



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

“China” As the West’s Other in World Philosophy

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Fuller, Steve. “‘China’ As the West’s Other in World Philosophy.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 11 (2018): 1-11.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-42x> (provided by WordPress)

*This essay was previously published in the Journal of World Philosophy, their Summer 2018 issue.*

Bryan Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* draws on his expertise in Chinese philosophy to launch a comprehensive and often scathing critique of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. I focus on the sense in which "China" figures as a "non-Western culture" in Van Norden's argument. Here I identify an equivocation between what I call a "functional" and a "substantive" account of culture.

I argue that Van Norden, like perhaps most others who have discussed Chinese philosophy, presupposes a "functional" conception, whereby the relevant sense in which "China" matters is exactly as "non-Western," which ends up incorporating some exogenous influences such as Indian Buddhism but not any of the Western philosophies that made major inroads in the twentieth century. I explore the implications of the functional/substantive distinction for the understanding of cross-cultural philosophy generally.

### **Dragging the West Into the World**

I first ran across Bryan Van Norden's understanding of philosophy from a very provocative piece entitled "Why the Western Philosophical Canon Is Xenophobic and Racist,"<sup>1</sup> which trailed the book now under review. I was especially eager to review it because I had recently participated in a symposium in the *Journal of World Philosophies* that discussed Chinese philosophy—Van Norden's own area of expertise—as a basis for launching a general understanding of world philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

However, as it turns out, most of the book is preoccupied with various denigrations of philosophy in contemporary America, from both inside and outside the discipline. The only thing I will say about this aspect of the book is that, even granting the legitimacy of Van Norden's complaints, I don't think that arguments around some "ontological" conception of what philosophy "really is" will resolve the matter because these can always be dismissed as self-serving and question-begging.

What could make a difference is showing that a broader philosophical palette would actually make philosophy graduates more employable in an increasingly globalized world. Those like Van Norden who oppose the "Anglo-analytic hegemony" in contemporary philosophy need to argue explicitly that it results in philosophy punching below its weight in terms of potential impact. That philosophy departments of the most analytic sort continue to survive and even flourish, and that their students continue to be employed, should be presented as setting a very low standard of achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Van Norden, "Western Philosophy is Racist," (<https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-western-philosophical-canon-is-xenophobic-and-racist>; last accessed on May 10, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See: Leigh Jenco, Steve Fuller, David Haekwon Kim, Thaddeus Metz, and Miljana Milojevic, "Symposium: Are Certain Knowledge Frameworks More Congenial to the Aims of Cross-Cultural Philosophy?" *Journal of World Philosophies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 82-145 (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp/article/view/1261/128>; last accessed on May 10, 2018).

After all, philosophy departments tend to recruit students with better than average qualifications, while the costs for maintaining those departments remain relatively low. In contrast, another recent book that raises similar concerns to Van Norden's, *Socrates Tenured* (Frodeman and Briggie 2016),<sup>3</sup> is more successful in pointing to extramural strategies for philosophy to pursue a more ambitious vision of general societal relevance.

### Challenging How We Understand Culture Itself

But at its best, *Taking Back Philosophy* forces us to ask: what exactly does “culture” mean in “multicultural” or “cross-cultural” philosophy? For Van Norden, the culture he calls “China” is the exemplar of a non-Western philosophical culture. It refers primarily—if not exclusively—to those strands of Chinese thought associated with its ancient traditions. To be sure, this arguably covers everything that Chinese scholars and intellectuals wrote about prior to the late nineteenth century, when Western ideas started to be regularly discussed. It would then seem to suggest that “China” refers to the totality of its indigenous thought and culture.

But this is not quite right, since Van Norden certainly includes the various intellectually productive engagements that Buddhism as an alien (Indian) philosophy has had with the native Confucian and especially Daoist world-views. Yet he does not seem to want to include the twentieth-century encounters between Confucianism and, say, European liberalism and American pragmatism in the Republican period or Marxism in the Communist period. Here he differs from Leigh Jenco (2010),<sup>4</sup> who draws on the Republican Chinese encounter with various Western philosophies to ground a more general cross-cultural understanding of philosophy.

It would appear that Van Norden is operating with a functional rather than substantive conception of “China” as a philosophical culture. In other words, he is less concerned with all the philosophy that has happened within China than with simply the philosophy in China that makes it “non-Western.” Now some may conclude that this makes Van Norden as ethnocentric as the philosophers he criticizes.

I am happy to let readers judge for themselves on that score. However, functional conceptions of culture are quite pervasive, especially in the worlds of politics and business, whereby culture is treated as a strategic resource to provide a geographic region with what the classical political economist David Ricardo famously called “comparative advantage” in trade.

