**Metaphilosophical myopia and the ideal of expansive pluralism**

**Abstract**

This paper argues for the diversification of university-level philosophy curricula. I defend the ideal of expansionist pluralism and connect it to metaphilosophical myopia – problematically limited or constrained visions of the range of forms taken by philosophy. Expansively pluralist curricula work to challenge metaphilosophical myopia and one of its costs, namely, a specific kind of hermeneutical injustice, perpetrated against the communities and traditions shaped by the occluded forms of philosophy.

1. **Preliminaries.**

I propose that teachers of philosophy should convey to their students an expansive sense of the richness of the subject, across times and cultures. Among the many reasons, I consider one – using the concept of *metaphilosophical myopia*, which is explained and illustrated in sections 2 and 2. It refers to a problematically limited sense or conception of the range of actual and possible forms taken by philosophy. Students, as novices, are unaware of so much of this richness. Over time, their conception of philosophy ought to be slowly expanded, including a sense of the range of philosophical topics and goals and an understanding of their historical and cultural variations. We should want students to be increasingly initiated into an expansive sense of the *possibilities for philosophising*. This sort of ideal – call it *expansive pluralism* – does not entail *endorsement* of all those possibilities, but rather an ability to see, identify and imaginatively explore them, rather than remain entrapped within more limited visions.

The pedagogical upshot of expansive pluralism is that teachers of philosophy should expand the students’ sense of the diverse aims, motivations, practices, standards and kinds of social practice relevant to kinds of philosophy. Something like this is surely required by the ideal of *truthfulness*, construed as a distinctive professional virtue of teachers (Cooper 2008). However, other kinds of values can be brought into play, including justice, since one feature of the metaphilosophical myopia I criticise involve failures to understand or respect unfamiliar or marginalised kinds of philosophy. At the least, a teacher should work to spot and correct narrower or shallower visions of philosophy in their students – such as the idea that philosophising is an exclusively Western enterprise, or a subject ‘all about’ ethics, or is ‘really’ the activity of analysing arguments. Expansive pluralism aims to interdict these sorts of misconception by repleting the actual richness one finds in the historical record. However, it also has deeper functions, one of which is promoting a kind of *hermeneutical justice.*

To explain this function, let me describe one of the experiences which inspired these ideas. I teach undergraduate classes on Buddhist and classical Chinese philosophies and was often struck by the inability of some students to understand Buddhis, and Daoism. This was not a failure to follow an argument or get to grips with some technical term. It emerged that students were thrown by the *character* of the moral visions in the Buddhist and Daoist texts. The students were trying to interpret them as kinds of *moral activism*—as, roughly, forms of moral practice directed towards the systematic transformation of the social world through collective action. For those students, being a moral agent meant being a *moral activist*: those aiming at ‘changing the world’ by working towards large-scale ‘causes’. On this view, the aim and value of philosophy resides in its ability to motivate, legitimate, and direct the desired kinds of world-changing projects. In effect, this metaphilosophical assumption was blocking their ability to understand Buddhism and Daoism, whose moral ethos is quietist – aimed at personal self-cultivation and an ideal of tranquillity or equanimity, which involved disciplined distancing from sociopolitical concerns. An obliviousness to the very idea of moral quietism was occluding certain ways of understanding the remarks of the Buddha and Zhuāngzǐ.

This obliviousness to morally quietist forms of philosophy was connected to a kind of injustice. As long as students were oblivious to quietism, they tended to see the Buddha and Zhuāngzǐ in derogatory terms as failed activists. A typical judgment was that the Buddha was ‘strangely confused’ when he advised his monks to avoid discussion of political topics and that Zhuāngzǐ’s decision to decline political office was ‘weird’, given his critical remarks on the moral condition of the world. Such epistemic derogation was sustained by the myopic conviction that all moral philosophy takes activist forms. If one tries to interpret quietists as activists, then the quietists can only look confused, wrong-headed, ‘confused’ or otherwise in error. This is a metaphilosophical confusion – one rooted in convictions and ideas about what philosophy is – which blocked the students’ interpretive abilities. For this reason, their myopic conception of philosophy fed kinds of epistemic derogation that in turn perpetrated a specific, if unusual kind of hermeneutical injustice, whose objects were the traditions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In what follows, I connect expansive pluralism, metaphilosophical myopia, and this kind of hermeneutical injustice. Focusing on university-level philosophy curricula, I propose that we – teachers of philosophy – should instil in our students expansive visions of philosophy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such expansive visions help expose metaphilosophical prejudices and presumptions – ones that, if left unchecked, distort the students’ ability and willingness to understand diverse forms of philosophy. If so, expansive pluralist pedagogy helps foster a kind of hermeneutical justice.

