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The Opening of the American Mind

Raphael Sassower, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

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Bryan W. Van Norden accounts for the failure of “academic philosophers” because “they are not teaching the profound, fascinating, and increasingly relevant philosophy that is outside the traditional Anglo-European canon.” (p. 2) What is wrong with the canon?

Three complaints are interwoven: the canon is too narrow, its process of selection is problematic, and the methodological approach with which it is studied is limited and limiting. Even if we consent to condemn the selection process (p. 21) and ask ourselves to think about new selection prospectively (rather than lament the status quo), there is also the danger that the analytic method (mostly associated with Anglo-Americans) may deprive students of the richness of the texts they are reading.

Not only might we find Socratic dialogues reduced to argument analysis (pp. 147-8) and the difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche summarized by how many logical inconsistencies their respective works exhibit (which will strip them of their profundity and cultural settings), but, Norden asks, is it justified to pretend that “what one Western philosopher does is definitive of all philosophy”? (p. 30) What does it mean to read Spinoza “analytically” or understand Nietzsche “logically”? Mockingly, Norden suggests that [Analytic] “contemporary philosophers are more likely to be accused of boring the youth to death with their sentences than they are of being sentenced to death for corrupting the youth!” (p. 3)

The plea for incorporating Asian philosophical texts into the philosophical curriculum is in the name of conceptual enrichment and the broadening of the philosophical conversation about the question, “what is it to live well?” Norden’s offerings include, for example: “The Confucian cardinal virtues are benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, while the Thomist list of natural virtues is wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation.” (p. 5) Numerous other complementary comparisons are introduced in this volume, all of which point to overlapping similarities among different traditions and the illegitimate preference of the so-called “Western” kind.

For Norden, “greater pluralism can make philosophy richer and better approximate the truth.” (p. 36) Recounting the many instances where such enrichment is available, the author pushes further to claim that the division between the Anglo-European philosophy and “the supposedly nonphilosophical [Asian] thought is a manifestation of a broader pattern of xenophobic, chauvinistic, nationalistic, and racist efforts to separate ‘us’ from ‘them.’” (p. 84)

The Three Arguments

In this book, Norden seems to make three interrelated arguments. The first is about the need for pluralism in the philosophy curriculum of American universities, the second about the narrow argumentative practices of “academic philosophy,” and the third about the importance of philosophy in general. These three arguments parallel a different, but overlapping, contention about the methodological (and pedagogical and political) divide between so-called Analytic and Continental Philosophy, a divide that has characterized the academic landscape for generations.

However, a divide, if this is what we are faced with, does not necessitate preferential treatment nor the dominance of one camp over the other. Sadly, the dominance of the

Analytical camp—in terms of curricula, job openings, and graduate funding—has foreclosed the potential for philosophical communication across this artificial divide (since there is an arbitrary and conventional classification that would puzzle some of our predecessors). When Analytic philosophers (not all of them, of course) claim that their Continental interlocutors are not philosophers at all (perhaps literary scholars, poets, or just curious humanists), the conversation stops; there is nothing more to say, and the best we can do, following David Hume, is retire to play billiards.

The charge of “what you are doing is not philosophy” levelled against Continental philosophers parallels the concern Norden raises about non-western philosophical texts and their authors. The false binary of “A” and “non-A” could be forgiven when one is foraging for mushrooms in the forest and is warned against a poisonous variety, but not when it becomes a power play that privileges one kind over the other (as Foucault illustrated), or that infuses “terror” into what should be a dialogue, as Jean Francois Lyotard reminds us. (p. 150)

Will Continental or Asian or African or Native American philosophy poison the mind, like some appealing, colorful, and somewhat seductive mushrooms? Will any of these varieties necessarily corrupt young minds? Phrased in these terms, one recognizes the ancient Greek allusion to Socrates’ detractors and their eternal fate of killing a martyr. Is Norden’s lament one of martyrdom? Will the dominant Analytic tradition be retrospectively shamed for its poor and dismissive treatment of Continental and by extension all other non-Western texts and philosophies?

