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Book Review Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto

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Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto
Bryan Van Borden, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 248 pp., \$26.00
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Philosophy departments in America are at a crossroads. Current conditions have made it the case that most students are learning primarily—or exclusively—about Western philosophy. And most professors are trained to teach theories and concepts from the Western tradition only. This means philosophical ideas from outside this tradition are largely undervalued or overlooked, if not outright ignored, and this deficit means that few students graduate with much knowledge of other philosophical traditions (e.g. African philosophy). Contributing to this deficit is the fact that few trained philosophers teaching in America have been trained in these areas and are therefore qualified to teach material from these traditions. But that in itself does not justify overlooking the rich philosophical traditions around the globe. If we are to improve this status quo, we must take action. But how do we diversify? Bryan Van Norden offers one suggestion in his book *Taking Back Philosophy*.

Van Norden begins with a provocative claim: “philosophy must diversify or die” (8). While this may sound drastic to some, Van Norden is careful in both his diagnosis of the current status of American training of philosophers and also in his prognosis and appeal for change.

Prior to publishing this book, Van Norden and Jay Garfield (who wrote the foreword of this book) published a piece in “The Stone,” the philosophy column of the *New York Times*. In this piece, titled “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” the authors suggested that American philosophy departments that refuse to diversify should be forced to change the name of their departments from “Department of Philosophy” to “Department of Anglo-European Philosophy.” This piece netted an astounding number of comments and a fair amount of backlash, which is perhaps why Van Norden describes his book as “polemic and intentionally provocative in the hope that it will incite discussion and raise awareness” (xxiii). I imagine he has already succeeded in doing both.

Van Norden begins with a sharp assessment of the current status of philosophy in mainstream America, namely in the view of the American public. He points out that philosophy is not just looked down upon by politicians and pop culture figures, but that data regarding the high performance of philosophy majors on exams like the LSAT and MCAT is ignored. Philosophy, like other areas of the humanities, is not respected publicly for its value—inherent or instrumental. And yet, despite the often stellar performance of philosophy majors on these and other exams, the discipline’s lack of diversity is failing those we are training. This lack of diversity is often paired with a prioritizing of a narrowly Western canon that ignores and devalues all other philosophical thought that has occurred in the history of human thought. Van Norden is deliberate in pointing out that this current set of conditions is the byproduct of both a rewriting of the history of philosophy that occurred in the nineteenth century and also a growing justification

of philosophy as a discipline for white European intellectuals (21). Reckoning with these details will likely be uncomfortable for some readers, as is often the case with confronting privilege and racism. But if diversifying is seen as better than death, then this confrontation is a necessary step in moving forward. To sweep aside the racist history of Western philosophy and ignore the beliefs held by philosophical giants like Kant would be disingenuous. Van Norden's book does not mince words. He clearly and concisely documents the supremacist attitudes of canon philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, illustrating precisely how their words laid a foundation for racism that continues today. This recognition is a step in the right direction, paving the way toward diversity and inclusion of other non-Western philosophies and traditions.

As a product of this system—my own graduate training in philosophy included no courses in non-Western philosophy because none were offered—and as a professor at a university intending to combat this crisis head on (my department exchanged a logic requirement for a mandatory “critiques of Western philosophy” component in our introductory course), I see firsthand the problem created by this deficit in the system, and also the difficulties in correcting it. The toolbox of Western philosophy includes particular arguments and concepts that do not immediately map onto non-Western philosophical traditions, which have their own toolboxes. As though anticipating the struggles of philosophers like me, Van Norden offers ways of creating dialogue between different traditions, providing a detailed discussion of the history of the Western concept of *substance* and using this to discuss the Buddhist conception of the Five Aggregates. Van Norden shows that to engage in a dialogue between these two traditions, one does not need to be a Buddhist scholar to understand the Five Aggregates, nor do the tools of Western philosophy need to perfectly map onto teaching non-Western ideas. This is but one of the examples Van Norden presents; the book is replete with other helpful pairings for discussion in multiple areas of philosophy.

Van Norden anticipates resistance and readily volunteers both defenses against critics who may oppose the idea of teaching outside the Anglo-European tradition and helpful information regarding moving forward. For a short book (216 pages including the index), the volume is comprehensive, offering insights about the state of the field and plenty of wry humor. He refers to these overlooked philosophical traditions as Less Commonly Taught Philosophies (LCTP) and uses his own expertise as a scholar of Chinese philosophy to show the enormous value of including Chinese philosophy in one's course. Citing China as a world power, he details the different purposes for which President Xi has invoked the work of Confucius in many of his speeches, and raises helpful points of comparison between Chinese and Western traditions. The book also contains a thorough comparative analysis between nationalism and notions of “wall building” in both China and the United States. In part a snapshot of current conditions in academic

philosophy and recent events, *Taking Back Philosophy* manages to pack a lot of helpful, relevant information into its pages.

Examples from recent current events are artfully used to demonstrate the book's thesis. For instance, Senator Marco Rubio's claim during a 2016 GOP debate that "we need more welders and less philosophers" speaks volumes about public attitudes toward philosophy, and Rubio's claims about the average income of philosophers is false. Van Norden thus manages to illustrate how the very soul of philosophy is in jeopardy—both from forces outside (i.e., the American public who denounce the value of studying philosophy) and within (i.e., philosophers who do not want to diversify the canon). The plea to save philosophy is there at the core of the book. Van Norden demonstrates how inherently valuable philosophy is to individuals and civilization as a whole, but that in itself does not make the discipline immune to problems that jeopardize its future survival. Thus, we must combat the problems from within. In an increasingly globalized world, there is little reason to cling to the Anglo-European canon, and Van Norden's examples deftly epitomize how applicable non-Western philosophies can both bridge the gap and vaccinate the disease. *Taking Back Philosophy* is a road map for the survival of philosophy and philosophers in America.

The main critiques of Van Norden's book are, again, anticipated within the book. Those who fear change will be resistant to overhauling the canon. Those who are skeptical of the value of Eastern thought will be quick to dismiss its value. Those who follow Senator Rubio's thinking will resist the insistence here that philosophy really *is* valuable, that its ideas have wide, comprehensive application. Those who dislike polemic discussions and criticism of anti-intellectualism will bristle at the information and how it is presented. But Van Norden is unshaken by these criticisms and does not apologize for his views. And if we truly value philosophy, his argument is compelling. As Van Norden writes, "Studying philosophy makes people more informed and more thoughtful citizens, more comfortable with the fact that others disagree with them, less vulnerable to manipulation and deception, and more willing to resort to discussion rather than violence" (128). If we want to combat anti-intellectualism, we need to make a strong case for the value of philosophy in higher education. If we want to help our students become more thoughtful and less vulnerable to forces of manipulation, false narratives, "alternative facts," and other methods of deception, then we should do all that we can to better our discipline and ensure its survival. This is not the only way forward, but it is certainly a viable, valuable one.