1. **Myopia.**

Something like expansionist pluralism has been defended by many recent philosophers on different grounds—from curiosity to fairness to discontent at disciplinary insularity to more expansive geopolitical and ideological considerations (Cooper 2003, Cooper and Fosl 2010, Flavel and Robbiano 2023, van Norden 2017). I will offer a *via negative*, focused on some of the epistemic harms of lacking an expansive vision of philosophy. Such lacks take different forms – one may be oblivious to the existence of certain forms of philosophy, or incapable of seeing certain activities as properly philosophical, or unable to see forms of philosophy genuinely different from those one prefers, and so on.

Call this *metaphilosophical myopia*, a problematically limited or constrained vision of the forms that philosophy can and has taken, in terms of its aims, practices, ethos, and its interpersonal and cultural expressions. It is metaphilosophical because it trades on very general ideas about the nature and value of philosophy. It is myopic insofar as it involves a problematically limited or distorted vision, as when we criticise a boss for being myopically fixated on profits at the expense of staff welfare, environmental sustainability, and so on.[[3]](#footnote-3) *Myopia* belongs to the same family of visual metaphors that includes *gaze* and *perspective* and everyday talk of *taking a broader view* of a problem or *looking into something* as part of research. Such meanings do not exhaust our epistemological vocabulary, since we might also *get to grips* with a difficult idea, but the visual meanings are dominant among the ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In its epistemological senses, it is useful to think of myopia as problematic because it (a) connotes a problematically limited vision which (b) tends to have bad epistemic and practical effects and (c) can also foster epistemic failings, such as closedmindedness and a disposition to derogate alternative ways of looking at things (Battaly 2018).[[4]](#footnote-4)

I think myopia is an umbrella term for a set of epistemic failings, not an epistemic vice in its own right. If anything, myopia is a *stance*, a structure of assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and character traits (see van Fraassen 2002). Being metaphilosophically myopic, for instance, includes convictions about the value of philosophy, assumptions and beliefs about its historical development, as well as kinds of dogmatism and obliviousness. Myopia is changeable and could take innocent forms: my concern is mainly with cases where myopia develops into more vicious forms which express bad motivations and values and/or manifest in bad behaviours and effects (Battaly 2015). The boss myopically focused on profits, above all else, manifests lack of care for the health of their staff and makes decisions that are deeply environmentally destructive.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To develop the concept of myopia, distinguish its two dimensions: *narrowness* and *shallowness* – the horizontal and vertical axes, if you like. Myopia can involve having a very narrow vision of something: one might fail to see or take seriously a wider range of aspects, dimensions or complexities of the thing. Myopia can also involve a shallow vision, a failure to apprehend or appreciate significant ‘levels’ of a topic, usually taking the form of a banal, superficial understanding of a topic.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the worst cases, one’s vision is narrow and shallow.

The epistemic values opposed to myopia are *broadmindedness* and *depth*. One can achieve a broader outlook – taking into account a wider range of perspectives, perhaps – and we can also become deeper in our thinking, by realising additional dimensions that are finally recognise as real and salient. What counts as ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ depends on cases and contexts. A broader and deeper understanding of a person is a different matter to one of an historical event or a political issue. What unifies breadth and depth is that they expand the range of epistemic possibilities one can experience *and* one’s ways of engaging with them. In practice this can involve acquiring new knowledge, experiences, perceptual and cognitive abilities and various character attainments, such as virtues, wisdom, or a sense of perspective. Moreover, these achievements proceed within an educational system designed to facilitate such edification.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It should be clear that myopic thinking is bad for a range of epistemic and practical reasons. If I am myopic about P, I am more susceptible to caricaturing it. If I have a myopic understanding of a situation, I will fail to discern complexities and problems in ways which incline to me arrogant overconfidence. I suffer imaginative impoverishment because there are wider or deeper possibilities unavailable to me. I fail to understand situations or events due to my superficial grasp of them. I find it harder to make sense of communities because their way of life involves different structures of sensibility and ambition which are occluded by my myopic outlook. The problems I contemplate seem much *easier* than they actually are because I fail to grasp their messy complexities, a fact which seems to elude everyone except me, for whom everything seems straightforward.