Forgive me for remaining skeptical, but unless we first distinguish the Analytic from the Continental, and see the Continental contributions like the ones Norden promotes, we may miss an important underlying danger. And this is that the Analytical grip has not loosened at all, remaining as it were for fifty years a kind of intellectual arrogance and narrowmindedness that can extend over the non-Western philosophies to which Norden rightly points.

Though Norden voices sympathy for Allan Bloom’s position regarding one’s tradition and the importance of reproducing the knowledge base of the Western tradition (however defined, pp. 102-7), I hesitate to cede that much to such normative moves. My worry is that once we agree to a strategy that upholds norms, we’ll be left with minor tactical maneuvers about this or that text, this or that author. Corrections on the margins might appear as victories, but in fact would be minor achievements that change little (but give lip service to inclusion and racial or feminist sensitivity).

Not that individual interventions and personal subversions are meaningless; but without a concomitant transformation of the curriculum, power relations would hardly change. Perhaps the Socratic gadfly will annoy here and there, introduce Asian or African authors where none were expected. But would this empower students and teachers alike to rethink the colonizing power of a specific hegemonic canon and its overly rationalized manner by which ideas and thoughts are engaged?

Why would departments of philosophy make a concerted effort to transform themselves? What would be their incentive? Would an instrumental appeal to the mighty power of China and India be convincing? In the age of Trump, as Norden argues, the reactionary response of philosophy departments parallels Trump's even if for different reasons, and as such is contrary to what he advocates. Norden's plea may fall on the deaf ears of conservative ideologues who prop up the political right as well as on those of the arrogant clique of insecure puzzle-solvers, those so-called philosophers dedicated to reduce the meaning of life to a logical exercise (a clever one, of course, but one better left to mathematicians and engineers).

Just as philosophers of economics have physics envy, so do analytical philosophers have math envy. This envy (reminiscent of the one discussed by Freud) is not simply pathological but is dangerous as well: it narrows philosophical inquiry to an economy of protocol sentences with their logics and empirical contests. And, as Norden mentions in passing, this pathology has deep American roots in what Richard Hofstadter termed "anti-intellectualism." (pp. 121-2) I

n this context, American academics notoriously (and perhaps unconsciously) shy away from their intellectual aspirations (and those foisted on them by the public) and retreat to nominal claims of expertise in ever more narrowly defined fields of research. It's scandalous that a country of this size may claim only a dozen or two public intellectuals (as distinguished from think tank hacks who pass for intellectuals).

Kongzi and Socrates

Both Socrates and Confucius, as Norden illustrates, reflect his notion of philosophy as a "dialogue about problems that we agree are important, but don't agree about the method for solving, where 'importance' ultimately gets its sense from the question of the way we should live." (p. 151) In their own respective ways, the two of them were public intellectuals whose voices were heard beyond the confines of formal teaching, and their influence has remained as strong as in their own time.

For Socrates and Confucius, philosophy is far from an intellectual parlor game: it has a significant ethical purpose . . . philosophy is conducted through dialogue. . . dialogue begins in shared beliefs and values, but is unafraid to use our most deeply held beliefs to challenge the conventional opinions of society. . . broadening philosophy by tearing down barriers, not about building new ones. (pp. 158-9)

Parlor games played by Analytic philosophers are rewarding, one must admit. Solving little problems within prefigured contexts, knowing the rules of the game, and being clever enough to get the right answer is what mice learn running through mazes and what monkeys master to receive extra bananas. In these cases, there is a right answer solution. The complexity of human life and the diversity of its conditions, by contrast, demand more nuanced approaches and more source materials. To be responsive and responsible in the age of Trump is to be philosophically minded in many directions, exploring as far afield as possible, and listening to all the voices that dare speak their minds.

Contact details: rsassowe@uccs.edu

References

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