis of the condition of Europeans today thus owes much to Nietzsche, for whom the decline of the framework of values that used to guide us has left us in a condition of nihilism. For Nietzsche, our highest values have devalued themselves by undermining one another. For one, the ideal of truth has come to tell against Christianity; yet without the Christian moral framework we lack compelling

reasons to value truth in the first place. Nonetheless, for Nietzsche, we continue both to abide by much of that moral framework and to pursue truth, without giving real assent to either: ‘the scientific conscience today is an abyss’ (Nietzsche [1887] 1997, p. 109). In a similar vein, Glendinning says that ‘we find ourselves today in this exhausted and worn-out Europe, and ... in a perplexed condition, with a sense, only, of the opacity of our time’ (2016, p. 12).

I agree with much of Glendinning’s account of the historical framework of ideas, beliefs and values which has shaped what Europe means. In Section I, I want to substantiate this account further by focusing on the philosopher who, arguably, provides the decisive articulation of this web of ideas about God, reason, humanity and history: Hegel, in his *Philosophy of World History* (hereafter PWH), in which, in fact, he counts only Europe as having a history proper. However, both Glendinning’s account of the philosophical sources of the idea of Europe and my elaboration of this account by way of Hegel raise a question (set out in Section II): is the idea of *Europe* inextricable from *Eurocentrism*? One might have thought that these two are analytically distinct, even if in practice many Europeans have been convinced of the superiority of their civilisation. But perhaps Europe and Eurocentrism are not so readily kept apart. Hegel, at least, interprets Europe as the region where world history has unfolded to its most developed point, beginning with the ancient Greeks and running through Christendom to the realisation of God’s plan or history’s goal in modern Europe. So, for Hegel, Europe has a special, privileged, central place in world history and/or the divine plan, where this privileged place is constitutive of what Europe is as a civilisation. And, arguably, Hegel is not alone in this but is only articulating a much broader current of thought and imagination about Europe.

If Europe and Eurocentrism are inextricable, though, then we appear to have yet another reason for withdrawing approval from the idea of Europe, which seems to confirm Glendinning’s bleak diagnosis of the plight of Europeans today. At this point, though, I will distinguish two approaches to Eurocentrism. One can approach it as a phenomenon internal to Europe: Europe defined itself by a worldview in which it stood at the centre of history, a worldview now in disarray.

Alternatively, one can approach Eurocentrism externally, in terms of Europe's relations with other regions of the world. I will explain this in Section III, partly with reference to the work of Mexican–Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel. This 'external' approach to Europe and Eurocentrism, it will turn out, opens up some more optimistic possibilities for what Europe is, or might be, today than we find in Glendinning's picture.

## I.

Hegel on Europe and World History. According to Glendinning, Europe as a civilisation crystallised when the Greek idea of the *zoon logon echon* was given the Christian construal that Man is rational and creative, made in God's image, hence at the heart of God's cosmic plan, a plan that becomes realised through humanity exercising its reason and creativity. Later figures such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel gave this scheme a historical interpretation which incorporated the idea of the fall: history arises as humanity falls from natural peace into a discord that propels us to make progressive movement towards a new, higher peace, progressively making and remaking our culture so as to advance towards history's goal of universal peace, freedom and well-being. For Glendinning, this view of our place in the world has been fundamental for Europeans. I now want to expand on Hegel's particular version of this view. I do so, first, because Hegel gives this view its most developed articulation, thus illuminating what the view involves; second, because along the way Hegel does much to clarify the idea of Europe too; and, third, because Hegel's work brings the attendant problem of Eurocentrism into relief.

For Hegel, a philosophical approach to history traces history's overall direction across all the world's periods and regions. That direction is progress towards the 'consciousness of freedom'. That goal is reached in three main stages, 'one is free', 'some are free', 'all are free' (all containing sub-divisions), corresponding to Oriental, Classical, and Germanic civilisations. Each embodies in its way of life and institutions a distinctive *Volkgeist* or spirit-of-a-people, centring on its shared conception of freedom. Advancement in consciousness of freedom occurs by each civilisation (and

