**Reloading the Canon**

Forthcoming in *The Philosopher’s Magazine*, 2021

**Pluralism and prejudices**

If we are to diversify undergraduate philosophy curricula, then we ought to do it well. That means, in practice, taking seriously the factors that can spoil diversification efforts. These will include certain prejudices or habits of thought on the part of students. After all, it is partly for their sake that we invest energy in curricular diversification efforts and, more importantly, we often solicit their preferences. For that reason, we should take due care to ensure that their stated preferences are not being narrowed or corrupted by preconceptions and biases.

Before we get going, I am, for the record, an enthusiast for – and, indeed, practitioner of – the diversification of undergraduate philosophy curricula. I currently teach Buddhist and classical Chinese philosophy and a module on the phenomenology of illness, alongside guest lectures on various topics in contemporary applied philosophy. In previous years, I also taught a history of philosophy course that included topics and figures from the African, Islamic, and Japanese traditions. Partly through teaching these subjects, however, I’m aware that students are often attracted to them for less than perfect reasons. Moreover, because I teach ‘trendy’ subjects, students often attribute to me problematic metaphilosophical convictions – a scorn for the canonical figures of the Western tradition, for instance, or disinterest in done-to-death topics like scepticism about knowledge or the problem of evil in theistic religions.

Such assumptions are false, since those dead figures and allegedly dusty topics really do interest me. However, they got me interested in the attitudes that students have towards curricular diversification projects. Do they approve of them? If so, for what reasons? How will studying a diversified curriculum affect their emerging understanding of the aims and nature of philosophy? And, more importantly, what sorts of biases or prejudices might students have that our curricular diversification efforts may inadvertently intensify? Over time, my answer to that last question has become rather pessimistic. I worry that curricular diversification efforts can tend to feed and entrench a complex pair of prejudices that I will label *neophilia* and *xenophilia*.

In what follows, I want to describe some of their main manifestations and ask what, if anything, we might do to resist them. By taking seriously these prejudices, we can ensure that our well-intentioned efforts to diversify our curricula in the direction of the “non-Western” traditions do not backfire by entrenching prejudices that we ought to be uprooting. I am thus assuming that one important aim of a philosophical education is to try and correct failings like closed-mindedness and a narrow intellectual imagination. It’s understandable if students start a philosophy course thinking that this enterprise started in Greece and ended in British and American universities. But it’s a problem if they finish their first-year still thinking that, not to mention if they graduate with that same Eurocentric conceit in place.

I will take the prejudices of neophilia and xenophilia in turn, but it’s worth emphasising that their common feature is a sort of myopia, an unwarrantedly narrow fixation on one aspect of philosophy to the exclusion of the others. A neophile supposes that philosophy is only really worthwhile if it directly engages with, or is rooted in, the prevailing concerns or issues of the contemporary world. A xenophile impugns the Western philosophical tradition, and only sees value or interest in the philosophies of other cultures, the further away the better. Each prejudice reflects and feeds a more general sort of metaphilosophical myopia, a narrow vision that fails or refuses to see the richness and value of the philosophical enterprise in its many forms as manifested in different times and cultures.

**The new and the now**

In its positive sense, a neophiliac is someone enthused or interested by what is new, someone with a marked taste for novelty. In its pejorative sense, however, a neophiliac fixates on what is novel or contemporary to the point of wilfully ignoring or forsaking whatever is traditional or established for the sole reason of its being older. Neophilia in this sense is a prejudice, since the valuations of old and new are typically made prior to any actual assessment – whatever is new is good and whatever is old ought to be abandoned. Sometimes the old ought to be done away with and what is good often is new, especially in fast-moving areas like technology. But this is not typically true of philosophy.

Considered as a metaphilosophical prejudice, neophilia usually shows itself in kinds of assertive preference for whatever is (or is seen to be) new or novel – topics, persons, ideas, ways of thinking and so on. In itself, that is not necessarily a bad thing. The new is often fresh and exciting and that is valuable for motivating students. Moreover, new areas of philosophy are often full of possibility – the various positions not yet exhaustively defined, the inevitable patterns of scholarly call-and-response not yet fixed in place, which encourage a sense of exploratory freedom. New areas of philosophy also often concern aspects of the world that are familiar to students, like climate change, artificial intelligence, and current social and political events. In these cases, a lecturer may be well advised to embrace novelty without thus being guilty of problematic neophilia. Embracing the new isn’t always mindless faddishness, just as staying close to the past isn’t always dogmatic traditionalism.