In practice one can be myopic about anything with depth and breadth, just as one can be dogmatic about anything one believes or indifferent to anything that might demand care and concern. Only some kinds of myopia will be sufficiently problematic that we ought to become worried, and, even when, we should appreciate the functions and attractions of myopia. At the individual level, myopia can feed a sense of epistemic confidence, a sense of the world as manageably straightforward rather than overwhelmingly complex. Myopia will make the exercise of certain epistemic virtues seem easier – open-mindedness is easier in a narrow horizon of possibilities. At the collective level, social groups are often defined by a shared myopic outlook and relate social-epistemic phenomena – such as echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. Caricaturing our opponents often means presenting them as narrower and shallower – small-minded, parochial, insular – than they actually are. Michael Oakeshott, for one, noted a general tendency to ‘attribute to our enemies a homogeneity which in fact they do not posses’ (Oakeshott 2004: 162).

1. **Metaphilosophical myopia.**

*Metaphilosophical myopia* means being myopic about philosophy itself – its aims, norms, practices, standards, social and institutional forms and its value and place in human life. As we study philosophy, we start to acquire metaphilosophical convictions. Some are directly taught to us when our teachers define philosophy. Some are tacitly acquired along the way, perhaps through implicit inferences about philosophy based on the kinds of it to which one has been exposed. In most cases, there is some combination of explicit and implicit kinds of metaphilosophising.

I think that our metaphilosophical imagination must reflect one of the most striking features – the remarkable *heterogeneity* of the forms it can and has taken across time and cultures. Philosophical education should, among other things, ensure that students can see and appreciate this heterogeneity. Novices will experience a sort of initial myopia, sure, but this should be gradually expanded during the course of their philosophical education. What should come into view is the heterogeneity of forms of philosophy – whether in terms of its values and aspirations, ideas about its relation to aesthetic and epistemic activities, and the self-conceptions of different philosophical traditions.

I think there are many kinds of metaphilosophical narrowness and shallowness. The narrowness involves inabilities to recognise or accept a wider range of forms of philosophy. It’s fine for someone to have a preferred kind of philosophy. But there is bad narrowness in derogating and impugning wider forms. Some years ago, a group of philosophers defended a strong kind of scientific naturalism, which includes the proposal that kinds of enquiry that did not conform to the methodological or metaphilosophical strictures of naturalism ‘fails to qualify as part of the enlightened pursuit of truth’ and should be ‘discontinued’. On this self-described scientistic view, the task of philosophy is to serve ‘the great epistemic enterprise of modern civilization’ – natural science (Ladyman and Ross, 2007, vi, 310; for a critique, see Kidd 2022a).

Strong forms of naturalism and scientism are one source of narrowness, but there are others. Jacques Derrida once stunned an audience at a Chinese university by declaring that there was no philosophy in China, only ‘thought’, since the term philosophy should be reserved for intellectual traditions of ‘ancient Greek’ origin and ‘European form’ (quoted in van Norden, 2016, 25).[[8]](#footnote-8) In a subsequent interview, Derrida reiterated his claim: ‘to speak of a “Chinese philosophy” is a problem’, since, so far, ‘Chinese thinking … has not imported European models’ (in Zhang 2020: 13). For Derrida, there cannot be any *Chinese philosophy*: the only admissible kinds of philosophy are those on ‘European models’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such Eurocentrism is a source of metaphilosophical narrowness. Consider, relatedly, debates in the early 20th century, about whether there are or were African intellectual traditions that deserve the title philosophy (Bello 2004 and Coetzee and Roux 1998: ch.1). At stake in such controversies was the fact that, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, ‘‘*philosophy’* is the highest-status label of Western humanism. The claim to philosophy is the claim to what is most important, most difficult, most fundamental in the Western tradition’ (Appiah 1992: 88). In this case, a myopic conception of philosophy is arguably the product of historiographical and metaphilosophical decisions to exclude African traditions from the history of philosophy (Park 2013). Colonialist legacies are another source of metaphilosophical myopia, hence those Chinese philosophers’ alarm at the Derrida’s suggestion that philosophy is confined to the ‘forms’ taken to belong to the European tradition.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Doubtless many other kinds of metaphilosophical myopia can be described. Many philosophical, cultural. and ideological convictions can feed narrowness, superficiality, and other failings. Moreover, there are crucial differences between different kinds of myopia. Ladyman and Ross offer *arguments* for their metaphilosophical claims – ones which merit serious engagement – unlike the myopia of those who want to confine the honorific status *philosophy* only to the intellectual achievements emanating from European societies.

