

Diverse Philosophies: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?

Shen-yi Liao ponders the answers and the questions

I know that I am a Taiwanese philosopher, in the sense that I am a Taiwanese person and that I teach and research in philosophy. But I am not sure whether I am a Taiwanese philosopher, in the sense that my work falls under the label “Taiwanese philosophy”.

My training is in the analytic philosophy tradition, which comes with its own set of canonical thinkers, works, topics, and methods. In fact, until a few years ago, when I came across a couple of essay collections co-edited by Tzu-wei Hung – *Existential Engagement: Philosophy in Taiwan, the Japanese Era and Enlightenment and Rebellion: 100 years of Taiwanese Philosophy* – I had never even heard of the label “Taiwanese philosophy”.

“What is *Taiwanese* philosophy?”, I wondered. Taiwan is so young – its liberal democracy is less than twenty-five years old and its independence remains unrecognised by most of the world – that it seems doubtful that it can have a philosophy of its own. How can Taiwanese philosophy be different from Chinese philosophy, given the Sinicizing influence brought by the most recent colonial occupation? And even if it is, how can Taiwanese philosophy be

different from Japanese philosophy, given the influence brought by the colonial occupation that came before? Does Taiwanese philosophy include influences from The West, which – as you might expect by now – also includes a few colonial occupiers who came to Taiwan before the Japanese? And does Taiwanese philosophy include the thoughts of Indigenous Formosan people, who were gradually displaced and marginalised by the Han immigrants – themselves colonial settlers – a few hundred years ago? Or, to turn to the present, does it include the thoughts of New Immigrants, especially those from Southeast Asia, who came in the very recent years? Much like Taiwan itself, Taiwanese philosophy is asked to prove its very own existence over and over again – even in my own mind.

“Is Taiwanese philosophy really *philosophy*?”, I also wondered. The thinkers who are labelled as Taiwanese philosophers are not ones I had ever heard of in my training, and their writings are more foreign to me than those of Aristotle and Confucius. Li Chunsheng, a businessman who has been called “the first thinker of Taiwan”, wrote essays that looked to me like Christian the-

ology. Lin Mosei, a John Dewey-influenced pragmatist who was disappeared during the February 28th Massacre that cemented the Chinese colonial occupation, did not even have a PhD degree in philosophy. Joshua Wen-Kwei Liao, who did earn a PhD degree in philosophy from University of Chicago, appears to be completely forgotten in contemporary debates about morality and legality, the twin topics of his dissertation. Even if Taiwanese philosophy can prove its existence, it still has to prove it is philosophy – not only to me, but to the discipline of philosophy as it stands.

