

# The Problem of the Genesis of Greek Philosophy in Modern Cultural Studies: Orientalism vs. Eurocentrism\*

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**Abstract**—In this article we will consider the problem of genesis of Greek philosophy in modern cultural studies on the example of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. It is obvious that in recent decades, numerous historical, linguistic and cultural studies have significantly strengthened the position of Orientalism, replacing the classical Eurocentric model. Meanwhile, with regard to the genesis of Greek culture and philosophy, this model, as we will show, has not lost its relevance and significance in modern cultural studies, even against the background of the obvious success of Orientalism.

**Keywords**—*pre-philosophy; Orientalism; Eurocentrism; culture; genesis; mythology; philosophy; Ancient Greece; Ancient Egypt; Ancient Middle East*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of Orientalism, we will turn to the Middle East theoretical sources of Greek philosophical thought in foreign antiquity and historiography through the prism of centuries, based on linguistic analysis of mutual influences. In the beginning, we note that in relation to the middle Eastern theoretical sources of Greek thought, there are two opposing theories: classical — Eurocentric and orientalist (Afrocentric) theory. The first is based on the ideology of the "Greek miracle", which says that European philosophy and culture is the result of the development of the ancient Greek, recognized as self. The second theory is the value elevation of African cultures and their influence on the formation and development of ancient Greek civilization.

There is a statement that the Greek philosophy was mainly influenced by the mythological cosmogonies of the ancient Middle East. M. West, for example, is loyal to this statement and says that the contact of Ancient Greece with Eastern cosmology and theology helped the emergence and development of imagination, first of all, the early Greek philosophers. This certainly gave them a boost in their subsequent philosophical and cultural shifts.

Access to newly discovered or newly available texts allows researchers in the field to review the conditions of

interaction between cultures. Thus, instead of studying ancient Greece based on its uniqueness — its isolated, exceptional "brilliance", the Greek world is transformed by interacting with adjacent cultures located in the East and South of the Mediterranean Sea.

So, for example, most of the Eastern influences that contributed to the formation of the Greek world are very obvious. There is no time frame when any influence of ancient Egypt, be it artistic models or actual imported objects, is absent. The great antiquity of the civilizations of the valley of Mesopotamia and the Indus, which preceded the activities in Greece for more than two thousand years, points to the slow-moving Western progress of the main components of civilization, such as agriculture, animal husbandry, social regulation and the preservation of some written records. There are many other connections that are possible, but problematic, some completely unprovable in the current state of our historical knowledge.

## II. THE PROBLEM OF THE GENESIS OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

In this article it is important to note that the problem of possible influences of the spiritual culture of the East on Western philosophical thought became interested in Europe at the turn of the XVIII-XIX centuries. "One of the reasons for this phenomenon was the emergence of a humanistic recognition of the equality of all peoples and the equal value of their cultures." [1]. Thus, it is impossible not to recognize the fact that interest in this issue plays an important role in the modern scientific community in the attempt to reveal the true origins of Western philosophical thought. Therefore, it is impossible to confine ourselves to the "classical" Eurocentric model of understanding the Genesis of Greek philosophy, expressed in the works of H.V. Hegel and E. Zeller, not taking into account other models, in particular, Afrocentric. Thus, only the recognition of not one but several research models contributes to the further development of this idea, taking into account all the facts, without concealing the "objectionable" one or another concept.

It is worth noting that the philosophy of history, first of all, explores the theoretical foundations of practice, the social

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consequences of history and historiography. This is commensurate with other areas of research, such as the philosophy of science or the philosophy of religion. First, often the philosophy of history uses significant theories in the main areas of philosophy, such as metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, to solve questions about the nature of the past and how we know it: whether the past has sunk into oblivion without the opportunity to develop in the future, without having a basis or is directed in some way to subsequent development. Second, as in other fields, the philosophy of history explores problems that are unique to its subject matter. The story focuses on the unique, not the General. Its driving forces are often researchers who act for different internal reasons.

