

Professional Philosophy, “Diversity,” and Racist Exclusion: On Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*

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This following essay uses Bryan W. Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017) to articulate several reasons for why diversification efforts in professional philosophy face an uphill battle. Besides methodological, material, and “ideological” obstacles, diversity initiatives in academic philosophy are often commandeered and result in tokenization rather than diversification. On top of that, many professional philosophers view calls for diversification as an additional burden levied upon philosophy departments, one that comes not from genuine philosophical interests but from a cultural atmosphere that is increasingly under the influence of political correctness and identity politics. As such, diversification is antithetical to the furtherance of “real philosophy” and often amounts to a waste of time and money. Methodologically, or so the thought goes, one cannot find a discipline that is more disserved by administrative efforts, or the vociferous complaints of members of philosophy departments, to “diversify.”

Some of these claims manifest in Van Norden’s book, and as nonwhite Mexican-American in professional philosophy, I must admit that I am happy to see more “mainstream” (read “white”) philosophers willing to engage in this type of metaphilosophical debate. That being said, whereas *Taking Back Philosophy* poses a series of *internal* challenges to professional philosophy, it pales in comparison to the critical work on the diversification of philosophy done from the margins of academic philosophy, from the decolonial, Latin American, indigenous, feminist, and Africana thought of the past three decades. These traditions are not only “diverse,” but they also problematize and critically challenge the professionalized practice of philosophy today. I therefore find it frustrating (but am not surprised) that Van Norden’s book garners professional uptake whereas the work of nonwhites, women, and philosophers from the “formerly” colonial world remain relatively ignored. This book’s success, in this sense, is also its failure.

You might be thinking that this line of thought is slightly unfair given that Van Norden’s comparative endeavors are primarily between Eastern and Western perspectives (as he admits throughout the book). To hold him accountable for not working in the aforementioned traditions is

off the mark. Therein lies the problem. It is unfortunate, bear with me, that Van Norden specializes in Chinese philosophy and strives to work from those traditions he is most familiar with. “Unfortunate” because this will reinforce the idea that *Taking Back Philosophy* is essentially about the need for more Chinese philosophy (or, generally speaking, “Asian” philosophy) in our profession. While of course valuable to the profession, “Asian philosophy” is the most tolerable form of “diversity” in professional philosophy today; it is many a philosopher’s go-to interpretation of “non-Western” or “comparative philosophy.” In saying this, I do not mean to disregard the philosophical systems and longstanding traditions/debates that fall under the umbrella of “Asian philosophy,” but I am frequently shocked by how this area of specialization is fetishized and used for ideological purposes by professional philosophers, as I explain below.

I can put this concern in the form of a question. Van Norden’s book is clever enough to succeed in making some philosophers uncomfortable to the point that they take the plunge into what passes for “comparative philosophy” in the profession these days. Would Van Norden’s book be as effective if its main point of comparison was the experience of people of color in the United States, Nahuatl thought (the philosophy of the “Aztec” people), or even feminist philosophy, rather than Chinese philosophy? Would Van Norden’s argument, particularly constructed with Chinese philosophy in mind, work for Latin American philosophy? While Van Norden calls for a truly *global* and not *globalized* conception of philosophy, to borrow language from David Hall,¹ it is a call that, unfortunately, will fall upon orientalist ears. (Just to be clear, I mean Edward Said’s use of “orientalism.”)

Unless Van Norden’s claims are taken farther, they might not help achieve the goals his book sets out to accomplish. Moreover, in terms of the text itself, there is an unspoken tension between the call for diversification and his attempt to demonstrate the value of philosophical inquiry in the sociopolitical and historical contexts of today (the social contexts that led to Trump!). This is a tension that many will exploit in order to evade diversification efforts, a point I return to in my closing. Overall, while the book is a start (albeit a late one) to the debate about the value of “philosophy” in a rapidly changing world, *Taking Back Philosophy* fails address the deeper reasons for why diversification efforts are stymied. It also fails to adequately address the complexity of the issues surrounding “diversity” in professional philosophy today.