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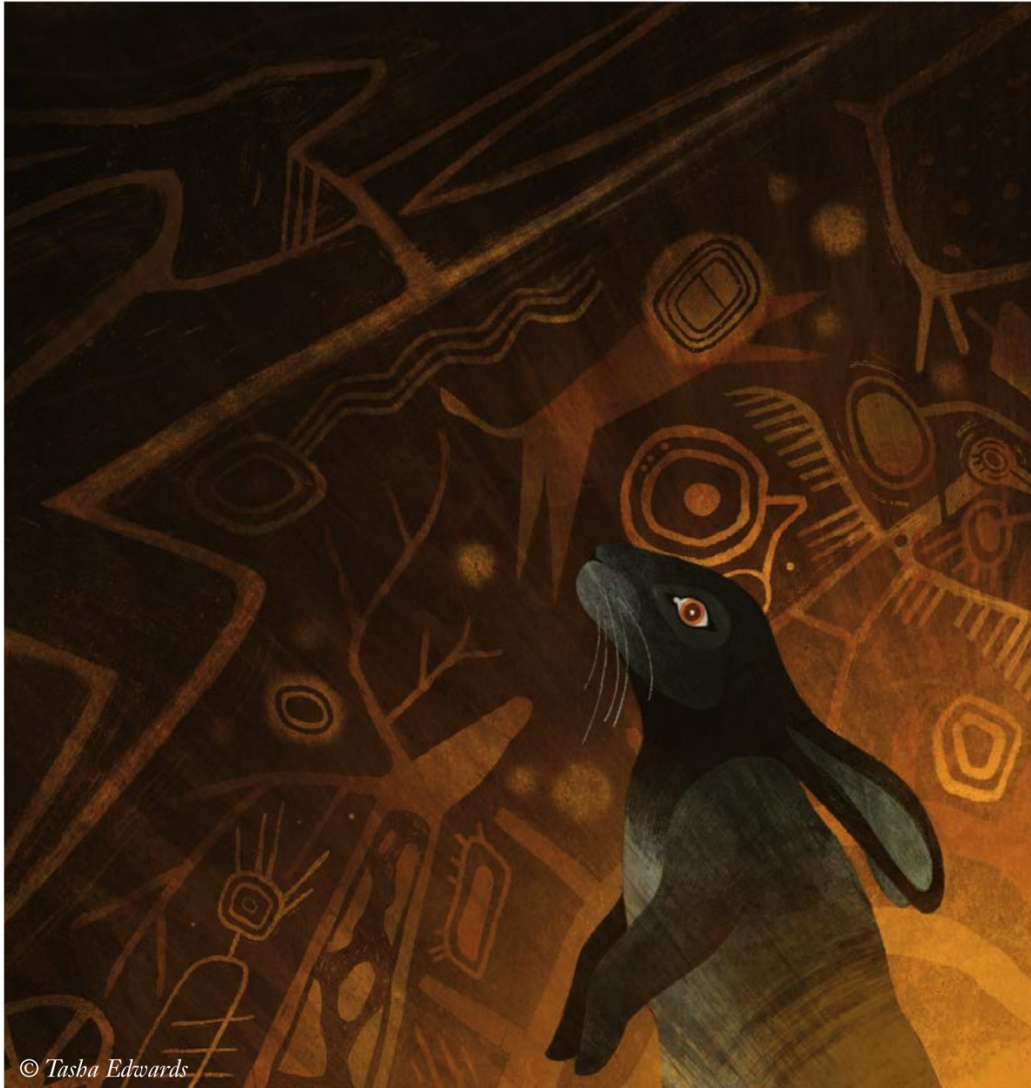
Despite their specialness to me, I know that my wonderings are not unique. In fact, the pattern that they illustrate is pervasive in conversations about “diversifying philosophy”. Whenever philosophers try to include a “diverse” – in the sense of not currently recognised as canon – philosophy *x* into their teaching and their research, they inevitably get asked: “What is *x* philosophy?” and “Is *x* philosophy really philosophy?”

These metaphilosophical questions do not only arise with attempts to include “diverse” intellectual traditions, but also with attempts to include “diverse” thinkers, works, topics, and methods. First, they are asked to prove that *x* exists. Second, they are asked to prove that *x* is really philosophy. To refer to the pattern of debates that these questions engender, call it *conversational dynamics of diversity*. This dynamics can be observed in diverse philosophies that are more established than Taiwanese philosophy, where these debates have gone on for much longer.

For it is not only this Taiwanese philosopher who has thought about whether there is a Taiwanese philosophy. As Susana Nuccetelli recounts, “Latin American philosophers have often thought about whether there *is* a Latin American philosophy”. There is a longstanding and ongoing debate centred on the metaphilosophical question “What *is* Latin American philosophy?”. In trying to answer this question, philosophers seem to be searching for a concept whose boundary includes disparate works – from, say, Nahua poetry from the fifteenth and sixteenth century to, say, Emilio Uranga’s mid-twentieth-century “Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican” – that fall under the label “Latin American philosophy” in our thought and talk.

*“Is Taiwanese
philosophy really
philosophy?”*

Some philosophers advocate for an answer that presupposes the universality of philosophy, on which Latin American philosophy is nothing more than philosophy done in Latin America. Others advocate for an answer that presupposes the distinctiveness of different philosophies, on which Latin American philosophy must reflect the characteristic circumstances of Latin America, as they are shaped culturally, socially, and historically. Either way, they are attempting to show that there is an internal and external coherence to the label “Latin American philosophy”; that is, to prove that there *exists* a Latin American philosophy. Despite their



disagreement on the answers, these philosophers seem to agree on the assumption that lies behind the question “What *is* Latin American philosophy?” – that there is a coherent concept of “Latin American”, whose boundary we can discover.

And it is not only this Taiwanese philosopher who has thought about whether Taiwanese philosophy is really philosophy.

There is another longstanding and ongoing debate centred on the metaphysical question “*Is* classical Chinese philosophy really philosophy?”. In trying to answer this question, philosophers seem to be, once again, searching for a concept whose boundary includes the disparate works that fall under the label “philosophy” in our thought and talk.

