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Problematism Western philosophy as one part of Africanising the curriculum

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This paper argues that one part of the picture of thinking about decolonising the philosophy curriculum should include problematising the notion of Western philosophy. I argue that there are many problems with the idea of Western philosophy, and with the idea that decolonising the curriculum should involve rejecting so-called Western philosophy. Doing this could include granting the West a false narrative about its origins, influences and interactions, perpetuating exclusions within contemporary and recent North American and European philosophy, perpetuating exclusions and failed acknowledgements within the history of so-called Western philosophy, while at the same time rejecting a tradition which has included in itself so many topics and methodologies that what is left after excluding it would leave other traditions with limited resources, at the same time as wrongly granting the West proprietary rights over any ideas it has happened to investigate, rather than seeing these as belonging to all of humanity. I therefore conclude that a central part of curriculum change should be problematising Western philosophy, including our learning more about, and teaching, more complex views of its history and interactions with other traditions.

Introduction

This paper argues that one part of the picture of thinking about decolonising the philosophy curriculum should include problematising the notion of Western philosophy. Both decolonising the curriculum and Africanising the curriculum could mean a number of things. For example, one thing that could be meant is having more of the curriculum taken up with African philosophy and less with so-called Western philosophy; another way of understanding it could be using techniques of philosophy from various traditions, including Western philosophy, and bringing them to bear on African problems and questions. Both of these approaches require an account of what counts as “African philosophy” and what counts as “Western philosophy”. In this paper I argue that there are a number of problems with the notion of Western philosophy and that these need to be taken seriously in thinking about changing the curriculum. I argue that the account of Western philosophy that has, at least in the past few hundred years, been taken by European and North American philosophers as their tradition involves claiming for themselves ideas to which it is not obvious that they have proprietary rights, and that rejecting methodologies and topics as Western is in danger of wrongly recognising these wrongful claims.

The ‘Meta’ philosophical question

If we wanted to replace substantial amounts of “Western” philosophy with African philosophy in the curriculum, we would need some idea of what counts as each. The meta-philosophical question of what makes African philosophy African has been given much attention in African philosophy; there are interesting parallels here with a similar trend in Latin American philosophy,¹ in which

1 See Vargas (2007, 66) and Nuccetelli (2013), who says, “A salient feature of Latin American philosophy is its early engagement in

the question what distinguishes Latin American philosophy—what makes it distinctively Latin American—is also one that has had a lot of attention. Notably, this is not a question which has concerned “Western” philosophy much. Similarly, on the basis of my limited contact with them I would surmise that one does not find a similar proportion of introspective attention into related questions in either Chinese or Indian philosophy. With respect to Chinese and Indian philosophy, this may reflect the self-confidence of the enormously long, relatively autonomous text-based traditions in these areas; while this is certainly an interesting question, it is beyond the scope of this paper as well as of my expertise. In line with my focus on problematising Western philosophy, my interest here is in what we can learn from the lack of attention to the identity or meta-question in Western philosophy in comparison to African philosophy. I argue that there are a number of lessons to learn from comparing the dominance of the identity/meta question in African and Latin American philosophy with its almost complete absence in so-called Western philosophy.

While my concern is with the absence of the meta-question in “Western” philosophy, I will briefly make some comments about discussions of this question in Latin American and African philosophy. This is not with an aim to giving a representative account of this question in these areas, much less to attempt to contribute to this debate, but simply to bring out the contrast with the situation in “Western” philosophy. A number of philosophers have noted that the metaphilosophical question of what makes African philosophy African has been one of the central focuses of postcolonial African philosophy (see, for example, Appiah 1992, 85). One central debate with respect to the status of African philosophy concerns the status of philosophy in sub-Saharan Africa prior to the written tradition and the formalisation of philosophy in universities from the 60s onwards. Appiah, among others, distinguishes what he calls “folk philosophy” from academic or institutionalised philosophy, where folk philosophy refers to collected wisdom and “beliefs about the nature of humankind, about the purposes, and about our knowledge of and our place in the cosmos” that exist in every culture (Appiah 1992, 86). One trend in African philosophy is what has been called “ethno-philosophy”, which aims to collect and study what Appiah calls folk philosophy; this conception of African philosophy has been subject to sustained critique by prominent African philosophers such as Bodunrin (1984) and Hountondji (1983).² While not presenting his work as ethno-philosophy, Thad Metz (2015) provides an example of a philosopher currently working on African philosophy who starts with beliefs that are supposedly salient in African societies, and sees African philosophy as an attempt to theorise these.