For example, the final denial of the historical fact of the Phoenician influence on Greece and its complete rejection by Eurocentrists, interpreted as a kind of "Mirage", prevailed in science, according to Martin Bernal, only in the 20s of the twentieth century. In 20-ies and 30-ies of all the legends of the Phoenician colonization of Greece were discredited, even though the views on the possible presence of Phoenicians in the Aegean and Italy in the XIX — XVIII centuries BC, a result previously set by the assumptions concerning the Semitic origin of the Greek terms were rejected.

It remains undeniable that linguists, historians and other categories of researchers in the field of the origins of philosophical thought, mainly based on Middle Eastern theoretical sources, are trying to move more away from the traditional model of worldview to a new approach, because the understanding of the past is paramount need of every scientist. As a support are used just references to the Middle East tradition as truly prerogative, despite the fact that the written artifacts found not so much as, for example, in Ancient Greece. It is an indisputable fact that the earliest sources of the first philosophical thought are concentrated mainly in Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that "in the VI century BC, the Greeks in their great cities on the Asia minor coast maintained ties with all the leading centers of the civilized world: Egypt and Phoenicia, Lydia, Perseus and Babylon. There is no doubt that this contact played a role in the rapid development of Greek culture. However, it is impossible to estimate the size. As always, when cultural contact is truly fruitful, simple borrowing is rare. All that the Greeks borrowed, they are transformed" [2]. Thus, it becomes clear that the denial of the fact of the Middle East influence on Greek philosophy, which later became recognized as the source of all European philosophical thought, is groundless. Theoretical borrowings in constant contact with the Ancient Middle East were present and this is a powerful argument in favor of the fact that Greek philosophy is not the result of its own reflection. Of course, the culture of the Middle East had some influence on the formation and ontogenesis of Greek philosophical thought, "In the Greek mysteries we meet well-known Oriental motifs. In some rituals, the participants experienced a direct connection with the deity, manifested in nature; and in this aspect there is a similarity with the Ancient Middle East" [2].

### III. ORIENTALISM VS. EUROCENTRISM

The Greeks did not hide that they adopted their philosophy from the Egyptians. The answer is obvious: while the ancient Greeks were completely satisfied with their heritage of Egyptian philosophy, there were no modern scholars. As a result, they had to "jump through hoops" to explain some of Plato's writings. Plato stated that many souls of the deceased pass through the rebirth of the soul. This concept was previously unknown in Greece, where it was believed that death signals the end of everything; the "underworld" lay behind the veil of death. It was the Egyptians who believed that death is only the first stage of existence; the soul continues to exist after death.

Greek myths develop this theme further. They claim that the first "Greeks" were Egyptians who colonized the Greek Islands and mainland. For example, Herodotus wrote in his *Chronicles* that the temple of Athena was actually nothing more than a temple revered in Sais on a par with Osiris goddess Nate. Martin Bernal adds that Nate was written as "Ht" in Egypt. It was declared "Ath" or "At". This means that even in Sais, the ancient goddess Nate was regarded as an "Atanata," after which the Greeks later began to interpret as "Nate" for Nate, not "Atan" for "Athena."

Herodotus wrote that the Greeks knew and said that the Mysteries of the Dodon originated in Egypt. Herodotus, thus, said that in Greece and Egypt, he repeatedly heard how the Greek civilization came from the mouth of the Nile. In this regard, Herodotus was called a liar, which was much worse than being a "dreamer" and talking about the ideal state, which Plato spoke about, and which was for some time misunderstood in connection with the sayings about Atlantis. In Dodon, however, it was said that the Eleusinian mysteries were also of Egyptian origin. In the temple of Erechtheion, this was a merger of several Greek cults and also referred to the Eleusinian mysteries as a copy of the Mysteries of Isis and Osiris. But, again, scientists argued that the Greeks themselves were wrong.

