Thought (as opposed to Philosophy)

1. Introduction

What is thought? There is "French thought" and there is "French philosophy." What is the difference? Why is there no "English thought?" Let us start with a basic distinction. First, philosophy is an institutionalized activity usually practiced by officially acclaimed philosophers, while thinking can be practiced by everybody. Though thought, as it is understood in "French thought," is different from mere "thinking" it has more democratic connotations because thinking is less elitist than philosophizing. Philosophy comes out of philosophy departments while "thought" is most often produced by academics in humanities departments other than philosophy, or also by writers when they are thinking in more systematic or more abstract fashions. Most philosophers do not *produce* thought, but their work can be *perceived* as thought or be *transformed* into thought. Very often, philosophy *becomes* thought: sociologists, literary scholars, anthropologists or much of the "general public" are inclined to approach "French philosophy" as "French thought." During the shift from philosophy to thought, philosophy as a pure, more or less self-sufficient discourse mainly destined to produce other philosophical discourses, becomes "impure" as it enters in closer contact with culture. By becoming thought, philosophy comes closer to a "way of thinking." Philosophy produces philosophy whereas thought is only thinkable through its application in the more concrete fields of the humanities. This does not mean that philosophy cannot be applied to the real world; but *when* it is applied, it will most probably look like what is in the humanities called "thought."

2. Philosophy, Theory, Thought

Roughly speaking, philosophy is abstract and universal while thought is more concrete. Theory is situated somewhere in between. Bernard Crick, who has been reflecting since the 1960s upon the difference between philosophy, thought, and theory, writes that "political thought is always a product with particular cultural roots but with a universal human relevance" (Crick 2012: 277, note 1). This goes for political thought as much as for any other thought. What distinguishes philosophy, theory, and thought, is the level of abstraction and universalism with which each one is practiced. Compared with philosophy, thought is closer to "opinion." In his 1967 article

"Philosophy, Theory and thought" Crick viewed "political thought" in the sense of "political opinion." Thought and opinion are immediate and concrete while political theories "are concepts as to how social and political order adheres;" and political philosophy "is the most abstract expression and the most general" (278). Of course, "French thought" differs very much from "French opinion." Thought is more structured than opinion and often it almost overlaps with theory. However, despite this shift towards theory, thought remains less formal and less abstract, and is also less officially sanctioned (by academics and university departments) than philosophy. Niklas Luhmann contrasts theory with philosophy by saying that the former is able to integrate contingent elements from real life into itself, and above that it can even deal with irony. Contrary to philosophies, theories are not as strongly affected by systems. Even if systems *are* used (as in Luhmann's case), theory manages to remain open: "Systematic theory, as opposed to traditional systematic philosophy, is antifoundationalist; it does not attempt to prove its necessity, but to explain its own contingency. In this way, unlike 'serious' philosophy, theory implies an ironical attitude toward itself" (in Moeller: 6).

Luhmann's concept of theory comes closer to Deleuze's idea of theory as something that "cannot be totalized, it multiplies itself and it multiplies others" (Deleuze and Foucault 1972: 34). For Deleuze "theory is against power by nature" (5). This is just one way of seeing theory. Husserl suggests the contrary when defining theory in the most rigid way, as a philosophical meta-narrative. Husserl offers a more Platonist definition of theory as a totalizing activity. For Husserl, theory strives for constant growth through perfection (Husserl: 280). Even more, *theoria* is a master concept invented by and owned by the Europeans and the ancient Greeks; and all other philosophies must be classified as non-theoretical. Husserl also uses theory as a universalist notion signifying the essence of Western philosophy.

To conclude: the status of theory in the history of philosophy is unclear, which is one more reason to appreciate the term thought.

Analytic philosophers tend to give different accounts of the problem. Peter Simons believes that theory is more abstract than philosophy because it "sees no need to answer to extra-textual tests" as "the text replaces reality, and the pursuit of truth takes a back seat" (Simons 2001: 307). Simons could mean "theory" in the way it was understood by Husserl, but given the context of the discussion from which this statement is taken, Simons presumably has obtuse continental theory in mind. He correctly notes that the latter is often advertised as "thought."

The main difference between philosophy and theory is that philosophy is only what *certain* people (philosophers) are thinking, whereas theory, in Crick's understanding, is "merely" theory and not yet philosophy. It thus settles between philosophy and thought. Any philosophy works with theories. However, philosophy does not stay with those theories. For long periods during its history, philosophy used to subsume them into systems. Though this is no longer obligatory, certain formal requirements remain valid. Even if philosophy is no longer necessarily systematic, it is expected to remain attached to the history from which it has emerged. It is expected that a particular philosophy be attributed to a certain system, even if this system is only vague. It can be concluded that thought represents a more informal accumulation of theories.