But equally, Benedict Anderson's (1983) influential account of nationalism as the construction of “imagined communities” in the context of extricating local collective identities from otherwise homogenizing imperial tendencies would fall in this category.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Frodeman, and Adam Briggie, *Socrates Tenured* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Leigh Jenco, *Making the Political: Founding and Action in the Political Theory of Zhang Shizhao* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Basically your culture is what you do that nobody else does—or at least does not do as well as you. However, your culture is not the totality of all that you do, perhaps not even what you do most of the time.

To be sure, this is not the classical anthropological conception of culture, which is “substantive” in the sense of providing a systematic inventory of what people living in a given region actually think and do, regardless of any overlap with what others outside the culture think and do. Indeed, anthropologists in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries expected that most of the items in the inventory would come from the outside, the so-called doctrine of “diffusionism.”

Thus, they have tended to stress the idiosyncratic mix of elements that go into the formation of any culture over any dominant principle. This helps explain why nowadays every culture seems to be depicted as a “hybrid.” I would include Jenco’s conception of Chinese culture in this “substantive” conception.

However, what distinguished, say, Victorians like Edward Tylor from today’s “hybrid anthropologists” was that the overlap of elements across cultures was used by the former as a basis for cross-cultural comparisons, albeit often to the detriment of the non-Western cultures involved. This fueled ambitions that anthropology could be made into a “science” sporting general laws of progress, etc.

My point here is not to replay the history of the struggle for anthropology’s soul, which continues to this day, but simply to highlight a common assumption of the contesting parties—namely, that a “culture” is defined exclusively in terms of matters happening inside a given geographical region, in which case things happening outside the region must be somehow represented inside the region in order to count as part of a given culture. In contrast, the “functional” conception defines “culture” in purely relational terms, perhaps even with primary reference to what is presumed to lie outside a given culture.

### **Matters of Substance and Function**

Both the substantive and the functional conception derive from the modern core understanding of culture, as articulated by Johann Gottfried Herder and the German Idealists, which assumed that each culture possesses an “essence” or “spirit.” On the substantive conception, which was Herder’s own, each culture is distinguished by virtue of having come from a given region, as per the etymological root of “culture” in “agriculture.” In that sense, a culture’s “essence” or “spirit” is like a seed that can develop in various ways depending on the soil in which it is planted.

Indeed, Herder’s teacher, Kant had already used the German *Keime* (“seeds”) in a book of lectures whose title is often credited with having coined “anthropology” (Wilson 2014).<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Wilson, “Kant on Civilization, Culture and Moralization,” in *Kant’s Lectures on Anthropology: A Critical Guide*, ed. A. Cohen (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 191-210.

is the sense of culture that morphs into racist ideologies. While such racialism can be found in Kant, it is worth stressing that his conception of race does not depend on the sense of genetic fixity that would become the hallmark of twentieth-century “scientific racism.” Rather, Kant appeared to treat “race” as a diagnostic category for environments that hold people back, to varying degrees, from realizing humanity’s full potential.

Here Kant was probably influenced by the Biblical dispersal of humanity, first with Adam’s Fall and then the Noachian flood, which implied that the very presence of different races or cultures marks our species’ decline from its common divine source. Put another way, Kant was committed to what Lamarck called the “inheritance of acquired traits,” though Lamarck lacked Kant’s Biblical declinist backdrop. Nevertheless, they agreed that a sustainably radical change to the environment could decisively change the character of its inhabitants. This marks them both as heirs to the Enlightenment.

To be sure, this reading of Kant is unlikely to assuage either today’s racists or, for that matter, anti-racists or multiculturalists, since it doesn’t assume that the preservation of racial or cultural identity possesses intrinsic (positive or negative) value. In this respect, Kant’s musings on race should be regarded as “merely historical,” based on his fallible second-hand knowledge of how peoples in different parts of the world have conducted their lives.

In fact, the only sense of difference that the German Idealists unequivocally valued was self-individuation, which is ultimately tied to the functional conception of culture, whereby my identity is directly tied to my difference from you. It follows that the boundaries of culture—or the self, for that matter—are moveable feasts. In effect, as your identity changes, mine does as well—and vice versa.

### **Justifying a New World Order**

This is the metaphysics underwriting imperialism’s original liberal capitalist self-understanding as a global free-trade zone. In its ideal form, independent nation-states would generate worldwide prosperity by continually reorienting themselves to each other in response to market pressures. Even if the physical boundaries between nation-states do not change, their relationship to each other would, through the spontaneous generation and diffusion of innovations.