The main question is what the race of the ancient Egyptians is. Relations between black and white Europeans were a serious social problem in the United States and Britain; in 1879 Britain ruled one quarter of the world. It was at this time that scientists began to awaken to the realization that the Egyptians have a powerful culture; it was at this time that Greece was defined as the cradle of Western civilization. They were mostly European scientists who did everything to avoid any mention in history of the Middle East, which influenced the formation of Greek civilization. In the end, this can lead to serious social consequences. Afrocentrism will never play a leading role in the realization of Greek civilization? The Greeks had no problem drawing their knowledge from Afro-descendant backgrounds; nowhere do they refer to the "white deities" or "white leaders" among the black culture that served as the beginnings of their philosophy. However, modern researchers argue that at present it is difficult to accept the fact that the generally accepted "Greek miracle", which formed Western thinking, can't live with the understanding that Greek culture, like the Western civilization as a whole, is the heritage of "black"

Egypt. This led to absurd discussions that the ancient Egyptians could not have been Africans, or got off with more general phrases that seem to prevail today, preferring to leave their race unspecified. However, the Arab race is now the predominant race in Egypt (especially in the North), and references such as "our ancestors" often imply that the ancient Egyptians were Arabs. Such facts are very different and radically oppose any such revisionist thinking.

We can say that the Greek land was used for the supply of grain, which was exported to Egypt, of course, was impossible, because it is now becoming a question of the true world order of Greek civilization, emphasizing the fact that the cultural development of Greece largely depended on everything that happened anywhere else in the world.

The priority topics of contemporary discussions in the field of culture science include the works of Jan Assmann. In addition to his publications on ancient Egyptian themes such as hymns, prayers, theology, and the history of Egyptian religious beliefs in general, he developed archival ideas about collective memory, remembrance, death, and ancient Egyptian religion and its adoption. It may be noted whether there are differences in the belief system, as evidenced by the monuments and texts addressed to both the elite and other segments of society, who do not have the opportunity to learn without having the necessary means to express themselves. Of particular value are the Jan Assmann's studies in the field of assessing the role of cultural categories in the formation of early forms of worldview in the Middle East and archaic Greece. One of these categories, equally important for both Greek culture and the cultures of the classical East (Egypt, Sumer) is the category of time. In particular, the Egyptian language since the era of the Old Kingdom (2700-2170 BC), is extremely rich in nouns associated with various aspects of time and its perception by man both in the ordinary and in the religious (sacred) aspect. According to Jan Assmann, in Egyptian culture initially there were two concepts of time — "linear" and "cyclic". The first of them has always been associated with the everyday perception of time as a single directional flow of the past, present and future, perceived within the life of an individual or social group. The second was related to the religious understanding by Egyptians of their history, which consisted in a constant and consistent change of large time cycles or epochs. Such cyclicality in relation to the historical process was characteristic, according to Jan Assmann, for all stages of the history of ancient Egyptian culture, from the early dynastic period and up to the end of Hellenism. This feature of the perception of the category of time by the Egyptians follows from their mythology and, in particular, from the ancient cosmogonic myths: as Jan Assmann notes, "the Egyptian cosmogony is always at the same time and cratogony." [3] In Egyptian culture, the earthly state led by the king is represented as part of the cosmic state of the Sun-God, whose son is the king. Each new king begins the count from the moment of his ascension to the throne, thus repeating the cosmic cycle of time.

The Egyptian thought closely connects the idea of time with the concept of eternity. Already in the 70s of the last century Jan Assmann in his works correlated the concept of

"linear" and "cyclic" time with two Egyptian designations of eternity: *neheh* and *djet*. The first, in his opinion, is the designation of eternity as omnipotence, that is, a single stream of the past, present and future. The second, as the German researcher believes, invariably meant absolute and unchanging completeness, personified in the eyes of the Egyptians by the netherworld, the *Duat*. Despite the fact that such an interpretation, in particular the binding of these two concepts of eternity to the typology of forms of the Egyptian verb, dating back to Kurt Sethe and Alan Gardiner, does not seem to us absolutely convincing, it is important to note that such notions of the relationship between the categories of time and eternity can be found in the Greek tradition. It is important to emphasize that they can be found not only in the relatively early pre-philosophical and philosophical thought, but also in classical Greek philosophy: in particular, Plato's definition of time as "the moving likeness of eternity" given by him in the "Timaeus". This is a clear proof not only of the obvious presence of Egyptian theoretical sources of Greek philosophy, but also shows that the issues of ontological problems are already present in the earliest categories of pre-philosophy. However, the convinced supporters of Eurocentrism, based on Hegel's historical and philosophical methodology, usually put forward their basic objection here, based on fundamental differences between pre-philosophical and philosophical categories: the former, in their opinion, do not have a high degree of abstraction and are practically oriented, which is expressed primarily in the pronounced applied nature of the entire science of the Ancient Middle East. Thus, from their point of view, all categories of pre-philosophy are exclusively religious and mythological, and, therefore, to have a significant impact on the process of the origin of philosophy in Greece, they could not.

