

Scottish Institute for World Philosophies (SIWP)

We propose to establish and develop an institute for connecting those interested in philosophical traditions outside the dominant forms of 'Western' philosophy, to promote research and teaching in these areas. Academic philosophy in Europe is especially Eurocentric, and few departments of philosophy have specialists in any 'non-Western' tradition. There is increasing concern with diversifying and broadening the canon, however, and there is certainly the demand from students, so the time is ripe for making a more concerted effort to raise the profile of other philosophical traditions and forms of thinking.

While patchy in philosophy departments, there is good expertise in 'non-Western' traditions of thought in other disciplines, such as anthropology, 'area studies', history, languages and literature, politics, sociology, and religious studies, so an important aim is to bring these experts into the institute. Genuine interdisciplinarity would thus be one of its essential features.

The proposed institute will be a Scottish institute, drawing on and bringing together, first and foremost, the knowledge and expertise in the various Scottish universities. Geographically, that is an appropriately sized region for effective collaboration. In the Scottish context, it highlights our outward-facing and international concerns, and can be badged as part of a Second Scottish Enlightenment. But we will also have international partners, both individuals and other institutions.

The institute will be established through development of a website, the identity of the institute being constructed by its members and partners, and over time through the activities and projects pursued by its members. As an internet and social media presence, the institute can naturally evolve without specific institutional constraints, expanding as interest grows and resources develop (see below).

World philosophies

The institute will be the first of its kind to be established in Europe and will demonstrate that we take seriously forms of thinking in countries outside Europe that may differ from dominant forms within Europe. Talk of 'philosophies' rather than 'philosophy' is intended to highlight the *diversity* of these forms, and what is meant here is not confined to *academic* philosophy. The title of the institute is also intended to include what goes on under the headings of 'comparative philosophy', 'intercultural philosophy', 'global philosophy', and the like, but – in addition – to consider questions as to how philosophies are 'lived', 'travel', and negotiated at the local and everyday levels. We may focus initially on, say, Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and African philosophy, recognizing that we must start from existing categories, even if they are soon seen to break down into subtraditions, with boundaries far from clear. But the aim is to be maximally inclusive and open to questioning and conceptual reform of all philosophical and historiographical categories.

The i's have it

Many universities now have interdisciplinarity, internationalization and inclusivity at the top of their agenda – among their main research themes or challenges. In all its activities, the institute will encourage comparative perspectives on research, and act as a think tank for these themes and challenges, taking a strong lead in making the argument for them and demonstrating their benefits. Investigating philosophy in its broadest, socially inclusive and culturally diverse sense, *means* being interdisciplinary and international.

Teaching

Since few departments of philosophy can offer courses across even a good selection of world philosophies, we need to think how to pool our resources, making them more widely available, to

broaden what we all teach. One suggestion is to develop a bank of lectures given by those who do teach in the relevant areas that others could use for their courses, with the back-up seminars, etc. provided in-house by tutors who then don't have to have full expertise. (This simply adapts the standard lecturer/TA model split across institutions.) Such an arrangement could be supplemented by one-day workshops at which the lecturer visits the university hosting the course. With universities now used to online teaching, this may be easier to organize – as long as we still insist that face-to-face teaching continues through tutorials, etc. At the PG level, we can arrange cross-institutional (and cross-disciplinary) joint supervision, thereby making Scotland a more attractive place to study.

Research

Research can be fostered in the usual ways: seminars, workshops, conferences, etc. But here, too, there is value in having a bank of online material available for introducing world philosophies to both other researchers and the wider public (pitched appropriately). We can link to, and draw inspiration from, such resources as Peter Adamson's podcasts (historyofphilosophy.net). We will especially encourage interdisciplinarity, given the complementary expertise across the relevant disciplines. One suggestion is to record 'round tables', at which, say, a philosopher, area studies expert, historian, and language scholar analyse and discuss a certain passage or text. We could also take key concepts, such as that of 'person', 'nature', 'God', 'knowledge', 'citizenship', and 'philosophy' itself, and debate the range of ways in which they have been understood and lived out (with appropriate self-consciousness about concept-individuation and the philosophical issues raised here). And we could explore different ways in which philosophical questions have – or have not – been answered within different traditions. Over time, funded research projects run by members of the institute can be advertized on the website, and the existence and activities of the institute can be mentioned in supporting research applications.

Funding

The University of Aberdeen has awarded us £15k to help set up the website, develop resources, and fund a workshop later this year (December 2021). Members will be encouraged to apply for grants from their own institutions or funding bodies to organize activities and pursue projects, to build up the profile of the institute, and to expand the online resources we aim to provide.

Management

The institute will be managed by a relatively small committee, as representative as possible within that constraint, to maintain and advise on the website, run a blog and email list, coordinate activities, and organize podcasts, etc. Regular informal meetings can be run online, and subgroups set up as appropriate for specific tasks. All members will be encouraged to contribute to the website – for example, by editing content in their relevant fields.

Summary

The central aim of the proposed institute is to bring together all those with an interest in world philosophies, broadly construed, so that we can coordinate and enhance our research and teaching activities, quickly make connections when funding opportunities arise, and together build a set of resources to foster the study of world philosophies at a crucial point in history. We find ourselves in a period of unprecedented crisis and conflict – facing ethnic, political and religious-based violence and terrorism, a pandemic, and ecological disaster – and it is more urgent than ever to understand the differences between philosophies and their cultural contexts in the hope of finding ways forward. The key move in all of this is to encourage greater openness to the full range of world philosophies.