

# APA Newsletters

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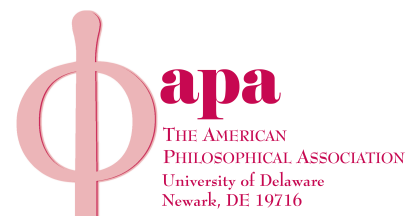
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# The Status of Asian & Asian-American Philosophers & Philosophies

Yoko Arisaka, Editor

Fall 2001

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## FROM THE EDITOR

**Yoko Arisaka**

*University of San Francisco*

The demographic makeup of the United States is changing. California has already become the second “minority majority” state after Hawaii, with unprecedented growth in the Hispanic, Asian, and immigrant population. In this context, it has become perhaps by now a cliché to mention “diversity,” but this socio-political reality, which anyone can see clearly in visiting public schools not just in California but other metropolitan centers in the country, still seems to receive insufficient attention in our profession. Although there are efforts to change the curriculum, still the majority of our philosophy courses pay little attention to any philosophy outside the Western or analytic tradition.

The question that is immediately raised here is: How is “philosophy” defined? Many of us in the profession would not have any problem including non-Western philosophy as “philosophy,” while many others would, and this is no uncontroversial matter when it comes to curriculum changes, negotiations for new positions, and hiring.

But this is not merely an issue of professional politics. It touches on the very heart of why we exist in the first place as university educators. Our world today is no longer a collection of isolated nations and peoples, but a dynamic arena of communication and conflict. With today’s technology and the constant flow of people, information, and capital, our students will have to learn that provincial attitudes, willful ignorance about the rest of the world, and academic ethnocentrism are no longer viable for cosmopolitan participants in the global culture. Philosophy may have had a narrow self-definition that sufficed for the past 100 years, but this fact in itself says nothing about what we will have to do to move forward in a radically different world.

Unwillingness to engage in this conversation would be an oversight that could undermine our very role as philosophical educators, and this is a serious matter. Studying our own tradition is certainly essential, and so is teaching good methods of argumentation and the power of abstraction. But teaching Western philosophy does not excuse us from learning about the rich thought traditions of other cultures, past and present. As educators, especially of philosophy, we are responsible not only for teaching critical modes of thinking, but also for transmitting the broader implications of our field in the world today. And why should we be exempt from such an obligation?

Professionalism is sometimes invoked as an excuse. Chemists and physicists do not have to deal with globalization. Why should philosophers? This reply is both cynical and naïve: cynical because it assumes that demands for social relevance are evidence of “impurity” and incompetence; naïve because it assumes philosophy, as a discipline, is relevantly equivalent to chemistry and physics, which it is not. We had better address some real-world problems ourselves, and today many of the problems we can address are related to globalization and diversity.

These are some of the considerations that led our Committee to host a special panel, “What is Philosophy? The Status of Non-Western Philosophy in the Profession,” at the Pacific APA meeting in 2000 (Albuquerque). The participants of the panel were Professors Joseph Prabhu, Eric Schwitzgebel, Robert Solomon, Kwasi Wiredu, and Xianglong Zhang. Prof. Martha Nussbaum, originally on the program, unfortunately could not attend at the last moment. These professors all do research and teaching extensively involving some type of a so-called “non-Western” philosophy in various departmental settings, while also having their areas of focus primarily in other fields. Thus, they were particularly sensitive to the issues involving the reception of doing research in and teaching non-Western philosophies in their professional settings. The panel overall went well and the participants addressed different aspects of this issue. The session was fairly well attended, and the audience seemed sympathetic to our concerns. A commentary by Schwitzgebel and articles by Solomon, Prabhu, and myself appear below.

## FROM THE CHAIR

**Xinyan Jiang**

*University of Redlands*

Our committee is relatively new. Its first members were appointed in the late 1998. The committee held its first meeting in Berkeley on April 3, 1999. The committee has a double mission: to promote the status of Asian/Asian American philosophers and the status of Asian/Asian American philosophies. Since not all Asian/Asian American philosophers are doing Asian/Asian American or comparative philosophies and not all who are doing Asian/Asian American or comparative philosophies are Asian/Asian Americans, the committee has special responsibilities to both those who are Asian/Asian American philosophers regardless of their

specializations and those who do Asian/Asian American or comparative philosophies regardless of their ethnic identities. More specifically, as stated in the committee charge statement:

The Committee is charged with assessing and reporting on the status of Asians and Asian Americans in the profession. Among its responsibilities are to identify unfair or discriminatory practices and to advise the Board and the members of the Association of ways in which they may be rectified; to study and propose ways of encouraging and helping Asians and Asian Americans enter the profession; to promote the interaction between Asian and Western philosophical traditions and to help draw out their mutual relevance. The Committee seeks to advance teaching and study of Asian and comparative philosophy. It sponsors sessions on Asian philosophy, comparative philosophy, and other relevant topics at divisional meetings.

Since 1999 the committee has sponsored various panels at each APA divisional meeting and actively involved the NSF/ APA project (A project funded by National Science Foundation and aimed at philosophical explorations of science, technology, and diversity). To report and promote the status of Asian/Asian American philosophers and philosophies, the committee has conducted a survey during 2000-2001.

