Antidotes to Provincialism

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Bryan Van Norden’s book rightly castigates the exclusion or minimizing of non-Western philosophy in mainstream US philosophy curricula. I was shocked by the willful ignorance and arrogance of those such as able philosopher of biology, Massimo Pigliucci, whom, before reading the quote about Eastern thought, I highly respected. Van Norden is on target throughout with his criticism of Western professional philosopher’s dismissive provincialism. I only worry that his polemic, though accurately describing the situation, will not at all convert the unconverted. Calling the western philosophers who exclude non-Western philosophy “Trumpian philosophers” is both accurate and funny, but unlikely to make them more sympathetic to multi-cultural philosophy.

A Difficult History

Westerners until the last third of the twentieth century denied that there was any significant traditional Chinese science. Part of this was based on racial prejudice, but part of it was that by the nineteenth century, after the Opium War and the foreign concessions were made, Chinese science had degenerated, and superstitious aspects of such things as geomancy and astrology, rather than the earlier discoveries of geography and astronomy dominated. Prior to the late 1950s for professional Western historians of science, and, until decades later (or even never) the public, scoffed at the idea of sophisticated traditional Chinese science. Chinese insight into astronomy, biology, and other fields was rejected by most people, including respectable historians of science.

The British biochemical embryologist and Marxist Joseph Needham over the second half of the twentieth century in the volumes of Science and Civilization in China gradually revealed the riches of Chinese knowledge of nature. There, is of course the issue of whether traditional Chinese knowledge of nature, and that of other non-Western peoples, often with the exception of Middle Eastern science, can be should be called science. If science is defined as necessarily including controlled experiments and mathematical laws, then Chinese knowledge of nature cannot be called science. Needham himself accepted this definition of science and made the issue of why China never developed science central to his monumental history.

However, Needham discovered innumerable discoveries of the Chinese of phenomena denied in Western science for centuries. Chinese astronomers recorded phenomena such as new stars (Novae) appearing, stellar evolution (change of color of stars), and sunspots in astronomy, None of these were recorded by ancient and medieval Western astronomers. Famously, modern astronomers have made use of millennium old Chinese recordings of novae to trace past astronomical history.

In China, the compass was known and detailed magnetic declination maps were made centuries before the West even knew of the compass. Geobotanical prospecting, using the correlation of plants with minerals in the soil, the idea that mountains move like waves, and on and on. Since field biology, observational astronomy, and historical geology in modern Western science usually do not involve experiments, and many contemporary philosophers
of biology deny that there are biological laws, the “experiment and mathematical laws” definition of science may be too narrow.

An example of the chauvinist rejection of Chinese science, and of Needham’s monumental work is that of a respected Princeton historian, Charles Coulston Gillispie. In his review of the first volumes of Needham he warned readers not to believe the contents because Needham was sympathetic to the Communists. Ironically, in the review, Gillispie tended to dismiss applied science and praised the purely theoretical science supposedly unique to the West, accusing Needham of “abject betrayal of the autonomy of science.”

Also ironically, or even comically, in the margin of Gillispie’s reply, doubling down on the denunciation of Communism and defense of pure, non-materialist science was an advertisement recruiting guided nuclear missile scientists for Lockheed! One hopes, but doubts, that Gillispie was embarrassed by his review, as he made similar comments in his Edge of Objectivity, also suggesting that the Arabs and the Chinese could not be trusted with nuclear weapons as “we” can, with our superior moral values.

The Heights of Chinese Philosophy

Even decades after Needham’s magisterial sequence of volumes had been appearing, Cromer in an anti-multicultural book claims not only that China had no science, but that the Chinese had no interest in or knowledge of the world beyond China (neglecting the vast trade on the Silk Road during the ancient and medieval periods, amazingly varied Chinese imports during the Tang Dynasty, the voyages of exploration of Zheng He, the Three Jeweled Eunuch (perhaps a contradiction in terms), and the most complete map of the world before the 1490s (from Korea, but probably from Chinese knowledge and available in China).

Hopefully there will be a process of recognition of non-Western philosophy by American analytic philosophers of the sort that began fifty years earlier for Chinese knowledge of nature among historians. So far this has hardly happened.