Diversity and Philosophy: On Suicidal Tendencies

Taking Back Philosophy problematizes the supposed (and self-assumed) universality of Anglo-European philosophy (chapter 1). It provides an excellent example of what comparative philosophy ought to look like (chapters 2), and points out the racism, xenophobia, blatant ethnocentrism, and fear operative in academia today (chapter 3). It also helps to explain the anti-intellectualism of our present cultural and political climate (chapter 4) and aspires to restore a sense of philosophy as vocation (chapter 5). Succinctly put (at least when it comes to chapters devoted to the diversification of professional philosophy), Van Norden's central claim is that "[p]hilosophy must diversify or die."² Throughout my relatively short tenure in academic philosophy, I have relied upon this slogan time and time again with mixed results. I am sad to say, however, that if faced with the option between diversification and departmental "death," the latter is what many, if not most, tenured philosophers would prefer.³ Indeed, if my experiences in professional philosophy have taught me anything, it is that many, especially those who are resistant to change, would rather see the ship sink, so to speak, than keep it afloat with women, racialized minorities, members of LGTBQ communities, and/or non-Western philosophical interests at the helm: "It just would not be philosophy anymore!" (Of course, this is not true of all departments or tenured professors of philosophy, but a lot—I would wager a majority.)

The reasons for such a stark claim are manifold. Probably the most important stems from a collective conflict of interests shared by many professional philosophers. A majority of persons occupying tenure-stream positions in departments and universities throughout the globe—especially in English-speaking countries and former colonial metropolises—have professional, economic, and personal investments in the philosophical *status quo* (in which diversity is minimally important). They are disincentivized when it comes to diversity since, in the eyes of many professional philosophers, it would entail the loss of tradition and "prestige," the abandonment of rigor (or so it is assumed), and the dissolution of the aura of sophistication and deference that is often evoked upon mentioning to someone that one is a professor of philosophy (or some other vain reason). Absent these, or so the idea goes, much of the money allocated to departmental budgets, faculty lines, salaries, and competitive research grants would be lost (since who would ever find philosophy attractive or take it seriously in its new multicultural garb?). Diversification efforts are seen as a direct attack on philosophical specialization, even though one can argue it will lead to new specialties and the broadening of philosophy on the whole (these efforts might even attract new crops of undergraduates into the discipline who might then find more "mainstream" areas interesting). On top of all this,

subjective preferences and biases, and indeed racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice disallow “diversity” efforts to be fully realized; they are often commandeered or result in tokenized hiring. Revealing a nefarious conflation of self and community, many philosophers are threatened by change, such that if one’s department or the field as a whole rapidly transforms then their *individual* status as a “philosopher” is called into question. In order for one to thrive as the philosopher she or he is *today*, professional philosophy has to remain the same (if not even be made *great* again!).⁴

For these reasons (and others), nothing short of generational turn-over, via retirement or other means, will allow for the widespread adoption of what Van Norden writes of: the replacement of one species of philosopher with another altogether,⁵ or, at the very least, a new crop of philosophers less invested in the way things are. Diversification efforts require the full support of administrators, including deans and provosts. They often have to force change. Perhaps flying the face of Van Norden’s attempt, you will not convince many *philosophers* to do right in terms of the inclusion of racialized minorities, women, and LGBTQ communities—a telling and sad point that echoes the anti-intellectualism he describes. Arguments pertaining to the well-being of philosophy departments or the need for attracting majors will rarely work (again, sink the ship!). Neither will clever gambits that ask philosophers to own up about the fact that they speak on behalf of only a portion of humanity and not all of it, as Van Norden and Jay Garfield dared to suggest in their *New York Times* op-ed. For diversification to be successful, you need as much faculty support as possible, financial investment and commitment from colleges and administrations, and the blatant disregard of racist, sexist, and homophobic perspectives (there should not be any reasoning with the unreasonable—I have seen department chairs commit this folly only to reveal their own conservative preferences in the process). You cannot learn from or find value in another individual when you do not view them or their identity as a valid locus for knowledge-production. To make matters worse, forcing one to think in your terms typically results in their work being derivative not to mention inauthentic.

