Editorial: Philosophical Multiculturalism?

Philosophy may have universalist pretensions; at least it may if its goal is still truth (absolute); goodness (for all) and beauty (as surviving a history-transcending test of time). No doubt such ideals are subject to accusations of Platonism, logocentrism and much else, though it is hard to see what philosophy is without least a taint of such ideals. An accusation these ideals is not properly subject to is 'Eurocentrism'. Whatever the Eurocentric faults of individual philosophers, the fault lies in the practice, not in the ideal.

No doubt there have been faults. At times there has been culpable ignorance of other traditions; at times shouting down of other voices (and this is not confined to other voices from non-Western cultures). One response to such faults is muticulturalism; a subject recently much in the news. Are we multiculturalists? Has multiculturalism failed? What is multiculturalism? These questions increasingly and not before time occupy public discussion; unfortunately generating in the answers given much heat and much confusion.

Whatever multiculturalism is, given its Herderian roots, it is at the very least a sense that other cultures, all other cultures, should receive recognition and should be heard. Recognition of others as others, in their otherness, is at the heart of it. And this is, in a sense, a universalist ideal. But it is one which may sit ill with the universalism of philosophy. If recognition is our ideal, what place in our activity is there for the search for truth, which has been defined as culture blind and culture transcendent?

In philosophy what we have is a clash between two perfectly defensible ideals, which are not jointly realisable in all cases. And if not in philosophy, maybe not in society either, where the recognition of the other must on occasion involve suppression of what in our best efforts we take to be universal ideals of truth, goodness and beauty. Not necessarily a clash of civilisations, so much as a clash of civilised values.