One possibility for the integration of Asian philosophy into mainstream philosophy curricula is the integration of non-Western philosophy into the standard history of philosophy courses. One easy possibility of integration is including non-Western philosophy in the standard Ancient Philosophy and Medieval Philosophy curriculum. While teaching Ancient as well as Chinese philosophy in the last two decades I have (perhaps too often) drawn parallels between and contrasts of Greek and Chinese philosophy. However, very few students take both courses. Until this coming year Eastern philosophy was offered yearly, but not as a required part of the history sequence, and few students were in both courses, I worried whether these in-class comparisons fell mostly on deaf ears.

I have thought about the possibility of courses on ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy including non-Western philosophy of the period. There are a couple of introductory philosophy anthologies, such as Daniel Bonevac’s, apparently now out of print, that include much non-Western philosophy. (Ironically, Bonevac is literally a “Trumpian
philosopher,” in the sense of having supported Donald Trump.) Robert C. Solomon included discussion of some Chinese philosophy in his survey but shows total ignorance of modern research on Daoism, doubting that Laozi was an older contemporary of Confucius but rather at least one or two centuries later. Some ways a course that covered both Greek and Chinese philosophy could make comparisons between the two are suggested below. Of course, the usual, casual, comparison of the two involves an invidious contrast perhaps less strong than that of Pigliucci.

A Genuinely Modest Proposal

My proposal involves not introductory surveys but histories of philosophy from the Presocratics to the German romantics and early twentieth century philosophers. Parallels between the Warring States philosophers and the Pre-Socratics have been noted by among others Benjamin Schwartz in The World of Thought in Ancient China. The Pre-Socratics’ statements have numerous parallels to those of Chinese philosophers of the same period. Qi has some parallels to the air of Anaximenes, in particular in terms of condensation as the source of objects. The Dao of Laozi, as source of all things, yet being indefinable and ineffable has resemblances to the Apeiron of Anaximander.

Of course, many of the paradoxes (that an arrow does not move, the paradox of metrical extension, that a length can be divided indefinitely, that an assemblage of infinitely small points can add up to a finite length) are almost identical with those of Zeno. Of course, the emphasis on Being in Western philosophy from Parmenides through Aristotle to Aquinas and other medieval contrasts most strongly with the emphasis on non-being in Laozi and its presence with less emphasis in Zhuangzi. West’s Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient has many evocative suggestions of influences of the East on the Presocratics. There is extensive work on the parallels and contrasts of the ethics of Mencius and that of Aristotle. The concept and role of the concept Qi has strong similarities to the Stoic notion of pneuma, as described, for instance in Sambursky’s Physics of the Stoics.

A.C. Graham in Disputers of the Dao argues that as the formal logical approaches of the early Wittgenstein, Russell, and logical positivism in the first half of the twentieth century gave way to the later Wittgenstein, and French deconstruction developed, these parts of Western philosophy more closely approximated to the approaches of traditional Chinese philosophy.

Shigehisa Kuriyama has provocatively and insightfully written on the comparison of traditional Chinese medicine and Greek Hippocratic medicine on the body. There have been many articles speculating on the relation of Greek skepticism being influenced by Eastern thought via Alexander’s invasion of India. Diogenes Laertius’s claims that Pyrrho (of later Pyrrhonian skepticism) went to India with Alexander where was influenced by the gymnosophists (“naked sophists”) he met there. C. Beckwith has argued that Phyrronism is a product of Buddhism. Jay Garfield, though thinking the influence question is a red herring, has written extensively and insightfully on the logical isomorphisms between Greek and Tibetan skeptical theses.
Buddhist logic of contradiction can be compared with and at least partially explicated by some twentieth century logics that incorporate contradictions as not illogical. These include presupposition logic as Buddhist. (Though a former colleague told me three people who worked on this died horrible deaths, one by cancer, another by auto accident, so I should avoid studying this area). Other twentieth century symbolic logic systems that allow contradictions as not fatal are Nicholas Rescher’s and Robert Brandom’s paraconsistent logic on applied to Eastern philosophy by Graham Priest, dialethic logic. One can also compare Pai-chang’s Zen monastic rules to the simultaneously developed ones of St. Benedict.