Methodological Blinders and the White Light

Attempts at “diversifying” professional academic philosophy take many shapes and forms. Some of these attempts seek to increase the number of people of color and/or women in the field but keep in place the current research interests, the types of courses offered by philosophy departments, and the range of experience or sources for knowledge considered pertinent to philosophical inquiry. Other attempts at diversification paint a more global picture of philosophy and strive to expand the variety or range of questions considered “philosophical” but are not necessarily concerned with changing the

face of philosophy. The best forms of philosophical diversification do both, that is, they increase the number of *people of color and women* in professional philosophy as well as incorporate more “projects of color” (see below) into the mainstream. They also do not demand the complete overlap of the two—that is to say, they do not leave it up to the minorities and women to do all the work. That being said, increasing the number of white people (men in particular) studying “non-Western” philosophy does not diversify philosophy; neither does offering admission into “club philosophy” to racialized minorities, women, and those from the “formerly” colonized world albeit on terms requiring their assimilation into well-established philosophical questions, methods, and problematics. Philosophical diversity requires a change in personnel as well as thematic adjustment, the type of which the pervasive whiteness of professional philosophy will not allow for.

In “Philosophy Raced. Philosophy Erased,” Charles Mills explains that philosophers of color face an assortment of challenges upon entering the ranks of professional philosophy.⁶ Some of these include implicit and explicit racial/gender biases, microaggressions, double standards, forms of tokenization, and outright hostility or animosity. All of these, unfortunately, have come to be expected by racialized minorities entering academic philosophy (which does not make them right). The most perplexing and unique challenge faced by philosophers of color, Mills continues, is the relegation of the types of interpersonal, structural, and historical issues faced by racialized minorities to the status of “non-philosophy.” In particular, Mills has in mind questions on race and processes of racialization, but one can easily add racism, sexism, colonization, slavery, various forms of objectification and denigration, political marginalization, economic exploitation (*as women and/or people of color*), and more, all of which I referred to as “projects of color” above.

The relegation of projects of color to the status of non-philosophy comes from certain metaphilosophical commitments and specific ideals about the end goal of philosophical thought. In comparison to other fields, such as literature, sociology, or history, philosophy aspires to ask perennial questions, those that span space and time and place one on a discursive level where they can think alongside of the great minds of history. “Philosophy is supposed to be abstracting away from the contingent, the corporeal, the temporal, the material, to get at necessary, spiritual, eternal, ideal truths,” writes Mills.⁷ From this perspective, the range of questions that fall into the domain of philosophy ought not include those that lack broad appeal. Questions devoted to race and processes of racialization, therefore, are of limited relevance to “philosophers” on account of being “local,” particular, *too* corporeal (as it were), and mostly of interest to “minorities.” It is not that white philosophers altogether lack interest in any of the above concerns; many do work on and find such

topics interesting (such that my use of “projects of color” might even be offensive to some). Nevertheless, Mills’ analysis centers on the way questions connected to race are considered (at best) “applied” issues, “special topics,” the ever so charitable “non-ideal theory,” or whatever term is used to confer peripheral, tangential, outlier-status as *not really philosophy*.

A major reason (but definitely not the only one) for this type of marginalization is the fact that the hegemonic group of individuals traditionally associated with being “philosophers” lack the range of perspective or experiences often shared by people of color. To make matters worse, this group also inhabits positions of racialized normativity. Using political philosophy as an example, Mills explains that the experiential starting point for people of color, generally speaking, runs contrary to the basic assumptions about political subjectivity maintained by “mainstream” thinkers. He writes, “Your moral equality and personhood are certainly *not* recognized; you are *not* equal before the law; and the state is *not* seeking to protect but to encroach upon your interests in the interests of the white population.”⁸ In the contexts of the United States racial imaginary, African Americans are fundamentally viewed as criminal and dangerous; the existence of Latinx peoples is predicated on tropes of “illegality.” While the rights of Blacks and Hispanics might be protected nominally, these protections are not automatically granted in our society but must be continuously fought for and asserted, a point that gives new meaning to the idea of racial privilege. All this is to say, a metaphysically stable and legally secure political subjectivity is something political philosophers can take for granted only when the class of individuals who make up professional philosophy are treated the same by the law, show up in similar ways in terms of political representation, and also share a similar range of normative concerns. Thus, when relying upon one’s (white racial) self as a frame of reference for discussion of rights or political organization (or even when designing syllabi!), it is quite possible that, in academic contexts where a majority of peers inhabit more or less the same circle of privilege as you, the particularity of your view is obscured and the experience of “unraced” whites becomes the norm, as Mills puts it.

