Trade-offs, Backfires, and Curricular Diversification[1]

Ian James Kidd

Abstract: This paper presents two challenges faced by many initiatives that try to diversify undergraduate philosophy curricula, both intellectually and demographically. Trade-offs involve making difficult decisions to prioritise some values over others (like gender diversity over cultural diversity). Backfires involve unintended consequences contrary to the aims and values of diversity initiatives, including ones that compromise more general philosophical values. I discuss two specific backfire risks, involving the critical and political dimensions of teaching philosophy. Some general practical advice is offered along the way.

Keywords: curricula, diversity, philosophy, teaching.

1. Introduction

Contemporary debates about diversity and inclusion in academic philosophy tend to include debates about undergraduate curricula. Many departments accept the need to diversify their curricula – topically, methodologically, and into currently neglected historical periods and cultures. Such acceptance might reflect a general concern for periodic refreshment, to rotate texts or keep up to date with the scholarship. Sometimes, though, the motivations are more highly charged. Consider the influential *New York Times* article by Jay L. Garfield and Bryan van Norden, distinguished scholars of Buddhist and Chinese philosophy, respectively, entitled "If philosophy won't diversify, let's call it what it really is" (Garfield and van Norden 2016). The article criticised the enduring Eurocentrism of many philosophical curricula, expressed in their provocative proposal that "any department that regularly offers courses only on Western philosophy should rename itself 'Department of European and American Philosophy'". Online debate naturally ensued with the usual proportion of thoughtful debate and reactive screed, prompting van Norden to offer a fuller set of arguments – moral, intellectual, pedagogical – in his book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (van Norden 2017).

These curricular debates reliably feature both ardent admirers and concerned critics, and my aim is to raise two sets of concerns about some recent efforts to diversify philosophy undergraduate philosophy curricula. These are

trade-offs and *backfires*, each illustrated by an example from my home department at the University of Nottingham. I should add at the start that I am on the side of the angels in wanting to increase the intellectual and demographic diversity of philosophy curricula. I currently teach courses on the classical Chinese tradition and the philosophy of illness, alongside guest lectures on African and Buddhist philosophy. I'm also unimpressed with the low bars for diversity some departments set themselves. A handful of lectures on Buddhism tucked in at the end of a Philosophy of Religion course doesn't suffice for coverage of the Indian philosophical tradition. During my own undergraduate years, not a single lecture was devoted to Chinese or Japanese philosophy and there was no mention of even the existence of the philosophical traditions of Africa and the Americas. Granted, many factors – historical, institutional, professional – conspire to make inclusion of those traditions difficult. Curricular diversification requires the things most of us lack – time, energy, budget, staffing. Indeed, some departments can only dream of having discussions about whether their next hire should be an early modernist or a scholar of classical Chinese philosophy. Many departments are struggling to survive, let alone diversify, which is one reason not to be overly pious about abnegating instrumental justifications for adding modules in the Asian traditions. I take it as axiomatic that academic philosophers and their allies should work together to try to ensure the survival of our enterprise in these financially, politically, and ideologically difficult times. Curricular diversification can be a part of those efforts at the pragmatic level, but, as van Norden argues, the sorts of concerns and interests raised key into much deeper questions about the nature and value of philosophy:

> The thesis of this book is not that mainstream Anglo-European philosophy is bad and all other philosophy is good. There are people who succumb to this sort of cultural Manicheanism, but I am not one of them. This book is about broadening philosophy by tearing down barriers, not about building new ones. (van Norden 2017: 159)

I agree with this position, which we might call *additive pluralism*. We should aim to add new content, rather than simply swap one pattern of exclusion for another. I hope for a future time when undergrads discuss Kǒngzǐ and the Buddha as naturally as they do Aristotle and Descartes. But I also think that being a true friend of curricular diversification means being proactively honest and constructively critical of the dangers and risks inherent in some of the motivations and practical proposals associated with it. Anything that can be done can be done badly and curricular diversification projects often generate the problems I call trade-offs and backfires.