The result would be an ever-changing global division of labor. Of course, imperialism in practice fostered a much more rigid—even racialized—division of labor, as Marxists from Lenin onward decried. Those who nevertheless remain hopeful in the post-imperial era that the matter can ultimately be resolved diagnose the problem as one of “uneven development,” a phrase that leaves a sour aftertaste in the mouths of “post-colonialists.”

But more generally, “functionalism” as a movement in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology tended towards a relatively static vision of social order. And perhaps something similar could be said about Van Norden’s stereotyping of “China.” However, he would be hardly alone. In his magisterial *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*,

a book which Van Norden does not mention, Randall Collins (1998)<sup>6</sup> adopts a similarly functionalist stance. There it leads to a quite striking result, which has interesting social epistemological consequences.

Although Collins incorporates virtually every thinker that Chinese philosophy experts normally talk about, carefully identifying their doctrinal nuances and scholastic lineages, he ends his treatment of China at the historical moment that happens to coincide with what he marks as a sea change in the fortunes of Western philosophy, which occurs in Europe's early modern period.

I put the point this way because Collins scrupulously avoids making any of the sorts of ethnocentric judgements that Van Norden rightly castigates throughout his book, whereby China is seen as un- or pre-philosophical. However, there is a difference in attitude to philosophy that emerges in Europe, less in terms of philosophy's overall purpose than its *modus operandi*. Collins calls it rapid discovery science.

Rapid discovery science is the idea that standardization in the expression and validation of knowledge claims—both quantitatively and qualitatively—expedites the ascent to higher levels of abstraction and reflexivity by making it easier to record and reproduce contributions in the ongoing discourse. Collins means here not only the rise of mathematical notation to calculate and measure, but also “technical languages,” the mastery of which became the mark of “expertise” in a sense more associated with domain competence than with “wisdom.” In the latter case, the evolution of “peer review” out of the editorial regimentation of scientific correspondence in the early journals played a decisive role (Bazerman 1987).<sup>7</sup>

Citation conventions, from footnotes to bibliographies, were further efficiency measures. Collins rightly stresses the long-term role of universities in institutionalizing these innovations, but of more immediate import was the greater interconnectivity within Europe that was afforded by the printing press and an improved postal system. The overall result, so I believe, was that collective intellectual memory was consolidated to such an extent that intellectual texts could be treated as capital, something to both build upon and radically redeploy—once one has received the right training to access them. These correspond to the phases that Thomas Kuhn called “normal” and “revolutionary” science, respectively.

To be sure, Collins realizes that China had its own stretches in which competing philosophical schools pursued higher levels of abstraction and reflexivity, sometimes with impressive results. But these were maintained solely by the emotional energy of the participants who often dealt with each other directly. Once external events dispersed that energy, then the successors had to go back to a discursive “ground zero” of referring to original texts and reinventing arguments.

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<sup>6</sup> Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

### **Can There Be More Than One Zero Point?**

Of course, the West has not been immune to this dynamic. Indeed, it has even been romanticized. A popular conception of philosophy that continues to flourish at the undergraduate level is that there can be no genuine escape from origins, no genuine sense of progress. It is here that Alfred North Whitehead's remark that all philosophy is footnotes to Plato gets taken a bit too seriously.

In any case, Collins' rapid discovery science was specifically designed to escape just this situation, which Christian Europe had interpreted as the result of humanity's fallen state, a product of Adam's "Original Sin." This insight figured centrally in the Augustinian theology that gradually—especially after the existential challenge that Islam posed to Christendom in the thirteenth century—began to color how Christians viewed their relationship to God, the source of all knowing and being. The Protestant Reformation marked a high watermark in this turn of thought, which became the crucible in which rapid discovery science was forged in the seventeenth century. Since the 1930s, this period has been called the "Scientific Revolution" (Harrison 2007).<sup>8</sup>

In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, all appeals to authority potentially became not sources of wisdom but objects of suspicion. They had to undergo severe scrutiny, which at the time were often characterized as "trials of faith." Francis Bacon, the personal lawyer to England's King James I, is a pivotal figure because he clearly saw continuity from the Inquisition in Catholic Europe (which he admired, even though it ensnared his intellectual ally Galileo), through the "witch trials" pursued by his fellow Protestants on both sides of the Atlantic, to his own innovation—the "crucial experiment"—which would be subsequently enshrined as the hallmark of the scientific method, most energetically by Karl Popper.

