



Contemporary Philosophy

## From Apocalyptic to Messianic: *Philosophia Universalis*

Helena Gourko  
Boston University  
[hgourko@bu.edu](mailto:hgourko@bu.edu)

**ABSTRACT:** Perhaps for the first time in history, the turn of a millennium is directly reflected in philosophy-as an apocalyptic end of philosophy. Recently, an attempt to channel apocalyptic into messianic has been undertaken by Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx*. However, Derrida's endeavor does not relate directly to philosophy and thus does not alter its apocalyptic landscape. Considering the critical state of contemporary philosophy, it is unclear whether such an alteration can be performed in the West. A radical reinterpretation appears to be much more probable when undertaken from an outside position. It may be that this is the case with the *Philosophia Universalis* developed by the Russian-American David Zilberman (1938-1977) from classical Hindu philosophies and applied, as a new synthesis, to Western philosophy. Major ideas of the *Philosophia Universalis* as well as its principal results and achievements comprise the content of this presentation.

It is a miraculous feeling:  
You are touching cinders,  
But because of your touchz  
They blush — they turn into diamonds."

David Zilberman

Contemporary Western philosophy is eschatological through and through; bread of apocalypse is philosophical daily bread there for quite a long time already. (1) One may argue who introduced what Derrida calls 'an apocalyptic tone in philosophy' (2) — Derrida himself, Heidegger, or, even earlier, Nietzsche, Marx, or Kant. It appears, however, that the very idea of the end of philosophy is taken seriously. As any end, the end of philosophy means death, and thus, as Derrida elaborates on in his *Spectres of Marx*, entails funeral, eulogy, spectres, and sentiment of irretrievable loss. Could it be otherwise? Would it be possible to philosophize at (on) the end? Could philosophy be an eschatology and still remain a living thing?

Questions of death and rebirth, ends and new beginnings are among those fashionable ones in contemporary philosophy. They have been raised lately, among others, by Derrida in his indepth and novel analysis of apocalyptic and messianic. (3) This exploration, obviously inheriting to philosophical intentions of M. Blanchot, E. Levinas, and V. Benjamin, results in a broad picture of a world organized under the idea of the "new International", a messianic structure of the future ought to replace (and actually replacing, according to

Derrida) apocalyptic discourses of today. Messianic as a structure of experience within community without community, party, political structure, as focused around some secret unidentified bond between those accepted into it, appears to be the widest possible description of the human world to come. Could it be narrowed to philosophy? What position should be occupied by philosophy in this future world and what might happen to philosophy as we know it then? There are some extremely valuable hints to it in Derrida's analysis (like those on deconstruction as "the movement open to the absolute future of what is coming", (4) and on "this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction" (5) — remark which will be hopefully clarified later), but apparently it is not within a scope of his exploration to focus on apocalyptic and messianic in philosophy and for philosophy.

Such a focus distinguishes a highly unusual and novel philosophical system developed by a Russian-American philosopher David Zilberman (1938-1977). He is a remarkable philosopher for, at least, three reasons: an extraordinary scope of philosophical erudition, an astonishing fluency in non-Western philosophies (he considered himself to be an expert primarily in Hindu classical philosophies), and his drive to universality and systematization vitrually incomparable in contemporary philosophy. Zilberman's initial intention is to work in 'comparative philosophy', understood, however, not as a correlation of different philosophical traditions, but as their assessment from a universal standpoint which he calls *Philosophia Universalis*, and acquires within analysis of classical Indian philosophies. His major philosophical motivation is to unveil a subject-matter of philosophy as distinct from that one in other fields of human intellectual activity. A very simple aspiration — to concentrate on philosophy as a particular intellectual occupation (as he put it in one of his letters: "you [can] love wisdom, while I [will] love a love to wisdom [=philosophy]") guides his search for uniqueness of philosophical approach. A long history of stripping philosophy in Western culture from its traditional objects and replacing philosophy by religion, science, ideology, etc. (something that never occurred in classical India) prompts Zilberman to scrutinize Hindu philosophies as an embodied philosophy and thus as what might be closed to *Philosophia Universalis*.