A Newsletter on Asian/Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies is also part of the committee's effort to fulfill its mission. Such a newsletter on Asian/Asian American philosophers and philosophies will provide a forum for the sharing of the Asian/Asian American experience in philosophy and for open discussion of studying and teaching Asian/Asian American and comparative philosophy. The committee members believe that such a newsletter, like those edited by other APA diversity committees, will definitely contribute much to promote diversity in philosophy in the United States. The newsletter will greatly help our committee in accomplishing our mission.

For the first one or two years, editors of each issue of the newsletter will be one or two of our current or formal committee members. Since they know the mission of committee well, their editorship will lay a good foundation for the newsletter. Editors of each particular issue have an authority to invite a guest editor or co-editor to participate. They also will make decisions in inviting, reviewing, and selecting submissions. Lastly, they are responsible for sending the completed newsletters they edit in proper form to the APA national office for printing and publication. After one or two years, the committee may select someone outside to be an editor for a year or longer term.

Each issue of the newsletter will be organized around a theme. It may include articles, book reviews, news, and announcements. For the first four issues, we plan to focus on the following topics:

- (1) The Status of Non-Western Philosophy (Editor: Yoko Arisaka)
- (2) Asian/Asian Americans and Philosophy (Editors: Vrinda Dalmiya and Xinyan Jiang)
- (3) Comparative Philosophy (Editor: Chenyang Li).

- (4) The Interface of Asian American Philosophy with Other Philosophies of Race. (Editor: David Haekwon Kim).

Below is a list of the current members of our committee. You are very welcome to contact us with comments and suggestions relating to the committee's works. If you are interested in more information on our committee, please consult our committee web page at: <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/governance/committees/asians/index.html>.

## Status of Asian & Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

### Committee Members 2001 - 2002

#### Chair:

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Douglas Allen (2004)  
Yoko Arisaka (2002)  
Vrinda Dalmiya (2002)  
Yong Huang (2004)  
Craig Kei Ihara (2003)  
David Haekwon Kim (2003)  
(Terms expire June 30 of the year in parentheses)

## COMMENT

### *Why Don't We Know Our Chinese Philosophy?*

**Eric Schwitzgebel**

*University of California, Riverside*

American philosophers have all heard of Confucius (Kongzi) and Lao Tzu (Laozi). Some have also heard of their (approximate) contemporaries in classical China: Mencius (Mengzi), Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi), Mo Tzu (Mozi), and Hsün Tzu (Xunzi). So why haven't most of us read any of their works?

Even by the strictest criteria, Mo Tzu and Hsün Tzu are plainly philosophers. Both wrote discursive essays on ethics and political philosophy; both support their views with reasonable (if not always ultimately persuasive) arguments; both offer counter-arguments to opponents' views. Their arguments do not require the acceptance of any narrowly religious dogma, but rather start from considerations that for the most part are intuitive and widely acceptable even in the contemporary United States. Mencius and Chuang Tzu did not write in standard philosophical essay format, but both offer persuasive arguments for positions in ethics, political

philosophy, philosophy of mind, and epistemology. Unconventional format should no more prevent us from regarding them as philosophers than it does in the case of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. The philosophy of Kongzi and Lao Tzu (setting aside authorship complications) we find only in fragments without significant argumentation, but the same is true of some pre-Socratic philosophers. The works of classical Chinese philosophers are taught more in Religious Studies than in Philosophy departments, but in fact their religious commitments are less invasive and dogmatic than the religious commitments of many European philosophers.

Perhaps the classical Chinese philosophers are not sufficiently important to warrant broader attention in the United States? If ‘important’ means good, it is not clear that this is so. Although to some extent such judgments are a matter of taste, in my estimation Mencius’ and Hsün Tzu’s views of moral psychology are as good as anything we have going now, and their debate about whether human nature is good or evil is considerably more sophisticated than the corresponding debate between Hobbes and Rousseau. Chuang Tzu’s skeptical and relativist arguments are as lively and challenging as Descartes’ first two Meditations, Sextus Empiricus, or Peter Unger, and his positive vision is interestingly distinct from that of any major philosopher in the West.

If we assess importance by historical influence, different potential criteria come into competition. Considered globally, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and to a lesser extent the other major classical Chinese philosophers have been enormously influential, probably more influential in Far East than Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have been in Europe and the Americas. Even in the United States among the general population Confucius and Lao Tzu are better known and more broadly discussed than any but a handful of European philosophers. Still, perhaps the proper measure of historical importance for us in deciding what to teach and read is the influence that a particular philosopher has had on contemporary philosophy in the United States. Here, finally, we may have a justification for our ignorance of classical Chinese philosophy.

But it is then worth inquiring why classical Chinese philosophers are not especially influential here and now. One possibility is historical accident: Because the dominant culture in the United States traces back to Europe, the classical Chinese philosophers were not taught to, and thus not read by, the succeeding generations. Ignorance thus apparently justifies ignorance: Because we do not know their work, they have little impact on our philosophy; because they have little impact on our philosophy, we are justified in remaining ignorant about their work. On the other hand, perhaps these philosophers would not have much influence even if we did read them; but if they are good, it is hard to see why this would be so unless our education had so distorted us that we were unprepared to learn what they had to teach.