Bacon famously developed his own "hermeneutic of suspicion" as proscriptions against what he called "idols of the mind," that is, lazy habits of thought that are born of too much reliance on authority, tradition, and surface appearances generally. For Bacon and his fellow early modern Christians, including such Catholics as Rene Descartes, these habits bore the mark of Original Sin because they traded on animal passions—and the whole point of the human project is to rise above our fallen animal natures to recover our divine birthright.

The cultural specificity of this point is often lost, even on Westerners for whom the original theological backdrop seems no longer compelling. What is cross-culturally striking about the radical critique of authority posed by the likes of Bacon and Descartes is that it did not descend into skepticism, even though—especially in the case of Descartes—the skeptical challenge was explicitly confronted. What provided the stopgap was faith, specifically in the idea that once we recognize our fallen nature, redemption becomes possible by finding a

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

clearing on which to build truly secure foundations for knowledge and thereby to redeem the human condition, God willing.

For Descartes, this was “*cogito ergo sum*.” To be sure, the “God willing” clause, which was based on the doctrine of Divine Grace, became attenuated in the eighteenth century as “Providence” and then historicized as “Progress,” finally disappearing altogether with the rising tide of secularism in the nineteenth century (Löwith 1949; Fuller 2010: chap. 8).<sup>9</sup>

But its legacy was a peculiar turn of mind that continually seeks a clearing to chart a path to the source of all meaning, be it called “God” or “Truth.” This is what makes three otherwise quite temperamentally different philosophers—Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger—equally followers in Descartes’ footsteps. They all prioritized clearing a space from which to proceed over getting clear about the end state of the process.

Thus, the branches of modern Western philosophy concerned with knowledge—epistemology and the philosophy of science—have been focused more on methodology than axiology, that is, the means rather than the ends of knowledge. While this sense of detachment resonates with, say, the Buddhist disciplined abandonment of our default settings to become open to a higher level of state of being, the intellectual infrastructure provided by rapid discovery science allows for an archive to be generated that can be extended and reflected upon indefinitely by successive inquirers.

### **Common Themes Across Continents**

A good way to see this point is that in principle the Buddhist and, for that matter, the Socratic quest for ultimate being could be achieved in one’s own lifetime with sufficient dedication, which includes taking seriously the inevitability of one’s own physical death. In contrast, the modern Western quest for knowledge—as exemplified by science—is understood as a potentially endless intergenerational journey in which today’s scientists effectively lead vicarious lives for the sake of how their successors will regard them.

Indeed, this is perhaps the core ethic promoted in Max Weber’s famous “Science as a Vocation” lecture (Fuller 2015: chap. 3).<sup>10</sup> Death as such enters, not to remind scientists that they must eventually end their inquiries but that whatever they will have achieved by the end of their lives will help pave the way for others to follow.

Heidegger appears as such a “deep” philosopher in the West because he questioned the metaphysical sustainability of the intellectual infrastructure of rapid discovery science, which the Weberian way of death presupposes. Here we need to recall that Heidegger’s popular reception was originally mediated by the postwar Existentialist movement, which was fixated on the paradoxes of the human condition thrown up by Hiroshima, whereby the most

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Steve Fuller, *Science: The Art of Living* (Durham UK: Acumen, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Steve Fuller, *Knowledge: The Philosophical Quest in History* (London: Routledge, 2015).



advanced science managed to end the biggest war in history by producing a weapon with the greatest chance of destroying humanity altogether in the future. Not surprisingly, Heidegger has proved a convenient vehicle for Westerners to discover Buddhism.

### **Early Outreach? Or Appropriation?**

Finally, it is telling that the Western philosopher whom Van Norden credits with holding China in high esteem, Leibniz, himself had a functional understanding of China. To be sure, Leibniz was duly impressed by China's long track record of imperial rule at the political, economic, and cultural levels, all of which were the envy of Europe. But Leibniz honed in on one feature of Chinese culture—what he took to be its “ideographic” script—which he believed could provide the intellectual infrastructure for a global project of organizing and codifying all knowledge so as to expedite its progress.

This was where he thought China had a decisive “comparative advantage” over the West. Clearly Leibniz was a devotee of rapid discovery science, and his project—shared by many contemporaries across Europe—would be pursued again to much greater effect two hundred years later by Paul Otlet, the founder of modern library and information science, and Otto Neurath, a founding member of the logical positivist movement.

While the Chinese regarded their written characters as simply a medium for people in a far-flung empire to communicate easily with each other, Leibniz saw in them the potential for collaboration on a universal scale, given that each character amounted to a picture of an abstraction, the metaphorical rendered literal, a message that was not simply conveyed but embedded in the medium. It seemed to satisfy the classical idea of *nous*, or “intellectual intuition,” as a kind of perception, which survives in the phrase, “seeing with the mind's eye.”