The family of the six Indian classical philosophies (*Samkhya*, *Nyaya*, *Vedanta*, *Mimamsa*, *Vaisesika*, *Yoga*), according to Zilberman,

"[c]omprises six 'visions'. Visions — of what? Visions of whom? And what is it, an 'exclusive vision'? Generally speaking, six different visions of the *Veda*..." (5) But these visions, even they are still directed to the *Veda*, "are not just six complimentary views on the pre-established thematics of the *Veda* from different standpoints. They gradually emerge in the course of ...inventions from the thought-off stuff and at the expense of consuming one's production as the food and the building material for the other... for example, *Vaisesika* cedes to *Nyaya* her physics and system of ontological categories; *Nyaya* grants to *Vaisesika* his epistemology and formal logic... *Yoga* is active as a pragmatics of 'psychism'; *Samkhya* is passive in its theory. *Mimamsa* prudentially takes care of methodology of building the world and Reason in accordance with eternal normative injunctions of the authoritative text. *Vedanta* is a virile methodology of revelation in the text which makes those norms manifest, etc..." (6)

This was never just a simple complementarity; such links are by far more deep and meaningful than a simple division of labour or distribution of philosophical roles. If to keep this approach with respect to Western philosophies, we have to agree, for instance, that

"[t]here were not Galilean and Aristotelian mechanics themselves which should be compared as such, but different systems of philosophy (Galilean and Aristotelian - H.G.), one of which should be a supplier of an idea of experience for the other... They are interconnected and do not require a world of Nature." (7)

Due to their reciprocal self-sufficiency, Hindu philosophies not only need not to lean on the world of Nature, but on any cultural foundation as well. To understand this total negativity

helps the so-called 'doctrine of double knowledge', when philosophical knowledge is interpreted simultaneously as 'extra-referential' (*paramarthika*) and 'transactive' (*vyavaharika*). 'Extra-referential-ness' means that this knowledge is beyond any references and cannot be proved by anything except itself; 'transactivity' describes activity of transference of the burden of proof from one philosophical fragment (or 'vision') to another. So, 'double knowledge' is neither about Nature, nor about consciousness, God, knowledge, or culture itself (i.e., the *Veda*); this knowledge is complete by its reference to the bodies of texts produced by each of six *darsanas*.

Dialectic of extra-referential and transactive knowledge is shaped as a possibility for every philosophical system to be taken absolutely or transactively depending on its role in a particular modal inter-connection (that of a 'modal mirror', or an 'image in a modal mirror'. Zilberman calls this a "principle of a mental constitution when philosophical systems are inclined to each other in eternal and 'mirror' vision." (8) This principle, or a 'mirror strategy' could extend enormously a horizon of philosophizing, because in a sum of interactions every philosophical system might perform an infinite number of reflections. This, however, needs a certain philosophical permission to multiply ontological images of the world and was given to Indian *darsanas* by a quasi-naturalistic doctrine of *Maya* ('the transcendental illusion', ontologically) or *avidya* ('nescience', if approached epistemologically). Thus interpreted texts of Indian classical philosophy created a special 'inter-textual' domain of philosophy, not even non-natural (as related to Nature), but also non-existent (both physically and culturally). So, finally the philosophical 'subject-matter', which can be nothing else but philosophy itself, has been acquired.

Philosophy becomes in classical India a polemic dramatization which has its philosophical reason in what Zilberman called a partnership or sharing of a work, and the responsibility of the philosophers involved (due to complementariness of their systems) in the same Universe of philosophizing. This became a foundation for Zilberman's concept of the 'philosophical Other', who "is not a hell, but an entrusted person, to whom you transfer those problems of your own metaphysics which you cannot resolve within this metaphysics due to its 'natural' qualities." (9)

It is evident to Zilberman that "the idea of the summary participation and interconnectedness of all and every trend of philosophical thought" (10) in a joint philosophical enterprise was hardly ever recognized by Western philosophers; "indeed, there is nothing similar to the image of *maya* in the Western philosophical tradition...". (11) *Maya*, a quasi-naturalistic doctrine of transcendental illusion, is buried there by two layers of naturalism inherent to philosophical consciousness in Western culture, and related to Nature and language. Metaphysics as an attempt to overcome a spell of Nature is not sufficient in securing philosophy its real 'subject-matter' and thus bringing it to itself. Another agent of naturalization, language, is always there; it has never been (at least, prior to deconstruction) suspected as an improper object of philosophizing. That language is natural and thus non-philosophical can be proved, according to Zilberman, by its created nature, its secondariness if pure creativity, which is a real nature of philosophizing, is concerned. Until a necessity to overcome a 'physics of language' is not recognized in philosophy, it cannot be considered as such. Western philosophy, thus, though seemingly at its end, is not 'no longer', it is 'not yet':