As noted, there has similarly been sustained attention in Latin American philosophy to the meta-philosophical or identity question. Vargas argues that, in what he calls the Latin American metaphilosophical essay, philosophers are standardly required to argue for or against the claim that Latin American philosophy exists and has existed as a historical tradition (Vargas 2007, 54). In his own answer to this question, aiming to avoid essentialism and the presentation of homogeneity, Vargas says

It seems to me that the correct descriptive account of Latin American philosophy will be an institutional one: Latin American philosophy is whatever it is that people who take themselves to be working on Latin American philosophy treat as Latin American philosophy or that Latin American philosophy is (1) philosophy done by people in Latin America, or (2) work that engages with philosophical discussion that occurred or is occurring in Latin America (Vargas 2007, 53).³

reflection about its nature and significance—indeed, the very possibility of its existence”.

2 As Bodunrin describes it, ethno-philosophy refers to the “works of those anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers and philosophers who present the collective world views of African peoples, their myths and folk-lore and folk-wisdom, as philosophy. What ethno-philosophers try to do is to describe a world outlook or thought system of a particular African community of the whole of Africa” (Bodunrin 1984, 142)

3 He suggests that we have to take the same approach to defining philosophy itself, in terms of the kinds of things that occupy philosophers who take themselves to be doing philosophy (Vargas 2007, 534). He argues that there is distinctive, valuable content to Latin American philosophy...not necessarily because it is Latin American, per se, rather because there is a body of useful conceptual moves and philosophical resources that have some currency in the history and present of Latin American philosophical work. Perhaps these ideas gained widespread currency in Latin America when they did because of the particularities of its intellectual and social history. And,

For a similar approach to African philosophy, see Hountondji, who says “[b]y ‘African Philosophy’ I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans themselves and described as philosophical by the authors themselves” (1983, 33).

In contrast with both these traditions, as I have already noted, a vanishingly small amount of “Western” philosophy is concerned with the question of what makes its philosophical tradition “Western”; this is simply not taken to be a question that requires answering. “Western” philosophy does, however, engage with the question of what makes something philosophy. One way of understanding this aspect of the Western approach to the question is simply as an illustration of a feature of Western arrogance that mirrors what a number of writers have noted in writing about whiteness: its assumption of itself as the centre, as neutral, as normative, as perspectiveless. Thus, it could be that in asking what makes something philosophy, rather than what makes something “Western” philosophy, the “Western” tradition is assuming that philosophy simply is Western philosophy, or that Western philosophy simply is philosophy. If Western philosophy understands itself simply as philosophy, and not as in any way positioned or particular, this would explain its having some concern with the question “what is philosophy?”, rather than with the question of what distinguishes Western philosophy from other traditions. On the related and similar question of white ways of seeing the world, Paul Taylor writes that whiteness “tends to involve a commitment to the centrality of white people and their perspectives... The way they [whites] see the world just is the way the world is, and the way they get around in the world just is the right way to get around” (Taylor 2004, 230). Similarly, as Samantha Vice puts it: “One of the key ways of theorizing whiteness is as a global norm that is invisible, working in the background as a standard, not of one particular way of being in the world, but as normalcy, as universalizability, of just being ‘the way things are’” (Vice 2010, 324). George Yancy says that “[w]hites have a way of speaking from a centre that they often appear to forget forms the white ideological fulcrum upon which what they say (or do not say) or see (do not see) hinges” (Yancy 2004, 1) and that

[w]hiteness fails to call into question its own modes of socio-epistemological constructivity, ways that social reality is constructed and regulated. Through this process of “white-world-making”, the construction of a world with values, regulations, and policies that provide supportive structures to those identified as “white”, a world that whiteness then denies having given birth to, a possible slippage between knowing and being that is often difficult to encourage. It short, what whiteness knows is what there is (Yancy 2004, 11).

Commenting on a colleague who advised him not to get “pegged” as working on race and African-American philosophical issues, Yancy says “he did not see his own work—engagements with European and Anglo-American philosophy—as ‘pegged’; he simply taught philosophy *qua* philosophy” (Yancy 2004, 1). In a similar way to these analyses of whiteness, the “Western” philosophical tradition could be taken to be seeing itself as the centre, as not itself positioned, and therefore taking philosophy to be simply what is done in this tradition, so not in need of qualification by the term “Western”.