## ARTICLES

### **“What is Philosophy?” The Status of Non-Western Philosophy in the Profession**

**Robert C. Solomon**

*University of Texas at Austin*

*(This piece appeared in Philosophy East West: 51:1, 2001: pp. 100-104. Reprinted here with permission from the University of Hawai'i Press.)*

The question, “what is philosophy?” is both one of the most virtuously self-effacing and one of the most obnoxious that philosophers today tend to ask. It is virtuously self-effacing insofar as it questions, with some misgivings, its own behavior, the worth of the questions it asks, the significance of the enterprise itself. It is obnoxious insofar as it refuses to question its own behavior but instead takes that same behavior as the exclusive standard to de-legitimize any other activity that dares to call itself “philosophy.” Thus, for most of this century, Anglo-American and most European philosophers have simply ignored the rich philosophical traditions of Africa, Asia, Latin and native America and the rest of the world. Some leading African-American and African-European philosophers have dismissed “ethnophilosophy” as “not philosophy,” presumably to protect their own analytic credentials. Universities as far flung as Singapore, Sierra Leone, and New Delhi have prided themselves on their fidelity to Oxbridge philosophy. With the globalization of free market economics seems to go the globalization of one brief moment in philosophy, with similarly devastating effects on local cultures and the rich varieties of human experience.

Philosophy might be thought of as made up of two components, critical thinking and passionate vision. But “critical thinking “ does not necessarily imply the hermeneutics of suspicion, skepticism or intellectual paranoia, all too often the trademarks of the bright young professional philosopher. One can be “critical,” that is, reflective, while at the same time being committed, even devoted, to an idea or a way of thinking. The emphasis on passionate vision, however, is just as essential, and any philosophy that doesn’t include both just isn’t worthy of the name. Without passionate vision, we get that utterly eviscerated focus on argument forms—philosophia minimalia—devoid of “empirical” content (that is to say, content) and, as far as most people are concerned, devoid of any interest. Without critical reflection, we get gullibility and the worst of New Age philosophy, accepting of any kind of nonsense, just because it stirs the passions. But to simply assume that philosophy must be as rigorously self-questioning as modern European and Anglo-American philosophy is a subtle form of ethno-chauvinism. It eliminates from the realm of philosophy not only African ethnophilosophy and Latin and native American and South Pacific mythology but a good deal of the philosophy of religion, the basis (for better or worse) of the development of Western philosophy over much of the past two thousand years.



I just withdrew from a recent dispute from a respectable and supposedly eclectic philosophy journal, in which my worst fears in this regard were rather bluntly confirmed. I had made the above point, I thought rather matter-of-factly, that if (analytic) philosophy dismisses or ignores modes of thinking that are not obviously self-critical and are presented poetically instead of by way of positions to be argued for then a good deal of the world's philosophy, including a good deal of Western philosophy, would be left out of the arena. The journal's board reacted indignantly, to put it mildly, to the suggestion that anything should count as "philosophy" that was not sufficiently self-critical in just this sense. But what about the millennium or so of religious philosophy in the West. Does anyone think that Anselm or Alvin Plantinga for that matter is seriously skeptical of the truth of Christianity, as they go through their admittedly brilliant argumentative routines? For that matter, to what extent is the emphasis on logical form and argument subjected to scrutiny in contemporary analytic philosophy? (As one of the foremost practitioners of that art commented, "Metaphilosophy makes me sick.")

Some of the hostility to world philosophy, to be sure, turns on the conflict between philosophy and religion, which may have its origins in ancient and medieval philosophy but emerges full-blown with the Enlightenment and its campaign against "superstition." But many people and a good many cultures do not distinguish philosophy and religion. If we consider the word "philosophy" in view of its history and the cultural conditions of its development, it becomes evident that philosophy has a great deal in common with religion. We can also see how the current concept of philosophy emerged as a product of the enlightenment campaign against religious superstition and how it thus became a celebration of critical reason. But if we are going to be scrupulous about our language and careful about what historical strictures we impose on the evaluation of what "we" philosophers do, it would seem obvious that we should recognize this particular conception of philosophy as historically and culturally bound, and not "essential" to philosophizing. What we do (and what that is) really should be an item for serious self-scrutiny, and not just by way of eliminating the competition.

If we continue to take it as a necessary condition of philosophy that it is critical thinking, then we better be careful that we do not confine "critical thinking" to that limited and problematic epistemological history defined by Descartes and Hume or the aggressive eighteenth century effort to free science and society from the clutches of sectarian religion. If philosophers say, with this emphasis on critical thinking in mind, that the belief systems of most of the peoples of the world are not philosophy, that bespeaks a profound impoverishment of philosophy. Why should we, of all people, allow ourselves to be trapped and suffocated by our own history? Our critical scrutiny today should be turned on the word "philosophy" itself, along with its history, to realize that today what had once been a liberating concept has become a constricted, oppressive and ethnocentric one. To demean African "ethnophilosophy" as "not philosophy," as many African-American philosophers have done is to buy uncritically into enlightenment (and colonial) ethnocentrism. The philosophy of South Asia is not, contrary to some University curricula, the same philosophy that one finds at Oxford, Cambridge, and Princeton. Indeed, if Indian philosophers can be shown to have been practicing "analytic philosophy" for

two millennia before Frege came on the scene, then that is all the more reason for reading Indian philosophy with a keen sense of its own traditions and peculiarities, not just as a curious anticipation of Russell and Wittgenstein.

