TOWARDS A GENERAL THEORY ON THE EXISTENCE OF TYPICALLY NATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES. THE PORTUGUESE, THE AUSTRIAN, THE ITALIAN, AND OTHER CASES REVIEWED*

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The question now is how we are to understand the relationship between nationalism and multiculturalism as two of the most significant forces in the modern world.

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Abstract: The author studies the problem of the existence of typically national philosophies, he shows that it has crossed the history of Western philosophy since the first half of the 19th century until nowadays, and that, at its core, are, not only what philosophers thought to be the relationship between culture and philosophy, but, mainly, what they thought to be the statute of philosophy itself. He argues that, in order to explain what we believe culture and philosophy are, we need a theory on utopia and its connections with ideology. From this point of view, he carefully analyses the concept of “national philosophy” and several historical examples of it, and suggests that we need to enlarge that concept (for instance, regarding multinational philosophies and philosophical traditions). Particularly,
given the present diversification and complexity of such a concept, we need a
typology of it, which would allow us to understand not only what philosophers
are trying to say when they speak of their “national/multinational philosophies”
or “philosophical traditions”, but also to compare them to each other. The author
concludes that, when we have reviewed the problem of the existence of typically
national philosophies according to these suggestions, it turns out to be at the top
of the 21st century philosophical agenda.

Keywords: culture, Hegelianism, ideology, multiculturalism, nationalism,
national philosophies, philosophical traditions, positivism, relativism, universal-
ity of philosophy, utopia.

Reformulating some fundamental concepts

In this paper, I study the problem of the existence of typically national
philosophies, which arose mainly in the 19th century, in Europe, in the
context of the definition (or redefinition) of national identities. As far as
I know, that problem has been studied only in a very partial and limited
way. Its historiography lacks a general approach to it, not simply from
the perspective of this or that (supposedly) national philosophy, but as a whole, or systematically. Furthermore, it lacks an historiography that would consider in what sense multinational philosophies and associated philosophical traditions can be taken as (more recent) versions of the old idea that typically national philosophies do exist. In fact, what are the conceptual features that define such philosophies? In what sense can we say that a culture of a given country corresponds to a national philosophy? In general, it lacks a typology of such philosophies analogous to that concerning nationalism and national cultures (as the one which was suggested by Gellner 2006, chap. 7, pp. 85foll.). Finally, and perhaps more interestingly for us here, it seems to lack an approach that would consider the problem of the existence of typically national philosophies in light of the more general problem of knowing in what sense – in the first quarter of the 21st century – can we speak of the “universality of philosophy”.

All of these problems are crucial for contemporary philosophy and for political philosophy in particular. As suggested by some authors: “The question now is how we are to understand the relationship between nationalism and multiculturalism as two of the most significant forces in the modern world.” (White 2005, p. 2) Philosophical nationalisms, in particular, do have strong ideological and political connections, and – as I will suggest when concluding this paper – they seem to constitute, nowadays, a powerful trend which opposes, in our globalized world, to multiculturalism (which is also not immune to such connections). In this sense and given the complexity of the subject, the typology I was referring to would play, essentially, an heuristic role. It would be an indispensable tool not only for analysing what philosophers are saying when they talk about their “national philosophies” and “philosophical traditions”, and for comparing them to each other, but also, eventually, for a new approach to the relationship between philosophy, politics and culture in general.

I suggest that the question of the existence of national philosophies, far from being a located issue of this or that country, and insofar as we consider it as an interpretation of the relationship between philosophy and culture, has crossed the history of Western philosophy from the 19th century until nowadays. Having in mind some known examples of what has been identified in the past with “national philosophies” (as is the Portuguese, the Austrian, and the Italian cases in the 20th century, or the

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1 K. Mulligan wrote a lot of very original and fruitful papers about nationalism and philosophical traditions, without answering these questions. For a bibliography of that author, see Mulligan (2010). For his concept of nationalism, see Mulligan (2001).
German one in the 19th), I hold that at the core of them are, not only the above-mentioned relationship, but also, and essentially, the relationship between utopia and ideology. What we believe to be “culture” in a given society or even in our globalised world, or what we think to be “philosophy” in these contexts (if we consider philosophy a sort of “self-consciousness” of culture), is an expression of an utopian thinking which has always, by nature, ideological presuppositions and implications. In this sense, the problem of the existence of typically national philosophies is not old, but a very recent and contemporary one: we can find some versions of it in the idea that there are “philosophical traditions”, or, according to the postmodern approach (after the sixties of the 20th century), the idea that philosophy can be reduced to a cultural product or artefact. In fact, in the conclusion of my paper, I suggest that what is confusing in the present state of the problem regarding the existence of typically national philosophies is that this latter approach (that I will call the “relativist approach”) allow us to rehabilitate, in some sense, the old claim that such philosophies do, in fact, exist.

I will try to explore all these connections in the following pages. But, considering the reasonable extent of a paper to be published in a philosophical journal, and the complexity of some of the issues at stake, I cannot be wordy and even entirely precise regarding some historical and philosophical details. More information about them can be obtained consulting the bibliographic references (which, in spite of its extent, are far from complete).

1. Preliminary and provisional definitions

I suggest we begin for the time being with the following definitions. – “Typically national philosophies” means the philosophies which are produced in the context of a specific country or nation, and may be identified – according to those who believe such philosophies do exist – not only within the geographical and political boundaries of these nations, but also, essentially, with their language and/or culture in broad terms (including social, economic, political factors, among others). (In fact, as I will see, such boundaries are not essential to the definition, since national cultures, in certain cases, cannot/could not be reduced to them.) In principle, this definition contrasts with the definition of the opposite thesis, according to which philosophy is universal. In other words, philosophy is a supranational heritage – as that which was produced in the Western civilisation since ancient Greece until today –, which was to some extent (an “extent” that we will have to explain), cultur-