sub-division) in turn establishing its pre-eminence by prevailing, culturally and militarily, over the civilisation that was pre-eminent before it. Because repeated episodes of war and violence have therefore been required for progress, history has been a ‘slaughterbench’. Yet to the extent that the violence has been necessary for progress, it is justified (Hegel 1975, pp. 54, 69).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding ‘consciousness of freedom’, Hegel thinks that all human individuals have the capacity for freedom — that is, for self-determination, the capacity to determine their actions and thoughts from within themselves (Hegel 1992, §7, p. 41) — but individuals are not always aware of this. If they are unaware of the capacity, then they will fail to exercise and develop it, and will remain practically unfree (although ontologically free) — free only ‘in themselves’ but not ‘for themselves’ (§10, 44). For instance, the ‘Orientals do not know that spirit, or the human being as such, is intrinsically free; *because* they do not know this, they are not themselves free’ (Hegel 2011 [H], p. 87; my emphasis). And if others do not recognise that someone is free — say if they treat an individual as a slave — then that individual will be unaware of their capacity for freedom, for one’s recognition of this capacity in oneself depends on its being recognised by others. This is why

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<sup>4</sup> Hegel never personally published his PWH as a book. He lectured on the PWH in 1822/23, 1824/25, 1826/27, 1828/29 and 1830/31. His manuscripts of the Introduction from 1822 (rev. 1828) and 1830/31 survive, as do many transcripts made by his students, which between them cover every course. I refer to: Hegel’s own manuscripts as in the English translation (Hegel 2011) of the corresponding volume of the *Gesammelte Werke* (Hegel 1995a); and the integrated text of the 1822/23 course composed primarily from Hotho’s and Griesheim’s transcripts, and included in Hegel 2011 (where the German is Hegel 1996). I disambiguate these two parts of Hegel 2011 as [H] and [HG]. Since the German critical edition of the transcripts remains incomplete, for materials on Hegel’s later courses I have used Heimann’s transcript (Hegel 2005) or failing that the composite texts produced by Karl Hegel in Sibree’s translation (Hegel 1991) and by Georg Lasson/Johannes Hoffmeister in Nisbet’s translation (Hegel 1975). English translations, when available, are sometimes adjusted in light of the German.

freedom advances across history in tandem with the *consciousness* of freedom, with the latter advancing as each civilisation's political institutions, customs, and culture come to embody more and more of a recognition of freedom.

History moves west — like the sun, for Hegel — in that its most advanced stage is the 'Germanic' civilisation whose spirit is 'all are free'. Admittedly, for Hegel, this insight was first articulated by Jesus Christ — thus in Judaea, not Europe. Christ recognised freedom only in spiritual form, however (1975, p. 54): that is, that whatever our social positions we all have souls, stand in personal relations to God, and can choose between good and evil. But it was in ancient Rome that Christ's message took hold — because the Romans already recognised that 'some are free' (native-born male slave-holders) and so they were receptive to Christianity's message that even those people who were ranked unfree in Roman society still had spiritual freedom (2011 [HG], pp. 450-1). As a combined effect of Roman imperialism and their prolonged contact with Rome in the ultimately successful struggle against it, the Teutonic tribes of northern Europe encountered Christianity and gradually took it on. Along this route, then, the Germanic peoples became the 'bearers of the Christian principle of freedom' (p. 460).

Through this adoption of Christianity, the Germanic world emerged as a distinct civilisation. Hegel tends to talk indifferently of the 'Christian', 'Germanic' and 'European' states (see, for example, Hegel 2011 [HG], p. 463). This is because Teutonic tribes migrated across Europe — that is, across what had been the Roman Empire — spreading Christianity along pathways of influence inherited from these residual Roman structures (1991, pp. 347-9). For Hegel, therefore, 'Germanic' means not 'German' but 'Christian European' more broadly.

For centuries, Hegel continues, the Europeans continued to recognise freedom only in spiritual terms, and even that recognition was compromised by Church hierarchies. The Reformation finally dismantled the worst of these hierarchies and thereby restored the principle of spiritual freedom. The next step, the Enlightenment, was to recognise that freedom pertains to secular life too and should be realised in freedoms to own private property, choose a profession and

spouse, participate in public affairs, and so on. However, against the excessively abstract realisation of freedom in the French Revolution, the most advanced European states have seen that determinate social institutions (nuclear family, market economy, constitutional monarchy) are needed to secure individual freedom and reconcile it with social structure. Overall, European history has consisted in a centuries-long process of working out and putting into practice its defining principle — the freedom of all (Hegel 2011 [*H*], p. 88).