If this is the correct explanation of the absence of the identity question in “Western” philosophy, one part of decolonising the curriculum would involve questioning this way that the Western tradition sees itself, focusing on ways in which this tradition has its own positions and presuppositions, and contrasting it with other traditions. While I do take this to be part of what we should do, I will argue that the situation is more complex than this response suggests, and that in fact problematising the notion of “Western” philosophy should involve more than trying to focus on what is distinctive in this tradition as opposed to other traditions.

Exclusions within “Western” philosophy

A first part of the complexity of the situation is to note that when European and North American philosophers are concerned to argue that something is or is not philosophy, this is usually with

perhaps such ideas could or did develop elsewhere under different conditions. My point is simply that there are useful philosophical resources to be found in Latin American Philosophy (Vargas 2007, 68).

respect so some work being done by other European or North American philosophers. For example, at their most antagonistic, some extreme proponents of the “analytic” or “continental” traditions may have rejected the opposing tradition as not being really “philosophy” (see Appiah for a discussion of the history of this dispute in relation to contemporary African philosophy). Similarly, there has been controversy about the relatively recent field of “experimental” philosophy as to whether it is really philosophy.⁴ Since, in these cases, the areas with respect to which there is dispute about whether they are philosophy feature within European and North American thought, it cannot be that there is a simple equation of philosophy with the way Europeans and North Americans do philosophy.

Another complication is with respect to whether the analysis of “whitely” ways of seeing the world translates straightforwardly onto “Western” ways of seeing the world. One problem with this is that regarding European and North American societies as white would exclude the very many non-whites who are part of these countries. Seeing Western philosophy in this way might entrench the exclusion of under-represented groups from the so-called Western tradition. Suppose, by analogy, that within Indian philosophy there was an important group of philosophers who had been seriously neglected in the official or mainstream canon, perhaps for reasons of class, religion or gender, but who had indisputably produced extremely significant work. Using the term “Indian philosophy” for something presented as an official canon but which excludes these thinkers would accept and perpetuate the exclusion. Similarly, we should be careful of rejecting what we think of as “Western” philosophy without paying attention to exclusions *within* the so-called Western tradition’s current and historical self-representation (as well as ways in which this might have changed)—without understanding this we will have an inaccurate view of the tradition we are supposedly rejecting, as well as perpetuating exclusions.

It is well-known that European and North American philosophy are in fact disproportionately white and male, both with respect to demographics and, arguably, as reflected by topics that dominate curricula. It might be thought that the relative absence of philosophy written by women and black philosophers on European and North American teaching syllabuses simply reflects the relative absence of the presence of these groups in academic philosophy, and that while this relative absence of course has a root in patriarchy and white supremacy, it means that there simply are not the female and black philosophers available to draw on in large parts of the tradition. In fact, however, the situation might be worse than this, as while it is true that there are fewer philosophers from these groups, it is also arguable that much significant work by philosophers from these groups exists but has not been recognised in the standard representations of the European and North American tradition. For example, there is currently, recently, attention being paid to female philosophers writing in the European early modern period who have not been traditionally discussed in work on this period.⁵ Similarly, as Krishnamurthy has argued, European and North American political philosophy for some time represented contemporary analytic political philosophy as beginning with Rawls, thereby excluding some of the most important American political philosophers and thinkers, such as Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, W. E. B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington.⁶ These authors have of course been read for some time in “black studies” departments, but have only recently begun to get significant attention in “mainstream” political philosophy. Krishnamurthy argues that both Indian political philosophers and African-American political philosophers have been wrongly neglected in North American and European political philosophy, and refers to the project of giving them their rightful place in political philosophy as “decolonising political philosophy”. In some respects, it seems to me that “decolonising” is not an obvious term to use here—the excluded African-American political tradition is an excluded tradition within North America.⁷ This point can be made more obviously with respect to the excluded early modern

4 See Alfano and Loeb’s “Experimental Moral Philosophy” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/experimental-moral/>.

5 See <http://www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net/>, and <http://www.newnarrativesinphilosophy.net/>.

6 See also Mills (1997) for an account of exclusions within the North American and European political philosophy tradition. His focus is on the exclusion of attention to race, and in particular, white supremacy.