However, the Chinese refused to take Leibniz's bait, which led him to begin a train of thought that culminated in the so-called Needham Thesis, which turns on why Earth's most advanced civilization, China, failed to have a “Scientific Revolution” (Needham 1969; Fuller 1997: chap. 5).<sup>11</sup> Whereas Leibniz was quick to relate Chinese unreceptiveness to his proposal to their polite but firm rejection of the solicitations of Christian missionaries, Joseph Needham, a committed Marxist, pointed to the formal elements of the distinctive cosmology promoted by the Abrahamic religions, especially Christianity, that China lacked—but stopping short of labelling the Chinese “heathens.”

An interesting feature of Leibniz's *modus operandi* is that he saw cross-cultural encounters as continuous with commerce (Perkins 2004).<sup>12</sup> No doubt his conception was influenced by living at a time when the only way a European could get a message to China was through

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969); Steve Fuller, *Science: Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Milton Keynes UK: Open University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

traders and missionaries, who typically travelled together. But he also clearly imagined the resulting exchange as a negotiation in which each side could persuade the other to shift their default positions to potential mutual benefit.

This mentality would come to be crucial to the dynamic mentality of capitalist political economy, on which Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage was based. However, the Chinese responded to their European counterparts with hospitality but only selective engagement with their various intellectual and material wares, implying their unwillingness to be fluid with what I earlier called "self-individuation."

Consequently, Europeans only came to properly understand Chinese characters in the mid-nineteenth century, by which time it was treated as a cultural idiosyncrasy, not a platform for pursuing universal knowledge. That world-historic moment for productive engagement had passed—for reasons that Marxist political economy adequately explains—and all subsequent attempts at a "universal language of thought" have been based on Indo-European languages and Western mathematical notation.

China is not part of this story at all, and continues to suffer from that fact, notwithstanding its steady ascendancy on the world stage over the past century. How this particular matter is remedied should focus minds interested in a productive future for cross-cultural philosophy and multiculturalism more generally. But depending on what we take the exact problem to be, the burden of credit and blame across cultures will be apportioned accordingly.

Based on the narrative that I have told here, I am inclined to conclude that the Chinese underestimated just how seriously Europeans like Leibniz took their own ideas. This in turn raises some rather deep questions about the role that a shift in the balance of plausibility away from "seeing with one's own eyes" and towards "seeing with the mind's eye" has played in the West's ascendancy.

## **Conclusion**

I began this piece by distinguishing a "substantive" and a "functional" approach to culture because even theorists as culturally sensitive as Van Norden and Collins adopt a "functional" rather than a "substantive" approach. They defend and elaborate China as a philosophical culture in purely relational terms, based on its "non-Western" character.

This leads them to include, say, Chinese Buddhism but not Chinese Republicanism or Chinese Communism—even though the first is no less exogenous than the second two to "China," understood as the land mass on which Chinese culture has been built over several millennia. Of course, this is not to take away from Van Norden's or Collins' achievements in reminding us of the continued relevance of Chinese philosophical culture.

Yet theirs remains a strategically limited conception designed mainly to advance an argument about Western philosophy. Here Collins follows the path laid down by Leibniz and Needham, whereas Van Norden takes that argument and flips it against the West—or,

rather, contemporary Western philosophy. The result in both cases is that “China” is instrumentalized for essentially Western purposes.

I have no problem whatsoever with this approach (which is my own), as long as one is fully aware of its conceptual implications, which I’m not sure that Van Norden is. For example, he may think that his understanding of Chinese philosophical culture is “purer” than, say, Leigh Jenco’s, which focuses on a period with significant Western influence. However, this is “purity” only in the sense of an “ideal type” of the sort the German Idealists would have recognized as a functionally differentiated category within an overarching system.

In Van Norden’s case, that system is governed by the West/non-West binary. Thus, there are various ways to be “Western” and various ways to be “non-Western” for Van Norden. Van Norden is not sufficiently explicit about this logic. The alternative conceptual strategy would be to adopt a “substantive” approach to China that takes seriously everything that happens within its physical borders, regardless of origin. The result would be the more diffuse, laundry list approach to culture that was championed by the classical anthropologists, for which “hybrid” is now the politically correct term.

To be sure, this approach is not without its own difficulties, ranging from a desire to return to origins (“racialism”) to forced comparisons between innovator and adopter cultures. But whichever way one goes on this matter, “China” remains a contested concept in the context of world philosophy.

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