Although Hegel does not spell out in so many words how he understands ‘Europe’, we can see that for him it has four key elements. (i) Europe is not only a physical geographic region but also, and primarily, a *civilisation* — a *spiritual* region. (As such, colonials and their descendants in America, Australia, etc. are also Europeans, because they share in this civilisation — America, Hegel says, is entirely a European society; Hegel 1975, pp. 165–6.) (ii) European is ‘Christian’ civilisation, but also (iii) it is the civilisation that recognises the spirit of freedom, where Christianity is crucial *because* it distils this recognition that ‘all are free’ — which, however, cannot ultimately be confined to the spiritual form under which Christianity grasps it. (iv) The classical civilisations are also crucial: Europe comes to bear the Christian principle of freedom *because* it takes it over from the Roman Empire, where in turn Christianity took hold because the Romans *already* recognised that ‘some are free’, building on the same recognition by the ancient Greeks. That last was a decisive step for Hegel, marking the transition from unfreedom to freedom: ‘The consciousness of freedom *first* awoke among the Greeks’ (2011 [*H*], p. 87; my emphasis). So, overall, Europe is the civilisation that takes up and develops further, by way of Christianity, the spirit of freedom that began with the Greeks.

Hegel’s conception of the identity of Europe thus depends on his demarcation of the Greeks from the non-Greeks, a demarcation that he draws on the basis that only the former were conscious of freedom. The Greeks, Hegel admits, arose from a mixing of heterogeneous Oriental peoples, but the Greeks *surmounted* or *overcame* [*überwinden*] this background. By the Greeks’ doing so, their



‘free, beautiful’ spirit emerged (2011 [*HG*], pp. 214, 374). The Greeks overcame their Oriental background to *make themselves* (p. 372).

For Hegel, the Greeks’ awakening to freedom was equally the transition from pre-history to history. As such, this awakening signalled a change in the *kind* of existence led by humanity, not only in the degree to which it realised a single mode of existence. Hegel says of the Oriental world that we ‘cannot speak here of a proper history as such’ (2011 [*H*], p. 87). The Oriental civilisations of China, India and Persia feature in world history only ambiguously, as the *un*historical stage preceding history proper, a stage that must exist so that history proper can emerge by transcending it. The Orient is unhistorical because freedom is not recognised in it — or rather is recognised only very inadequately, as belonging to one emperor (China), ruling caste (India), or empire (Persia).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, individuals in these cultures are not motivated to pursue their own freedom, for they believe that they have none — hence their cultures contain no inner motor for development, and so have no history properly speaking. Even so, the Oriental civilisations belong in world history because their all-encompassing lack of freedom is yet structured by a minimal level of consciousness of freedom, as belonging *only* to the emperor, highest caste, etc. This is the lowest possible level of consciousness of freedom that counts as such, whereas, for Hegel, Africans and indigenous Americans lack any awareness of freedom so that their world is fully, non-ambiguously pre-historical. History proper, then, has been co-extensive with the development from ‘some are free’ to ‘all are free’, hence confined to European soil.

In setting out Hegel’s PWH I have concentrated on what he believes about Europe and its place in history. I have bracketed two hotly contested aspects of his PWH: whether he believes in an ‘end of history’, and what role his PWH assigns to God. On both he is ambiguous. On the one hand, he says that modern Europe is the end of days, history’s goal is now reached, etc.; on the other

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<sup>5</sup> We might think that this does not differentiate the Orientals from the ancient Greeks, since the Greeks too only recognised freedom inadequately, as belonging to native-born male slave-owners rather than all human beings. I shall return to this issue below.

hand, that modern Europe is only the most advanced point that humanity has reached so far, where nothing beyond that can be said because the philosophical historian only deals with what has happened so far and makes no predictions. On God, Hegel suggests sometimes that a religious view of history as the unfolding of God's plan is a mere approximation to an essentially secular philosophical truth about history as the realisation of freedom. Yet he also thinks that that freedom really includes the spiritual dimensions identified by Christianity. From Glendinning's perspective, these ambiguities are built into the network of ideas about God, humanity and history with which Hegel is working: we have fallen from God into the secular realm, but this fall is necessary for our eventually re-uniting with God; and if the goal to be reached is full freedom, surely its attainment must entail our further freedom to go on developing, endlessly.