What follows is therefore intended in a spirit of critical allegiance to diversification efforts. By recognising certain risks in advance, we are better placed to deal with them. Forewarned is forearmed. Such procedural cautiousness has several merits, but there is also a more strategic reason for it in this context. Anyone with experience of 'diversity work' knows that many

colleagues are resistant to it, for various invidious reasons and in invidious ways (Kidd 2017). Resisters often seize on any stumbles and unclarities as excuses to call for complete stoppage of work, meaning that we must take more than the usual degree of care to manage the trade-offs and potential backfires of any proposed curricular diversification efforts.

Before that, though, we should distinguish two senses of curricular diversification, the *intellectual* and the *demographic*. Intellectual diversification refers to addition of topics, styles of philosophising, disciplines and traditions currently absent or underrepresented within the curriculum. I presume most curricula include, *inter alia*, Plato and Aristotle, the early modern 'Big Six', and modules in ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of science, plus courses in logic. Fewer likely include, *inter alia*, Zhuāngzǐ and Mòzǐ, Renaissance philosophy, phenomenology, and the Afro-Caribbean and Mesoamerican traditions (Henry 2000, MacLeod 2019). But there is also demographic diversity, the new or further inclusion of philosophers from marginalised or subordinated communities and groups – philosophers of colour, LGBTQ+ philosophers, philosophers with disabilities, philosophers culturally or institutionally located outside the Euro-American world, philosophers typically classified in some other role, like social activists or writers (think of, say, W.E.B. DuBois or Audre Lorde). Such diversification matters because there is considerable contingency in the ways that philosophy can be organised and pursued. Obliviousness to this fact can mean we fail to see certain philosophically pertinent figures because we were not looking for them. Moreover, many of the professional and institutional structures of modern academic philosophy tends to lock out certain social groups. Such systemic biases and prejudices that being constantly reinscribed in our disciplinary demographics (de Cruz 2018).

Crucially, the relationship of intellectual and democratic diversities is complicated. In some happy cases, we get two for the price of once, since some areas and disciplines tend to be predominantly populated by the members of currently marginalised social groups – think of black feminist epistemology or philosophy of disability (Collins 1990, Toombs 1993). Sometimes, though, we have to work harder. Some intellectually marginalised areas tend to be dominated by demographically dominant groups. So, we should not invest hope in 'buy-one-get-one-free' shortcuts to curricular diversify. In these cases, we need to work on both fronts. We must also be alert to the risks of suggesting that some topics are usually or even exclusively populated by the members of certain social groups – that, say, only women can or should teach and research feminist ethics. All this underscores the strategic importance of procedural cautiousness – exercising more than the usual amounts of care and critical thoughtfulness about the aims and methods of our diversification initiatives.

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2. Trade-offs

The first risk of curricular diversification are trade-offs, defined as situational decisions where an increase of one quality or feature can come at the cost of a decrease in some other quality or feature. Such decisions arise when we are forced to choose between things that cannot be simultaneously enhanced. I think efforts to promote some forms of diversity can often require us to either lose or leave unimproved some other form of diversity, like being forced to choose between enhancing the intellectual or the demographic diversity of a curriculum. Trade-offs force us to ask difficult questions about the relative priority of our philosophical, pedagogical, and professional values and goals. Answers to those questions often reflect our different roles – as module convenor, as advocate of Asian philosophies, as principled champion of the canon, as Departmental Director of Teaching. Moreover, these roles often pull in different directions, as when the desire to include more 'non-traditional' figures conflicts with a principled desire to represent figures from the established canon.

The upshot is that diversifiers need to attend to (a) the types of diversity they want to promote, (b) the degrees of priority they want to give to those types, (c) their interests and goals as teachers, colleagues, and philosophers, and (d) whether diversification is measured at a modular or curricular level. Obviously, this all requires delicate, thoughtful handling of complex issues – modular coherence; integrity of the curriculum; educational needs of students relative to their abilities, preferences and interests; metaphilosophical debates about the essential character of philosophy and more besides. To see all this more clearly, consider a case study from my own department.