We should also be particularly careful not to tie the bonds of "critical thinking" too tightly to what (in the west) is called "autonomy." We can thus include African and American Indian philosophy and any number of "non-Western" (i.e. pre- or post-Enlightenment) philosophies which have their own styles of internal criticism, despite the fact that they are based on authority and not autonomy, do not adopt what (in the West) is called "the scientific method," and do little by way of trying to get "outside of" their own systems of thought to see them from afar. But, then, many analytic philosophers are similarly loathe to raise questions about the significance of their own pursuits (reflecting, perhaps, their own tribal status).

The problem, as I have argued in my recent book, *The Joy of Philosophy*, is the way contemporary philosophy has rendered itself so "thin," cutting itself off from context, history, and culture. The philosophical games based on a dubious notion of "logical possibility" and the continuing insistence on necessary and sufficient conditions, giving rise inevitably to the counter example contest, have been undermined by recent work in the philosophy of language. It is easy enough to appreciate why young philosophers continue to be enticed to join in such games, but few people outside of academic philosophy departments find anything of interest or significance in them. Moreover, the compulsive nature of the games distracts us from confronting the problems that so-called real people face in their lives. (How many more centuries are we to watch some of our brightest young minds lose themselves in "internalism-externalism," "realism-antirealism" debates).

Such debates do not arise in Chinese philosophy, or in African philosophy, not because the Chinese and the Africans are unsophisticated and lack an adequately rigorous epistemology but because the linguistic and ethnocentric distinctions on which such games depend do not exist there. But the emphasis on rigorous arguments also undermines our sense of "our own" philosophical tradition. We define "philosophy" in terms of the criticism of arguments and then read Plato, the great myth-maker, dialectician, and dramatic playwright as the purveyor of bad arguments. We limit our attention to the bare logical bones of Hume's skepticism and utterly ignore that fact that he was one of the most cultured men of the eighteenth century. There is now a new (and evidently very successful) move to logicize Hegel, converting his quasi-religious notion of "spirit" and his infamously voracious "dialectic" into a series of quasi-formal moves in semantic analysis and concept revision.

None of this, I hasten to add, constitutes an attack or even an objection to "technical philosophy," philosophy that celebrates formalism and the sorts of puzzles that have dominated the "analytic" literature for the past half century or so. Many of the most brilliant philosophers working today enjoy and exemplify this way of doing philosophy. What I have objected to is the exclusiveness of this approach, not in the sense that only those "in the know" have any interest or ability in the practice but in the much more damning sense that only those who practice such esoteric philosophy are considered "serious" philosophers, or, for that matter,

philosophers at all. This excludes not only most of the world's great and lesser intellectual traditions and virtually all non-professionalized philosophers but it utterly alienates philosophers from the rest of humanity, including most of their own students. Fascinating and intractable as its puzzles may be, no discipline can survive for long as a publicly sponsored activity if it refuses to recognize or give equal footing to ways of thinking other than its own.

Philosophy is in a crisis. It could be argued that philosophy has always been in a state of crisis, that such is the nature of the discipline, thus explaining the rather desperate pronouncements of many of our greatest philosophers to “end” philosophy or to have solved its unsolvable problems once and for all. But the dominant paradigm of Anglo-American philosophy—which has now been declared “dead” many times—continues to get more emaciated and more exclusive. Meanwhile the global nature of intellectual life demands that philosophy accommodate a great many ways of thinking that have not been taken seriously or given a place within the American Philosophical Association. (A brief glance at the program of almost any APA meeting shows a familiar picture, a core meeting with the usual suspects and puzzles, and a proliferating number of “Group Meetings,” which are not part of the APA proper, often scheduled at awkward times. Many of these focus on “non-Western” philosophy.)

This must change, but it is not just re-scheduling that is required. The very conception of what counts as philosophy has to be seriously revised. This is not to say that dumb acceptance of doctrine now counts as philosophy, but it is to say, against the enlightenment tradition, that faith and authority have their place in the tent of philosophy. And this is not to open our flaps to any poetic or literary production or pretension, much less to sectarian proselytizing, without regard to its philosophical significance. But it is to accept metaphor, mythologizing, conscientious ambiguity, and “analogical thinking” as legitimate modes of philosophizing. Much of this makes analytically trained philosophers such as myself more than a bit uncomfortable. But as some of my ruder students would say, “just get used to it.”