## II.

*Problems of Europe and Eurocentrism.* For Hegel, Europe is the civilisation that, by way of Christianity, has grasped and developed the spirit of freedom first born in Greece. None of the world's other peoples have recognised freedom, hence they have had no history properly so-called. The events of world history have unfolded on an intra-European stage. Thus in Hegel's PWH the idea of *Europe* seems to be inextricable from *Eurocentrism*, broadly understood as the view that Europe is more advanced than the rest of the world and stands at the centre and summit of history.<sup>6</sup>

What, more specifically, is Eurocentrism? I understand it to be a discourse, in Foucault's sense: a historically evolving web of interconnected knowledge-claims and assumptions which are

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for some, Hegel is *the* paradigmatic Eurocentrist. See, for example, Tibebu: Hegel articulates the 'foundational structure of ... Eurocentric knowledge production ... [and gives] the most sophisticated rendition of the Eurocentric paradigm. ... Hegel's paradigm ... lays the foundation for systemic Eurocentrism predicated on the claim of the absolute superiority of the "West" over the "non-West"' (Tibebu 2011, pp. xi, xv, xxi). See also Dussel ([1992] 1995, ch. 1). However, for a defence of Hegel against the charge of Eurocentrism, see Buchwalter (2009).

bound up with social power relations. In this case, the key power relations in question are those of Europeans over non-Europeans as they took shape under colonialism, the system of European political and economic dominance over the rest of the world which existed from roughly 1500 to 1960.<sup>7</sup> According to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam:

Eurocentrism first emerged as a discursive rationale for colonialism ... [but a]lthough colonialist discourse and Eurocentric discourse are intimately intertwined, the terms have a distinct emphasis. While the former explicitly justifies colonial practices, the latter embeds, takes for granted and ‘normalizes’ the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism, without necessarily even thematizing these issues directly. (Shohat and Stam [1994] 2014, p. 2)

Further, they say, the Eurocentrist

- (i) holds that European culture — including that of European-derived people in the U.S., Australia, etc. — is ‘the best that has been thought and written’;
- (ii) sees history as following a linear path from Greece through Rome to medieval then modern Europe, all change powered internally to this line;
- (iii) sees inherent progress taking place along this line towards democracy (and freedom, equality, etc.);
- (iv) overlooks or denies the existence of non-European democratic traditions (or ones that are egalitarian, liberatory, etc.);

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<sup>7</sup> I restrict ‘colonialism’ to this system of European global dominance, although of course many other powers, such as ancient Rome, have established colonies and empires. Kohn (2014) notes that colonialism and imperialism are sometimes distinguished on the grounds that the former involves settlement whereas the latter involves conquest and control without settlement. I understand European colonialism to have been a broad project of domination that encompassed both strategies in different cases.

- (v) minimizes the West's oppressive practices by construing them as mere accidents along the way to democracy;
- (vi) appropriates non-Europeans' achievements without giving them acknowledgement (see Shohat and Stam 2014, pp. 1-3).

Hegel is a paradigmatic Eurocentrist under Shohat and Stam's characterisation. (i) He believes that the most advanced values and ideas are European, and (ii) that Europe develops purely internally, through Greece, Rome, and the Christian-Germanic world, towards (iii) the fuller comprehension and application of its principle of freedom. Hegel also believes (iv) that non-European civilisations do not recognise freedom and (v) that oppressive episodes in European history either have stemmed from its not yet having fully worked through its own principle of freedom or were, regrettably, necessary for that process of working through. (As to Hegel and point (vi), I'll come back briefly to this later.)

A question that Hegel's PWH prompts, then, is whether the idea of Europe is necessarily connected to belief in Eurocentrism, and whether, if we consistently jettisoned all Eurocentric assumptions, we would be left with any meaningful conception of Europe as a civilisation at all. Certainly, within Hegel's own terms, one could not say that Europe has had a specific conception of freedom which has defined this civilisation — a conception specified by the meanings it has taken on as it has passed through Greece, Rome, Christianity, and modernisation — whilst the civilisations of 'the Orient', Africa, indigenous America, etc., have also had their own specific conceptions of freedom. For Hegel, the spirit of freedom is unique to Europe and defines it – and, also, defines it in such a way that every other civilisation counts as inferior in failing to recognise the same freedom. Equally, within Hegel's framework one could not say that Europe has been defined by a specific conception of the good life, one that prioritises freedom, while other civilisations have prioritised different values. For Hegel, other values must ultimately lead on to freedom as the freedom to determine which values to prioritize and how to conceive of the good

life, and so if non-European civilisations have valued values besides freedom then that still renders them inferior: less self-aware, less rational, less consistent.