History of Philosophy: From Ancient to Modern is an optional, first-year module at the University of Nottingham which usually attracts around one hundred students. It aims to offer an historical introduction to selected episodes, figures, and periods from the world's philosophical traditions. It runs for ten weeks and involves three hours of lectures per week, taught by a rotating team of faculty, sometimes supported by postgraduates (or graduate teaching assistants) who lead seminars sometimes occasionally lecture, too. The module content has several constraints. It must be accessible to first-year undergraduates, only some of whom will have studied philosophy before; it must roughly span the history of philosophy from the respective ancient periods up to the 20th century; there should be minimal overlap with other first-year modules. Further constraints are set by the course textbook, David E. Cooper's *World Philosophies: An Historical Introduction*, chosen for its readability and cultural diversity. It explores the main thinkers, debates, and movements of the Western, Islamic, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Afro-Caribbean traditions (Cooper 2002).

HPAM aims to be diverse in three ways. *Historically*, it should cover diverse historical periods with a general expectation that the last topic should be taken from the 20th century. *Culturally*, it should span at least the Western,

Indian, and Chinese traditions, acknowledging the complications of those terms, with a strong expectation of including other traditions – in recent years, sections were dedicated to Islamic and Afro-Caribbean philosophies. Sometimes a cultural tradition would only be visited once, meaning that the Chinese tradition, say, might be represented by the single figure of Kǒngzǐ. *Topically*, it should range across different areas and topics – ancient Greek conceptions of the good life, say, then the nature of religious faith, in Islamic philosophy, then early modern conceptions of science, and so on. Sometimes, these topics start to weave together in a way that, done well, gives a sense of the dialectical rhythms of the historical enterprise of philosophy. Understanding patterns of fusion and resistance is integral to an historical understanding of philosophy of the sort which can begin with modules of this sort.

An obvious problem is that, even with these multiple constraints, the module faces an acute embarrassment of riches. Too many topics, too little space. In the spring 2019 semester, the module began with early Buddhist and classical Chinese philosophy then segued into Zen, before turning – in week four – to the Presocratics then to medieval Christian philosophy. An entire week was devoted to Hume - the only figure enjoying a dedicated 'slot' – before moving onto Afro-Caribbean discussions of *Negritude* and *Africanité*, early analytic philosophy, Sartre and de Beauvoir, before ending in 20th environmental philosophy. With this line-up, HPSM achieved diversity on three fronts. *Culturally*, students encountered philosophies from many countries and regions – India, China, Japan, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean. *Demographically*, the module introduced white philosophers and philosophers of colour from four continents. *Topically*, the module included 'usual suspects', like Heraclitus and Hume, alongside those rarely featuring in introductory modules, like Iris Murdoch or Frantz Fanon.

I also included periodic discussions of critical issues in historiography of philosophy, a sort of self-reflectiveness appropriate to a module motivated by diversification concerns. The readings included van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy*, for instance, as well as discussion of Genevieve Lloyd's classic *Man of Reason* and Peter K.J. Park's *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy* (Lloyd 1984, Park 2013). Sometimes, these were used to explain curricular choices, sometimes to make methodological points about critical study of history of philosophy. These points mattered, since some students found that the course challenged preconceptions about the nature and history of philosophy – ones many of them evidently acquired from exposure to a resolutely Eurocentric secondary school philosophy curriculum. Happily, many of them also realised the richness of the course after comparing notes with friends taking less diverse introductory courses in history of philosophy at other UK departments.