*Metaphilosophical shallowness* refers to the inability to realise or admit that certain forms of philosophy have kinds of *depth*. A conception of philosophy is shallow when it fails to accommodate kinds of deeper meaning or significance. Imagine someone who insists that philosophising is basically a kind of intellectual chess – clever, interesting, absorbing, but ultimately useless. In some contexts, seeing philosophy as a game may be valuable and there can be deadly serious games. Moreover, there are interesting parallels to explore between *philosophising* and *games* and we should not mistake a narrow metaphor for narrow *uses* of a metaphor (Kidd, 2021a). For myopic philosophers, though, talk of the value of philosophy in deeper terms –of existential authenticity, moral edification, or political enlightenment –seem absurdly hyperbolic. If I see philosophy as a ‘way of life’ and talk excitedly of the work of Pierre Hadot, then a metaphilosophically shallow colleague can only see me as attributing to philosophy kinds of depth it does not and cannot have. Moreover, my failure to grasp this fact reflects badly on me (cf. Chase, Clark, and McGhee 2009; Cottingham 2009).

R.G. Collingwood described a kind metaphilosophical shallowness in an interesting remark about early twentieth century Oxford philosophy. Too many of its practitioners, he lamented, had ‘excogitated a philosophy so pure from any sordid taint of utility … that it was no use at all’ (Collingwood, 1939, 51). This austere vision of philosophy denies kinds of depth to philosophising – no practical payoff, no existential import. For them, philosophy is an ornate intellectual game – no more than that. Other philosophers at Oxford of this time were sympathetic to richer conceptions of the nature and value of philosophy, such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch and their tutor, Donald McKinnon (cf. Lipscombe 2021 and MacCumhaill and Wiseman 2022).

I will not exhaustively document kinds of metaphilosophical myopia. It is enough to establish that there are varieties of metaphilosophical myopia, each with different sources and consequences. Two comments, however. First, some sort of metaphilosophical myopia is to be expected among students and others who are new to philosophy (which is not to say seasoned philosophers can’t be myopic). Ideally, myopia is a transient phenomenon, slowly replaced by a broader and deeper vision. In practice, we should only worry if myopia endures or if it mutates into metaphilosophical dogmatism. Second, one can focus on certain forms of philosophy without being myopic. There is a difference between *focusing* – a strategic and self-conscious narrowing of one’s attention – and one’s having a narrow outlook. Indeed, the activity of focusing presupposes a deliberate movement from a broader to a narrower view. Moreover, a focus could become a fixation, but there are ways of guarding against that, such as self-reflection and taking seriously the warnings of others.

To see how metaphilosophical myopia can connect to curricular diversification in an expansive pluralist sense, consider a specific case: the rich range of *goals* of philosophising. It matters *why* people feel compelled to engage in the at times difficult, unusual, and even dangerous thing we call philosophy. The lives of Socrates and Confucius illustrate the dangers of philosophising. Philosophising in hostile times must therefore be well-motivated by *goals*, ones sufficiently substantive as to make the risks worthwhile. Metaphilosophical myopia, of course, distorts our ability to appraise philosophical goals, rendering those who pursue them strange, weird, odd or plain unintelligible. So, too, will the individuals – even the cultures – committed to those goals.

Consider this short, unsystematic list of some goals that have animated philosophers:

* To advance social justice.
* To articulate (or endorse) a misanthropic appraisal of humankind.
* To cure what Wittgenstein called ‘mental cramps’.
* To deepen our ability to appreciate kinds of beauty.
* To defend the epistemic abilities on which everyday life depends.
* To describe the fundamental structures of human experience.
* To enable individual release from *saṃsāra*, ‘the wheel of suffering’, rebirth, and *karma*.
* To enhance one’s relationship with God.
* To justify (or challenge) the authority of the state.
* To motivate withdrawal from the pressures and corruptions of the mainstream world.
* To question prevalent presuppositions and predilections.
* To restore a deteriorating cultural tradition.
* To safeguard the moral values on which civilized human life depends.
* To secure (or deny the possibility of) knowledge of the nature of reality as it is ‘in itself’.
* To support (or put a brake on) scientific enquiry.
* To urge on us (or resist) a pessimistic appraisal of human life.