One might conclude that Hegel's PWH is plain objectionable, insofar as it entails that all non-European civilisations are inferior to European civilisation, and hence that the PWH should be rejected. However, my point has been that, objectionable as some of his theses are, Hegel articulates in especially systematic form a much broader current of European thinking about Europe itself, a current that has shaped the understanding of Europe that we inherit today. To that extent, the problems with Hegel's work should prompt us to ask how far our inherited ideas about the nature of European civilisation are intertwined with and shaped by Eurocentric assumptions, even if we profess explicitly to reject Eurocentrism. The same question arises with respect to Glendinning's historical account. On this account, Europe is constituted as the civilisation it is when ancient Greek ideas of humanity (or of freedom, for Hegel) are given a Christian interpretation and the resulting Graeco-Christian mix is then progressively, if ambiguously, secularised into a set of 'grand narratives' about historical progress. Thus to be a European c. 1800 was to locate oneself within this course of historical progress and so, tacitly or overtly, in the region of the world that one identified as being at the centre of history (where it was identified as this region — Europe — by that central position). And to remain amongst the legacy of these grand narratives without believing in them is to be a European today. A European c. 1800 was a self-confident Eurocentrist; a European today is a perplexed one.

One might now respond that these metanarratives, their Hegelian systematisation, and so on, are just so much accidental historical baggage that has accreted to the idea of Europe and from which that idea can be extracted or abstracted. But the idea of Europe has to retain some content to be meaningful, and the more we abstract the idea from its historical context, the less meaning will be left in it, until 'Europe' becomes merely an empty word.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, when we praise European

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that any particular individual has to *know* about the history that has shaped the idea of Europe in order to experience this idea as meaningful. One can inherit the results of a

ideals, say of humanism and enlightenment, inevitably these ideals have a historical provenance, and so their Eurocentric background threatens to creep along too, as a silent qualification ‘*specially* European ideals’, ‘*uniquely* European ideals’, ‘the best that has been thought and said’.

We might also praise Europe for producing the notion of critique and argue that this notion makes Europe ideally equipped to critique and distance itself from its own Eurocentric past. But here too the risk is that there is a silent qualification ‘Europe’s *special* capacity for critique’, its ‘*superior*’ self-critical reflexivity in comparison to other cultures that supposedly remain more dogmatic, credulous, unreflexive, etc. So there is a danger of re-instating Eurocentric assumptions just where we propose that Europe possesses purely within itself the intellectual resources to overcome them. But perhaps we can be on our guard against this danger, and keep in mind that European notions and traditions of critique and self-reflexivity are not necessarily the only or best ones that the world has produced. Even so, if Europe is fully equipped to criticise and reconstruct itself then by implication it need not engage with other cultures or their peoples’ criticisms of European domination, but may legitimately remain occupied purely with itself. Such a view ties in with key aspects of Eurocentrism and with the attendant set of colonial power relations which I will discuss in Section III. So there are reasons to be cautious about the thought that Europe has just within itself the intellectual resources to criticise its own Eurocentrism.

I have been suggesting that the idea of Europe is entangled with Eurocentric assumptions and power relations, presumably giving us yet more reason to be sceptical about this idea, in line with Glendinning’s diagnosis of where Europeans stand today: unable to believe in a framework of ideas which we cannot quite leave behind either. However, this brings me to an aspect of Glendinning’s account with which I disagree. Glendinning treats the history of Europe’s self-understanding as a phenomenon internal to Europe. In the next section I want to question and offer

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history of thought and imagination without having to know consciously about the pathways along which this inheritance has taken place.

an alternative to this treatment, with particular regard to two issues: the Europeanness of the ancient Greeks, and the European colonisation of America.

### III.

*Europe's Relations with Others*. On Glendinning's account, 'the major scansions of the history of Europe itself, including the emergence of the natural sciences and Europe's emergence as a global power, all take place within a space opened up by Greek philosophy' (2016, p. 5). However, Glendinning continues, Europe is constituted by the confluence of ancient Greek and Christian ideas — so that the ancient Greeks cannot have *already* been Europeans, at least not fully or completely so, at the time when their civilisation flourished. Something similar is true for Hegel: the ancient Greeks cannot yet have been fully European, because Christianity and with it the principle 'all are free' are integral to European civilisation, whereas the Greeks only recognised the freedom of some. Nonetheless, Hegel holds, although the Greek outlook was limited in that it recognised only some people to have freedom, it *did* still recognise freedom in this limited scope, as no peoples before the Greeks had done. Thus the Greeks, Romans, and Christian Europeans all line up on one side of the freedom/unfreedom line, with the world's other peoples on the opposite side. For the same reason, the Greeks can retrospectively be recognised to belong to Europe — and their territories became incorporated into Christian Europe — because the Greeks made possible the further development of freedom that has constituted the European world. Ultimately, what qualifies the Greeks as belonging to Europe is that the Greeks, in grasping that 'some are free', *broke* with every culture before them. They separated themselves from their predecessors and gave birth to themselves.