Unfortunately, the specific sorts of diversification achieved by HPAM came at the cost of various problematic omissions. First, it omitted very many important 'big names', like Plato and Kant. Partly we justified this by noting some students often knew a little about them, and that they did appear elsewhere in

the curriculum. Similarly, several important periods and movements were missing, such as the Renaissance or German Idealism. Second, it was clearly historically imbalanced – three weeks in the ancient periods of India, Greece, and China, then four weeks devoted to the last hundred and fifty years. Moreover, aside from Hume and Zen, little was said about the period from the C5th BCE to the C19th CE. Third, the course was poorly representative of women, who only figured at the end, in existentialism and environmental philosophies. (By contrast, an earlier iteration of this course – History of Western Philosophy – devoted a fifth of its ten weeks to women, albeit all white Europeans).

HPAM therefore illustrates a difficult series of trade-offs between forms of intellectual and demographic diversification. It achieved forms of cultural and demographic diversity only at the cost of sacrificing forms of intellectual and gender diversity. For instance, incorporating the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese traditions meant greater inclusion of male philosophers – the Buddha, Kǒngzı, and Zen masters like Dōgen. At this point, we should ask if diversity ought to be measured at a module or curricular level. Our first-years encountered very few women philosophers in HPAM, but that imbalance was repaired by another of our popular first-year modules, *Gender, Justice, and Society*. (In practice, most of our students take both HPAM and GJS, since the number of options is only a little larger than the number of modules). Therefore there's a big difference when we look at the level of the first-year curriculum, rather than at individual modules—a fact with implications for debates about which modules, if any, should be compulsorised for all students. The need for trade-offs should be taken into account when we think about the content, number, and compulsory or optional status of modules in relation to one another. This includes attending to formal and informal constraints on student choices, such as module caps, prerequisites, assessment styles, the costs of textbooks, and so on.

Curricular trade-offs will always be complicated and often arouse deeply contested issues, since they involve contrasts between the marvellous diversity of the philosophical enterprise and the multiple constraints of time, resources, curricular space, staff teaching competence, and much else. How, then, should we handle trade-offs? Well, there are no general solutions; so much depends on the particularities of a departments' curriculum, staffing, and resources. Moreover, trade-offs turn on people's metaphilosophical convictions—about which subjects *matter*, about which traditions should be honoured as *compulsory*, about what sorts of styles or methods of philosophising are *serious*, and so on. Our curricular decisions are symbolically charged and so what's needed is acknowledgement of values, assumptions, and convictions that are often left lurking in the background and which manifest. Once that's achieved, we're better placed to have debates about the curriculum. Should it, for instance, be set up to make sure students complete their first year having studied philosophers from outside the Western tradition? After all, one can only really start trading once one has a sense of what one *values*.

3. Backfires

A backfire is a consequence of an action or policy which is unintended and undesired, and especially those contrary to the intended and desired outcomes. Any action or policy can risk backfiring, since there is always *some* element of uncertainty in the connection of intentions and outcomes. I worry that curricular diversification efforts sometimes run backfire risks in at least two ways. One concerns cases where everyone agrees an outcome was unintended; the second concerns cases of genuine disagreement about the desirability of the outcomes. These second sorts of cases are probably the most difficult to resolve.

My case study for backfire risks is an optional, first-year module at Nottingham, titled *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, which attracts about two hundred students. It usually runs in the first semester and extremely popular, meaning it helps shape how many students conceptualise philosophy as a subject. It explores a rotating set of philosophical issues rooted in contemporary, 'applied' topics. There are three hours of lectures per week and a fortnightly one-hour seminar, usually led by a teaching assistant. It grew from a desire among staff for a flexible applied philosophy module, broader in scope than applied ethics, and encouraged by a perceived interest among many students for such a module. Instead of being 'theory-first', this new module should be topic-based, starting with some contemporary phenomenon – like moral obligations to refugees – then working out into the relevant philosophical theories and ways of thinking.

Since PCW is team-taught, the specific topics will depend on staff interests, expertise, and availability. There is no expectation for all departmental staff to contribute, nor that the contributors teach the same topic each time. Some explore favourite themes; others react to events in the world that capture their interest or concern; others explore issues that don't fit naturally into other modules. The topical structure means PCW lacks a systematic, narrative structure, although, where possible, certain topics are clustered together.