7 A further problem with the alignment of the project of decolonising philosophy with rejecting “Western” philosophy is that it is in danger of treating British colonial power as standing for European philosophy. Germany was not a significant colonial power (in comparison to Britain’s rule of much of the world), but an extremely significant part of European philosophy. To talk about changing the curriculum as

female philosophers: these are largely European thinkers within Europe who have been traditionally excluded due to patriarchy. In other words, it may be that at various times so-called Western philosophy has problematic and exclusionary views of which philosophers have featured in its own tradition, rather than just neglect of philosophy from other parts of the world. The importance of the African-American political tradition, and the fact that for a long time it was marginalised, including for reasons not unrelated to some of the reasons for which African philosophy has been neglected, seem to me reasons that it should feature in our curricula. Since some of these exclusions are related to and arguably are a product of the dominance of white supremacy as an ideology, they seem to me to be an important part of our project of curriculum change, even if they do not strictly fall under “decolonising” or “Africanising”. One change I would like to see to our curriculum therefore would include paying more attention to the African-American political philosophy tradition.

Related both to the point of exclusions within the “Western” tradition as well as to the point about the whitely (and possibly also Western) assumption of itself as a centre and as normative, in addition to paying attention to which individuals and traditions have been ignored or excluded in this tradition, we should also take note of topics which have been neglected. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills (1997) argues that North American and European political philosophy and its historical tradition have failed to pay any attention to the role of white supremacy as an ideology. He says

[w]hite supremacy is the unnamed political system that has made the modern world into what it is today. You will not find this term in introductory, or even advanced, texts in political theory. A standard undergraduate philosophy course will start off with Plato and Aristotle, perhaps say something about Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli, move on to Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Marx, and then wind up with Rawls and Nozick. It will introduce you to notions of aristocracy, democracy, absolutism, liberalism, representative government, socialism, welfare, capitalism and libertarianism. But though it covers more than two thousand years of Western political thought and runs the ostensible gamut of political systems, there will be no mention of the basic political system that has shaped the world for the past several hundred years. And this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the fact that standard textbooks and courses have for the most part been written by whites, who take their racial privilege so much for granted that they do not even see it as political, as a form of domination (Mills 1997, 1).

It seems to me that Mills’ contribution to rectifying this omission and the work that engages him is important reading for philosophy in South Africa: the colonial period and the apartheid period both reflect the dominance of white supremacy, so work on white supremacy and its presence in philosophy is clearly relevant to South Africa and South African political philosophy. At the same time, Mills is situated within the North American tradition, in terms of his life, education, and philosophical tools. In my view, this illustrates a way in which decolonising the curriculum need not mean only simply rejecting Western philosophy, but could also mean reading thinkers within the North American and European tradition who are engaging with the ways in which the Western canon has been shaped by colonialism and white supremacy.

Problematising the history of “Western” philosophy

I have been arguing that we cannot assume that we know what “Western” philosophy is without paying attention to the exclusions within “Western” philosophy, where these include exclusions of Western philosophers within this tradition, as well as topics and frameworks within the tradition that may have been partly shaped by ideology, and in particular the ideology of white supremacy. A related point is to pay attention to the historiography of “Western” philosophy, and the way in which this changed and developed, arguably in ways which erase the role of non-Western philosophy in the history of Western philosophy. Peter Park (2013) argues that in the 1700s and 1800s the

decolonising the curriculum is in danger of giving British political power a much more significant place in European intellectual thought than it in fact had.

history of Western philosophy was rewritten (by Westerners); he argues that while up to this period so-called Western philosophy had traced its origins to India, Egypt and Babylon, not seeing its origins as Western, but rather seeing its roots as lying in Africa and Asia. He argues that during this period this story was rewritten, excluding African and Asia from histories of philosophy, and he argues for attributing this exclusion to racism. He argues that the exclusionary Eurocentric canon, and, in particular, the exclusion of Africa and Asia from the history of philosophy began in the 1780s. Prior to this, he argues, the great majority of early modern historians agreed that philosophy began in the Orient, and only in the late eighteenth century did historians of philosophy begin to claim a Greek beginning for philosophy. Park traces the view of philosophy as beginning in the Orient back to the views the ancient Greeks themselves had of their tradition, and argues that it was the dominant view until the 18th-century German rewriting of academic syllabi. This indicates that “Western” philosophy only came to think of itself as “Western”, as opposed to being continuous with a tradition originating in India and Africa, relatively recently. If Park’s argument is sound, then the tradition which has thought of itself as Western has unacknowledged non-Western roots, and has only relatively recently come to see itself as “Western”. This means that rejecting this tradition out of a desire to reject Western philosophy and replace it with something non-Western could, ironically, involve accepting and perpetuating the West’s false view of this tradition as originating with itself.