This list can be extended and elaborated. Some goals could be combined. The intelligibility and salience of these goals depend on wider background commitments and maybe also on what William James called *temperaments* (James 1981). Secularists naturalists will not see enhancement of one’s relationship with God as intelligible or salient. By contrast, they may find restoration of a deteriorating culture *intelligible* (they can make *sense* of it) even if they do not see it as *salient* (it does not *matter* to them).

A remarkable variety of goals have and continue to animate philosophers. Some are seemingly perennial. Others are more transient. Some will seem morally abhorrent. Others will be parts of morally progressive projects. Some are difficult to understand for denizens of late modernity. Some will seem trivial or antiquated. Others may become intelligible if we enrich our imaginative capacities or adopt new methods and ways of thinking (Burley 2015). Metaphilosophical myopia, however, occludes these goals and blocks these kinds of self-transformation. The philosopher of science, Bas van Fraassen, reported being ‘baffled’ by medieval Christian doctrines, like the Trinity, even if they are set alongside the ‘unimaginable otherness of closed space-times’ and modern physics (van Fraassen, 1985, 258). However, a sense of ‘bafflement’ would lessen if those doctrines are put in the context of the medieval Christian world. Outside their proper context, they may seem ‘baffling’, but so, too, do many moral and metaphysical convictions (cf. Kidd 2012).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Myopic obliviousness to the goals animating a person or philosophical tradition can distort or prevent our efforts to understand them in at least three ways. First, we fail to see that a philosopher or tradition *has* philosophical goals. Second, we see their goals but fail to appreciate that as *philosophical*. Third, if their actual goals are ones we cannot accept or find intelligible, then one attributes to them *other* goals. As an example of (iii), I was asked by a student some years ago if my module could drop the ‘old-fashioned epistemological stuff’ in favour of ‘existential’ themes. Ironically, the topic was scepticism, which disturbed Descartes precisely because it jeopardised the moral and religious certainties that are ‘the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life’ (Descartes, 1998, 98). The student erred by presupposing scepticism to be a narrowly epistemological issue, without any existential implications. Once informed otherwise, the student extended a new willingness to sympathetically engage with Descartes – in effect, to interpret him in ways expressive of a kind of hermeneutical justice.

1. **Diversification of university philosophy curricula.**

There are many kinds of diversity one can strive for in undergraduate philosophy curricula – demographic, topical, cultural, or methodological. Imagine a curriculum which lacked any work by philosophers from Asia or Africa—or one wholly populated by analytic philosophy without any phenomenological or existential philosophy—or one which presented only male philosophers. Diversification cannot mean including everything from everywhere; there are constraints, trade-offs, and structural obstacles to curricular diversification (Fokt, Pharr, and Torregrossa 2023; Kidd 2020; van Norden 2017).

The diversification of university philosophy curricula invites a range of practical and principled questions. What are the aims? What are the criteria for diversification? Should diversity be measured at the level of the individual modules or courses or the curriculum as a whole? Should students be required to take certain modules by making them compulsory or ‘core’ in an attempt to ensure their exposure to certain kinds of content?

I make the modest claim that one aim of curricular diversification should be to try to reduce tendencies to metaphilosophical myopia. There are other aims, some of which might be congruent with the anti-myopic tendencies (cf. Cooper and Fosl, 2010, xxiv-xxix). There is more needed, of course, than simply adding more kinds of philosophy to the curriculum. We might, after all, inadvertently make the newly-included philosophical thinkers and traditions objects of ridicule. Students must be educated to ensure their sympathetic receptiveness or at the least trained to resist tendencies towards overgeneralisation and crass perennialism. Moreover, diversifying does not mean abandoning the established or canonical in preference of the newly-emergent. Swapping A for B is not pluralism: this would simply mean swapping one pattern of exclusion for another (Kidd, 2021b). Expansion could be measured against the *local standard* of what was previously included in one’s curriculum and the *global standard* provided by the the history of world philosophies.

