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Action in Harmony with a Global World

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Bryan Van Norden has become about as notorious as an academic philosopher can be while remaining a virtuous person. His notoriety came with a column in the *New York Times* that took the still-ethnocentric approach of many North American and European university philosophy departments to task. The condescending and insulting dismissal of great works of thought from cultures and civilizations beyond Europe and European-descended North America should scandalize us. That it does not is to the detriment of academic philosophy's culture.

Anyone who cares about the future of philosophy as a tradition should read *Taking Back Philosophy* and take its lessons to heart, if one does not agree already with its purpose. The discipline of philosophy, as practiced in North American and European universities, must incorporate all the philosophical traditions of humanity into its curriculum and its subject matter. It is simple realism.

A Globalized World With No Absolute Hierarchies

I am not going to argue for this decision, because I consider it obvious that this must be done. *Taking Back Philosophy* is a quick read, an introduction to a political task that philosophers, no matter their institutional homes, must support if the tradition is going to survive beyond the walls of universities increasingly co-opted by destructive economic, management, and human resources policies.

Philosophy as a creative tradition cannot survive in an education economy built on the back of student debt, where institutions' priorities are set by a management class yoked to capital investors and corporate partners, which prioritizes the proliferation of countless administrative-only positions while highly educated teachers and researchers compete ruthlessly for poverty wages.

With this larger context in mind, Van Norden's call for the enlargement of departments' curriculums to cover all traditions is one essential pillar of the vision to liberate philosophy from the institutions that are destroying it as a viable creative process. In total, those four pillars are 1) universal accessibility, economically and physically; 2) community guidance of a university's priorities; 3) restoring power over the institution to creative and research professionals; and 4) globalizing the scope of education's content.

Taking Back Philosophy is a substantial brick through the window of the struggle to rebuild our higher education institutions along these democratic and liberating lines. Van Norden regularly publishes work of comparative philosophy that examines many problems of ethics and ontology using texts, arguments, and concepts from Western, Chinese, and Indian philosophy. But if you come to *Taking Back Philosophy* expecting more than a brick through those windows, you'll be disappointed. One chapter walks through a number of problems as examples, but the sustained conceptual engagement of a creative philosophical work is absent. Only the call to action remains.

What a slyly provocative call it is – the book's last sentence, "Let's discuss it . . ."

Unifying a Tradition of Traditions

I find it difficult to write a conventional review of *Taking Back Philosophy*, because so much of Van Norden's polemic is common sense to me. Of course, philosophy departments must be open to primary material from all the traditions of the human world, not just the Western. I am incapable of understanding why anyone would argue against this, given how globalized human civilization is today. For the context of this discussion, I will consider a historical and a technological aspect of contemporary globalization. Respectively, these are the fall of the European military empires, and the incredible intensity with which contemporary communications and travel technology integrates people all over Earth.

We no longer live in a world dominated by European military colonial empires, so re-emerging centres of culture and economics must be taken on their own terms. The Orientalist presumption, which Edward Said spent a career mapping, that there is no serious difference among Japanese, Malay, Chinese, Hindu, Turkic, Turkish, Persian, Arab, Levantine, or Maghreb cultures is not only wrong, but outright stupid. Orientalism as an academic discipline thrived for the centuries it did only because European weaponry intentionally and persistently kept those cultures from asserting themselves.

Indigenous peoples – throughout the Americas, Australia, the Pacific, and Africa – who have been the targets of cultural and eradicated genocides for centuries now claim and agitate for their human rights, as well as inclusion in the broader human community and species. I believe most people of conscience are appalled and depressed that these claims are controversial at all, and even seen by some as a sign of civilizational decline.

The impact of contemporary technology I consider an even more important factor than the end of imperialist colonialism in the imperative to globalize the philosophical tradition. Despite the popular rhetoric of contemporary globalization, the human world has been globalized for millennia. Virtually since urban life first developed, long-distance international trade and communication began as well.

Here are some examples. Some of the first major cities of ancient Babylon achieved their greatest economic prosperity through trade with cities on the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and as far east along the Indian Ocean coast as Balochistan. From 4000 to 1000 years ago, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Persian, Arab, Chinese, Mongol, Indian, Bantu, Malian, Inca, and Anishinaabeg peoples, among others, built trade networks and institutions stretching across continents.

Contemporary globalization is different in the speed and quantity of commerce, and diversity of goods. It is now possible to reach the opposite side of the planet in a day's travel, a journey so ordinary that tens of millions of people take these flights each year. Real-time communication is now possible between anywhere on Earth with broadband internet connections thanks to satellite networks and undersea fibre-optic cables. In 2015, the total material value of all goods and commercial services traded internationally was US\$21-trillion. That's a drop from the previous year's all-time (literally) high of US\$24-trillion.¹

¹ That US\$3-trillion drop in trade was largely the proliferating effect of the sudden price drop of human civilization's most essential good, crude oil, to just less than half of its 2014 value.