I offer the question of political justice as it relates to undocumented immigrants or irregular migration as a classic example. At the onset of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls explains that his main object of inquiry is justice, the basic structure of society.⁹ Seeking a simple conception of justice, Rawls limits his project in two ways (one of which is important here): “I shall be satisfied if it is possible to formulate a reasonable conception of justice for the basic structure of society conceived for the time being as a closed system isolated from other societies”.¹⁰ In *The Law of Peoples*, he adds “this position views society as closed: persons enter only by birth, and exit only by death.”¹¹ In

Political Liberalism (1996), Rawls continues: “That a society is closed is a considerable abstraction, justified only because it enables us to speak about certain main questions free from *distracting details*.”¹² Besides reducing the plight of undocumented peoples to a “distracting detail,” Rawls’ restriction betrays his own principles by providing too much information regarding the persons behind the famed “veil of ignorance.” When formulating the basic principles upon which the structure of society will depend, we may not know if we are rich, poor, black, white, able-bodied or not, male or female, gay or straight, but we *do* know that everyone behind the veil will be a “citizen” or, at the very least, have regular status. Through this restriction Rawls limits justice, in its most basic form, to those who are formal members of the body politic, a move that in the context of the United States alienates upwards of twelve million undocumented people from the basic structure of society (i.e., justice). Unless such a limitation is justifiable, which is to say that the burden is upon Rawlsians to show how citizenship is not an arbitrary starting point for a theory of justice (again, appealing to Rawls’ own standards), how can the range of justice, *in its most basic form*, be so narrow?

In asking the above, my goal is not to engage the burgeoning literature on the ethics of immigration. Instead, building upon what Mills writes, I demonstrate how many of the assumptions that “mainstream” philosophy rest upon, like taking citizenship or more abstractly “membership” for granted when constructing a theory of justice, reflects a rather particular perspective committed to a specific set of normative concerns. Now, imagine this happening in the aggregate, adding things like prestige and pedigree, canon formation, the weight of tradition, and the “need for rigor” into the mix.¹³ One can easily see how many of those intellectual endeavors that might attract and welcome more nonwhite people into the philosophy are jettisoned (I am tempted to say “deported”) to ethnic studies, area studies, women and gender studies, etc.

Before moving on, it is important to underscore that philosophers of color are not *only* interested in so-called projects of color. Neither is it the case that all minorities in philosophy think in essentialized ways that correspond with race, gender, or sexuality. To make such an assumption would be as oppressive and totalizing as the other injustices nonwhite philosophers put up with. Nevertheless, *my concern is with those individuals who would argue that race has nothing to do with philosophy; with those who dismiss the epistemic salience of social identity in philosophy altogether*. Moreover, it is not merely the numerical overrepresentation of whites that leads to the alienation of minorities in philosophy. Mills’ ultimate concern is with gate-keeping methodological constraints and “border-building” tactics that simultaneously curtail the diversification of philosophy as well as the obscure *the particularity* of those concerns passing themselves off as “universal.” Through this

process, professional philosophy remains overpopulated by white people (men in particular) and dominated by white interests passing themselves off as race-less philosophical concerns.