Consider some of the options:

Characterizations of philosophy abound. It is ‘the queen of the sciences’, a grand and sweeping metaphysical endeavour; or, less regally, it is a sort of deep anthropology or ‘descriptive metaphysics’, uncovering the general presuppositions or conceptual schemes that lurk beneath our words and thoughts. A different set of images portray philosophy as a type of therapy, or as a spiritual exercise, a way of life to be followed, or even as a special branch of poetry or politics. Then there is a group of characterizations that include philosophy as linguistic analysis, as phenomenological description, as conceptual geography, or as genealogy (Cooper, 2009, 1)

As curricula become diversified, students can be initiated into an expansively pluralist vision, increasingly receptive to the broader and deeper possibilities of philosophy. Preconceptions and generalisations should become replaced by a subtler understanding. Some philosophers are driven by curiosity; others condemn it. Some are religiously committed, others secularist, atheist or indifferent to religious aspirations. Some celebrate the sciences, others do not. As such realisations stack up, students come to appreciate that what is true of philosophers in one period or culture need not be – will not be – true of all others.

Here are three general features of a diverse curriculum able to challenge students’ latent metaphilosophical myopia. First, the curriculum must be expansively pluralistic. It will

accommodate many forms of culturally, topically and methodologically different schools and traditions. Second, there should be an aversion to prejudiced presentations of philosophies. If students are presented with A, then told it is false, weird, outdated, or old-fashioned, they cannot become properly pluralist. Suppose I taught my students that Buddhist doctrines are *really* ‘mind-numbing and wishful *hocus pocus*’ (Flanagan, 2013, 3). Such prejudices should not be communicated by teachers. Students should also be trained to identify any they bring with them. Third, expansive pluralist pedagogy should present myopia a *bad thing*. Having a narrow and shallow vision of philosophy may be intrinsically bad, but our focus should be on the kinds of myopia with bad motivations or bad effects (cf. Kidd 2019). Doing so means the teacher should take seriously the attractions and functions of myopia, many of which reflect entrenched aspects of the structure and culture of academia (cf. Berg and Seeber 2016, Kidd, Chubb, and Forstenzer 2021, Kidd 2022b).

Expansive pluralism and curricular diversity may be related in other ways. But I finish the paper by arguing that challenging myopia fosters a kind of hermeneutical justice.

1. **Hermeneutical justice.**

We generally tend to think of injustice as being done to a *person* – to ‘victims of injustice’ But we also talk of talk of ‘injustice’ being done to other things, too. I may accuse you of *not doing justice* to my argument. We do an injustice to something or someone if we treat it in ways that are both *unfair* and *wrong*. We might do an injustice to a person, group, idea, or culture.

I focus here on *hermeneutical injustices*, the term made famous by Miranda Fricker as a kind of what she calls an epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Her original account defined it as ‘having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource’ (Fricker, 2007, 155). Scholars quickly expanded this original account and identified other varieties (Mason 2011, Medina 2017, Pohlhaus Jr. 2012). It is generally accepted that hermeneutical injustice involves a ‘subject … rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible’ (Fricker, 2007, 162). If our social experiences cannot be properly interpreted and understood, one suffers a range of primary and secondary harms (Medina, 2017, 46-47).

I will propose that a hermeneutical injustice occurs when metaphilosophical myopia, individually or collectively, leads to denial or impugnment of the intelligibility or salience of occluded forms of philosophy. In some cases, African or Asian philosophies, say, cannot be recognised as intelligible instances of philosophy. In other cases, one can only interpret them in ways that distort or disguise their actual significance, on their own terms. In these cases I see a kind of hermeneutical injustice. One *fails* hermeneutically in ways at once harmful and wrongful. I do a philosophical tradition an injustice if, for instance, this hermeneutic inability has bad causes – such as racial prejudice, cultural chauvinism, or laziness – and/or if it tends to manifest in derogation. Indeed, some metaphilosophical myopia can alienate people from the philosophies associated with their own communities or heritage. In these cases, one may become assimilated into mainstream philosophy or become excluded from a philosophy they feel is ‘not for them’ (cf. Dotson 2012, Olberding 2015).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Metaphilosophical myopia can often sustain kinds of hermeneutical injustice of this sort – or so I think. Something like this claim is implicit in work by Ben Kotzee, who has argued that curricular diversification can expand the range of culturally-specific experiences that our students can understand:

[T]he selection of what is taught – what makes it onto the curriculum – has a deeper significance. Teaching a canon of ideas and works by actors from a particular cultural tradition makes that form of culture accessible to students; conversely, not teaching other cultural traditions forecloses students’ understanding of that cultural tradition. Educationalists alert to epistemic injustice ask how decisions about the curriculum enable or block students’ understanding of particular social experiences and encourage or inhibit the ability of students from particular cultures to express their particular understanding of the world (Kotzee, 2017, 327)

Kotzee does not specifically refer to culturally diverse forms of philosophy, but what he says applies to metaphilosophical myopia. A constrained curriculum introduces students to some forms of philosophy but risk ‘foreclosing’ their understanding of other forms—or, at least, to make the task of understansing much harder. A student without curricular exposure to, say, Confucianism is not *debarred* from understanding it. Put in my terms an under-diverse curriculum can feed kinds of metaphilosophical myopia which inhibits a students’ ability and willingness to understanding certain forms of philosophy. Expansive pluralism is intended to help redress those failings. Of course, there are other supporting strategies, such as training students in historical or anthropological approaches to philosophy (Burley 2020).

Here it is useful to consider specific examples and indictments of metaphilosophical hermeneutical injustice:

1. Massimo Pigliucci wrote a blog-post entitled ‘On the Pseudo-Profundity of some Eastern Philosophy’ which offers the following scorn:

“What is the sound of one hand clapping?” “What did your face look like before your ancestors were born?” These are some allegedly profound questions posed by Zen masters […] It is also the sort of philo-bubble that gives philosophy a bad name – and sells plenty of titles in the Eastern philosophy section of bookstores (Pigliucci, 2006).

Pigliucci shows no understanding of the nature or function of *koans*, nor explains the criteria of a ‘profound’ question, nor seriously attempts to understand the practice of *koans* within to Zen teachings. Indeed, the reference to ‘philosophy’ in the context of the worry about it being given a ‘bad name’ seems to betray a myopic sense of the aims and practices of philosophy. *Koans* may perhaps seem eccentric or absurd relative to the usual methods of analytical philosophy. But those are not the methodological norms to invoke in this case.

2. Kristie Dotson challenges what she calls the ‘culture of justification’ in philosophy in terms which resonate with my worries about myopia. Her paper, ‘How Is This Paper Philosophy?’, has a clear commitment to something very much like what I called expansionist pluralism:

I am not concerned with appropriate answers to the question, “how is this paper philosophy?” Rather, I am concerned with the kind of disciplinary culture that renders such a question of paramount importance […] Typified in the question, “how is this paper philosophy,” is a presumption of a set of commonly held, univocally relevant, historical precedents that one could and should use to evaluate answers to the question. By relying upon, a presumably, commonly held set of normative, historical precedents, the question of how a given paper is philosophy betrays a value placed on performances and/or narratives of legitimation (Dotson, 2012, 5)

The ‘presumption’ Dotson rightly criticises will be indicative of metaphilosophical myopia – the narrowness that results that presuming that each philosophical tradition shares the same goals or asks the same questions. Of course, that will be a ridiculous presumption, but that does not stop it being common. Presumptuousness can be fed by obliviousness to alternative traditions and ways of thinking– one continues to presume P because one is unaware of Q.

3. Michael Dummett endorsed a narrow account of the aims of philosophy:

[O]nly with the rise of the modern logical and analytic style of philosophizing was the proper object of philosophy finally established, namely ... the analysis of the structure of thought, [for which] the only proper method [is] the analysis of language (Dummett, 1978, 458)

Here is the dogma of the definite article: the reference to *the* ‘proper object’ of philosophy. Analysis of the structure of thought is *an* aim of philosophy, for sure, but hardly the only aim. A dogmatic insistence on the unique, privileged status of that aim is a strong sort of myopia. Dummett presents one particular aim as *the* aim, to be accepted by all proper philosophers. Such metaphilosophical dogmatism, one fears, ‘hinders one’s ability to argue for the positive philosophical status of one’s projects’ (Dotson, 2012, 13).