Some philosophers with distinctivist sympathies – especially, though not exclusively, those who believe that philosophy is distinctively Western – argue that, no, classical Chinese philosophy is not really philosophy. In making their case, they often seem to presuppose that there are objective markers of philosophy’s boundary that they can appeal to. In turn, these criteria reveal their supposed discovery of the concept of philosophy. Some such criteria are formal, such as the presence of overt arguments, which is admittedly difficult to find in the *Analects* or *Daodejing*. Other such criteria are cultural, social, or historical, such as the etymological origin of the term “philosophy” in ancient Greece.

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Other philosophers with universalist sympathies argue that, yes, classical Chinese philosophy really is philosophy. In making their case, they too often seem to presuppose that there are objective markers of philosophy’s boundary that they can appeal to – in fact, more or less the same ones as their opponents! In turn, these criteria also reveal their supposed discovery of the concept of philosophy. Again, some such criteria are formal, such as the presence of overt arguments in *Mozi* or *Xunzi*. And again, some such criteria are cultural, social, or histori-

cal, such as the Buddhist influence on David Hume’s Enlightenment thoughts or Christian Wolff’s acknowledgement and praise for Confucius and Mencius.

Yet again, despite their disagreement on the answers, these philosophers seem to agree on the assumption that lies behind the question “*Is classical Chinese philosophy really philosophy?*” – that there that there is a coherent concept of “philosophy”, whose boundary we can discover.

The debates that these metaphilosophical questions engender are not only endless but, in my view, exhausting. To be sure, some philosophers are unbothered by these metaphilosophical questions, and simply forge ahead with the ground-level questions and engage with non-canonical intellectual traditions (or thinkers, works, topics, methods) on their own terms. In fact, the metaphilosophical questions are unlikely to make much sense without engagements with ground-level questions. But for other philosophers, the conversational dynamics of diversity can deter their original interest. It is easier to stick with canonical intellectual traditions (or thinkers, works, topics, methods), where these metaphilosophical questions seem to somehow never arise.

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Analogous debates on the questions I started with – “What is *Taiwanese* philosophy?” and “Is Taiwanese philosophy really *philosophy*?” – are barely existent, yet. However, it is not difficult for me to imagine the same conversational dynamics of diversity repeating itself once or twice more. Even in imagination, these analogous debates already seem endless, and I am already

exhausted by them. I cannot help but also wonder whether there are better metaphilosophical questions to ask, which might help to redirect our focus of inquiry, and which might help to reshape the metaphilosophical debates in more theoretically and politically advantageous ways.

To change the metaphilosophical questions, I think we can look to Sally Haslanger's distinction of, on the one hand, *conceptual* and *descriptive* inquiries and, on the other hand, *ameliorative* inquiries. And then, to recognise the work that this distinction can do, we can return to the more established metaphilosophical debates about the "diverse" philosophies of Latin American and classical Chinese traditions.

A conceptual inquiry seeks to elucidate a concept via an investigation of its intensional meaning by investigating "our" intuitions. A descriptive inquiry seeks to elucidate a concept via an investigation of its extensional instances, by uncovering "our" paradigmatic cases of the concept. Despite their differences, on both of these approaches, we *take concepts as they are*. As such, these modes of inquiries focus on discovery.

By contrast, ameliorative inquiries focus on not discovery, but engineering. Fundamental to this mode of inquiry is asking what concepts are good for: what are the conditions under which they can best serve "our" theoretical and political aims. That is, on the ameliorative approach, we *make concepts as we want them to be*. There are no objective markers of these concepts' boundaries, only ones that we collectively negotiate and decide on.

Different modes of inquiries are suitable for different concepts. The original contexts for Haslanger's distinction are

the longstanding and ongoing debates about the concepts of race and gender. To Haslanger, "[m]uch recent debate over race, in particular, seems to have become bogged down in the question whether this or that account of race can claim to be an analysis of *our* concept of race". Haslanger is critical of approaches that take concepts of race and gender as they are, in part because she is skeptical that there are objective markers of these concepts' boundaries to be discovered. Instead, Haslanger argues that the ameliorative approach, which "seeks to identify what legitimate purposes we might have (if any) in categorising people on the basis of race or gender, and to develop concepts that would help us achieve these ends" is more theoretically and politically advantageous. Instead of taking concepts of race and gender as they are, we should make these concepts as we want them to be. That is, instead of asking "What *is* gender?" and "What *is* race?", we should be asking "What *do we want* gender to be?" and "What *do we want* race to be?".