Worries should arise, though, if students start to evince neophiliac tendencies which manifest in problematic ways. I have in mind cases where students seem either unable or unwilling to engage with the history of philosophy. In these cases, a taste for the new starts to include a distaste for whatever is traditional, canonical, or merely *old*. Think of cases where students express a scorn for “old dead Greeks” or ask if the Intro to Philosophy module could “ditch Descartes.” Sometimes, no reason is given except the fact of historical distance, or the reasons given are weak or self-undermining. The call to dump Descartes came from a student who wanted the module to focus on “existential issues”, not “old-fashioned epistemological” ones, like scepticism. Obviously, they were unaware that scepticism exercised the Frenchman

precisely because it jeopardised the religious convictions that afforded “the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.”

A further sort of neophiliac prejudice shows itself in the crass conviction that study of the history of philosophy becomes rapidly redundant since, after initial studies of the mighty dead, one quickly exhausts them. Neophiliac students of this sort often protest that they have “done Aristotle” – or whatever historical figure or doctrine they are asked to study – and beg leave to concentrate on more contemporary material. The old hits are all well and good, they say, but what really matters are the new sounds – an attitude only really appropriate for those already well-familiar with the old hits. Partly this attitude is encouraged by a lack of close reading of the historical texts, whose rich content is commonly reduced to a series of bullet points on a PowerPoint slide – not to mention by the “study guides” offered by websites like CourseHero and SparkNotes. Alongside intellectual laziness, a main problem with of this sort of neophilia is the error of supposing older texts to be finite resources, distillable into a handful of “key points.”

One way to tackle this sort of neophiliac resistance to the old is to challenge its guiding assumption that the mighty dead are irrelevant to contemporary developments and debates. Perhaps Kǒngzı, writing two and a half millennia ago, can help us tackle big moral and political issues of the early twenty-first century if one just looks closely enough at him? Many scholars of Confucianism would agree, emphasising, for instance, the importance to moral life of “ritual conduct.” Such work helps us to dissolve the neophiliac assumption that philosophies, like loaves of bread, have Best Before dates. It also helps show how venerable philosophical texts and systems can track abiding features of human life.

A worry about this response, however, is that it plays into a neophiliac stance. It still makes the interest and value of history contingent on its resonance with current concerns and predilections. A lecturer can still emphasise other reasons for an appreciative study of earlier figures and traditions, like their intellectual richness and beauty and their articulation of profound visions of the good life. But those appeals may increasingly fall on deaf ears if the neophiliac fixation on the new and the now is what determines what is interesting and worthy of study.

This worry points to a third, subtler form of neophilia: the *conditionalization* of one’s willingness to engage past philosophers, texts, and traditions. In these cases, a neophiliac will do the work but only on condition that it the outcomes will be salient to contemporary issues. Either study of the past should *engage* with those issues in some tangible way, or they should help to *endorse* contemporary values and predilections. Sometimes, study of the past actually does offer such engagements or endorsements. Such cases inspire the pleasing experience of solidarity between the Long Dead and those living in the Here and Now – of our encountering, across the ages, a person with whom one shares thoughts in common.

Not always, though, and some attempts to play into neophiliac stipulations have very peculiar results. A recent radio show tried to portray the resigned Boethius as a social activist, as if his *Consolations* should really have been titled *Confrontations*. What is lost in these cases is the chance for a student to have the experience of imaginatively entering into a strikingly different world – a whole economy of concerns, practices, and aspirations that mark out contextually specific forms of human life that could be thoughtfully explored rather than dismissed with a shrug. In other cases, lecturers’ attempts to play into neophiliac prejudices leads to pedagogic procrusteanism: one starts to inflate or excise aspects of the history of philosophy to make them fit a conception of the subject better suited to contemporary minds. I was once advised by a well-meaning colleague to “play down” Kǒngzı’s deep respect for cultural tradition, since “students won’t go for that.” One may as well try and “play down” Kant’s enthusiasm for the categorical imperative or the Buddha’s interest in *duḥkha*.