4. Amy Olberding, a noted scholar of classical Chinese philosophy and advocate of curricular diversification, notes a ‘double-bind’ that afflicts those who call for the inclusion of currently underrepresented philosophical traditions:

[T]he more these philosophies appear to strike out into territories largely unexplored in western canonical sources or contemporary debates, the less “philosophical” they may seem to western-trained interlocutors. Failure to hook into existing domains of inquiry or doing so in an unfamiliar style may awaken suspicion that here is something other than philosophy proper. The double bind for scholars who would promote interest in non-western traditions, then, can register as an importunate, impossible demand: Show us something we have not seen before, but be sure it looks well and truly familiar to us too (Olberding, 2015, 15)

This is an interesting hermeneutical injustice: a philosopher allows the in-principle possibility of exploring forms of philosophy currently unknown to them, but only on the condition that those forms *conform* to those criteria of intelligibility and salience one already endorses. This precludes the possibility of forms of philosophy being intelligible or salient in different ways. Olberding puts it well when explaining how, for this myopic philosopher, ‘the unfamiliar [is] weighed and evaluated relative to how well it conforms to [one’s] existing expectations and preoccupations’ (Olberding, 2015, 16).

Each case involves kinds of hermeneutical injustices caused by metaphilosophical myopia. In some cases where is a narrow sense of what does or could count as proper aims or practices of philosophy. In other cases, there is a shallow sense of the value of philosophy. The upshot are hermeneutical failures. Occluded forms of philosophy are wrongly and unfairly perceived as defective – ‘weird’, ‘stupid’, ‘mind-numbing and wishful *hocus-pocus*’, and so on. There is also the phenomena of invidious *conditionalization of hermeneutical agency*. The willingness to make sense of a form of philosophy comes at the cost of effacing its distinctive character. To quote Olberding one final time:

It is not … uncommon in *fora*where “east meets west,” where efforts are made to bring Confucianism to the attention of scholars trained exclusively in western philosophy, to hear remarks that include prefaces such as: “What would make Confucianism more appealing…” or “What would make Confucianism work…” What follows such prefaces are typically recommendations that Confucianism sacrifice whatever is perceived as alien, regardless of how significant it may be for Confucianism itself (Olberding, 2015, 16)

In this case the hermeneutical injustice takes on a double character: one fails to make sense of a form of philosophy on its own terms, then tries to present it as intelligible or salient only by effacing its unique character. Here one sees a subtle hermeneutical injustice caused by a kind of metaphilosophical myopia. An expansionist pluralist curricula and pedagogy will help challenge these injustices—or so I hope.

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1. Of course, we can also identify other kinds of injustice that might also be in play, like that of attributing to a European philosopher arguments and ideas first developed in earlier or more distant cultures. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a philosophical study of philosophy teaching in schools, see Gatley (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Myopia’ is widely employed as a metaphor for distorted understanding, hence my use of it here, though it could be used – or misused – in ableist ways (see Vidali 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We should also distinguish specific kinds of myopic thinking, like *short-termism*, where one disregards the temporally distant consequences of one’s actions or policies. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I also think that myopic people are not aware of their myopia; it may a ‘stealthy’ epistemic failing – one which tends to be self-sustaining because it’s difficult for those who have it to detect it (Cassam 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Myopia could also take the form of fixating on the ‘deeper’ aspects of a topic to the exclusion of its ‘surface-level’ aspects (the opposite of superficiality, essentially). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The cultural and educational developments that encourage narrowness and shallowness are well-described by Battaly (2013), Bloom (1987), Deresiewicz (2014), and Forstenzer (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wang Yuanhua, his interlocutor, reports the audience was ‘stunned’, partly least since that judgment, for them, recalled other denials of the existence of Chinese philosophy and the capacity of Chinese people to philosophize (cf. DeFoort and Zhaoguang 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For Derrida’s original remark, see Xiaozhen and Ning (2002): 139. On Derrida’s relation to Chinese philosophy, see Meighoo (2008) and Zhang (2020. The latter includes an interview where Derrida is challenged on his claim. Martin Heidegger, too, said similar things, despite his own debts to Buddhism and Daoism (May 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The idea of a distinctive and distinguishable European or Western tradition, isolable from wider influences, is itself questionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In later work, van Fraassen turned his attention to religious sensibilities and outlooks: see van Fraassen 2002: lecture 5, sections 6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I owe this point, and the phrasing of it, to a referee for this journal. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)