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Thinking À La Carte

Adam Briggle and Robert Frodeman, University of North Texas

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In 2016, we published an article in the *New York Times* column The Stone, titled “When Philosophy Lost its Way.” We followed this up with a book, *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st Century Philosophy*. In similar fashion, Bryan Van Norden has published a book that expands on an argument originally placed in The Stone. Both our book and Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy* criticize professional philosophy. We both call for greater diversity in the face of homogeneity.

For us, the troubling orthodoxy is disciplinarity – the way philosophers conceive of themselves as experts just like any other academic branch of knowledge. We called for a wider engagement by philosophers, where their place of business isn’t only the classroom and the study, but also projects in the field, working in a day-by-day fashion with scientists, engineers, policy-makers, and community groups. For Van Norden, what’s problematic is the orthodoxy of the Anglo-European canon. He prescribes diversifying the curriculum through the greater inclusion of less commonly taught philosophies (LCTP).

“People Had Been Dreaming, and First and Foremost – Old Kant”

Kant is our common *bete noir*. We see in Kant a tipping point where philosophy written for someone other than specialists became recast as ‘bungling,’ which was obviously the sort of thing any self-respecting specialist should avoid. By the end of the nineteenth century, Socratic philosophy (fundamentally interrogative in nature) morphed into our present philosophical institutions (whose focus on expertise bear a distressing similarity to sophistry).

For Van Norden, Kant serves as the key villain in the Western drama of philosophical ethnocentrism. Kant’s unabashed prejudices have burdened philosophy with a legacy of “structural racism.” Western philosophy, Van Norden claims, practices an Orientalism where certain peoples and traditions are written off as simply non-philosophical.

Both of our critiques, then, are institutional as well as epistemic. We are both addressing deeply engrained assumptions about what counts as ‘real’ philosophy and how those assumptions get built into practices of teaching, evaluation, hiring, promotion, and more. In short, we are sympathetic to Van Norden’s basic project. After all, who could argue against the inclusion of different and diverse perspectives in philosophical teaching and research?

As Van Norden shows, there is much to be gained by, for example, putting Hobbes in conversation with Confucius or adding Cheng Yi to discussions about weakness of the will. We do, however, have a couple of criticisms, which we offer in a spirit of solidarity given our shared efforts to reform the institutions of philosophy. The first criticism is about the magnitude of the problem and the second is about its definition.

The Scope of the Problem

How big is the problem of philosophical ethnocentrism really? In some sense, this is a matter of attitudes and institutional climates that are very hard to measure. But in other ways

it is an empirical question. Van Norden's argument would be strengthened if he expanded his survey of the profession. He offers many anecdotes of philosophers with prejudices, but he only offers a few systematic empirical remarks about what kinds of LCTP are and are not being taught at different institutions.

And the way he does this is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, he tends to focus only on 'top' (via Leiter's definition) philosophy departments or PhD-granting departments. This can give a skewed picture, which is something we wonder about, given that we have two faculty in our relatively small department focused on Southeast Asian philosophy and religion. To give one other data point, discovered in our recent travels: one of the four philosophy faculty at UW-La Crosse focuses on Chinese philosophy. These snapshots make us wonder about the adequacy of his survey.

Second, there's the way he measures the problem. He first isolates different kinds of LCTP (Chinese, Indian, Native American, and African) and then notes how rarely each features on the roster of philosophy departments. But it could be that when LCTP are aggregated the problem dissipates.¹ As he notes, not every department can do every kind of philosophy, so diversity is to be accomplished collectively and not within each discreet academic unit. So, why use isolated academic units to measure the problem?

And this says nothing of the possibility that philosophers regularly sprinkle LCTP into their curricula in ways that wouldn't show up on such a cursory survey. We certainly would not list ourselves as specialists in any LCTP, but we both draw from a variety of traditions and cultures in the classroom. We suspect this kind of practice is widespread.

So What Is Philosophy?

But set aside the question about the magnitude of the problem to consider again its definition. Van Norden defines philosophy as dialogue about important problems in the absence of an agreed-upon method for their resolution. He claims this dialogue has happened in many cultures but that philosophy departments tend to only busy themselves with one culture. And they do so for no good reason, just rank prejudice.

Yet there might be a good reason to focus (not exclusively, but mainly) on one cultural tradition. Not because one is the best or only tradition. Rather, because philosophy is inextricably woven into cultures. Van Norden gives a passing mention that "doctrines and practices of argumentation are situated in their particular cultures" (p. 30). But he quickly sets this aside to remind us that philosophy in the West (or anywhere) is not monolithic. He takes from this a sense of philosophy that is really only very loosely or shallowly rooted to any particular tradition. Since there is no *one* single conception of Western philosophy, he seems to say, then we can extract this or that conception and set it alongside this or that conception extracted from any LCTP.

Van Norden pictures the problems in philosophy as discreet units that can be excised from their historical contexts and analyzed in isolation. This constitutes the analytical approach to

¹ His original Stone article (with Jay Garfield) makes a stronger empirical claim that seems to be absent from the book for some reason.

philosophy or what we call thinking a la carte, where issues can be dished up as separate items rather than as components of a larger meal.

We subscribe to a different conception of philosophy. On our view, philosophy does not primarily consist of a series of problems (e.g., free will; intrinsic value) which one can take a variety of positions on. Philosophy consists of a tradition and a narrative across time. The thoughts of Hegel or Heidegger can best be understood as a rumination on an ongoing conversation involving Nietzsche, Christianity, Duns Scotus, Aristotle, Plato, etc.

In short, we picture philosophy in narrative and historical terms as embedded in cultural contexts. And given that there is only so much time and so many credit hours in the degree plan, a philosophical education is understandably limited to one tradition (though, again, not exclusively – there should be room for cross-cultural comparisons).

It is best, we are suggesting, to learn one story with some depth and care rather than take a desultory and superficial tour across a hodgepodge of traditions. This kind of episodic and fractured mental life is given more than enough room in our media landscape today, where everything is served up a la carte, with few if any binding ties to things around it. Let philosophy stand as a counterweight to the aimlessness of popular culture.

A Western World

We are comfortable with a general focus on Western philosophy. It is the culture we live within, and the culture that has for-better-and-worse taken over the world. After all, when President Trump meets with President Xi Jinping, they wear suits and ties – the traditional Western garb, not traditional Chinese clothing. This symbolizes the fact that ours is a world most strongly influenced by Western traditions, especially science, technology, and politics. Immersing one’s self in the history of Western philosophy will help illuminate that world – its historical development and its underlying presuppositions about the human condition.

None of this is to either endorse or condemn “the West.” Nor to deny that greater exposure to LCTP traditions wouldn’t be a good thing. It is only to suggest that students who understand the history of Western philosophy will be well-equipped to critically engage with contemporary society on a deep level. We grant with Van Norden that there is no such thing as “*the*” Western conception of philosophy.

Of course that tradition is full of disagreement. But it is a tradition and we all live in a world of its making. In other words, we fear that Van Norden’s proposal taken at full strength will contribute to the a la carte thinking that leaves people ill-prepared to address the challenges that 21st century society presents us with.

Contact details: robert.frodeman@unt.edu, adam.briggle@unt.edu

A. Briggie and R. Frodeman

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