I could describe several other neophiliac tendencies evident among modern students of philosophy. Obviously not all students share this zealous privileging of the present or evince resistance to study of the past. But a fault need not be ubiquitous to invite concern. What worries me about neophiliac tendencies is that they encourage forms of myopia – an inability or unwillingness to look for the interest and value in the history of philosophy. Granted, there may be aspects of that history that will fail to arouse one’s enthusiasm. But what is worrisome about the neophiliac is that they establish the present as the exclusive measure of intellectual interest and worth – the present being the contemporary world of globalised technological modernity with its associated background of metaphysical and moral convictions. If our imagination is defined relative to that world, then it is also confined within its parameters.

**The West and the rest**

By any reasonable criteria of longevity, complexity, and richness, there are at least three great world traditions in philosophy – the Western, Indian, and Chinese. Alongside those we should add traditions from the Middle East, east Asia, Africa, and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Once the singular focus was a narrowly defined selection of the Western tradition – one that more senior colleagues tell me once excluded the Hellenistic philosophies, Renaissance humanism, and other major periods and movements. Nowadays, there is an abundance of resources for those who want to teach “non-Western” philosophies – new translations, textbooks, and the like. Even my local second-hand bookshop stocks scholarly editions of the *Dàodéjīng* and the *Dhammapada* and, until I bought it, a handsome copy of *Black Elk Speaks*.

Curricular diversification efforts often focus on the south and east Asian philosophies, usually Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. Several UK departments offer undergraduate courses on Chinese philosophy and some Buddhism often shows up in philosophy of religion courses. Less representation is made for Hinduism, for instance, or the Japanese, African, and American traditions . As one might expect, there’s reliable student interest in, indeed demand for, “non-Western” philosophy as well as topical areas like the philosophy of mental health. Such interest is often motivated by good reasons, too, ones that should be endorsed, like a desire for an expanded acquaintance with the richness of world philosophy or simple curiosity.

As with neophilia, however, enthusiasm for “non-Western” philosophy can sometimes tend towards excessively zealous forms that are rooted in problematic biases or stereotypes. In these cases, one has cases of the prejudice that I called *xenophilia.* At its most general, this refers to forms of excessive uncritical enthusiasm for culturally Other philosophies – ones not belonging to what one regards as the Western tradition. It also usually involves some degree of hostility to that tradition, manifesting in patterns of resistance and rejection.

A common example, in my experience, is praise of the Chinese tradition for lacking the tedious “abstractness” held to be characteristic of “the West.” The praise is sincere in its intentions, but triply problematic. First, that generalisation comes at the cost of emptiness. Saying “Western philosophy is abstract” is like declaring “music is loud.” Second, the operative contrast between abstract and applied or practical is untenable. Consider the Confucian doctrine of *zhèngmíng*, the ‘Rectification of Names’, an effort to properly align the meanings of words, like “ruler,” with specific normative moral and social responsibilities, like compassionate governance. Is this doctrine abstract or applied? Well, neither – any attempts to apply such crude contrasts would efface its specific character. Third, there’s an irony, too. The xenophile affirms their respect for Chinese philosophy by urging its study, then in the next breath issues sweeping generalisations that portray it as a homogeneous mass – hardly something truly consistent with genuine respect.

Let me describe three more specific forms of xenophilia that have recurred in my own experiences of teaching students the diverse range of topics and traditions described earlier.

To start with, xenophilia can manifest as a default attitude of pre-emptive enthusiasm for “non-Western” philosophies tied to an undiscerning hostility to “the Western tradition.” I already gave the example of the “abstractness” charge, the target of which turned out to be a sort of ill-digested Platonism. But xenophilia of this sort also involves what often seems like an impatience to shut the door on some or most or all of the Western tradition, once and for all. The objection isn’t anything as ambitious as the postmodernist obituaries that announced the “death of philosophy.” It’s more usually a sense that the Western tradition has exhausted its interest and value, that the “good stuff” lies in other traditions. If so, our best move should be to up sticks to the greener intellectual pastures of Asia or other regions of the world. “The West is over,” one of my students confidently explained, “the best stuff is elsewhere.” This particular xenophilic imperative to “look East” is often tied to neophiliac denunciation of the misogyny of the Western tradition – an odd coupling, given the near-total absence of women from Indian and Chinese philosophies.