In the 2018-19 academic year, we taught the following topics:

- liberal education

- implicit bias

- chilly climates and stereotype threat

- the moral problems of classism

- the removal of statues and renaming of buildings

- veganism and carnism

- representations of religion in contemporary media and politics

- punishment and the law

- cultural appropriation

- social identity

- media ethics

- intersex rights

- artificial intelligence and jobs

- conspiracy theories

- sexbots

- freedom of speech

- moral obligations to refugees and asylum seekers

- the ethics of privacy

In later years, other topics were added – anti-natalism, 'safe space' policies in education, truthfulness and 'bullshit' in political culture, and philosophy of mental health, for instance.

Unsurprisingly, the module proved proven popular with students and staff, not least for its illustrations of how philosophising connects to 'practical' issues, many of them familiar to many of our students. But this sets up my worries that the module is at risk of (a) failing to foster in students a properly critical attitude toward many of their pre-existing assumptions and convictions while also (b) manifesting an inappropriately partisan politicised conception of philosophy. Obviously, describing these at *risks* is contentious. Not all philosophers agree that these outcomes are problematic – indeed, many enthusiastically endorse them. Against the first worry, some argue that it is perfectly legitimate to aim to fortify students' convictions even if that means suspending the imperative to criticality – better fortify those convictions, rather than risk dissolving them in the universal acid of critical philosophical scrutiny. Against the second worry, some argue that education unavoidably encodes political values; if so, then better to be upfront, rather than flapping about with naïve, untenable attempts at neutrality.

I will take each of the backfire risks in turn, albeit with the proviso that I am unsure about them both. My position is one of lingering disquiet, sustained by a sense of unease, stirred by certain remarks voiced by students, some of them quoted below. If the worries are actually overstated, that's a welcome conclusion, although I fear there is something to them. After all, these backfire risks turn on substantial and contested philosophical and political convictions about the aims and nature of philosophy and education. Let's take the two backfire risks each in turn.

Backfire one: failures to cultivate criticality

The first backfire risk is that a module like PCW might failing to encourage in many students an attitude of uncritical affirmation regarding their convictions, rather than one of reflective criticality. Several features of the course can encourage this risk – the selection of topics, the stances taken on them, their politically charged character, and the fact that lecturers can be open about their own commitments. In itself, that last feature can be acceptable, although is able be become problematic under certain conditions: presenting those who hold rival views are morally problematic, for instance, through the use of highly charged or coercive language. (When I give my lecture on carnism, for instance, I avoid terms like 'evil' and 'barbarity', since those create a polarising atmosphere of highly charged moral tension). Of course, not all the topics incur these sorts of risks, but many do.

Stated schematically, the worry is that the module risks cultivating in students a set of bad epistemic attitudes that are inconsistent with some of the basic functions of philosophical education. PCW is at risk of doing this because it is too easily perceived as promoting a 'Right on!' conception of philosophy, one that reiterates and affirms a discernible range of particular moral, social, and political convictions. While such affirmations may be welcome for those of the students who endorse those attitudes, the risk is that they come at the cost of other basic functions of a philosophical education. Obviously, we are back in metaphilosophical territory. I see at least three basic functions of a philosophical education, none of which strike me as at all idiosyncratic (Kidd 2012). First, to motivate and enable people to critically challenge, rather than simply echo and affirm, inherited attitudes and convictions, at least the substantive ones which pertain to the ways we conceive of and comport ourselves within the world. 'Challenge' need not mean 'overturn' or 'reject', of course, since achieving a critical relationship with our convictions can enable deeper and more robust commitments to them. Second, to motivate and enable people to engage – fairly, systematically, sympathetically – with alternatives and rivals to their own convictions. Obviously, this is closely related to the first aim, since strong convictions are often sustained because of an ignorance or underappreciation of alternatives. The reflective capacity to engage appropriately with alternatives is thus essential if we are to judiciously manage our commitments, confidence, certainties, and uncertainties. A third basic function of a philosophical education is to challenge the natural tendencies of so many of us to certain epistemic vices and failings – complacency, dogmatism, groupthink, and intellectual laziness and other attitudes and tendencies that corrupt our thinking. In many traditions, one of the primary purposes of philosophical practice was to overcome such failings, whether as a good in itself or as a means to attaining certain further goods, like autonomy or wisdom. I'd hope that these basic functions, at least in these general forms, would be endorsed by most, if not all those engaged in teaching philosophy.