We make concepts as we want them to be

Let us now return to conversational dynamics of diversity. Like "race" and "gender", concepts such as "Latin American" and – yes – "philosophy" are socially constructed. The boundaries of these concepts are ones that have been collectively negotiated, and can be collectively re-negotiated. So I contend that when it comes to these concepts, the ameliorative approach is also likely to be more theoretically and political-

ly advantageous than the conceptual or the descriptive approaches. Instead of asking “What *is* Latin American philosophy?” and “*Is* classical Chinese philosophy really philosophy?”, we should be asking “What *do we want* Latin American philosophy *to be*?” and “*Do we want* classical Chinese philosophy *to be* philosophy?”.

The difference in these metaphilosophical questions is not merely semantic. We are rejecting the existence of deep, objective, necessary facts concerning the boundaries of intellectual traditions and of philosophy itself. Instead, we are affirming that, insofar as there exist facts concerning these boundaries, they are only shallow, subjective, and contingent. In particular, that means when we ask questions about “our” theoretical and political aims, there may be no univocal answer. Different constitutions of “us”, in different conversational contexts, may call for different boundaries to be drawn.

So, what exactly are the philosophers doing when they are engaging with the “is” questions about diverse philosophies? On my diagnosis, they are actually already engaging with the “want ... to be” questions about diverse philosophies – whether they realise it or not. Specifically, they are engaging in *metalinguistic negotiations* of the respective concepts.

Metalinguistic negotiation is a linguistic practice that happens often in mundane conversations. For example, you and I might be in the same room, looking at a thermostat together, and still you say “it is hot here” and I say “it is not hot here”. In this example, you and I are not disagreeing about the temperature of the room. Instead, you and I are disagreeing about the temperature condition under which the concept “hot”

applies. That is, you and I are disagreeing about the boundary of hotness.

Philosophers engaging in conversational dynamics of diversity are, on my diagnosis, involved in the same linguistic practice – only they are disagreeing about the boundaries of intellectual traditions and of philosophy itself. But they err when they do not realise that negotiating the boundaries of these concepts is actually what they are doing. In particular, they err when they take themselves to be engaging in a dispassionate dispute about what specific intellectual traditions are or what philosophy is, rather than inherently normative negotiations about what they want them to be.

I find this thought liberating

A particularly insidious form of this error takes place in connection with what Kristie Dotson calls philosophy’s “culture of justification”. Whereas questions of the form “Is x really philosophy” standardly comes up with non-canonical intellectual traditions (or thinkers, works, topics, methods), they do not standardly do so with canonical ones. And these questions function as a part of a vetting process used by those with existing prestige statuses and material resources to cement their own legitimacy while denying, or merely selectively availing, statuses and resources to those without them.

Philosophy’s culture of justification is why the question of “Is x philosophy really philosophy?” arises for classical Chinese philosophy, but not ancient Greek philosophy. Non-canonical intellectual traditions

are asked to meet some imagined objective constitutive criteria – which may not even hold for the canonical traditions! – in order to count as really philosophy. More subtly, this culture of justification is also why the question of “What is x philosophy?” arises for Latin American philosophy, but not (European) early modern philosophy. Non-canonical intellectual traditions are asked to demonstrate their internal and external coherence – which, again, may not even hold for canonical traditions – in order to even be considered for inclusion. That is, these non-canonical intellectual traditions are asked to prove that they exist, in order to get seated at the table, even though no analogous demands are made of canonical intellectual traditions.

Admittedly, changing the “is” metaphilosophical questions to the “want ... to be” ones will not, by itself, diversify the discipline. The same conversational dynamics of diversity may well remain. But by changing the metaphilosophical questions, philosophers interested in diversification can better recognise these conversational dynamics for what they really are, especially when these conversational dynamics are in service of philosophy’s culture of justification. In turn, philosophers can better accord prestige statuses and material resources, in their teaching and their research, in making philosophy what they want it to be.

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What about Taiwanese philosophy? In this case, the change in metaphilosophical questions can also change the continuing conversations. We can turn away from trying to prove the existence of Taiwanese philos-

ophy to others, and turn to trying to figure out what we want this label to do for ourselves. To be sure, we need to remember the thinkers, works, topics, and methods that have been forgotten, or erased by political forces such as Sinicization and orientalism. But in constructing a history of Taiwanese philosophy, we can also imagine different futures and collectively negotiate them. As a Taiwanese philosopher, I find this thought liberating. People like me do not need to take Taiwanese philosophy as it currently is. We have the power, when it comes to the distribution of prestige statuses and material resources, to make it what we want it to be. Indeed, we have no choice but to do so: for concepts like “Taiwanese” and “philosophy” are not parts of the world given to us, but parts of the world made by us.

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