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Dawid Rogacz

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RACIST CURRICULA AND THE CHALLENGE OF MULTICULTURAL PHILOSOPHY

Bryan Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*

Dawid Rogacz

Department of Philosophy, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

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*This review essay discusses Bryan Van Norden's book *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. Van Norden analyzes the situation in which the West deprives philosophies from other cultural traditions of their philosophical nature, as well as the cultural and political conditioning of this problem. Van Norden convincingly demonstrates implicit racism hidden behind philosophy curricula, which is supported by increasing nationalism in both Europe and the United States. Although his book is not radical enough in multiculturalizing philosophy, it successfully combines the approach of an academician with a practical response to the social demands of our times.*

Imagine you live on an island with only one species of trees, namely pine. Since you can distinguish it from other kinds of plants by merely using the word *tree*, you simply call it *tree*. As a result, according to your definition of tree, a tree is coniferous and gymnospermous, and does not shed its needles in winter. If anybody asked you the reason for such a definition, you would indicate the trees on your island, which – for as long as anybody can remember –

have had precisely this form. However, one day you leave the island and reach another one, where there is nothing but cherries, which are not coniferous and do not have any needles, not to mention the fact their leaves cannot survive winter. Your first reaction would be: ‘This is not a tree! I mean, it’s beautiful, but it did not grow on my island and it does not resemble any of our trees!’ You could also enlarge upon your definition, searching for a common denominator for pines and cherries (in contrast, for example, to blueberries, which still fall outside this new definition of *trees*), running the risk that any future encounter may reveal the shortcomings of your tentative definition.

The situation described in this story is basically that of western philosophy in an encounter with its non-western, mainly Asian counterpart, particularly the situation in which the West deprives philosophies from other cultural traditions of their philosophical nature. This problem, along with its cultural and political conditioning, has been directly addressed in Bryan Van Norden’s recent book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. With this book, Van Norden – Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple Professor at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, and renowned expert in Chinese philosophy – has put his knowledge of Asian philosophy into a broader, argumentative context. The book was inspired by an editorial in ‘The Stone’ column of the *New York Times* published by Van Norden and Jay L. Garfield (a respected scholar in Indian philosophy) in May of 2016. The article, entitled ‘If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,’ ended with the conclusion that departments which regularly offer courses only on western philosophy should change their name to ‘Departments of European and American Philosophy.’ The article received 797 comments in just twelve hours, most of which were critical, mainly of the ‘political correctness’ of authors; while some of them were openly Eurocentric, if not racist. The endeavour to answer those dismissals in a systematic way makes Van Norden’s book something much more than just another scholarly treatise; it is a place when academic philosophy meets social criticism.

The book has a foreword by Jay L. Garfield. As Garfield points out, most of those who commented on the *New York Times* article did not provide any textual support; if any of them referred to Chinese philosophy, for example, they mentioned ancient figures such as Confucius, trying to prove the non-philosophical character of all non-western thought on this basis. Using the *per analogiam* argument, Garfield compares this to someone quoting nobody but Heraclitus in order to state that the West has no tradition of debate (Garfield 2017, xiii–xiv). Another argument employed against using the term ‘philosophy’ in regard to Asian thinkers is that they were sages rather than philosophers – an argument that reminds me of what I, as a scholar of Chinese philosophy, have heard many times from my colleagues in the philosophy department, namely: ‘the East certainly had some wisdom, perhaps had some thought, but definitely had no philosophy.’ As Garfield notes, there are

no ‘wisdom departments,’ so although at first glance this attitude appears to recognize the East, it is ultimately no less Eurocentric. The third argument could be encapsulated by the motto ‘philosophy was born in Greece.’ The ridiculousness of this statement has been demonstrated with the story about pines and cherries, and Garfield gives a similar example, by defining food through the prism of Italian cuisine. The foreword ends with the assertion that since departments of philosophy do not even attempt to engage with non-western intellectual traditions, their curricula are simply (and deeply) racist (xix).