Even if we accept that the “Western” tradition has significant roots in ancient Greece, one can still question the extent to which it makes sense to call this ancient Mediterranean tradition “Western”, and it obviously is no part of white supremacy, which dates to the modern world. Looking at a map of the ancient Greek world, one will see settlements in what is now Italy, parts of France and Spain, as well as in Africa and Turkey. The philosophers usually identified as the earliest ancient Greek philosophers, the first pre-Socratics, came from what is now part of Turkey. In ancient Greece there was more exchange with what is now Turkey, Iraq and north Africa than there was with Britain and Germany. This, in my view, adds to the case for thinking that accepting this tradition as somehow essentially Western would involve wrongly accepting the West’s claiming for itself of an ancient Mediterranean tradition which was not obvious Western.

A similar point can be seen if we trace the development of the ancient Greek and Roman tradition in which “Western” philosophy now standardly locates its origins, in the late ancient and early medieval periods. When I was first taught about this period, the story presented was that there was a time in which Greek and Roman philosophy was “lost”, and then it was “recovered” from the Arabic world, through the presence of the Moors in Spain. Of course this Western perspective ignores the fact that the work was not “lost”, but rather seamlessly integrated into a continuous philosophical tradition in the Islamic world. This is not a tradition I was taught anything about in my philosophical education, despite the fact that Avicenna was mentioned, an Islamic philosopher who originated in modern day Afghanistan, when we studied arguments for the existence of God, as one of the philosophers engaged with such arguments. Not mentioned were the Islamic philosophical tradition in which Avicenna was based, the continuous engagement of this tradition with the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, and the influence of Avicenna’s arguments on philosophers such as Leibniz, and, through Leibniz, Kant, central figures in the “Western” canon. As the history of philosophy is typically taught in pressured undergraduate programmes, it primarily features Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, might touch on Augustine or Aquinas, and then jumps to Descartes and the early modern (male) European philosophers. This way of presenting the story obscures the importance of the Islamic tradition in terms of its engagement with and transmission of the ancient Greek and Roman texts, the philosophy in the Islamic tradition building on those texts, and the influence of this philosophy on “Western” philosophy. One way of looking at this occlusion is that it is an instance of “Western” philosophy failing to acknowledge its debts to other traditions, but another way is to question whether it really makes sense to think of the Islamic tradition as something separate from the “Western” tradition, which the “Western” tradition stole from. This might lead us to question whether it makes sense to think that there really is such a thing as the “Western” tradition. The claim that there is might involve accepting a narrative told by European powers at the height of their modern nationalistic arrogance.

Heterogeneity in the content and methodology of “Western” philosophy

I have noted that “Western” philosophy has not sought to characterise what makes it Western, and also that there are a number of geographical and historical questions that can be raised about the extent to which the philosophy seen by modern North American and European philosophers as the Western tradition really belongs to the West. It might be thought, however, that we can give an account of the kinds of concerns that characterise the Western philosophical tradition in terms of its content and/or methodology. Metz, for example, in presenting his characterisation of African philosophy, contrasts it with ideas which, he suggests, have been dominant in the West. He says that

[g]eographical labels like “Western” and “African” refer to features that are salient in a locale, at least over a substantial amount of time. They pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. They denote fairly long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions (Metz 2015, 1176).

He then suggests as typically Western ideas “the combination of markets, science and constitutionalism” (Metz 2015, 1177).⁸ These strike me as odd ideas to designate as typically Western, whether we are looking either at the philosophical tradition known as Western or at thought in Western societies. At the most, it might be taken to represent one strand in parts of European and North American thought in the 19th and 20th centuries. Even by looking just at the 20th century, if we look either at dominant ideas in European societies (think about the number of European countries under fascist rule in the 20th century) or if we look at European philosophy we will find an extremely non-homogenous set of ideas and methodologies. It seems to me that it would be difficult to characterise what the obsessively systematic systems of Kant have methodologically in common with the (arguably) obsessively unsystematic aphoristic approach of Nietzsche. Which of these are we to take as the “Western” method? What do either of them have in common with the methodology and ideas of Marx, Frege or Russell, never mind with contemporary experimental philosophy? Certainly there are connections between these thinkers, the tracing and understanding of which many people working in the history of philosophy find a rewarding enterprise, and the connections, conversations and influences between these philosophers might make sense of saying that there is significant sense in which they belong to a common tradition. What seems to me more questionable though, is that there is either a methodology or a set of topics they have in common, which would designate them as typically “Western”. Even as early as the ancient Greek tradition to which, as I have noted, contemporary European and North American philosophy tends to trace its roots, it is hard to find an agreed methodology or an agreed set of problems. Rather, there is an abundance of difference—relativists, sceptics, emotivists, cynics, theists, hedonists, ascetics and many other theories and methodologies.