For additional support take Plato’s *Republic*. On my read, this book is essentially about justice as it unfolds at both the political and individual levels, and the justification for why reason ought to govern nonreason. For Plato, justice amounts to a kind of harmony or balance. A properly aligned or “balanced” psyche means that one’s reason dominates their more beastly parts, i.e., their passions/spirits and physical needs. Similarly, a just society requires an organic social totality wherein the rational parts of the body-politic command the non-rational. Plato’s right, in my opinion, to think that what you put into a society you get out at the individual level: if society is just, the people in it will be just. I believe the inverse is also true. If your society is predicated on injustice, the people within it will be incapable of a “balanced soul.” In this sense, think of W.E.B. Du Bois’ idea of double-consciousness. An African-American man who lived during that time in American history when black people were emancipated but nevertheless unfree (1868–1963), Du Bois describes the feeling of having a split or fractured self in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He writes, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”¹⁴ Du Bois has his self-consciousness, his “self,” but when introspecting he’s also forced to factor in the opinion of others, namely whites. While some might think that this is something all people do, that is, we all have to factor the opinion of others into our identity-construction, not all do it equally. Imagine being black and having to filter all of one’s exchanges with whites knowing that they view you first and foremost as threatening, criminal, or rapacious. From this perspective, of what value is a balanced soul when suffering from double-consciousness? Can Du Bois achieve harmony of the soul without one part of his “self” dominating the other? In a racialized context burdened by white supremacy, allowing “reason” to command “nonreason” means something quite different than what Plato had in mind.

Following Mills, my point is to demonstrate how the experiential starting-point for much of philosophy is white normativity. Those inhabiting white normativity are privileged to only have to deal with problems of the mind and not those problems generated by the racist minds in their midst. And even though a case can be made that *white* people too are incapable of achieving a balanced soul in a society predicated on white supremacy, they are capable of evading this question in most

philosophy courses. The sense of whiteness that permeates professional philosophy is a byproduct of methodological assumptions that run deeper than simply suggesting that if philosophy departments do not diversify, then they should own up to their ethnocentrism. Garfield captures what I mean when he writes that “ignoring non-Western philosophy in our research, curriculum, and hiring decisions is deeply racist, and is a practice we cannot endorse in good faith once we recognize this.” (Too bad he walks this claim back).¹⁵

The Semiotics of “Diversity”: On Philosophical Orientalism

While it is one thing to “diversify” philosophy, it is quite another to empower “epistemes” of difference. Van Norden’s argument for why Chinese philosophy deserves greater coverage in U.S. universities needs to be considered in light of this claim. He offers a valid argument that hinges on China’s increasing relevance on a global scale, the richness of this tradition, and the overwhelming whiteness of philosophy in English-speaking contexts.¹⁵ In addition to the question I asked above, that is, would this argument work if we swapped “Chinese philosophy” for Latin American or Africana thought, let me pose another. Does Chinese philosophy deserve more uptake in the United States than, say, Africana or Latin American or *Asian American* philosophies? Given that “students of color are confronted with a curriculum that is almost monolithically white,”¹⁶ as Van Norden writes, why not ask these students to study philosophical traditions that serve them or their interests better, and not just assume that their professor’s appreciation of “Asian thought” will suffice in terms of exposing students to difference? Why not draw from, and philosophically empower in the going, the range of experience of these students of color?

A response might be that by introducing students to a “non-Western” perspective, like Chinese philosophy, one exposes them ways of thinking that go beyond their sociohistorical contexts and thus do them some good: the broadening of epistemic horizons. While I agree with this, my rejoinder is the following: First, are we really doing students of color (particularly Black, Latinx, and indigenous students) a service by having them study a perspective that is, to some extent, completely irrelevant to their point of view? Again, I do not mean this as a knock against Chinese philosophy. Nevertheless, given the current racial, gender, and ethnic demographics of professional philosophy, most *students of color* already occupy a position of marginality or “otherness” relative to professional philosophy. By studying Anglo-Continental philosophical traditions these students are, in a sense, being exposed to a different tradition. They are already becoming “worldly” (and, in fact, due to their lack of privilege are forced to). My assumption here is that growing up nonwhite in a white dominated social

context(s) grants one a type of double-consciousness or *mestiza/o* or “border” consciousness that Gloria Anzaldúa writes of.¹⁷ Regardless, if the exposure to epistemic difference or getting outside of one’s comfort zone is not working for these students now, i.e., when nonwhite students study “white philosophers,” why assume that asking these students to think about Chinese thought will be better? It might do *white* students some good, but does it help *nonwhite* students?