A second kind of xenophilia is a tendency to make rapid, reactionary dismissals of the Western traditions, dismissals which lack appropriate argumentative rigour and scholarly circumspection. Conversely, the xenophile is at the same time typically willing to show considerable charity to “non-Western” philosophies. In many cases, the sense is that criticism should be directed only at the Western tradition and never outwards to the other traditions. Several of my students report an inchoate sense that it’s somehow *wrong* to criticise Asian philosophical concepts or arguments, even if the objections are reasonable and voiced with respect. Other will engage in criticism of, say, Buddhist conceptions of the self or the Mohist defences of just war and do so in ways that are intellectually and scholarly robust. But no such standards are applied when they turn to the Western tradition. At that point, the standards no longer seem to apply. It is hard work to train students in logic and argumentative discipline: but the work is made harder by xenophilic biases that try to make criticism flow in only one direction.

Interestingly, this sort of xenophilia has a positive counterpart: a willingness to do the intellectual work required to present the “non-Western” traditions in a good light. Consider the claim that Aristotle’s ethics should be “dumped” due to its sexism. Some students who make that claim argue that, if we want a virtue ethics, we should turn to Confucianism and its sustained emphasis on social roles, relationships, and caregiving practices. But, first, feminist virtue theorists will resist the claim about Aristotle, argueing that a modified Aristotelianism can help us better theorise the relations between moral character and oppressive social structures. If they are right, “dumping Aristotle” is a bad move: the smart move is retooling his virtue ethics in light of feminist values and sensibilities. Second, it takes a lot of careful intellectual and scholarly work to create something that can reasonably be called a “feminist Confucianism”, rooted in the Master’s teachings but also congenial to modern feminist sensibilities. In this case there is an inequality of willingness, that is partly explicable in terms of a xenophilic bias in favour of whatever is “non-Western.”

A third sort of xenophilia arises from racist, romanticising, or “orientalist” assumptions and stereotypes about “non-Western” cultures and philosophies. One still hears explanations of interest in Indian thinkers or Chinese texts that refer to a “taste for the exotic” or a desire to imbibe “the wisdom of the East.” A colleague told me of a tutee who, writing a dissertation on Zen Buddhism, explained that, with food and philosophy, alike, they “love anything Asian.” I worry when students explain their interest in Native American philosophies in romanticising talk of how the Lakota and Crow “lived at one with nature.” Likewise,when students root their enthusiasm for the Indian philosophies in their being “mystical”, not “logical” and “rational.” Naturally those students are disappointed – and not a little put off – when they actually sit down to read Nāgārjuna or the *Nyāya Sūtras*.

The common concern about xenophilia and neophilia is that they rely on problematic prejudices, biases, and stereotypes that occlude the many forms taken by philosophy and the many kinds of significance that they enjoy. They nourish a myopic vision of philosophy which actively obscures or omits much that really ought to be put in the picture, especially for those younger students who are trying to get a proper sense of the scope and complexity of philosophy.

The irony is that these two prejudices are opposed to so many of the values earnestly professed by so many students – tolerance, open-mindedness, a receptivity to other cultures, and the attainment of an intellectually cosmopolitan perspective on the world. Our students will never realise those ideals if they remain entrapped by a prejudiced myopia that only sees value in the new and exotic. Sometimes, one should value what’s old and homegrown, too. A better response is to resist prejudices. Doubtless there are lots of ways of doing that, but one will be to cultivate old-fashioned virtues, like carefulness, judiciousness, discernment, and a critical alertness to transient intellectual and cultural fads and fashions. They may help us to pursue our curricular diversification efforts in ways undistorted by those prejudices.

**Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the Editor, James Garvey, for the invitation to contribute, and to David E. Cooper, Simon Fokt, and an audience at St Andrews for helpful discussion of these ideas.