I noted at the beginning that “Western” philosophy has not had much explicit preoccupation with what, in specific, makes it Western (unlike the focus on the meta-philosophical question in African and Latin American philosophy). I suggested that one part of the explanation of this might be the West’s having something like the whitely failure to see its own position as a position. However, I think we can now add a further, complicating part of this, which is the extent to which so-called Western philosophy is not monolithic or homogenous, and the extent to which this means that one cannot easily pick out either a subject matter or a methodology and declare it to be specifically “Western”. Even attempting to characterise the content or methods of European and North American philosophy by looking at what is currently taught and written in European and North American philosophy departments would yield a significant amount of dispute, and would include philosophers arguing for such philosophical methods as returning to the ancient concern of how to live well, philosophers working in empirical experimental philosophy, and those who see philosophy as continuous with natural science. Topics and methodologies are constantly contested and vary widely. Going only a little way back in the history of the twentieth century would get us

⁸ In comparison, he says, “Similarly, it is African to hold a belief in the need to respect ancestors, wise progenitors of a clan who have survived the death of their bodies and now live in an invisible form on earth” (Metz 2015, 1176).

to a time in which North American and British analytic philosophy was barely reading the history of philosophy, and doing very little work in ethics, a situation very different from the present. And looking at philosophers currently working in North American and European philosophy departments would include many philosophers who are critical of much of twentieth century philosophy, as well as philosophers working on analysing oppression, gender, sexual orientation, revolution, violence, epistemic injustice, race, white supremacy, and many other topics. It is not obvious that there is a sense in which these are peculiarly Western topics.

Conclusion

I have suggested that in terms of content and methodology, it is not obvious that there is an easy way of determining what makes Western philosophy Western, given the extent to which it is not homogenous or monolithic, and has been constantly changing and contested, and given the breadth of the topics which have, at various times, been taken as its subject matter. (This is compatible with its being the case that its focus and topics have at least some of the time been parochial, as well as influenced by ideology and racism, as we have seen argued by both Mills and Parks). In my view, this raises a problem for the attempt to define a tradition in opposition to so-called Western philosophy, as well as for the idea that Africanising the curriculum would mean excluding or replacing so-called Western philosophy. The problem with the former is that traditions which try to define themselves as different to the Western tradition will be attempting to define themselves as different to a tradition with respect to which it will be hard to find topics and methodologies that it has not included. This means that attempting to define yourself in opposition to the Western tradition in terms of either content or methodology would be, it seems to me, unnecessarily painting yourself into a corner with almost no room for methodological manoeuvre and few concepts left. Similarly, the question Vargas reports as getting significant attention within Latin American philosophy—“does Latin American philosophy exist?”—seems to me in danger of granting too much to Western philosophy. Western philosophy is allowed to take itself to exist no matter what topics or methodologies it engages with; the idea that Latin American philosophy be recognised as existing only if it does something distinctively different to the West cedes too much conceptual ground as property of the West.

I have argued that there are many problems with the idea of Western philosophy, and with the idea that decolonising the curriculum should involve rejecting so-called Western philosophy. Doing this could include granting the West a false narrative about its origins, influences and interactions, perpetuating exclusions within contemporary and recent North American and European philosophy, perpetuating exclusions and failed acknowledgements within the history of so-called Western philosophy, while at the same time rejecting a tradition which has included in itself so many topics and methodologies that what is left after excluding it would leave other traditions with limited resources, at the same time as wrongly granting the West proprietary rights over any ideas it has happened to investigate, rather than seeing these as belonging to all of humanity. I therefore conclude that a central part of curriculum change should be problematising Western philosophy, including our learning more about, and teaching, more complex views of its history and interactions with other traditions. Of course it is entirely compatible with this that we simultaneously devote more of the syllabus to philosophy that identifies as African, as well as to using philosophical tools to think about problems pertinent to Africa, as well as teaching parts of North American and European philosophy that have been neglected, particularly those which may have been neglected through racism, such as the African-American political tradition, and the medieval Islamic tradition.

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