3. Thought and "Way of Thinking"

It is possible to argue that thought remains closer to a "way of thinking" that is able to enter different discourses "from below," simply because it has kept a more intimate contact with (certain) culture(s). Thought is closer to a "way of life." For instance, "French thought" is fed by what the general public believes to be the particularities of French culture or of the "French way of life:" French thought is liberal, revolutionary, intellectual, and inclined towards stylistic sensitiveness. "French philosophy" does not have the same connotations. Thought can also be linked to certain regions. However, the region covered should not be too large nor should the time span covered be too extended. Still, it must appear as a distinct entity: the term "European thought" would be too broad a term while "Continental thought" is more acceptable because it refers to an academically established substance with limited spatial and temporal extensions. "European thought" is too extended, not only in terms of space, but also in terms of time, as it reaches from antiquity to the present. Thought can be linked to the culture of a certain geographical region or to supranational sections of populations. "Feminist thought" is supposed to be a theoretical examination of the world as determined by a way of life believed to be suitable to women. It is not called "Feminist thought" because it spells out truths that are only of interest to women. Truth is not either male or female. The truths of "Feminist thought" are general enough to spark *everybody*'s philosophical (theoretical) interest. In this sense, Feminist thought follows an intrinsic micro-macro pattern whereas Feminist *philosophy* could be criticized because it seems to suggest that truth is either male or female. At least, that's what follows if we apply the critique of [ethnophilosophy](#) to feminist philosophy. Feminist *thought* simply suggests that a healthy input of "women's culture" can create a sound synthesis of formal thinking and life.

Thought is also different from Applied Philosophy. What matters to the latter are merely the consequences that philosophy has on the world, whereas in thought the pattern works vice versa: the world has repercussions on philosophy. This is particularly important for philosophies that are closer to thought "by nature." Lawrence Thomas explains that feminist and African American philosophies share certain life experiences: "A remarkable affinity exists, I believe, between female and African American experience. At least, both traditions take seriously the importance of being morally constituted through the other" (Thomas 1992: 118).

The impact or attraction of the culture to which thought is linked must be strong to produce a genuine "thought phenomenon." Some philosophies cannot be transformed into thought. For example, there is no "English thought," simply because English philosophy can hardly be conceived in terms of a "local culture." For a similar reason there is no "American theory." Theory, in this context, must be a theory of *something* (American theory *of politics*, for example). Theory cannot simply be the presentation of how this nation "thinks." At the same time, the culturally colored thought must remain philosophical and maintain a relatively universal character: French thought is not meant to be consumed by French people only, just as feminist thought is not exclusively aimed at female readers. A sense of universality must persist,

but it will be reached via local cultural components. Philosophical expressions, on the other hand, tend to develop more straightforwardly towards the universal.

4. Thought in Japan and China

4.1. Japan

In the early twentieth century, the Japanese excluded Indian and Chinese philosophies from Tokyo Imperial University's department of philosophy. Only those non-Western philosophies that had developed under Western influence could be called philosophy. Until today, philosophy (哲学 *tetsugaku*) refers in Japan exclusively to Western (or Western-inspired) philosophy while Eastern philosophy (including Chinese and Indian philosophy) must be referred to as "thought" (思想 *shisou*). Obviously, the word "thought" is here used because the cultural-religious productions of Japanese thinkers were (or are) not found "philosophical" enough (in the Western sense). Before the coinage of the word *tetsugaku*, Japanese (and also Chinese) philosophy was referred to as "thought" (思想). Until today, the word *gaku* (学), which means "study" in the academic understanding, will not be applied to philosophies practiced outside academic contexts. An exception is Zen Buddhism. Only for Zen Buddhism, both *tetsugaku* and *shisou* are possible, perhaps because of Zen's highly "philosophical" nature. To reinforce this paradigm, philosophies of Anglo-European heritage are even referred to as "pure philosophy" (純粋哲学 *junsui tetsugaku*), which is very telling. However, despite this terminological separation, a true East-West integrative philosophy could develop very early in Japan, with the work of the Kyoto School.

4.2. China

The Chinese borrowed the Japanese character compound 哲学 (chin. *zhéxué*) but did not adopt the Japanese East-West distinction. In Chinese, *zhéxué* is used to refer to both Western and Asian philosophy whereas thought (思想, *sīxiǎng*) will be used when referring to the specific philosophy of a person. It is impossible to call a person's philosophy *zhéxué*. Mao's philosophy is thus called "Mao Zedong thought" (毛泽东思想). Just like in Japanese, *sīxiǎng* is a more general and less academic term than *zhéxué*. In spite of this more liberal definition of philosophy that the Chinese offered from the beginning, integrative work similar to that of the Japanese Kyoto School emerged only much later in China.

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