Van Norden’s preface describes the book as ‘polemical and intentionally provocative,’ ‘accessible to general readers,’ and thus ‘less detailed’ than typical academic work. This is reflected at the start of the first chapter (‘A Manifesto for Multicultural Philosophy’), which opens with statistics showing the extremely low percentage of department members who work on any form of non-western philosophy: ‘among the top fifty philosophy departments in the United States that grant a PhD, only six have a member of their regular faculty who teaches Chinese philosophy’ (Van Norden 2017, 2), which stands in stark contrast to numerous narrowly specialized positions from the field of Greek or analytic philosophy, for example. Teaching Chinese philosophy (and other ‘less commonly taught philosophies’ [LCTP], as Van Norden calls them) is important for at least three reasons: first, geopolitical (globalization and the position of China); second, philosophical (comparisons between Chinese concepts of virtue and justice or Buddhist dialecticism and western ideas, for example); third, demographic (more and more Asian, African, and Native American students). Van Norden then comes back to the comments on the *New York Times* article and the opinions of prominent politicians such as Antonin Scalia that mocked Chinese philosophy as ‘fortune cookies’ or ‘staring at a wall,’ and poses a (rhetorical) question of what is so unphilosophical in the arguments behind a series of Chinese concepts, such as the Mohist idea of state-of-nature, Mencius’ view on human nature, Zhuangzi’s skepticism, Han Fei’s political realism, Zongmi’s idealism, Fazang’s relationism, Wang Yangming’s ethical intellectualism, Dai Zhen’s naturalism, Mou Zongsan’s critique of Kant, and so on (14).

This substantive case is followed by an analysis of the argument against ‘essential ethnocentrism,’ which claims that since philosophy is a Greek term, only the tradition that grows out of the Greek thinkers can be called *philosophy*. As Van Norden argues, the type of inquiry cannot depend on historical accident (just as in the case of pines and cherries). Furthermore, it is not true that Chinese thinkers did not know the word *philosophia*. The preface to the Chinese translation of and commentary on Aristotle’s *Categories* from 1631, written by Li Zhizao (a neophyte from the direct circle of the Jesuits), states ‘the study of love of wisdom is called in the West *feilusuofofiya*, and it is a general name for all studies that investigate principle’ (Li and Fu 1965,

1). In this way, Li Zhizao found the common denominator of *philosophia* and the ‘investigation of principles,’ a distinctively Chinese term for philosophy, in contrast to Van Norden’s adversaries, who still claim cherries are not trees. What is more, Van Norden refers to the work of historians who reveal that the view that philosophy’s origins are Greek was, in the eighteenth century, the opinion of an extreme minority of historians. Instead, philosophy was said to be born in India, Africa, or both (Park 2013, 76). Philosophers such as Leibniz, Wolff, Quesnay, and Voltaire not only wrote about philosophy in China, but also admired it. However, everything changed with Kant and his explicit racism, as he claimed that philosophy is not to be found in the Orient (and any non-Caucasian group), and made a hierarchy of races with white on the top (followed by the Chinese and the Hindus, ‘the Negroes,’ and the Native Americans) (Van Norden 2017, 21–22). Kant’s approach was later followed by many thinkers, from Hegel through Heidegger, and even to Derrida. Van Norden’s conclusion – that the exclusion of non-European philosophy from the canon was a decision, not something that people have always believed; a decision rooted in racism and open orientalism (in the sense given by Edward Said) – is one of the clearest messages of his book (27). The chapter ends with practical advice on how to broaden current curricula in order to avoid this kind of racism.

The second chapter, ‘Traditions in Dialogue,’ provides several examples of how different philosophical traditions can be brought into dialogue. In fact, Van Norden tries to show that some eastern ideas turn out to be more compatible with the current state of knowledge. When discussing the mind-body problem, Van Norden contrasts Descartes’ dualism with the Buddhist idea of no-self that understands the subject as a complex of transient and causally dependent states of both a psychical and physical nature. This view was later developed by the Chinese philosopher Fazang, who claimed everything is related to everything because it is relations that define the object, and objects as such do not exist; this metaphysics is compared with the ‘butterfly effect’ and contemporary cosmology. The next comparison is that between the political philosophies of Hobbes and Confucius; and ‘just as Buddhism helped us see alternatives to individualistic metaphysics like that of Descartes, Confucianism will help us to see the limitations of individualistic political philosophies like that of Hobbes’ (52). Van Norden refers to Confucius’ argument that neither self-interest nor fear motivates in the large scale to obey the law and Mencius’ child-at-the-well thought-experiment, with the conclusion that ‘contemporary developmental psychology supports Mengzi’s view that normal humans have an innate but incipient disposition toward compassion’ (56; see Mencius 2009, 35). Similarly, contemporary virtue ethics is weighed against Confucian ethics (which is an area of Van Norden’s expertise; see Van Norden 2007). The last case given as an example is the debate between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming on weakness