However, in our view, this approach has one serious drawback. Based on the classical formula "From Myth to Logos", it implies a sharp distinction between the ancient myth and the emerging philosophy, which in the real historical practice of the development of Greek thought is not observed. It would be unwarranted and even ridiculous to claim that Greek philosophy, with its height of abstract thought and richness of theoretical forms, is born directly from the oldest forms of primitive myth, based solely on empirical grounds. Between these two points of development — the initial and the final — there are a number of intermediate stages, clearly visible in the Greek pre-philosophical and early philosophical thought. The most important of these are the forms of so-called "speculative theology," or "speculative myth," most pronounced in the Orphic tradition, as well as in the *Theogony* of Pherecydes of Syros at the turn of the VIII and VII centuries BC. In the works of Pherecydes, who is still a characteristic representative of the early poetic tradition of Greece, the traditional Greek myth is no longer reproduced in its classical models: his images become more "human", and the stories begin to be subjected to a kind of critical analysis, unfamiliar to Homer and Hesiod. It is also very remarkable that it is to this historical epoch (VII century BC) that the beginning of the first permanent (and not episodic, as it was before) economic and cultural contacts between Greece and Egypt, established during the reign of the kings of the XXVI



dynasty, belongs. Taking this point of view as a basis, it is possible not only to clearly define the role of Eastern theoretical sources of early Greek philosophy, but also to clarify the underlying causes of its Genesis. The fact that philosophical problems have long been developed within the framework of a developed myth helps to understand the existence of such a high level of abstraction already in the first Greek philosophers of the VII century BC (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus), who have not yet used the term "philosophy". Finally, we must not forget that philosophy first appears at the extreme Eastern end of the Greek world (Asia Minor), which is most closely connected with the Ancient Middle East by numerous economic and cultural contacts.

Following the classical tradition, adopted by European explorers, in the Middle Ages, the Greeks developed most of his philosophy, based on the understanding of Egyptians, although the Egyptians, in turn, may have received some of their concepts from Mesopotamia and Persia. Based on this, it should be said that, according to the ideas that existed in the Middle Ages, "Hermes Trismegistos was seen as the founder of non-biblical or 'Gentile' philosophy and culture. This belief continued through the Renaissance. The revival of Greek studies in the 15th century created a love of Greek literature and language and an identification with the Greeks, but no one questioned the fact that the Greeks had been the pupils of the Egyptians, in whom there was an equal, if not more passionate, interest" [4]. The Greeks were admired for having preserved and transmitted some of the ancient wisdom. For example, according to M. Bernal, such experimental methods of natural science research, which were later developed by such well-known scientists as Paracelsus and I. Newton, belonged to it to some extent. These methods represented, according to M. Bernal, attempt to restore lost knowledge: Egyptian in origin or, in other words, hermetic. If we talk about further research in the field of these texts, M. Bernal writes that "... A few Hermetic texts had been available in Latin translation throughout the Dark and Middle Ages; many more were found in 1460 and were brought to the court of Cosimo di Medici in Florence, where they were translated by his leading scholar, Marsilio Ficino" [5].

Let us emphasize that the ancient Greek thinkers in the construction of their speculations relied both on their own direct observations, and on the experience of their predecessors and the achievements of nearby civilizations, mainly the Middle East, subjecting them to rethinking and changes, transforming in accordance with its system of worldview.

The moral setting of Hesiodian myths and the aestheticization of Homeric poems contributed to the emergence of a new worldview in Ancient Greece, which prepared the Greek mentality for the creation of philosophy, which, like mythology, began to strive to justify things through the search for their origins and motivations, but not through myth, but through the rationalization of concepts.

Do not lose sight of the problems of historical and philosophical study of myths, as they are very clearly able to

illustrate the passing moments between cultures, having a common essence, but a different interpretation due to the different arrangement of accents in the problems of a particular tradition. After all, "...the idea of tradition is so forgotten that the one who sincerely seeks to know it, does not know which way to go, and is ready to accept as truth any false idea that will be at hand" [6].