And as for analytic philosophy, it was and continues to be a healthy corrective to the sometimes excessive romanticisms of our day, including excessive multiculturalist and “post-colonialist” fervor. But this does not mean that we should look at excessive romanticism and analytic philosophy as poison and antidote, respectively. They are two parts of a dialectic that, at its worst, causes mutual defensiveness, self-righteousness and mutual assured misunderstanding. But at its best, and when it doesn't insist on being the only voice in the room, analytic philosophy still clarifies, articulates and opens up (rather than closes down) the world. It need not be reductionist or materialist or overly formal, self-absorbed in its own techniques. Nor need it be oblivious to content, context, culture and history. Indeed, it has always been the tension between the need to speculate and the urge to clarify, not only in Europe, England and America but around the world and across many disciplines, that characterizes the history of philosophy. In other words, *Yin* and *Yang*. And that, I hope, summarizes the future of world philosophy as well.

## Philosophy in an Age of Global Encounter

Joseph Prabhu

California State University, Los Angeles

Like everything build or instituted by man, India and China are immensely interesting. But like all institutions, they leave it to us to discern their true meaning; they do not give it to us completely. China and India are not entirely aware of what they are saying. What they need to do to have philosophies is to try to *understand* themselves and everything else. The remarks...commonplace today...come to us from Hegel. He was the one who invented the idea of “going beyond” the Orient by “understanding” it. It was Hegel who contrasted the western idea of truth as the total conceptual recovery of the world in all its variety to the Orient, and defined the Orient as a failure in the same understanding... Hegel and those who follow him grant philosophical dignity to Oriental thought only by treating it as a distant approximation of conceptual understanding. Our idea of knowledge is so demanding that it forces every other type of thought to the alternative of resigning itself to being a first sketch of the concept or disqualifying itself as irrational.<sup>1</sup> —Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty, writing as he was in the 1940's, was echoing what had been thought and said by many other European philosophers including Husserl, when he referred to the “concept of Europe as the historical teleology of the infinite goals of reason,” and to the European world uniquely born out of the spirit of genuine philosophy in contrast to “merely empirical anthropological types such as ‘China’ and ‘India.’” The European tradition for Husserl is not just one cultural tradition among others. It owes its identity to the ideas of philosophy and *theoria*, which provide it with a unique global mission—that of providing other traditions with a universal framework of meaning and understanding. “The Europeanization of all other civilizations is the destiny of mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

In the sixty years since Merleau-Ponty wrote these lines, has the situation with respect to the self-understanding of Western philosophy changed? Perhaps one incident might reveal a partial answer to that question, at least as far as contemporary American universities are concerned. When four years ago we advertised a position in East Asian philosophy in our philosophy department, we got some hundred applications, but of those hundred only about ten or so were from candidates in philosophy departments. The other ninety came from area studies, language and literature, history, or religious studies departments. Further investigation revealed that there are just as few research universities where Chinese philosophy is taught in philosophy departments as there were applicants from them. The position is even worse in regard to Indian philosophy. There are probably no more than eight philosophy departments in the entire U.S. where there are faculty teaching Indian philosophy primarily, who have full-time positions in philosophy departments. Students and faculty who want to do their PhD's in or to teach Indian or Chinese philosophy are thus, for the most part, forced to go to the other departments mentioned above. Likewise, if one goes through the main part of a typical program for APA

meetings, there is at best an occasional inclusion of a non-western philosophical figure and that too in all likelihood in sections dealing with ethics or value theory. The areas of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and science are left exclusively for Western philosophy. It is by and large only in group meetings that scholars working in the areas of Indian, Chinese, Islamic, and African philosophy can find a forum. The same pattern is replicated in departmental course schedules where, with the exception of the University of Hawaii, which was set up as a department of comparative East-West philosophy, students are unmistakably given the impression that non-western philosophy is an exotic pursuit lying at best on the periphery of mainstream Western philosophy.

Thus, one would have to say that news of the much-touted multiculturalism, supposedly a feature of our globalized world, has not reached the profession of philosophy in the U. S., which remains sublimely provincial and insular. In fairness one must acknowledge the sporadic efforts of the APA to mitigate this situation by including panels like this one (attended alas by only a dozen or so people) and the Committee for International Cooperation. But one cannot in any honesty say that these efforts have had a significant impact on the orientation of the profession. The strongly ethnocentric nature of philosophy courses offered in most departments is reflected as well in textbooks, proposals successful in securing grants, and in other professional activities.

There's no question that philosophy is regarded in contemporary U.S. universities as exclusively a Western product. Non-western philosophies are variously seen as "folklore," "religion," "wisdom," or "life orientations" to cite only the kindest terms I have heard. And yet, if one were to acquire even a slight acquaintance with the texts of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic traditions, one would have no doubt that they too constitute "philosophy" however different the orientation may be. If philosophy consists in systematic attempts to address fundamental questions about the nature of reality, the nature and methods of knowledge, the basis of moral aesthetic values and judgments, the self, and the meaning and goal of religion, then there is abundant philosophy in Indian, Chinese, and Islamic thought. (I cannot speak of African philosophy because of my own ignorance, but I would presume that it too embodies systematic reflection about the nature of things.)