of will. The author honestly admits that philosophies other than Chinese – Indian, African, Native American (including Aztec), etc. – are beyond the scope of his expertise, therefore he refers readers to his extensive bibliography of readings on less commonly taught philosophers, which is a work in progress.¹

1 <http://www.bryannorden.com/suggestions-for-further-reading>.

The third chapter, significantly entitled ‘Trump’s Philosophers,’ sketches the contemporary political background, which inhibits the task of making philosophy more multicultural. Ethnocentric ‘building of walls’ is present both in the United States (previously under Reagan, now under Trump) and China (then under Mao, now under Xi, despite frequent references to traditional Chinese philosophy, which are nationalist and selective). One could also add Europe, with anti-refugee sentiment and increasing nationalism in some EU countries. Commenting on ‘building walls’ in western civilization in general, Van Norden criticizes the conservative approach as represented by Edmund Burke and Allan Bloom. Bloom’s argument is not entirely anti-LCTP, but it argues *we* should focus on *our* cultural canon (in a similar way to Richard Rorty, who also evaluated ethnocentrism positively).²

2 For discussion between Rorty and Chinese philosophers, see Huang (2009).

The fourth chapter, ‘Welders and Philosophers,’ defends the worthiness of any kind of philosophical inquiry, starting with a criticism of Marco Rubio’s statement: ‘Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.’ As Van Norden proves, philosophy majors earn more than those with any other humanities degree and are successful in various non-philosophical professions (as evidenced by statistics and the list of famous philosophy majors he provides). Philosophy emphasizes clarity, accuracy, and cogency of reasoning, and is strictly connected with democratic education. However, in the political climate of anti-intellectualism these features are not desired anymore. Since the phenomena of religious fundamentalism and anti-evolutionism are part of this problem, Van Norden has put a lot of effort into showing that anti-intellectualism is not consistent with the spirit of Christianity. He also denounces a peculiar elitism hidden behind this attitude, implying that education is only for those who rule, whereas those who are ruled do not need anything like that, especially philosophy. It is clear, however, as Van Norden points out, that philosophy is essentially responsible for social development, since all the greatest scientists, Einstein and Schrödinger included, were philosophers. It may be added that in the area of socio-moral development philosophers have always played a crucial role (e.g., Marx and labour rights, the Enlightenment idea of human rights, feminism, postcolonialism, Singer’s postulate of animal rights, etc.).

The fifth and final chapter, entitled ‘The Way of Confucius and Socrates,’ appeals for a ‘hermeneutics of faith’ – that is, coming back to the classical works with the hope of renewed reading and interpretation appropriate for our times. For this reason, Van Norden (considering the topic of the book, quite surprisingly) argues against both cognitive and ethical relativism, which argue each truth or norm is valuable only for a concrete person or

culture. As one may guess, from the relativist perspective, there is no reason for studying the philosophies of other cultures. Treating philosophy as a ‘dialogue about important unsolved problems’ (in contrast to the disciplines of science, which, as Van Norden accurately observes, began as parts of philosophy but then separated themselves) leads to an inclusive and respectful attitude. To that end, philosophers (particularly Anglophone) have to acknowledge different types of argumentation and not overemphasize the role of the western type. Tight syllogisms are barely used by eastern philosophers, who instead quite often employ metaphors, similes, myths, etc. But then if anybody took Plato’s allegory of the cave out of context, it would give the impression that ‘Western philosophy largely consists of quaint myths and poetry’ – precisely the same kind of oversimplification that results from the deliberately selective reading of Asian philosophers (147). Each non-western philosophical text should therefore be read holistically, constructively, and charitably, just as when western works are read. *Taking Back Philosophy* ends with the statement that the question of what way one should live was central for Socrates and Confucius and should become central again for present-day philosophy, which very often does not differ from purely intellectual puzzles. For both Socrates and Confucius, philosophy is conducted through dialogue, which is the starting point for any multicultural philosophy.