An alternative position is that of Martin Bernal in *Black Athena*: Greek culture descended to a considerable extent from those of the Egyptians and Phoenicians, a descent that the Greeks themselves recognised (under what Bernal calls the 'ancient model' of Greek origins). It was later nineteenth-century historians who devised the 'Aryan model' on which Greek culture proper arose

from northern invaders driving out these earlier influences. Bernal does not deny that there were Indo-European influences on Greece, but he holds that the Egyptian and Phoenician influences were also there and were more significant and extensive than proponents of the Aryan model were willing to admit. The Aryan model had Eurocentric, indeed for Bernal racist, motivations: If the Greeks, the supposed sources of much of the best in Europe, owed much to the Egyptians, then the undesirable consequence would follow that much of Europe's value has come to it from a country within Africa, supposedly the world's backwards and barbarous region. Contrary, then, to the idea that the Greeks broke from the cultures before them, Bernal proposes that the Greeks *continued* the cultures before them, especially that of Egypt, and that they self-consciously saw themselves as doing so.

Bernal sees Hegel as a transitional figure: he was not yet a full-fledged Aryan, because he did acknowledge the Egyptian and Phoenician influences on the Greeks; but Hegel did drive towards the Aryan model, in that he saw the Greeks as breaking from these influences to remake themselves. However, it is not clear that even on his own terms Hegel can sustain the sharp Greeks/non-Greeks, freedom/unfreedom divides that he wants. According to the detail of his PWH, the Greeks mark only the latest phase in a growing recognition of freedom beginning in China. After all, even the Chinese allegedly recognise the freedom of the emperor. This is a more drastic restriction in the scope of freedom than we find with the Greeks, but it is consistent with there being a progressive extension in the scope of freedom over the course of world history — a change in the *degree* of freedom found in different civilisations rather than in the *kind* of existence led by their peoples. The same extension of freedom's scope continues, on Hegel's account, through India — freedom of the highest caste — to Persia — freedom of the state — and culminating in Egypt, Persia's most advanced province. Hegel positions Egypt as the hinge between Orient and Occident, in which the nature of the free human soul was almost grasped — but not quite, for the soul was still not distinguished from animal nature, a distinction that the Greeks went on to recognise (Hegel 2011 [HG], pp. 334, 368). However, the Greeks stopped short of recognising that all are free, which



means that their view of freedom was also intermingled with acceptance of natural contingency, in the shape of accidents of birth and geographical location (2011 [H], p. 88).

Thus, Hegel's graduated portrayal of world history's stages suggests that belief in freedom is *not* exclusively European, since the Persians and Egyptians already had versions of that belief — inadequate ones, for Hegel, but then so for him was the Greeks' version. However, Hegel preserves his division of European freedom from non-European unfreedom, despite its tension with his graduated picture, by counting all the European stages as stages of freedom, down to its lowest level, and all the non-European stages as stages of unfreedom, right up to where unfreedom is almost freedom, but not quite. Nonetheless, on Hegel's own account this is a series of gradations, and so without further justification his Europe/non-Europe, Greek/Egypt dividing line is arbitrary. In the absence of that justification, we may conclude that Hegel introduces that division in order to keep Europe bounded off from the rest of the world as a separate and superior civilisation.<sup>9</sup>

All this bears on Glendinning's thesis that 'a distinctively *European* world began to emerge as the ... concretization of a Graeco-Christian tradition of more than one tradition' (2016, p. 5). Perhaps, I am suggesting, the European world has actually been the place of more than just these two traditions, insofar as Europe's Greek branch was already partly Egyptian and Phoenician. That said, the meaning of Europe has certainly become shaped by processes in which intellectuals have defined the Greek — or properly, authentically Greek — and Christian traditions as the central ones for Europe. That is, while other traditions have been in play too, they have been repeatedly marginalised or their influence minimised. Take, for example, what Hegel says about Spinoza in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. He notes Spinoza's Jewish background — where Judaism

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<sup>9</sup> To clarify: Bernal's thesis is that the Greeks inherited a good deal, culturally, from the Egyptians and Phoenicians. But Bernal is not especially concerned with freedom, since after all he does not subscribe to Hegel's belief in freedom's central role in world history. But even from Hegel's perspective, we may actually reach the conclusion that the Greeks inherited, not only much of their culture, but also much of their notion of freedom in particular, from the Egyptians.