My pluralistic stance by no means slides into self-defeating relativism or a relaxation of standards of judgment. One has only to read the standard histories of Indian philosophy by S. N. Dasgupta<sup>3</sup> or E. Frauwallner<sup>4</sup> or of Chinese philosophy by Wing-tsit Chan<sup>5</sup> or A. C. Graham,<sup>6</sup> or the debates between the medieval Islamic philosophers to know that the criteria of conceptual rigor, depth of insight and argumentative force are amply met. The debates between the Nyaya logicians, or between Hindu and Buddhist philosophers would satisfy the demands of the most fastidious analytic philosopher. Michael Dummett conducted a seminar at Oxford with Bimal Matilal on Indian logic and was sufficiently impressed to want to repeat the experience. Alasdair MacIntyre has found his inquiries into Confucius and Mencius immensely useful for his project of virtue ethics.<sup>7</sup> J. N. Mahanty, trained at the Universities of Calcutta and Goettingen, has fruitfully brought together Frege's philosophy of language and

Husserl's phenomenology with the metaphysics and epistemology of Indian thinkers.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it cannot be on philosophical grounds that non-western philosophy is so neglected in American universities at present. This was not always the case; in the heyday of American pragmatism, Dewey, James, Royce, and Hawking were cognizant of non-western traditions and occasionally entered into dialogue with them. The contemporary neglect has many causes of which I shall mention only two. On the part of "continental" philosophy, a cultural argument is made purporting to show that only in the West have conceptual rigor and historical consciousness been achieved in a line of continuity from the Greeks to the present. The first thinker to assay a systematic comparison of Eastern and Western philosophies was Hegel, who thought that India and China represented the infancy of philosophy thinking, whose mature ripening was only to be found in Europe and especially in his own philosophy. India and China are represented as cultures of dream and fantasy and submissiveness to arbitrary authority, while in Europe alone is there true rational freedom. To carry out this comparison, Hegel felt it incumbent to study whatever he could find about Indian and Chinese philosophy and culture that was available in translation. He was hardly sympathetic to these philosophies, and given his ambition of constructing a universal philosophy of history, found it easy to derogate them. But at least he discussed them at length, even if in unflattering terms.

I guess it is better to be insulted than altogether ignored, which seems to be the fate of these traditions in contemporary Anglo-American philosophical discussion. In the absence of a strong historical consciousness, it is not surprising that fashions in philosophy are conditioned by a few dominant figures, who are themselves read unhistorically. Thus, in the 1960's in the heyday of "ordinary language" philosophy, Wittgenstein was interpreted as part of the linguistic approach inaugurated by Ryle and Austin, ignoring the strong influence on him of his continental background and, in particular, the influence of Kant and Schopenhauer. The 1970's and 1980's were predominantly the decades of Quine, Davidson, Kripke, and Rawls and concentration on problems in the philosophies of language, science, and logic and in political philosophy largely framed by them. It was only in the 1990's that a broader and more inclusive approach was attempted, when Davidson's work was juxtaposed with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Rawls and Habermas had their fruitful debates. This period also witnessed the strong set of challenges posed by feminist philosophers to the prevailing hegemony, some of which championed the cause of a more multicultural approach. In this respect the work of some feminist philosophers can be seen as paving the way for a recognition of cultural diversity and for a pluralism of philosophical styles.<sup>9</sup> To this must be added the powerful historical and genealogical work of Richard Rorty starting with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, who while not himself espousing intercultural conversation has at least been open to it.<sup>10</sup>

"Philosophy," says Hegel, "is its own time comprehended in thought." Our time in the early twenty-first century is a time of globalization, where new developments in technology, economics, politics, and culture have brought about—and continue to do so—revolutionary changes in society, that, in their totality, signal something like a social paradigm shift. There is now a palpable sense of worldwide interconnectedness as the effects of distant events can be



rapidly felt around the globe and local events often have significant global consequences. Globalization is to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries what industrialism was to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a mode of life that, whatever its continuities with the past, signals radical new prospects and possibilities on the one hand, and fresh tensions, conflicts, and challenges on the other. Part of this new interconnectedness is manifested in the fresh conversations taking place, not only in the realms of commerce and technology but also in those of culture and life style. It would be a shame if philosophy in America were not to register and respond to these changes, as the World Philosophy Congress already has. The 1998 World Congress in Boston took as its general theme “Paideia: Philosophy Education Humanity,” and the 2003 Congress in Istanbul has chosen the topic “Philosophy in an Age of Global Change.”

Nor is this globalization something abstract and remote. The United States is probably the country most impacted by such developments as is made evident by the new 2000 census figures. The U.S. is now far less of a white European nation, as waves of Asians and Hispanics flood the country. California and Texas now have minority white populations, as Indian electronic engineers settle in Silicon Valley and Hispanic businesses take root in Houston. These demographic changes need to be reflected in our philosophical consciousness and in the curricula that we offer our students.

There are, thus, three factors which I have cited that push for a multicultural approach in philosophy: (1) the internal challenges within the discipline represented, for example, by Rorty and the feminists; (2) the shifting demography in the U.S. and the changing needs of a culturally diverse student body; and (3) the worldwide trend toward globalization and interdependence. This, it seems to me, presents a new opportunity for philosophy in America to become a conversation of all humankind and not just a provincial scholasticism. It parallels other creative periods in the history of philosophy, when, for example, early Greek thought was receptive to Indian and Egyptian influences, or when Arabic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers were in conversation in the early medieval period.