It is still an insurmountable fact that Western civilization is the brainchild of Greece. For many centuries, the cultural achievements of Egypt or Sumer have been kept silent — and this continues, albeit to a lesser extent, to this day. But when it comes to Greek and Egyptian civilizations, it becomes clear that Egyptian civilization was "primitive" compared to the cultural and especially philosophical achievements of the Greeks. This binary relationship, in the hierarchy of pro et contra, stems from the European psychological need to create a cultural heritage inequality between West and East. The concept of "East" played a central role in the construction of European culture and helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, experience. The binary relations between the strong West and the weak East reinforce the cultural stereotypes created by literary, cultural and historical texts, rather fictional than factual; however, which give Orientalists a limited understanding of life in the Middle East, because Orientalism unites the various societies of the Eastern world, into a single world of the "East". This situation is now gradually beginning to change, although the gap between Greek and Egyptian culture remains, as we wrote above.

Of course, the Greeks adapted, modified and transformed elements of foreign cultures to make them "better", that is, better suited to Greek culture. But, of course, the opposite is also true, namely, that we are interested in studying here the continuing reciprocity of cultural contact associated with the transformation that continues to take place through mutual influences between cultures.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Today, great interest is shown in the research community is to the culture of the Ancient Middle East, which is largely able to explain many of the theoretical and methodological aspects of this study. We see that everything is interconnected in one way or another, so that with each argument there is less and less doubt that the interaction between cultures has been going on for many centuries, partly supplemented by its own remnants, making additions within its own framework, but not changing, nevertheless, radically. This makes it possible to study more deeply the problems of methodology and borrowings between the Ancient Middle East and ancient Greek culture. After all, in search of a starting point for a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to rely on both established models and the indisputable fact of our cultural heritage in the primordial philosophical history and traditions that have left an imprint on the present.

The interaction of Greek culture with other cultures and civilizations has long been an indisputable fact, confirmed by a large number of sources and has not needed any additional

evidence for a long time. However, the ideological aspects of this process to this day require serious clarification and detail — primarily in the issue of interaction of early Greek philosophy with the pre-philosophical traditions of Ancient Egypt and Iran. This applies, first and foremost, cosmological and cosmographic representations (Heraclitus), the cosmogonic and philosophical perspectives (Milesian school) and cultural anthropology (Orphic and Pythagorean tradition). Further study of these interactions within the framework of the mythological concept of the Genesis of philosophy will undoubtedly not only help to detail many of the provisions of the already classical formula "From Myth to Logos", but will also give an opportunity to look at the philosophical phenomenon of the "Greek miracle" in terms of the General vectors of spiritual and cultural development of the entire Eastern Mediterranean region. In the eyes of the Orientalists, this traditional formula of the historical and philosophical process looks artificial, since the Logos, from their point of view, does not originate in the Greek spiritual culture, but arises already in the Ancient Middle East, after which it is enriched with the content of the early Greek cultural tradition. Thus, the traditional motto of Orientalists *ex oriente lux* is currently receiving its new content.

However, despite the obvious triumph of the methodology of Orientalism, to talk about the "death" of Eurocentrism in modern culture studies would be clearly premature. Of course, modern critics of Martin Bernal and critics of other Orientalists very rarely based on the concept of "Greek miracle" in its "classical" version, proposed by E. Zeller and largely developed by E. Husserl in his ideas about the "spiritual image of Europe". Turning a blind eye to the obvious traces of Egyptian, Persian and Sumerian-Babylonian theoretical sources of early Greek philosophy and science would be, on their part, at least strange, but at most simply incorrect. That is why most supporters of this model do not deny the presence of these theoretical sources in early Greek pre-philosophical and philosophical thought, but do not recognize them as determining in the complex and multifaceted process of the Genesis of philosophy. The phenomenon of the "Greek miracle" in its modern sense is not reduced, thus, to the statement of absolutely autochthonous roots of Greek philosophy and culture, but is that all the theoretical sources of their philosophy and science, obtained in the Ancient Middle East, the Greeks not only perceived mechanically, but creatively comprehended and processed in accordance with the peculiarities of their mentality and their categories of culture.

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