counts as an Oriental, that is non-European, religion for Hegel – yet he argues that Spinoza must above all be understood as someone who follows Descartes’s philosophy through consistently. ‘The Oriental theory of absolute identity was brought by Spinoza ... directly into line, firstly with the current of European thought, and then with the European and Cartesian philosophy, in which it soon found a place’, as Hegel puts it (1995b, p. 252). So, Hegel claims, Spinoza re-worked his own ‘Oriental’ influence to produce a thoroughly European system. This, incidentally, is an instance of Hegel being a Eurocentrist in respect (vi): minimising the cultural contributions of the non-European world, in this case Judaism’s contribution to European philosophy. An alternative way of looking at Spinoza is as someone whose Judaism permeates his system (notwithstanding that, as a profoundly original thinker, Spinoza took this religious influence in a unique direction). That system, then, would be one pathway along which Judaic currents have exerted major influence on European thought — albeit influence that has often been unacknowledged or, as by Hegel, downplayed.

I turn now to colonialism. Enrique Dussel, in *The Invention of the Americas*, argues that the idea that Europe stands at the centre of world history — an idea that he finds definitively articulated by Hegel — could only take hold because of the European conquest and colonisation of the new world from the late 1400s onwards. Until then, Dussel argues, Europe was ‘*peripheral* and *secondary* to Islam’, and saw itself (and was seen by others) as located on the Western edge of the world, the central mass of which extended through the Islamic world into Asia ([1992] 1995, p. 88). In essence, Europe was then what Paul Valéry suspects it always really was and is now at last becoming: a ‘little promontory on the continent of Asia’ (Glendinning 2016, p. 12). Dussel offers a map intended to distil the European self-image at c. 1480–1500, with Europe squashed into the northwestern corner of a bulging Asian-through-Middle-Eastern land-mass (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> Thus

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<sup>10</sup> Dussel has distilled this map from three different maps in Toynbee (1959) that depict respectively the Ottoman, Safawi and Mughal Empires in 1605, the Mongol Empire and the Western City-State Cosmos in 1310, and the expansion of Muscovy c. 1300–1955.

Dussel says that, contrary to Hegel, ‘Western Europe, which never was the center of history, had to wait until 1492 to establish itself empirically as the center with other civilisations as its periphery’ (1995, p. 90). ‘Europe’s centrality reflects no internal superiority accumulated in the Middle Ages, but it is the outcome of its discovery, conquest, colonization and integration of Amerindia — all of which give it an advantage over the Arab world, India and China’ (p. 11).

Dussel’s point is that Europeans did not first espouse Eurocentrism then conquer America — and later Africa — believing themselves elected and entitled to do so. Rather, Europeans undertook these conquests, initially as a power-bid against the Islamic world (if they could find a westward passage to Asia, they could bypass the Arabic bloc), and once they had gained control of America Eurocentrism came to make sense to them. It became a world-view that Europeans could believe in, and for which the actual organisation of global power relations seemed to provide empirical support. Eurocentrism justified these power relations and helped to hold them in place; but had those power relations not already begun to be established in actual fact, a Eurocentric mind-set could never have taken root. This is not to deny that Hegel also provided arguments and empirical considerations in favour of his version of Eurocentrism. Rather, Dussel’s point is that it was within the broader context of global power relations that the project of articulating Eurocentrism philosophically came to make sense to Hegel (and others) in the first place.

‘Western Europe’s bursting the bounds within which Islam had confined it gave *birth* to *modernity*’, Dussel further claims (1995, p. 90). Here he wishes to complicate the view that modernity is a European phenomenon and that the decisive events in modernisation have occurred purely on European soil: the Reformation, Enlightenment, French Revolution, industrialisation, and perhaps then the crisis posed by the Second World War. Glendinning’s account of Europe’s history illustrates this same pattern of treating modernisation as an essentially intra-European process. Dussel’s partial alternative is that these European events of modernisation, while real, have all been made possible in the first place by the European conquest of the Americas. Having first made itself practically into the political and economic centre of the world, Europe could then start to narrate

itself as being located at the centre of world history, as the driver of progress and the director of world events. Then, impelled by this faith in its own historical agency, progress, and mission, Europe could pursue the series of developments that mark the successive stages of modernisation.