Philosophy stands between science and art, analysis and imaginative vision. Both the poles of argumentative rigor on the one hand and insight and creativity on the other feed off each other. The great figures and periods of philosophy have all been receptive, in different ways, to the science and culture of their time, whether it is Descartes and the new mathematical physics of the sixteenth century or Hegel and emerging historical consciousness in the nineteenth. A modest suggestion offered in this paper is that the new intercultural conversation of humankind that is happening all around us carries with it a significant creative potential for philosophy.

### Endnotes

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## Reflections on “What is Philosophy? The Status of Non-Western Philosophy in the Profession”

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*The following is adopted from a chapter, “Asian Women: Invisibility, Locations, and Claims to Philosophy,” in Women of Color in Philosophy, edited by Naomi Zack (Blackwell, 2000).*

When we consider the parameters of the term “philosophy” and reflect on this question from a professional standpoint, the very discipline of philosophy itself becomes an object of critical analysis. What are its boundaries, and how should that understanding be reflected in the curriculum? Apart from politics and turf wars, there seems to me to be a variety of conceptions about what philosophers regard as the proper topic and method of philosophy as a discipline.

Here are some of the ways in which “philosophy” has been conceptualized by academic philosophers, from broader conceptions to narrower ones:

1. Philosophy as defined by the type of questions it asks, which distinguish the various sub-discipline within our field. Examples are: “What is a good life?” “What is reality?” “What is knowledge?” “What is the ‘self?’” These are all philosophical questions to the extent that they address concerns about basic human being and reality in general. This broad conception often includes the notion of philosophy as analysis, reflection, and contemplation on the human condition. Sometimes material from literature or other disciplines are used to articulate a point of view. Often introductory philosophy textbooks are organized around such questions and it is not unusual today to see some writings from other disciplines included.
2. Philosophy as a rational system of thought, as opposed to mythic storytelling or in contrast to other endeavors in the humanities or social sciences. In distinction from literature, religion, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc., philosophy in this sense takes a meta-position with respect to the production of knowledge itself and concerns itself with theory-building about the



fundamental questions such as reality, justice, and personhood.

3. Philosophy as the history of Western philosophy. According to this definition philosophy is the study of thought from pre-Socratics to contemporary European or Anglo-American thought. By definition, anything outside of this tradition is not philosophy proper. According to its advocates, this is not supposed to be an ethnocentric definition, but rather it simply describes an aspect of the cultural history of a certain geographical area in which we happen to live. The very demarcation of “Western” vs. “non-Western” derives from this conception of philosophy. “Non-Western philosophy” is oxymoronic.
4. Philosophy as a critical method of argumentation. In this conception philosophy is more or less strictly about constructing sound arguments and counter-arguments. Although defined purely in terms of argumentative procedures, the approach and implicit ontology are modeled on “scientific method” and the sciences. This is often a presupposition in analytic philosophy. At its narrowest, this approach may exclude not only contemporary European philosophy but also philosophies of many other traditions. To some extent, the current problems of recognition of non-Western philosophy are simply the globalization of an earlier intolerance of “Continental” thought on the part of advocates of this definition of philosophy.

The so-called “non-Western philosophies” include Asian, African, Islamic, Latin American, and Native American philosophies. They are covered under 1, the broadest conception of our profession. Many of the multicultural philosophy textbooks include writings from other traditions, sometimes offering a fairly equal global and historical representation. Certainly, all of the fundamental philosophical questions have been asked and analyzed in detail in Asia and elsewhere over the past 2500 years, if not longer, and various replies and even systems have been produced. Such metaphysical pictures are not simply “religion.” Conception 2 could certainly include some Indian philosophical systems, Buddhist metaphysics, and aspects of Japanese philosophy. Conception 3 excludes non-Western philosophy by definition. Conception 4 again should accept, for instance, some forms of Indian metaphysics or Buddhist dialectic, but in common practice the conception of legitimate argumentation (and therefore the notion of philosophy) is often narrowly based on the natural sciences or the Anglo-American analytic tradition, excluding anything outside these traditions.

If one’s field of specialization includes non-Western philosophy, one is often put on the defensive by being asked to explain why one’s work should even be considered philosophy, sometimes to a rather unsympathetic audience which subscribes to conceptions 3, 4 or even 2. But in fact even *they* agree that conception 1 is indeed a legitimate way to understand philosophy as a discipline. So yes, on the one hand, non-Western philosophy belongs to philosophy to the extent that proper questions are being asked, but no, on the other hand, it’s not really philosophy because the questions are not being analyzed or answered in the proper way or in the proper tradition. Often the inquisitor is unaware of the fact that he or she has switched meanings. But *if* one grants conception 1 as the legitimate *subject-matter* of philosophy,

as most people in the field of philosophy indeed do, then endorsing 2, 3, and 4, while *at the same time* excluding non-Western philosophy, should require a further justification. This is where the sticky questions of legitimacy, prejudice, exclusion, and power enters in.

One such prejudice is indeed Anglo- and Eurocentrism. For those who hold conception 3, it is a matter of definition that there is no such thing as a “non-Western philosophy.” But if so, they must be claiming either that other traditions do not ask questions such as “what is a good life” or “what is reality,” or that only the Western versions of those questions and answers are legitimate. The former proposition is empirically false; the latter position is ethnocentric (in this case Anglo-Eurocentric, but in essence no different from other cultures claiming that theirs is the only measure of truth). Why should the philosophical answers arising out of a particular geopolitical history claim a monopoly on philosophical insights?

