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Title

Deconstructing a Discipline. A Review of Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto by Bryan Van Norden (Columbia University Press, 2017)

Author

Levine, Jill

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Jill Levine
University of Victoria
Seshat: Global History Databank

In 2016, Bryan Van Norden and Jay Garfield published an Opinion in The *New York Times* blog "The Stone": "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is." Van Norden and Garfield present statistics on the lack of "LCTP" (less commonly taught philosophy) specialists and course offerings in Philosophy departments across the United States: "No other humanities discipline demonstrates this systematic neglect of most of the civilizations in its domain" (Van Norden and Garfield 2016). So, what should we call philosophy? The authors conclude with a radical-seeming idea: "We therefore suggest that any department that regularly offers courses only on Anglo-European philosophy should rename itself "Department of European and American Philosophy." Van Norden's book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* was born from the ideas set out in his blog post with Garfield and from the widespread public reaction to it. The book's chapters place Chinese philosophers in dialogue with Anglo-European philosophers, delve into the role of philosophy in Chinese and American nationalism, and argue for the practicality of philosophy for university students. *Taking Back Philosophy* is a dynamic read: free of jargon but highly conceptual, as Van Norden's energetic prose makes philosophical building blocks like individualistic metaphysics and ethics education accessible for a lay audience.

With the rise of transdisciplinary fields like cultural evolution and digital humanities, traditional humanities departments have the chance to experiment with new forms of quantitative methodologies, comparative frameworks, community work, and more. But we cannot forget the roots of our disciplines. Van Norden's work proposes change within the framework of more traditional philosophical instruction: he does not seek to rewrite the structure of the discipline, but to modernize it through cross-cultural comparative study. As the opportunities for humanities scholars widen, it is important to continue to return to how the basics are taught to students. Despite more comparative work being undertaken, humanities departments still tend to focus on Anglo-European texts when teaching foundational methodologies to students. Van Norden (2017: 5) writes that philosophy in

Corresponding author's e-mail: jilldanalevine@gmail.com

particular often does not make room for the inclusion of non-Western scholars in the curriculum. Putting Chinese classical thought in comparative perspective alongside other cultural traditions is not a new concept in philosophy (Li 1999, 2008; Parkes 1996; Theodor and Yao 2013) However, it is one that, Van Norden argues, deserves more attention.

Taking Back Philosophy

Van Norden weaves his signature wit and musings on life, politics, and pop culture into his manifesto (full disclosure: Van Norden was once my undergraduate professor at Vassar College). The first chapter gives an introduction to the work and a history of the exclusion of Asian voices from philosophy curricula. Chapter 2 places Chinese philosophies in dialogue with Anglo-European classics. In Chapters 3 and 4, Van Norden admonishes intellectuals who create divides between Anglo-European and non-Western philosophers and criticizes what he sees as a general anti-intellectual attitude towards the discipline of philosophy. The concluding chapter emphasizes how philosophy, when interpreted with a hermeneutics of faith, can be used as a positive force for change and debate.

Exclusion and Inclusion

In Chapter 1, Van Norden (2017: 2) underlines the need to diversify philosophy curricula, not just to include Asian philosophers, but to encompass other "less commonly taught philosophies (LCTP)": African, Latin American, feminist, LGBTQ, and others. A compelling section of his chapter gives an overview of the history of exclusion of non-Western philosophies from the mainstream canon. Philosophers and others have argued against the acceptance of Asian philosophy for serious study for centuries. Van Norden (22) gives several examples of these philosophers, including Immanuel Kant's legacy of racism and Jacques Derrida's dismissal of Chinese philosophy (25), setting them in the context of wider Orientalist trends in academia. While this "othering" and dismissal of Asian philosophy greatly impacted philosophical discourse, Van Norden gives examples of philosophers who buck this trend and argue for the validity of Chinese philosophy. This non-exhaustive list includes Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), and François Quesnay (1694–1774). This background chapter shows that it is no accident that non-Western philosophies are excluded from university departments: discourses around philosophy have created a legacy of ethnocentrism and exclusion.

In Chapter 2, Van Norden brings Chinese concepts and philosophers into conversation with Anglo-European ideas. This section could be seen as strategic: it shows those who write curricula what kind of multifaceted discussions are possible when Asian philosophy is brought into the conversation. Such conversations

include discussions of metaphysics in Descartes' writings and in Buddhist traditions and the ideas of authority and human nature in the works of Hobbes, Confucius, and Mengzi. The last chapter emphasizes the importance of philosophy as a discipline and of intellectual exchange between traditions.