Undoubtedly, Van Norden offers a very important and timely defense of the philosophical character of non-western thought, all the more so as it comes from a scholar trained in western philosophy and who has become one of the leading experts in Chinese philosophy. Scholars from that field usually prefer to stay within the strict scope of purely philological issues and, influenced by linguistic relativism, they defend the distinctiveness of their fields of study (claimed to be ‘area studies,’ in this case ‘Asian studies’) so strongly that they are willing to deny there is any common ground between the tradition they examine and *philosophia* (Defoort 2001). In this respect, they become unexpected allies of the common, non-reflecting ethnocentrists. It is also worth noting that Van Norden defends LCTP in a systematic way, by analyzing different pros and cons, including whole strategies of argumentation. This helps him avoid the shallows of psychologism. The same applies to racism: Van Norden does not state that academics are actually active racists, but instead he calls it ‘implicit’ racism (2017, 108), while Garfield calls it ‘structural’ [2017, xix]), which is present in the social practices of exclusion. Since philosophical concern is undeniably a significant part of being human, or at least of participation in human culture, such exclusion – especially the disregard for the actual philosophical treatises of other traditions and cultures, which are simply ignored – has direct ethical implications. Of course, one may still argue, just as Eric Schliesser (2017) did, that ‘Kant’s philosophy provides resources for a more ennobling

cosmopolitanism – of the sort that Van Norden seems to embrace!’ Nonetheless, this is not a discussion among Kantians; what is important here is which ideas have spread (besides, is not colonialism a sort of racist cosmopolitanism?), and the opinion that there is no philosophy in Asia is certainly one of them. There is a similar situation with Hegel, whose racist views have found much more acceptance than, for example, the idea that both China and India had developed philosophies and are parts of one universal human culture (Halbfass 1990, 168; Tibebe 2011). Many notable nineteenth-century European thinkers, from Herder³ to Weber,⁴ expressed openly racist opinions regarding Chinese people, among others. It is hard to understand this and impossible to accept, but it does not mean it can be denied. The situation when each philosophy department has positions for scholars working on individual western thinkers but cannot find a single position for a scholar who would work on any (and at the same time all) non-western school of philosophy is not morally – or, as Van Norden shows, politically – neutral.

However, the third and the fourth chapters seem to devote too much space to issues that depart from the main question of the book. The defense of learning philosophy in general is very valuable (and excellently written), but that is the issue upon which Eurocentric philosophers agree with Van Norden, especially since his arguments are not focused on the economic and professional value of learning Asian philosophy. Accordingly, his sometimes off-topic critique of Republicans could give the wrong impression that being a Democrat (left wing) automatically leads to acknowledging the presence of philosophy in non-western traditions (although being a Republican/right winger definitely makes it more difficult). It is well known that Democrats outnumber Republicans in the social sciences (Flaherty 2016), thus at the same time they constitute the majority of the Eurocentric members of philosophy departments. There is no shortcut in diagnosing the bias against non-western philosophy, precisely because it involves so many intellectuals, and not only Rubio-like politicians who call for more welders.

Those parts of the book might have been used, instead, for more case studies of non-western philosophies. The lack of examples from Indian philosophy is very apparent; yes, Van Norden sincerely admits this lies beyond his competence (such a rare declaration in the humanities), but would it not have been a better idea to have co-written the book with Garfield, Indian scholar and co-author of the provocative manifesto that gave rise to the book? Nāgārjuna’s antisubstantialist metaphysics, Dharmakīrti’s epistemological dualism, and Vasubandhu’s arguments against the existence of the external world are only the tip of the iceberg, apart from which there are no less provocative thinkers of Hīnayāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, Hinduism (the schools of Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika), Jainism, Materialism, and so on. As a result, the general reader (unless we preach to the converted) may have the impression that Asian

3 Herder (1800, 293) depicted the Chinese as a crude nation originating from the Mongols whose people are ugly (‘endowed by nature with small eyes, a short nose, a flat forehead, little beard, large ears, and a protuberant belly’) and stupid (‘want of invention,’ ‘little feeling of internal satisfaction, beauty and worth’).