However, the source of Eurocentrism (I will include Anglo-centrism as a version of Eurocentrism for our purposes here) is deeper; it is not just that Europe as such is privileged (ethnocentrism), but rather that this privilege is *justified*—that this intellectual history contains in itself something which is universal and true, by which other traditions may be judged. This is what drives conceptions 2 and 4. The measure of truth is scientific thinking broadly conceived; it is a modern Enlightenment methodology which employs critical thinking, verification and accurate abstraction, as opposed to simply relying on beliefs or authority, “pre-modern” ways of thinking. It may be that European thought started out just as contingently related to the “universal” as non-European thought, but it was nevertheless in Europe that modern science first flourished and technology was first developed on a large scale. This is why, so it is believed, Europe enjoys the culture of modernity which is defined by the triumph of rationalism over mythic or religious beliefs, and universalistic thinking over local (and thus limited) knowledge. So properly speaking, this form of Eurocentrism is a kind of “scientism” or “modernism,” and this goes not only for the critique of non-European forms of thought, but even within Europe it is used in order to critique its own “dark ages” and surviving cultural lags.

Subscribing to the belief that scientific modernism has merits is not in itself Eurocentric, nor is it automatically scientific. But the belief that European modes of thought are generally *superior* because they developed this culture is Eurocentric, and the claim that anything that does not fit the criteria of scientific method is not knowledge or is simply false is a form of scientism. Non-Western philosophy is often excluded on both accounts, either because it is already deemed inferior or too foreign, i.e., not belonging to European history, or because it is prejudged to lack the right criteria of knowledge.

Even with the current prevalence of postmodernism and diversity talk, some basic forms of “innocent” cultural ethnocentrism, which legitimate exclusion, are still very much a part of our professional culture today, and this fact becomes painfully apparent in the treatment of non-Western philosophies in the profession. “Well they’re covered in other disciplines—religion, anthropology, and history, etc.” “Their methods may not be rigorous enough, and teaching non-rigorous methods may not be helpful.” “We cannot read them

in the original language, and this is essential for any serious inquiry.” “I know nothing about it and I should not teach the material I don’t know.” “But most of the so-called non-Western philosophers in Asia, Latin America, Africa, etc. study Western philosophy and they themselves don’t even bother with their own tradition.” These are some of the familiar comments I have heard over the years.

Let me respond. First: the claim that the study of non-Western philosophy need not be a part of our profession, since it is covered by other disciplines. Certainly, the world history of thought can be studied from many perspectives, and it is not obvious why, just because they are covered in other disciplines, non-Western philosophies should be ignored by our field. In fact, many topics covered—such as the meaning of “good persons” in Confucianism—are routinely posed by Western philosophers. Philosophical approaches and modes of analyses would certainly differ from historical, religious, or anthropological approaches. Second: the claim that culturally different modes of inquiry are not “rigorous” and therefore unfit for philosophy. It is true that philosophers favor rigor, and there is much merit to this; however, this preference should not be taken to mean that other modes of inquiry are not worth studying. Human beings express themselves and their philosophical insights in many different modes, and our education should certainly welcome varieties of methodology. Avoidance of foreign modes of thought which differ from the local definition of “good” argument, reflects an impoverished sense of intellectual engagement and curiosity. Third: regarding the inaccessibility of foreign languages. This seems a convenient excuse rather than a serious argument. People from other parts of the world study Western thought, usually in their own language, and grow up knowing a lot about our philosophical tradition. Willingness to engage, even with translations, is far more enlightening than closing off everything in other languages. After all, we teach Greek philosophy without demanding that the students also become proficient in ancient Greek. And how many enthusiastic students of Frege and Wittgenstein can read the German originals? Fourth: regarding professors’ own lack of knowledge about non-Western philosophies. It is never too late to start. Fifth, regarding non-Western philosophers not paying attention to their own tradition. This is a complex issue involving the nature of Western intellectual colonization, legitimacy, and power. However, all the political complexities aside, again, to dwell on this issue looks like an excuse. The fact that some non-Western intellectuals study Western philosophy is certainly not in itself a reason why we should neglect the study of their thought traditions. If anything, it would make for a more robust analysis of why this is happening in the first place.

Let me emphasize one point in order to avoid misunderstanding. I am not claiming that there is something wrong with narrowly defined philosophy per se. Technical analyses and methodologies and certain classic texts are what distinguish our discipline, and it is indeed a legitimate part of philosophical education. What I am claiming, however, is that there is something wrong with *attitudes* and claims which discredit the immensely vast, rich, and complex field of world philosophy, past and present. Such philistine attitudes, a type of intellectual laziness, get transmitted to our students, and perpetuating such a smug culture may have grave consequences. Certainly, recalcitrant resistance to broader

knowledge is contrary to the spirit of philosophical education—of critical analysis, of resistance to dogmatism, of unrestricted reflection, of giving serious consideration to the nature of the human condition.

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