Second, a central premise of much comparative philosophy (especially the East-meets-West variety) is the notion that comparative philosophy gets one into the mind of an “Other.” I think this assumes a type of mastery over others that is quite oppressive. Instead of assuming we now understand the world from a different point of view, why not decenter the self in a way that allows for *a world of others* to be possible? This should be the main goal of comparative philosophy. However, as it is currently taught, admittedly not by people as prepared as Van Norden (and I say this because of his second chapter is a great example of what comparative philosophy ought to look like), “getting into the minds of the other” is how many philosophers (and administrators) think of comparative or “non-Western” philosophy.

When comparing ideas across cultures, especially when one attempts to transverse *time* as well as *space*, as one does when studying Nahuatl (“Aztec”) philosophy for instance, a cautious and self-reflexive approach is best. Rather than perpetuate debates as to whether or not one is accurately portraying the thought practices and philosophical systems of conquered or foreign peoples, or for that matter debates about whether or not one can transcend their own epistemic framework and avoid the charge of cultural chauvinism or the problem of incommensurability, *comparative philosophical practices are better appreciated for their reflexive capabilities*. In light of a lingering skepticism about whether or not transcultural meanings exist, comparative philosophers are better off gaining a sense for how the comparative process challenges one’s preconceived views for what constitutes philosophy in the first place. In short, comparative philosophy *ought to assist more in decentering or destabilizing the self rather than understanding “the Other,”* as counterintuitive as this might seem. While I do not mean to obviate the importance of or dismiss the possibility of cross-cultural communication, one jeopardizes the significance of this methodological approach if one seeks to get inside the mind of other people.

Returning to my point, while Van Norden’s argument is complex and multifaceted, most of those who read it will only see or hear the need to study “Oriental” philosophy. The book will garner a half-hearted read, one that works in ideological ways to reify professional philosophy’s self-conception as well as several of its vices when it comes to comparative work. That is to say, given that Van Norden

personally works in Eastern traditions, his examples and demonstration for how to do comparative philosophy will eclipse his larger message.

When professional philosophers see “non-Western” philosophy, most think about Buddhism, Confucianism, or Daoism and seem to only have the so-called Far East in mind, never mind the Indian Subcontinent or Southeast Asia. Not only does such an image of “non-Western” philosophy lead to the exclusion of Amerindian, Africana, Latin American, and Caribbean traditions, since many of these have one foot in the West (which thus analytically rules them out as “non-Western”), but it also reinforces an image of historical progress articulated by G. W. F. Hegel who was famous for thinking that world history travels from “East” to “West.” When Anglo-European philosophers study Eastern traditions they often understand themselves as glimpsing images of philosophy’s past. Or, seeking to rebel from the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of Occidental culture (but nonetheless fans of “spirituality”), many professional philosophers are attracted to the religiously diverse aspects of Eastern thought (believe it or not, I have seen petty academics purport to be “Buddhist” only to frustrate those who claim to be Catholic). All this is to say, when looking “East,” Western philosophers catch a glimpse of their pre-approved past (assuming one does not venture too far east!). Most of what they see challenges Western thought in ways permitted by Western thinkers: the move from orthodoxy to orthopraxy; from essentialist, substantialist or static metaphysics to process ontologies; from philosophy as love of wisdom to contemplative and esoteric understandings of “philosophy”; and more. All of these take place within a range of intellectual developments that, although different enough to make possible points of differentiation, there remains enough overlap such that comparisons can be made.