For Glendinning, Europeans c. 1800 believed in a course of modernisation which placed them at its centre because they confidently inhabited a Graeco-Christian world-view which had been recast as a narrative of humanity's fall and redemption through history. Dussel adds another, external factor — the colonisation of America — into this picture. It was against the background of that colonisation, with the central role that the enslavement of Africans played in it, that it made sense for Rousseau, amongst many others, to claim that humanity passes through a sequence of stages of development. For Rousseau, the earlier stages were instantiated as well as is realistically possible by certain 'primitive' peoples, namely the Caribs and the Hottentots, who 'have as yet least of all deviated from the state of nature', while likewise the 'savages of America', although they have left the pure state of nature, are nonetheless closer to it than any other peoples so far discovered (Rousseau [1755] 1973, pp. 71, 82).<sup>11</sup> As Glendinning reminds us, there are many versions of this picture of stages in Kant, Hegel, Marx, etc. In putting forward such accounts of stages, then, Europeans did not generally argue that their civilisation was superior on the grounds of its economic or military dominance. Rather, a range of intersecting religious, historical, and metaphysical grounds were advanced. But it was against the backdrop where Europe's colonial power was a taken-for-granted fact of life that these mixed forms of argument for European superiority made sense and could possess credibility.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For critical discussion, see Meek 1976, who examines the central role played by conceptions of 'primitive' peoples in various Enlightenment theories of historical stages.

<sup>12</sup> This point need not apply only with respect to European colonialism. For other imperial and colonial powers too, their actual dominance has provided the backdrop against which it has made sense for their partisans to advance arguments for the religious, intellectual, cultural (etc.) superiority of these powers.

For Dussel, then, modernity ‘originates in a dialectical relation with non-Europe’ (1995, p. 8). On the one hand, Europe’s relations with non-Europe have been decisive for its self-conception: its ‘external’ relations have been the necessary conditions of its ‘internal’ self-understanding as the world-centre. On the other hand, these relations have taken such a form that their necessity has been hidden from Europe’s self-conception. First, these relations were ones of domination and economic exploitation, with Europeans exploiting and often directly controlling the land, labour and natural resources of non-Europeans. Thus these power relations placed Europeans at the organising centre of the world-system such that they could safely ignore the perspectives of non-Europeans, who after all were peripheral. Second, conversely, non-Europeans could not (and still cannot) ignore Europe, for the latter is central. For example, much of what philosophy students in non-European countries study is the philosophy of *Europeans* (including Americans of European descent), which is just called ‘philosophy’; whereas few European philosophy students study, say, African or Asian philosophy. Third, and another point made by Dussel, since 1492 Europe’s relations to non-Europe have been overwhelmingly antagonistic, not dialogic. Particularly with respect to indigenous Americans and Africans, Europeans have not related to non-Europeans as partners with whom to converse about ways to live together in light of their different worldviews. Notwithstanding a minority of dissenters, generally Europeans in the colonial era have treated non-Europeans not as people with interesting, in principle perfectly valid worldviews that have their own logics and motivations, but instead as the negative opposite of Europeans — uncivilised, natural, non-rational, illogical, governed by instinct, superstitious, etc. For Dussel, therefore, the relation of Europeans to non-Europeans has been essentially a *non*-relation: a reduction of non-Europeans and their cultures and countries to merely an inferior branch and peripheral organ of Europe — the mere body of an elect European brain, in Valéry’s metaphor (Glendinning 2016, p. 12), where the brain can afford to ignore the body because, after all, it’s only a body.

In this section I have proposed, following Dussel, that Eurocentrism is best approached ‘externally’, as a worldview that is integrally bound up with and was enabled by Europe’s practical

political and economic domination over America and, later on, Africa. But if the idea of Europe is, as I argued earlier, significantly infused with Eurocentrism; and if Eurocentrism was not merely a no-longer-credible fabric of thought but also a practical system of political and economic domination, much of which persists informally today; then the prospect of our positively adhering to the idea of Europe today may seem worse than ever.

I said, though, that hopeful possibilities would come into view once we took the ‘external’ rather than ‘internal’ view of Eurocentrism. From the ‘external’ perspective, Europe has always been in relation with an ‘outside’ — be it the Egyptians and Phoenicians, as significant influences on ancient Greece, or indigenous America, through whose conquest Europe could ascend to the summit of world power. The problem is that while Europe has depended on these relations it has tended to press them into antagonistic and unequal forms, as with the conquest of America, or to inhabit these relations in a mode of denial, say by ignoring colonised America as a mere periphery of the European centre, or by insisting that Greek culture proper is exclusively Indo-European. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Europe has never been a hermetically sealed space. It has always been animated in various ways — influenced, challenges, empowered — by its relations with non-European others. Perhaps if Europeans today were to acknowledge that Europe has always been dependent on non-Europe — has always been hybrid, never pure — then this would help Europe to escape from turning in the circle of its own exhaustion and to become re-animated by opening itself up to the other.

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Figure 1

