

Book Review

Taking Back Philosophy – A Multicultural Manifesto.

Van Norden, Bryan W. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 248 pp., ISBN: 978-0231184366 (hard-cover)

“This is the intervention we have been waiting for!” “What is new?” “I got stuck by page 10 because I found his self-righteousness insufferable...” friends and colleagues declared when I brought up Bryan W. Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. Van Norden, a highly accomplished scholar in Chinese and comparative philosophy, holds professorships at three institutions – Yale-NUS in Singapore, Wuhan University in China, and Vassar College in the US. Intentionally partisan and polemic, his latest book is deliberately “cheeky” and occasionally sardonic; it can perhaps best be summarized as “Philosophy must diversify or die” (Van Norden, 2017, p. 8). No surprise then that the book has elicited such divergent and often strong reactions from its readers. For those who want to get a sense of current academic discussions about the politics of departmentalisation and disciplining of philosophy in Western universities, it is a good read.

The book germinated from an opinion piece Van Norden and Jay L. Garfield (a long-time collaborator of Van Norden) did for *The New York Times*. On the first day alone, the piece garnered eight hundred replies, and later, thousands more on philosophy sites. Many of these comments were vitriolic in nature (Garfield, 2017, p. xii). Clearly, the article entitled “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is” had hit a nerve. Van Norden and Garfield argued for a restructuring of philosophy departments (especially those located in the West) into multicultural ones such that these departments would equally *include less commonly taught philosophies* (LCTP). That is, philosophies

other than the canonical Western ones. If this cannot be achieved, they argued, we must end the double standard of Eurocentric philosophy with its universal pretence, and call philosophy departments which do not teach and research anything other than Western canonical philosophy “Anglo-European Philosophical Studies” (Garfield and Van Norden, 2016).

Taking Back Philosophy elaborates this stand across its five chapters. Chapter One is a manifesto for a multicultural philosophy; it argues that there is value in including “non-Western” philosophy in the curriculum. Chapter Two illustrates how the tradition of Chinese thought is philosophical; that it too deals with common themes such as identity, altruism etc., and puts it into dialogue with other philosophies. Chapter Three shows how US President Trump’s wall and the walls between philosophies are related; that creating divisions and othering is part of a larger narrative. Chapter Four concentrates on how philosophy can be vocationally and politically useful; Van Norden especially criticises Marco Rubio’s view that “[w]e need more welders and less philosophers” (it should be noted that Rubio has since expressed that he was wrong). And Chapter Five argues that philosophy is a guide to life for everyone, and not only the activity of academics in their ivory towers.

In the book, Van Norden describes philosophy departments’ unwillingness to engage with LCTP as “a broader pattern of xenophobic, chauvinistic, nationalistic, and racist efforts to separate “us” from “them”” (Van Norden, 2017, p. 84). Strong words these are, and while most philosophy departments in the West do exclusively only deal with Western philosophy, with the exemption of common bigotry,

I share Jonardon Ganeri's hesitation to call it racist (Ganeri, 2018), writing as I am from Europe where most universities here live up to the example of Van Norden's critique. It is clear that even a cursory look at the department websites of universities uncovers very few full-time employees who do any research on "non-Western" philosophy. These departments, Van Norden argues, also tend to be white and male, and the philosophy departments of many European universities confirm this. However, is this enough reason to warrant them as structurally racist? Rather, as Ganeri writes, is it perchance the difficulty to relate to tool kits from other philosophical traditions which gives ground to the problem of parochialism, and deters the person who solely does mainstream Western philosophy? Couched as these other tool kits are in disparate languages, canons and texts other than the "standard" (Ganeri, 2018), the problem becomes more visibly focused.

Van Norden's remedy to the state of things is to equate multiculturalism's intimate link to the notion of diversity. But what does Van Norden mean with multicultural? Unfortunately, he does not detail the varying readings of multicultural that have been available for some time now, which makes his own notion somewhat unclear and hence difficult to grasp. Steve Fuller even questions if Van Norden's conception of non-Western cultures may risk becoming the West's Other (Fuller, 2018, pp. 157-8). Van Norden cannot be faulted for essentialising non-Western cultures, he aptly demonstrates how Chinese culture has changed over time. His book does stress that Chinese philosophy is different, and therefore it could, and should, be put in dialogue with, for example, Western philosophy. This reminds me of Paul Deussen's remark from 1907 that difference "furnished us [Europeans] with the strongest argument in favour of devoting ourselves to it [Indian Philosophy] all the more." (Deussen, 1907, p. 3).

In his reply to Fuller, Van Norden addresses many of the criticisms Fuller raises, yet he does not answer this particular challenge of difference (Van Norden, 2018). The question I wish Van Norden

had explored more, which is perhaps outside the scope of a non-academic book, is that which Jin Yuelin posed in 1930: "Is Chinese Philosophy the history of Chinese philosophy, or is it the history of philosophy in China?" (author's translation of: "所谓 '中国哲学' 是中国哲学的史呢? 还是在中国的哲学史呢?" (Jin, 2007, p. 203). Alternatively, as Bhagat Oinam phrased it more than 85 years later, "'Philosophy in India' or 'Indian Philosophy': Some Post-Colonial Questions" (Oinam, 2018).

Van Norden contends that philosophy departments should teach students different traditions of philosophy, multi-cultures of philosophy, and then make them talk to each other. This approach is "compelling, infuriating but ultimately unsatisfying" as Alex Sager states (Sager, 2018), with Alexandra S. Ilieva adding that "it does not go far enough" (Ilieva, 2018, p. 3). A more radical approach would be Ganeri's, who writes that the *manufactured notion of culture* should be altogether scrapped (Ganeri, 2018) without, I would add, losing each concept's situatedness in a particular milieu. This would entail thinking about *confluence* rather than the *comparative* sense that Mark Sideritis would be watchful of (Sideritis, 2017); in other words, an approach one could envision as a transcultural style of philosophy.

In hindsight many things can be said about the famous philologist and Orientalist Max Müller in contrast to the Indologist and philosopher Deussen, his contemporary, whose position I earlier likened to Van Norden's. I fancy Müller got this one right,

[a]nd if hitherto no one would have called himself a philosopher who had not read and studied the works of Plato and Aristotle, of Des Cartes [sic] and Spinoza, of Locke, Hume, and Kant in the original, I hope that the time will come when no one will claim that name who is not acquainted at least with the two prominent systems of ancient Indian philosophy the Vedānta and the Sāmkhya.

(Müller, 1919, p. xvi)

An asymmetry of ignorance in any form cannot form the basis of any interconnected world, especially in the realm of thought.

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