When confronted with “radical difference,” the type of difference that runs counter to the narrative of historical development, one can start to view the dangers and risks involved in comparative endeavors. If Western philosophers were to take Africana, Native American, Latin American, and Caribbean traditions seriously, especially in terms of analyzing their philosophical perspective and values, one would be making quite the political statement: it is to say, contrary to some of the most hallowed voices of the Western philosophical canon, that Africa is not a continent devoid of reason; that *mestiza* ways of knowing constitute real philosophy; that Nahuatl-speaking peoples, amidst the fact that some might have engaged in human sacrifice, were capable of practicing formal philosophical investigation. Such a statement would undermine the sense of historical progress that undergirds Western philosophy. The Native American philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. puts it the following way,

Tribal people have traditionally been understood by Westerners as the last remnants of a hypothetical earlier stage of cultural evolution, and this so-called “primitive stage” of human development is a necessary preamble to any discussion of human beings and the meaning of their lives. Indeed, the stereotype of primitive peoples anchors the whole edifice of Western social thought. We need the primitive so that we can distinguish Western civilization from it and congratulate ourselves on the progress we have made.¹⁸

Deloria notes the difficulties he and others face when trying to explain how it is possible that indigenous peoples practiced “philosophy.” Recognizing the reasoning skills of indigenous peoples necessarily undermines the narrative of “progress,” “civility,” and “sophistication” that undergirds Western modernity, an idea reliant upon relations of domination, processes of racialization and enslavement, as well as the de-historization of indigenous peoples and their subsumption into “universal” (read European) history. All of these (and more) were the means through which the reasoning faculties of non-Western cultures were covered-over and reduced to a caricature, one that, as Deloria notes at the end of the above passage, bolsters the superiority of the Western modern subject.

Towards a Liberating Philosophy

For me, when one speaks of diversity, the state of professional philosophy is not only at stake. I see the debates about the nature of philosophical diversity as part of attempts at epistemic justice in light of European colonization and the ways in which knowledge is racialized, gendered, and politicized today. Influenced by liberation philosophy (broadly construed), I believe that philosophy is not an end in itself but part of the struggle against multiple forms of dehumanization and oppression. This is why, historically, some of the best works in philosophy (cross-culturally speaking) are dialogues where neither of the interlocutors are reducible to the other but represent differing points of view. Here, taking philosophical diversity seriously, empowering and acknowledging the possibility that from where you think and who you are matters to philosophy, can lead to the “liberation” of philosophy.

Van Norden believes in such an ideal, too. Seemingly taking a page out of liberatory philosophy, the last chapters of *Taking Back Philosophy* provide arguments aimed at the sense of anti-intellectualism that pervades “American” culture and claims about the uselessness of philosophy.

Liberation philosophers put it the following way, even if it is considered “the pursuit of truth” or “love of wisdom”: philosophical *praxis* should never be reduced to the pursuit of truth or love wisdom for its own sake.¹⁹ In order for philosophy to be a *praxis* that contributes to society, one has to take it out of the over-specialized manifestations that have formed inside of academia. I am not saying that specialization in philosophy is irrelevant. However, it needs to be contextualized, as Van Norden explains using Bertrand Russell’s work.²⁰

Such an approach to a very nuanced understanding of philosophy restores a sense of sociality to philosophy. I mean “sociality” in the sense of bringing into conversation the philosophical points of view of different cultures, thus the expansion of philosophical thought and not just the demand that “others think like me.” But also “sociality” in the sense making sure philosophers can explain to themselves and society at large the importance of their work. That being said, there is an unspoken tension in the book that arises in light of Van Norden’s emphasis on helping philosophy combat the anti-intellectualism of the current day, not to mention his desire to restore philosophy to the sense of vocation held by Socrates, Confucius, or the Nahuatl-speaking *tlamatinimi*, Quetzalcoatl. How can we afford to do the former when immersed in a fight about the importance of critical thinking, that is, when the very idea of philosophy is called into question? Manipulating the call for philosophy to be more practical, many philosophers will find this to be a reason why diversification needs to be put off. You can only do so much, or so the claim will go. Yet, as I hope to have explained above, practical relevance in philosophy, if such a goal is desired, is achieved by meeting students where they are, by broadening philosophical horizons in ways that take philosophers “outside” of themselves. On top of that, if the goal is to factor in more minorities and women into the field, or indeed philosophers from outside the English-speaking world, then demonstrating what philosophy can do to help combat totalizing forms of social identity and even colonization might do to some good.