The Appropriation of Philosophy

Chapter 3 brings back the themes of exclusion and othering discussed in the first chapter, as Van Norden compares philosophers who dismiss Asian philosophical works with politicians who uses coded racial language to create a divide between "us" and "them." A long section of the book delves into the relationship between modern politics and classical philosophy. Van Norden discusses the politicians who use rhetoric to divide and invoke classical philosophical texts to promote nationalism. He writes, "Political figures who invoke philosophical or spiritual works for nationalistic purposes have no interest in the actual *content* of the classics they claim to revere" (97). These strategies are used by the modern GOP (Trump's wall and Reagan's rhetoric are mentioned) and by Chinese president Xi Jinping, who appropriates Confucian quotes to promote Chinese nationalism. This chapter serves as a criticism of different kinds of intellectuals who appropriate and misuse philosophy or ignore works outside the Anglo-European canon. While this modern historical context is valuable, sections on, for example, the 2016 GOP debate, already feel dated, possibly because of the current lightning-fast speed of the political news cycle in the United States. Chapter 4 defends philosophy as a subject against anti-intellectual trends. These trends, Van Norden points out, are especially prevalent among GOP politicians. He argues for philosophy's use as an occupation and its contribution to democracy and civilization, but interestingly defers to mostly Anglo-European philosophers in his reasoning.

Hermeneutics of Faith

Historians try to deconstruct everything. When reading *Taking Back Philosophy*, I couldn't help think about the historical issues surrounding Chinese philosophers—when Confucius lived there were no well-defined ideological schools. Sima Tan (165–110 BCE), grand historian to the first Western Han emperor, categorized writings from the earlier Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods into "the six houses of thought," or *jia*. The most influential were the *mo*, *ru*, *fajia*, and *daojia* teachings (Goldin 2001: 88). These four *jia* were precursors to some of the "-isms" that evolved in later centuries: Mohism, Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism, respectively (Kidder 2003: 130). Therefore, what we read as Confucius was compiled centuries later. Likely, Van Norden would say that this is too dismissive. His last chapter emphasizes the fact that philosophers read texts with a hermeneutics of faith: "They are open to the possibility that other people, including people in very

different times and cultures, might know more about these things then we do, or at least they have views that can enrich our own in some way" (139). As historians, we often focus on why texts are written in a certain way rather than what they are actually saying: this chapter provides a good scolding and an emphasis of the importance of the philosophical lens in interpretation. Van Norden ends his work with some examples of heroic figures like Martin Luther King Jr. who were inspired by philosophy. He concludes by drawing parallels between Confucius and Socrates: both emphasized the importance of dialogue.

Conclusion

Taking Back Philosophy argues Van Norden's central thesis, that philosophy as a discipline must diversify, persuasively with depth and wit. In bringing Chinese philosophers into conversation with Anglo-European thinkers, Van Norden demonstrates the type of discussions that most professors and students currently miss out on. And there are more discussions to be had. An edited series of other LCTP in dialogue with each other could be an interesting follow up to Van Norden's manifesto.

Cross-cultural enquiry already holds a key place in quantitative history and the modeling of historical trends (Goldstone 1991; Korotayev and Khaltourina 2006; Morris 2010; Skocpol 1979; Turchin and Nefedov 2008; and many more). Empirical and historical data collection, however, is more complete for some regions than others, which limits the abilities of scholars to make cross-cultural comparisons. Comparative ancient histories, for example, often focus on well-covered regions like Rome, China, and Egypt (Hoyer and Manning [2018] provide a thorough historiography). The groundbreaking quantitative humanities project Seshat: Global History Databank works, in part, to collect and curate historical data on less-studied regions and cultures like Yemen, Iceland, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Nation, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea (Turchin et al. 2015). This allows scholars to compare historical trends in these regions with those in Rome and Egypt. Continued serious, meaningful engagement by philosophers, historians, and other humanities scholars in cross-cultural thinking will only help widen our perspective beyond more traditional regions of analysis.

Van Norden's work emphasizes the importance of bringing cross-cultural dialogue into the classroom. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995: 48) discussion of the production of history in terms of silences fits in here as well: "[Silences] are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees." Every discipline has its silences. Van Norden's manifesto represents a critical look at some of the structural issues within his discipline that cannot be fixed by, say, adding a couple books to the reading list. A quick mention of LCTP philosophers just to tick boxes in curricula weaves a

narrative for students that these thinkers represent an "other." This practice in any discipline does little to combat traditional silences. Van Norden's work encourages academics to dig deeper and question how the foundations of each discipline are taught to students, a useful exercise for anyone writing a curriculum. He emphasizes that this kind of reflective work is necessary for both philosophy students and the field itself: "Students of philosophy are ill-served by a narrow, ethnocentric education. Fixing the problem of philosophy's homogeneity is a matter of justice, but it is also about the very survival of philosophy as an academic discipline" (Van Norden 2017: 8).

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