Several, both Western and Asian philosophers, have compared Chan Buddhist mysticism with that of Wittgenstein. Reinhardt May in Heidegger’s Hidden Sources has investigated influences of Heidegger’s readings of Helmut Wilhelm’s translations of Yi Qing and Dao De Jing. Eric Nelson, in his fascinating recent book has traced not only the recently more well-known use made by Heidegger, but also extensive use by Martin Buber, Hans Dreisch, and a number of less famous German philosophers of the early twentieth century.

Perhaps more controversial is the comparison made between the European medieval scholastics’ fusion of Christian ethics with Aristotelian cosmology and the medieval Chinese, so-called neo-Confucian scholastic fusion of Confucian ethics and politics with Daoist cosmology. One can compare the concept of 大 (da) in the “neo-Daoist of dark learning” Wang Bi and more extensively in the neo-Confucians, most notably Xuzi, as Leibniz had suggested. Beyond parallels there have been provocative arguments that Buddhist means of argument, via the so-called Silk Road in Central Asia, issued in part of European scholastic technique. Certainly, a topic in early modern philosophy is Leibniz’s praise of the Yijing as binary arithmetic, and his claims about the similarity of Xuzi’s metaphysics and his own Monadology, with brief note of Nicholas Malebranche’s less insightful dialogue between a Chinese and a Christian philosopher.

In western political philosophy the appeals to the superiority of Chinese society to that of Europe, or at least the existence of a well ordered and moral society without the Biblical God, by figures such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Quesnay, Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and others, both using “China as a Model for Europe” as Maverick’s book is entitled, or as a means of satirizing European supposed morals and justice. The Chinese legalists, who were doing behavioral political science and Malthusian population theory of history over two millennia before Western political theorists did so, could be noted in a course in social philosophy that includes behavioral political science.

Leibniz’s praise of the Yi as well as his extensive claims of similarity of Xuzi’s 太極 and 陽明 to his own form, substance, and monads. Also, Leibniz’s efforts of support for the Jesuit attempt to incorporate Confucian ceremonies into Catholic mass, and the Rites Controversy, detailed by David Mungello and others, deserve coverage in Early Modern courses.

There is a fascinating work by the child psychologist Alison Gopnik on possible connections that may have been made by Hume during his most creative period at La Fleche, where
Descartes had studied long before, with missionaries who were familiar with Asian thought, particularly one who had lived in Siam.

In German romantic philosophy we find relatively little sophisticated treatment of Chinese philosophy (Witness Goethe’s fragmentary treatment of China.) However, there was a great reception of Indian philosophy among the German romantics. Schlegel, Schelling, and others absorbed ideas from Hinduism, not to mention Schopenhauer’s use of Buddhism. (Sedlar gives an elementary survey). In late nineteenth century philosophy there is the growing sympathy of Ernst Mach for Buddhism, as well as Nietzsche’s disputed attitudes toward Asian philosophy. Interestingly, Nietzsche copiously annotated his copy of Mach’s Analysis of Sensations, and offered to dedicate his Genealogy of Morals to Mach.

In twentieth century philosophy there have been numerous works of varying quality noting similarities between Wittgenstein’s approach to metaphysical questions and Chan Buddhism. There also are a number or works comparing Alfred North Whitehead to Buddhism.

Despite the severe criticisms that have been made of some best-selling popular treatments of the topic, I think there are significant parallels between some of the interpretations of quantum mechanics and some traditional Asian philosophies. I once had a testy exchange in print with the physicist and writer Jeremy Bernstein on this topic. His Trumpian reply was “Yogic, Schmogic.” A few decades later he wrote appreciatively of the Dali Lama’s attempt to relate Buddhism to quantum philosophy.

**An Open Future for Education in Philosophy**

I realize that there is always the danger of superficial comparisons between very different systems of thought, but I believe that much of the work I mention is not guilty of this. I also, realize, as a non-specialist, I have mentioned mainly works of comparison from the sixties through the eighties, and many more fine-grained scholarly articles have been produced in the last two decades.

I look forward to the integration of non-western philosophy into the core of the standard history of philosophy sequence, not just by supplementing the two or four-year sequence of history of philosophy courses with non-Western philosophy courses, but by including non-Western philosophy in the content of the history of philosophy of each period.

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