"[t]his should enable me to begin a new philosophical synthesis, with a *predicament* greater than has ever been given to philosophy heretofore ...: the history of philosophy is not at an end — its genuine history has simply not yet begun." (12)

To facilitate grasping of the very idea of such synthesis one can try with the following Zilberman's statement:

"An embryo of my conceptual developing in a simple thought of Shankara about supra-mental as something real not only in its essence, but also in its form. Supra-mentality of thought on Absolute is hidden in the idea, that being thought by means of Reason, this thought, i.e., thought on Absolute is supra-mental not in some 'ontological' sense, but precisely in a matter of this, just now made statement. That is, something, which is proclaimed essentially, should be turned to a form of (what ought to be) expressed now, and thus should be caught in this expression... But how to vanish into non-absoluteness, to make alive, vulnerable, suffering the very assertion of Shankara about Absolute? to insert this assertion into a real life, how to make it a part of human existence?...What exactly I am doing by my philosophizing, how and for what reason? It is not at all a categorization from (something) alive, an idealization of (something) real. Try to take it into an absolutely different, if fact, unthinkable direction. It is life itself, which is weighing down on me by its diversities and non-reduces, but it is me, who transfers (shifts off) its order into something different, non-cognitive, takes it (life - H.G.) upon myself, paves it entirely different ways. What I am doing, thus, it is not idealization, but supra-('sur') realization of thinking. Modal methodology is 'sur-real' with respect to life, too ideal for philosophical activity as making a philosophy." (13)

Zilberman's philosophical method (= 'modal methodology'), characterized more specifically by its author as a type of "genetic epistemology", (14) is designed for investigation of "how various different philosophies (not philosophers) employed theirs [methodologies] to establish the principles of organization of their own thinking activity with respect not only to thinking, but behavior and culture in general." (15) His goal is to present philosophical activity of thinking as a specific form of material production of meaning, as a unique system-generating factor, which initially produces and constantly reproduces systems of culture. For Zilberman, philosophy appears to be a peculiar system of culture, one which comes to be incorporated into the sum of activity within this culture both as a system-generating factor and as a mode of inter-cultural activity transcending its origin. In order to grasp this twofold nature of philosophical thinking, Zilberman proposes the idea of modalization, which "never heads the way of thinking but always indicate the way in which a particular system of thought is being developed with respect to its inclination to act upon another system." (16)

'Sur-realization' (modalization) is a mode of mental construction (or thinking activity) which does not retain any resemblance to natural objects, is regarded as a pure creativity, and thus is absolutely free. Such unlimited freedom of philosophizing is manifested in three basic realms of creativity, namely, in 'textual', 'cultural' and 'interpretive' sur-realizations. Within these realms are produced, correspondingly, philosophical texts, the meaningful fabric of culture (and/or philosophy), and philosophical texture (or 'inter-text' of philosophy); in sum — 'philosophical substance' or philosophical 'subject-matter'. The peculiarity of this subject-matter is that it is both created by and investigated within, philosophy; as philosophical creation, however, it does not belong to philosophy alone, since as cultural 'sur-reality' it goes (as if) far beyond philosophy. This cultural enlargement, however, still remains within the philosophical domain, because the essence of philosophical analysis is that each case considered, whenever a cultural meaning is concerned, should relate to philosophy (insofar as it is initially created within philosophical activity and subjected only to this activity). And, finally: three major types of modalization (deontic, apodictic and hypothetical) taken within framework of 'double knowledge' (see above), give six possible combinations identified by Zilberman as six types of thinking or 'philosophical roles' ("methodological", "conceptual", "projective", "phenomenological", "axiomatic", "axiological").

This elaborated and highly esoteric scheme creates a skeleton of Zilberman's *Philosophia Universalis*. Its application to concrete philosophies requires a set of methodological procedures called 'preliminary', 'primary', and 'secondary' modalizations, with 'textual', 'cultural' and 'interpretive' subdivisions within two latter ones, 'comparative' and 'transformative' modalizations, etc. (17) What should result from their application is called

by Zilberman a 'polynomy' of all major philosophical visions (=philosophical roles), and interpreted as philosophical Universe embodied first in texts, then in culture (created primarily by/through philosophical meaningful activity), and, finally, in texture of philosophy itself. The only known example of philosophical polynomy, according to Zilberman, is represented by classical India, although it was anticipated in Western philosophy as well:

"In fact, in India we meet with an organic scheme of philosophizing, shaped as a materialization of the dream of all philosophers (cf. Socrates' talk about endless philosophical discussion in the *Phaedo*, Hegel's idea of Absolute Knowledge as a Life-long Cognition in the concluding chapter of his *Phenomenology*, and so on)." (18)