My worry is that a module like PCW can be at risk of abnegating these basic functions, although the severity of that risk is contingent on several factors that a good educator is able to control – most obviously, the ways that the course content is taught, the ways that seminar discussions are managed, the careful inclusion of a readings representing diverse perspectives and so on. But taking such measures means taking seriously the backfire risk of failing to foster a proper criticality – and, at a more fundamental level, accepting that *as* a risk to be avoided. Consider two ways of putting that worry.

(1) When a module consistently tends to affirm as right or correct a students' existing attitudes, beliefs, and convictions, there is a risk that they come to see philosophy as being too *easy*. The module increasingly seems to merely mirror much of their existing stance on the world, such that philosophy reduces itself to a cheerleading role. Perhaps a student's prior convictions are, as it happens, typically defensible and internally coherent and so on. But the worry is that they start to internalise an unacceptably narrow conception of philosophy as an enterprise of affirmation, not also one of critical interrogation. During my lecture on carnism and veganism, I open by announcing that I am, morally speaking, 'on the side' of animals, then by critically rejecting the concept of animal rights. Students who earnestly share my concerns about violence against and exploitation of animals had uncritically taken it as *obvious* that we should articulate those concerns in the language of animal rights. When challenged, however, few could really offer reasons in defence of the animal rights concept, nor really argue against alternative approaches. The students had supposed – uncritically and without engagement or awareness of alternatives – that 'being on the side the animals' *necessarily* meant respecting their rights. In this case, the students came to see that philosophising about animal ethics will be more difficult than just appealing to their rights. More importantly, they grasped the need to work harder – or at least, harder than they had been used to – to retool their convictions.

In this case, the backfire risk of failing to cultivate criticality was avoided, although not inevitably. I'd been struck in earlier years by the natural default to a language of 'animal rights' and so resolved to challenge that tendency, rather than leave it in place, however much it did put students on what I regard as the side of the angels. But one could imagine a teacher prone to suppose that it does not *matter* really what moral frameworks students use, so long as the conclusions they reach are the desired ones – that eating animals is morally wrong, say. Such a teacher rejects the insistence that convictions ought to be critically tested, thus rejects talk of fostering uncritical commitment as a *risk*.

(2) When a module engages with topics about which one has existing convictions, one should promote in the students capacities for critical self-reflection, including those for fair-minded, reflective engagement with rival and alternative positions and their advocates. Otherwise, an invidious tendency can develop of dismissing or scoffing at those rival theories and theorists, rather

than doing the philosophical work of understanding and engaging with them. Charity, fairmindedness, and other virtues should be in play—but students may be less likely to want to exercise them if they are beholden to a sense that certain positions are 'obviously absurd', or otherwise undeserving of careful engagement. Such attitudes of default dismissals should be causes for concern, since otherwise they fester into epistemic failings such as dogmatism. Such vices can be powerfully nourished by certain tendencies and temptations that are built into modules, like PCW, devoted to highly charged moral, social, and political issues. Consider, for instance, the temptations to nod along to those one regards as speaking out those morally charged truths; to want to disdain those arguing for 'the other side' of some position that one regards as 'obviously compelling'; the desire to wave through claims that one implicitly knows would require a lot of hard work to defend if scrutinised. If such temptations are not checked, they can mutate into a range of the epistemic vices and failings, that ought to be ameliorated by a philosophical education – this being the first type of backfire risk.