4 ‘The power of *logos*, of defining and reasoning, has not been accessible to the Chinese’ (Weber 1951, 125).

philosophy is basically practical and thus closer to what is often called ‘wisdom.’ First, the metaphysical and epistemological side is underrated, also due to presenting monism as a distinctively Asian worldview, in contrast to western individualism (Nyāya and Jain metaphysics are, for instance, extremely individualistic). Second, nowhere is it said that India developed its own tradition of syllogistic logic, which could lead to the view that the East probably had some philosophy, but definitely had no logic (the view I encounter very often in my personal communication with colleagues), especially as syllogistic or supposedly syllogistic types of argumentation are contrasted with other types found in the East. Third, three or four examples analyzed in the second chapter concern the narrow ethical issues of virtue, motivation, and will. Wang Yangming, who is presented as an ethical intellectualist, is much more original as a thinker, arguing for innate moral knowledge and the unity of knowledge and action, beliefs that could be so interestingly compared with pragmatism, for example (John Dewey stayed in China for two years, from 1919 to 1921 [Wang 2007]), and which have now found official support from Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. Little attention is devoted to Zhuangzi, a philosopher who is very often compared to various western thinkers nowadays; and the Legalists (whose beliefs were very similar to those of Hobbes and the legal positivists) are barely mentioned. Also, quite surprisingly, Japanese, Korean, and Tibetan philosophy is not mentioned at all. On the one hand, presenting as many traditions as possible was not the purpose of the book, but on the other hand, a book advocating ‘multicultural’ philosophy should not allow such omissions. Dōgen, T’oegye, and Tsongkhapa have written sophisticated philosophical treatises; simply mentioning them shows the internal diversity of Asian philosophy, which is comparable to that of western thought, and goes far beyond the paradigm of Confucian ethics. Last but not least, from a methodological point of view, a distinction has to be drawn between philosophies expressed in written form and those that are essentially oral – Native American, Aboriginal, Aztec and, to some extent, African philosophy.⁵ Due to a lack of written sources, the interpreter plays a much more active role, so that what is presented as ‘Aztec metaphysics,’ for example, is more her or his reconstruction based on religious texts, literature, and art (Maffie 2014) than on material to which everybody can refer in order to put forward one’s own interpretation of the thought in question. Discussion as to whether and how philosophy could be oral is also more open and substantial than using some personal criteria to deprive apparently philosophical treatises of their character, as Van Norden observed with the case of Chinese philosophy. Most importantly, we cannot rule out the possibility that there will be some philosophical treatises discovered in those areas, which is quite probable, taking their cultural development into consideration (with regard to Aztec thought, again, its treatises were likely destroyed by the conquistadors).

5 One example of philosophical treatises in classical African philosophy is Zera Yacob’s *Hatata (Inquiry)* (1667), which deals with ethics and epistemology, posing the question of the existence of God and the reliability of knowledge in a manner comparable to Descartes. See Sumner (1985).

Perhaps all these limitations of *Taking Back Philosophy* stem from the fact that so much falls outside the scope of a general and popularizing manifesto. In a way, the only weakness of Van Norden's book is that one wishes to have more of it: more examples, more arguments, more anecdotes. It could also have had a chapter on historical encounters between different traditions (Pyrrho and the Buddhists, the Jesuits and the Confucians, etc.), but then it would have required a lifetime study and thousands of pages (see Lach 1971). Instead, Van Norden's message is clear and sound, successfully combining the approach of an academician with a practical response to social demands. Above all, this book is not a summary of multicultural philosophy, some kind of last word on the matter, but quite the reverse – the beginning of a way towards a more inclusive way of teaching philosophy.

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