Realization of this dream in Indian 'visions' transformed them into a relentless whole-embracing philosophical activity where discussions were not a form to destruct another philosophical system, but to supply it with something important and unattainable. An outcome of such joined universal activity is a gigantic system of philosophical contents, an infinity of already attained and still possible 'reflective images'. What particularly interests Zilberman within this Universe (he also calls it a 'parade', a 'sum, or a 'symphony') of Hindu 'visions' is precisely its fullness, its self-sufficiency, a paradox of Hindu philosophies, which is so puzzling for Western interpretation (and which impedes Western philosophers from acknowledging these 'visions' as genuine philosophy), namely, that "all problems can be solved and all paradoxes avoided in a confined universe (of philosophical knowledge - H.G.)." (19)

Messianic vision of philosophy reviving from the ashes of non-being, of transforming "cinders into diamonds" in Western culture, thus, is clearly inspired for Zilberman by the Hindu universe of philosophical knowledge. *Philosophia Universalis* can be utilized as an agent of creating a philosophical Paradise within Western culture — through careful modal reconstruction of separate conceptions in philosophical 'texture', through tracing their cultural 'sur-realizations'. To accomplish it Zilberman reflects certain Western philosophies in a modal 'search-light' of already 'textured' Indian philosophies, in order to bring them into immediate contact with the whole variety of philosophical 'visions'. In Zilberman's texts there are many examples of comparative modalization: Hegel and *Mimamsa*, Kant and *Nyaya*, Husserl and *Nyaya-Vaisesika*, Wittgenstein and *Advaita*, Chomsky and *Advaita*, Democritus and *Vaisesika*, Descartes and *Yoga*, Plato and *Advaita*, psychoanalysis and *Samkhya*, and others. Next step would certainly have been a direct modal comparison of Western philosophies themselves — in order to establish an inter-textual domain of their philosophical existence, a 'texture' of Western philosophy. Unfortunately, Zilberman was not allowed by his early unexpected death to fulfill any one detailed modalization of that type; we only know that his immediate plans were to realize a modal line of Hegelian/Marxist/Leninist philosophical interpretation, to discover a root of Kantian transcendentalism in Hegelian logic and a root of Hegelian logic — in Husserlian phenomenology, to interpret Descartes through Husserl, to comprehend modal deployment of major ideas of Platonic philosophy within Hegelian texts, to explicate some failures of Husserlian phenomenology as if already modally foreseen by Hegel and Marx.

One last remark: the only cultural 'sur-realization' ever occurred in Western philosophy, according to Zilberman, is the Marxian one (see his *Orthodox Ethics and the Matter of Communism* (20)). In view of this it does not seem surprising to channel messianic through "this attempted radicalization of Marxism called deconstruction". (21)

## Notes

(1) Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx*. Routledge: New York & London, 1994, p. 14.

- (2) Derrida, J. *D'un ton apocalyptique adopte naquere en philosophie*. Paris, 1992.
- (3) Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx*.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- (6) Zilberman, D. *The Birth of Meaning in Hindu Thought*. D. Riedel Publishing Company: Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster, Tokyo, 1988, p.332, 335.
- (7) Zilberman, D. *Letter to G.Schedrovitskij*. August, 25, 1975, p.4. Zilberman Archive at the Mugar Library, Boston University, 5.1.2./2.
- (8) Zilberman, D. *Letter to O.Genisaretskij*. November 10, 1975, p.2b. Zilberman Archive, 5.1.3./3.
- (9) *Ibid.*
- (10) Zilberman, D. *The Birth of Meaning*, p. 340.
- (11) *Ibid.*, p. 336.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.2.
- (13) Zilberman. *Letter to O.Genisaretskij*. Undated, p.1. Zilberman Archive, 5.1.3./7.
- (14) Zilberman, D. *The Birth of Meaning*, p. 9.
- (15) *Ibid.*, p. XIII.
- (16) *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- (17) See: Gourko, H. *Zilberman's Modal Methodology*. 1995, 389 pp. (manuscript).
- (18) Zilberman, D. *The Birth of Meaning*, p. 57-58.
- (19) *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- (20) Zilberman, D. Orthodox Ethics and the Matter of Communism. In: *Studies in Soviet Thought*, vol. 17, 1977, pp. 341-419.
- (21) Derrida, J. *Spectres of Marx*, p. 90.