Backfire two: partisan politicisation

The second backfire risk is that a module like PCW can risk promoting a tangibly politicised conception of philosophy – one aligned with a set of, *inter alia*, progressive, anti-conservative, left-wing values and convictions. Given the usual list of topics – moral obligations to refugees, intersex rights, classism – it was unsurprising to overhear one student describe the module as "The Philosophy of Whatever's in Today's *Guardian*", a left-wing British newspaper. Granted, selection of such topics cannot by itself be indicative of commitment to left-wing values, since one could use classes on those topics in order to question or reject them. Nor does a decision by staff to teach those topics indicate that they have any particular view on them; some of us use the module precisely because we lack strong or settled views on certain topics and like to use our teaching to work out what we think. Some staff, of course, do have strong views which they report in their lectures.

A backfire risk arises, though, if the combination and alignment of topics selected and stances taken starts to encourage students to perceive or infer an implicit normative political orientation to the module. In that case, the risk is that the module itself is taken to involve an implicit political test – an assumption that, if left unchecked, can start to feed a perception of philosophy itself as necessarily committed to certain political values. In the case of PCW, this latter risk seems to be acute since, for many students, it is their first exposure to philosophy and so can powerfully shape their conceptions of the subject (only about half of our students have studied philosophy at school). Attributing a political character to philosophy in this way is a risk – a danger to be navigated – for at least two reasons. First, not all students are likely to subscribe to progressive left-wing values. Some students arrive with strong political views,

some with messily unstable views, yet to be worked out, while others are politically naïve. In some cases, these natural variations are obscured by homogenising talk of 'the students', and in other cases, substantive clams about students' political tendencies are based on little or no good evidence – biased sample sizes, generalising from single modules. (I once met a logician, who taught only elective advanced classes in logic, who expressed puzzlement at claims that many students dislike logic, since, in his experience, all students were very into logic).

A second reason to resisting attributing a strong political character to modules is that it can increase the risk of jeopardising the fairmindedness, representativeness, and principled commitment to intellectual balance constitutive of our role as teachers. In its strongest form, the risk is that pedagogy devolves into overt propagandising and proselytising, an activity that aims to impose upon students certain political orientations. Many of the most effective ways of persuasion entail the wilful abnegation, if not abandonment, of virtues like fairmindedness, since there are forms of illicit pleasure in florid derogation of rivals and muscularly moralising condemnations of alternative positions. Education always involve actively balancing different commitments – to inform, to inspire, to challenge, to encourage, and so on – but achievement of that balance becomes evermore difficult if one submits to the temptation to propagandise, especially if such submissions consistently converts students in the ways one desires.

Such concerns turn on complex claims about philosophical pedagogy, and many will resist my sense of them as concerns, especially in these politically contested times. Actually, I sometimes feel the force of the Machiavellian conviction that, under problematic conditions, one must adopt more pragmatic attitudes – *Realpolitik* in the classroom. Moreover, I can also sympathise with those who interpret 'critical balance' in terms of offering salutary correctives to entrenched, culturally dominant ideas and convictions. I am also sympathetic to the hope that a good teacher can often successfully balance procedurally fair-minded presentations of positions rival to their own convictions more critical, partisan stances. Hence this backfire risk is perhaps more conditional – more dependent on contingent conditions – than the other.

4. Thinking about backfires

Gathering these points together, my worries is that modules like PCW can tend to promote a 'Right on!' conception of philosophy which comes at the cost of its critical functions and also of promoting a problematically politicised conception of the philosophy. A philosophy teacher will struggle to maintain the functions of Cheerleader and Critic, especially when they have a vested interest in the political conversion of their students. What is at risk is realisation of the basic functions of a philosophical education – to foster a critical stance on one's convictions, to enable fair-minded engagement with alternative positions and

their advocates, and timely correction of common tendencies to epistemic vices and failings. Such risks can be mitigated; backfires can be avoided with forethought, critical reflection, careful teaching, careful design of the wider curriculum and a willingness to confess and debate one's own metaphilosophical commitments. What's crucial, though, is that students acquire a properly expansive sense of the complexity and heterogeneity of the philosophical enterprise. A student who internalises a sense that philosophy is identical with radical social activism has acquired an inaccurate and myopic vision of the subject – one that formed without serious engagement with the Buddha, Zhuāngzǐ, Montaigne, Burke, and Oakeshott, for instance.