Notes

1. With “global” and “globalized” I am drawing from the late comparative philosopher David Hall. See Hall, “Just how Provincial is Western Philosophy? ‘Truth’ in Comparative Contexts,” *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy* 15.4 (2001), 285.

2. Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.
3. While some might find my comments “pessimistic,” they are not intended to be so. I am trying to be “real” in the sense of Derrick Bell’s “Racial Realism.” See Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). On top of that, I have made a commitment to myself to be as honest and forthcoming as possible in academia, even to the point of it being brutal and vicious. I offer no apologies.
4. Much of what I have to say about professional philosophy parallels what I have to say about the state of racism and white privilege in the United States today. See Grant J. Silva, “Racism as Self-Love,” *Radical Philosophy Review* (forthcoming).
5. My comments here reference what Frantz Fanon suggests will be necessary for decolonization to come into effect. See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 35.
6. See Charles Mills, “Philosophy Raced. Philosophy Erased,” *Rethinking the Practice of Philosophy: Bodies of Color, Bodies of Knowledge*, ed. George Yancy (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 45–70. Some of what follows in this section comes out of Grant J. Silva, “On the Difficulties of Writing Philosophy from a Racialized Subjectivity,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletters: Hispanics/Latinos in Philosophy*, 18(1), 2–6.
7. Mills, “Philosophy Race. Philosophy Erased,” 60.
8. *Ibid*, 61.
9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1971), 3.
10. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 6–7. Rawls’ second limitation is that he wishes to “examine the principles of justice that would regulate a well-ordered society.” He continues, “Everyone is presumed to act justly and to do his part in upholding just institutions” (8). This is called “strict compliance theory,” an idea that has generated a comprehensive academic literature.
11. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 26.
12. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 12 (emphasis added).
13. Ofelia Schutte, “Attracting Latino/as to Philosophy: Today’s Challenges,” *Rethinking the Practice of Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 71–86; Jorge J. E. Gracia, “Philosophical

- Canons and Philosophical Traditions: The of Latin American Philosophy,” *Rethinking the Practice of Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 86–102.
14. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Thrift Edition, 1994), 8.
 15. *Taking Back Philosophy*, xix. Doing the proverbial walk back, Garfield goes on to explain that he does “not mean to suggest that our colleagues in philosophy individually harbor or act upon racist views,” since that would be “irresponsible” and “false” (xix). Instead he reveals in the gulf between interpersonal and structural forms of racism and writes, “A social structure can be racist without any individual who participates in it being racist when it serves to establish or to perpetuate a set of practices that systematically denigrate—implicitly or explicitly—people of particular race.” Not only is such a stance unnecessarily exculpating, but it also means that we can have “racism with no racists,” to borrow a line from the sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. Garfield’s understanding of interpersonal racism is obviously predicated on intentional acts of hatred and ignorant of the ways in which the perpetuation of injustice is just as bad as being the source of it. It is also why many philosophers of race shifted from volitional to consequential accounts of racism. Again, see Silva, “Racism as Self-love.”
 16. *Taking Back Philosophy*, 3–8.
 17. *Ibid*, 7.
 18. See Du Bois; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).
 19. Vince Deloria, Jr. “Philosophy and Tribal Peoples,” *American Indian Thought*, ed. Anne Waters (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 3–12.
 20. See Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Liberating Function of Philosophy (1985),” *Essays on History, Liberation and Salvation*, ed. Michael E. Lee. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 93–119. See also Grant J. Silva, “The Americas Seek Not Enlightenment but Liberation: On the Philosophical Significance of Liberation for Philosophy in the Americas,” *The Pluralist* 13.2, 1–21.
 21. *Taking Back Philosophy*, 153–155.