Travel, communication, and productivity has never been so massive or intense in all of human history. The major control hubs of the global economy are no longer centralized in a small set of colonial powers, but a variety of economic centres throughout the world, depending on industry. From Beijing, Moscow, Mumbai, Lagos, and Berlin to Tokyo, and Washington, the oil fields of Kansas, the Dakotas, Alberta, and Iraq, and the coltan, titanium, and tantalum mines of Congo, Kazakhstan, and China.

All these proliferating lists express a simple truth – all cultures of the world now legitimately claim recognition as equals, as human communities sharing our Earth as we hollow it out. Philosophical traditions from all over the world are components of those claims to equal recognition.

The Tradition of Process Thought

So that is the situation forcing a recalcitrant and reactionary academy to widen its curricular horizons – Do so, or face irrelevancy in a global civilization with multiple centres all standing as civic equals in the human community. This is where Van Norden himself leaves us. Thankfully, he understands that a polemic ending with a precise program immediately becomes empty dogma, a conclusion which taints the plausibility of an argument. His point is simple – that the academic discipline must expand its arms. He leaves the more complex questions of how the philosophical tradition itself can develop as a genuinely global community.

Process philosophy is a relatively new philosophical tradition, which can adopt the classics of Daoist philosophy as broad frameworks and guides. By process philosophy, I mean the research community that has grown around Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as primary innovators of their model of thought – a process philosophy that converges with an ecological post-humanism. The following are some essential aspects of this new school of process thinking, each principle in accord with the core concepts of the foundational texts of Daoism, *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi*.

Ecological post-humanist process philosophy is a thorough materialism, but it is an anti-reductive materialism. All that exists is bodies of matter and fields of force, whose potentials include everything for which Western philosophers have often felt obligated to postulate a separate substance over and above matter, whether calling it mind, spirit, or soul.

As process philosophy, the emphasis in any ontological analysis is on movement, change, and relationships instead of the more traditional Western focus on identity and sufficiency. If I can refer to examples from the beginning of Western philosophy in Greece, process thought is an underground movement with the voice of Heraclitus critiquing a mainstream with the voice of Parmenides. Becoming, not being, is the primary focus of ontological analysis.

Process thinking therefore is primarily concerned with potential and capacity. Knowledge, in process philosophy, as a result becomes inextricably bound with action. This unites a philosophical school identified as “Continental” in common-sense categories of academic disciplines with the concerns of pragmatist philosophy. Analytic philosophy took up many concepts from early 20th century pragmatism in the decades following the death of John Dewey. These inheritors, however, remained unable to overcome the paradoxes stymieing traditional pragmatist approaches, particularly how to reconcile truth as correspondence with knowledge having a purpose in action and achievement.

A solution to this problem of knowledge and action was developed in the works of Barry Allen during the 2000s. Allen built an account of perception that was rooted in contemporary research in animal behaviour, human neurology, and the theoretical interpretations of evolution in the works of Steven Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin.

His first analysis, focussed as it was on the dynamics of how human knowledge spurs technological and civilizational development, remains humanistic. Arguing from discoveries of how profoundly the plastic human brain is shaped in childhood by environmental interaction, Allen concludes that successful or productive worldly action itself constitutes the correspondence of our knowledge and the world. Knowledge does not consist of a private reserve of information that mirrors worldly states of affairs, but the physical and mental interaction of a person with surrounding processes and bodies to constitute those states of affairs. The plasticity of the human brain and our powers of social coordination are responsible for the peculiarly human mode of civilizational technology, but the same power to constitute states of affairs through activity is common to all processes and bodies.²

Action in Phase With All Processes: Wu Wei

Movement of interaction constitutes the world. This is the core principle of pragmatist process philosophy, and as such brings this school of thought into accord with the Daoist tradition. Ontological analysis in the *Dao De Jing* is entirely focussed on vectors of becoming – understanding the world in terms of its changes, movements, and flows, as each of these processes integrate in the complexity of states of affairs.

Not only is the *Dao De Jing* a foundational text in what is primarily a process tradition of philosophy, but it is also primarily pragmatist. Its author Lao Zi frames ontological arguments in practical concerns, as when he writes, “The most supple things in the world ride roughshod over the most rigid” (*Dao De Jing* §43). This is a practical and ethical argument against a Parmenidean conception of identity requiring stability as a necessary condition.