A unifying theme of my discussions of the trade-offs and backfires is the concern that students ought to be initiated into a properly truthful understanding of the complexity and heterogeneity of philosophy. Philosophy across its history and traditions has been conceived and practiced in a startling variety of ways – 'therapy for the soul', the means of release from 'the wheel of suffering', underlabourer for the sciences, conceptual engineering, an engine of social change and more besides. An informed sense of this heterogeneity guards our students and ourselves against distorting myopia and misperceptions, consistent with a sort of virtuous truthfulness about the philosophical enterprise in which we participate (Cooper 2008). This is one of the deep motivations for *History of Philosophy: Ancient to Modern*, whose expansively inclusive presentation of philosophy counteracts narrower visions by inducting students into the diversity of the intellectual and imaginative inheritance afforded by the worlds traditions – a vision of education eloquently defended by Michael Oakeshott (1989). What is needed for such initiation is an expansive sense of the richness of that inheritance, an alertness to those tendencies to an occluding myopia and partisan narrowness, and, of course, curricula that are enable all of this. At least in my experience, much teaching of philosophy, especially with first-years, involves myth-busting – not all philosophers were Platonists, not all were religious, not all were cold 'rationalists' hostile to emotion, not all supposed that critical argumentation was the sole or most effective strategy for moral persuasion – and so on.

My purpose in presenting these backfire risks is to enable us to navigate them in ways that minimise the chances of spoiling our diversification work, while also hopefully helping us to have the necessary complicated metaphilosophical conversations. Whether those backfire risks are relevant to oneself will depend on lots of local factors, not least the character of the student cohort currently sitting in one's classrooms. What one should ask is whether the risks are real or apparent, serious or secondary, and whether the potential harms of a backfire are worth the costs of intervention. If one is lucky, no such backfire risks obtain. If they do, then one has work to do.

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5. Conclusions

This paper presented two kinds of challenge likely to be faced by those attempting intellectual and demographic diversification of philosophy curricula – *trade-offs* and *backfires*. One reason to take them seriously is that diversification initiatives often face resistance from aggressive critics and stubborn sceptics, meaning we need to take special care when proceeding. I close with three pieces of practical advice. To start with, we need properly informed understanding of the attitudes and convictions of current generations of students – otherwise, it will be very tough to assess trade-offs and backfire risks. Second, we need more research about how our students experience and respond to diversified curricula, rather than relying on our untutored assumptions about what topics will seem salient. Students are not a homogenous group, thus we should be sceptical of confident assertions that, for instance, they prefer socially engaged, culturally diverse curricula over what is 'abstract', canonical, and traditional. (Anyway, those sorts of distinctions are crude – much contemporary philosophy of race involves complicated highly abstract claims about the metaphysics of race, while 'cool' Asian philosophical schools often surprise students with their calls for respecting tradition and politeness – see Olberding 2019).

A final piece of practical advice is to involve students in normative metaphilosophical debates about the aims, nature, and practice of philosophy. Some people tend to pull a face, sneering at what they see as narcissistic philosophical navel-gazing. But this is a silly attitude – critical reflection on aims and methods is integral to any systematic rational enterprise, not least the term 'philosophy' encompasses so many diverse activities and aspirations. We ought to engage students in these debates, since they are bound to *have* metaphilosophical beliefs. The more open and engaged we are about these issues, the easier it might be to manage the trade-offs and backfires that will increasingly emerge as our curricula continue to diversify.

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