What cannot change cannot continue to exist, as the turbulence of existence will overcome and erase what can exist only by never adapting to the pressures of overwhelming external forces. What can only exist by being what it now is, will eventually cease to be. That which exists in metamorphosis and transformation has a remarkable resilience, because it is able to

² [A student of Allen's](#) arrived at this conclusion in combining his scientific pragmatism with the French process ontology of Deleuze and Guattari in the context of [ecological problems and eco-philosophical thinking](#).

gain power from the world's changes. This Daoist principle, articulated in such abstract terms, is in Deleuze and Guattari's work the interplay of the varieties of territorializations.

Knowledge in the Chinese tradition, as a concept, is determined by an ideal of achieving harmonious interaction with an actor's environment. Knowing facts of states of affairs – including their relationships and tendencies to spontaneous and proliferating change – is an important element of comprehensive knowledge. Nonetheless, Lao Zi describes such catalogue-friendly factual knowledge as, “Those who know are not full of knowledge. Those full of knowledge do not know” (*Dao De Jing* 81). Knowing the facts alone is profoundly inadequate to knowing how those facts constrict and open potentials for action. Perfectly harmonious action is the model of the Daoist concept of Wu Wei – knowledge of the causal connections among all the bodies and processes constituting the world's territories understood profoundly enough that self-conscious thought about them becomes unnecessary.³

Factual knowledge is only a condition of achieving the purpose of knowledge: perfectly adapting your actions to the changes of the world. All organisms' actions change their environments, creating physically distinctive territories: places that, were it not for my action, would be different. In contrast to the dualistic Western concept of nature, the world in Daoist thought is a complex field of overlapping territories whose tensions and conflicts shape the character of places. Fulfilled knowledge in this ontological context is knowledge that directly conditions your own actions and the character of your territory to harmonize most productively with the actions and territories that are always flowing around your own.

Politics of the Harmonious Life

The Western tradition, especially in its current sub-disciplinary divisions of concepts and discourses, has treated problems of knowledge as a domain separate from ethics, morality, politics, and fundamental ontology. Social epistemology is one field of the transdisciplinary humanities that unites knowledge with political concerns, but its approaches remain controversial in much of the conservative mainstream academy. The Chinese tradition has fundamentally united knowledge, moral philosophy, and all fields of politics especially political economy since the popular eruption of Daoist thought in the Warring States period 2300 years ago. Philosophical writing throughout eastern Asia since then has operated in this field of thought.

As such, Dao-influenced philosophy has much to offer contemporary progressive political thought, especially the new communitarianism of contemporary social movements with their roots in Indigenous decolonization, advocacy for racial, sexual, and gender liberation, and

³ This concept of knowledge as perfectly harmonious but non-self-conscious action also conforms to Henri Bergson's concept of intuition, the highest (so far) form of knowledge that unites the perfect harmony in action of brute animal instinct with the self-reflective and systematizing power of human understanding. This is a productive way for another creative contemporary philosophical path – the union of vitalist and materialist ideas in the work of thinkers like Jane Bennett – to connect with Asian philosophical traditions for centuries of philosophical resources on which to draw. But that's a matter for another essay.

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21st century socialist advocacy against radical economic inequality. In terms of philosophical tools and concepts for understanding and action, these movements have dense forebears, but a recent tradition.

The movement for economic equality and a just globalization draws on Antonio Gramsci's introduction of radical historical contingency to the marxist tradition. While its phenomenological and testimonial principles and concepts are extremely powerful and viscerally rooted in the lived experience of subordinated – what Deleuze and Guattari called minoritarian – people as groups and individuals, the explicit resources of contemporary feminism is likewise a century-old storehouse of discourse. Indigenous liberation traditions draw from a variety of philosophical traditions lasting millennia, but the ongoing systematic and systematizing revival is almost entirely a 21st century practice.

Antonio Negri, Rosi Braidotti, and Isabelle Stengers' masterworks unite an analysis of humanity's destructive technological and ecological transformation of Earth and ourselves to develop a solution to those problems rooted in communitarian moralities and politics of seeking harmony while optimizing personal and social freedom. Daoism offers literally thousands of years of work in the most abstract metaphysics on the nature of freedom in harmony and flexibility in adaptation to contingency. Such conceptual resources are of immense value to these and related philosophical currents that are only just beginning to form explicitly in notable size in the Western tradition.

Van Norden has written a book that is, for philosophy as a university discipline, is a wake-up call to this obstinate branch of Western academy. The world around you is changing, and if you hold so fast to the contingent borders of your tradition, your territory will be overwritten, trampled, torn to bits. Live and act harmoniously with the changes that are coming. Change yourself.

It isn't so hard to read some Lao Zi for a start.

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