

A Comparative Feminist Reflection on Race and Gender



Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee

Professor of Philosophy, University of Hawai'i–West O'ahu
lihsiang@hawaii.edu

Bryan W. Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy* is a long-awaited and much-needed manifesto on multicultural curricula in the academic discipline of philosophy, which has up to now been stubbornly persistent in its monolithic approach to the teaching of its own self-defined genealogy, its origin, its methodology, and its very essence. As Van Norden points out, philosophy has a serious diversity problem. Only a handful of graduate programs have full-time faculty teaching non-Western philosophy.¹ No other discipline in the humanities or social sciences, other than those specifically designated as Anglo-European area studies, has been so lopsided in its curricula and student makeup as the resolutely and decisively Anglo-European-centered discipline of philosophy. Eighty-six percent of its Ph.D.s are granted to non-Hispanic whites.² Compounding this Anglo-European identity is philosophy's phallic-centrism: among all the Humanities disciplines, philosophy has the lowest percentage of female doctoral students. Philosophy manages to graduate even fewer female Ph.D.s than math, chemistry, or economics—a stunning revelation that the academic discipline of philosophy has a problem not only of cultural inclusion but also of gender inclusion to a much greater degree than other academic disciplines that are perceived as inherently “masculine.”³

Faculty-wise, philosophy has not fared much better either; only about 20 percent of full professors are women, a figure that has hardly changed since the 1990s.⁴ Thus, to say that philosophy is in crisis is hardly an overstatement or feminist hyperbole. But the problem goes beyond that of just recruiting more minority students, hiring more female professors, or adding more non-Western philosophy courses. The problem is methodological and structural. With Van Norden's long-awaited manifesto, hopefully this is the time of reckoning for philosophy to take a critical turn.

The claim that the practice of philosophy is specifically Western and Greek in origin and culture might sound intuitively correct to many, not just

to those who specialize in Anglo-European philosophy or who are of Anglo-European descent. Even in the small handful of graduate programs that have non-Western components, non-Western philosophy has been more tolerated than celebrated in its own right; it is almost like an adopted child waiting to be accepted into a large and disfunctional family whose members are constantly bickering among themselves about who they are, what they do, or what counts as a family business. But at the same time it is quite resolutely excluded as one of those who have no family resemblance that would allow it to get a foot in the door of philosophy.

This analogy was first proposed by Carine Defoort in 2001 in her provocative essay "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy: Arguments of an Implicit Debate." There, Defoort argues that the name "Chinese Philosophy" is a misnomer, a label retrospectively applied to Chinese thought in the nineteenth century as a result of Western influence, since philosophy is an "exclusively Western discipline," a "Western cultural product," and is "founded in Greek soil"; it is an "irrefutable fact that philosophy is a well-defined discipline that came into existence in Greece."⁵ Now, in light of today's discussion on Van Norden's manifesto, Defoort's assertion might sound outrageous, seemingly an ignorant comment made by those who have no linguistic or philosophical skills to navigate Chinese philosophy. But surprisingly, Defoort herself is a sinologist, and her article was published in the journal *Philosophy East and West*, whose audience is composed mostly of scholars in the field of Asian and Comparative Philosophy. Even more surprising is that Defoort received her M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, one of the few institutions that have a compulsory requirement of non-Western philosophy. It is mind-boggling to know that Defoort's claim went unchallenged until 2006 by Rein Raud in his short rebuttal published also in *PEW*.

As much as this stuns us, Defoort, a sinologist, was not alone in her intuitive claim that philosophy is Western in practice and Greek in origin, and "Chinese philosophy" is not philosophy since it fails to satisfy the "conditions of philosophy," for example systematicity, reflection, and rationality.⁶ In 2003, while five months pregnant with my daughter, I was invited to partake in the Conference on the *Lunyu* at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, a critic-meets-author panel presentation and discussion on Bryan Van Norden's edited 2002 anthology *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, a rigorous, philosophical study of the *Analects*, which was rare at the time, since Confucianism was and still is taught mostly as a religion or ethnic study, and its texts were treated as literature, not philosophy.⁷ Van Norden's effort in applying philosophical rigor to the *Analects* surely was noteworthy. But unfortunately, even in Van Norden's own anthology, the *Analects* is twice referred to as more akin to a religious text than a philosophical text, and Confucius himself is said "to lack the degree of systematicity that we typically associate with philosophers."⁸ Systematicity, just as claimed in Defoort's 2001

essay, is one of the conditions of philosophy, a condition Confucius as well as Confucian texts seem to have failed to satisfy in the eyes of philosophers. And hence, even among sinologists, Chinese philosophy is said to be occupying a different academic space from philosophy.

Although it is true that the condition of systematicity that Defoort laid out in 2001 and echoed by Van Norden in 2002 is not met by many Confucian texts, what is less clear, as Rein Raud in his 2006 response to Defoort points out, is why this should be the necessary condition of philosophy.⁹ What Defoort listed as conditions of philosophy—"Philosophy must give the appearance of systematicity, reflection, and rationality; it must differ from science and religion and it must be divisible into various subdisciplines such as metaphysics, logic, and epistemology"—is in fact a list of what Western philosophers usually do.¹⁰ Hence, the conditions of philosophy that are used to exclude Chinese philosophy are tautological in nature: philosophy is what Western philosophers usually do and hence Chinese philosophy is not philosophy. What is left unexamined is the assumption that what Western philosophers usually do is what philosophers should do. This exclusion of Chinese philosophy from philosophy, however, is more than just a result of personal prejudice or a lack of linguistic and philosophical skills to navigate the complexity of Chinese texts, as is clear from the examples of Defoort in 2001 and even Van Norden back in 2002. Rather, the problem is methodological and structural, and it is time that we philosophers take a critical look at what we have been taught and what we are still teaching about our own discipline.

As credited extensively in Van Norden's *Taking Back Philosophy*, thanks to Peter Park's 2013 exhaustive study on the systematic exclusion of Africa and Asia from the history of philosophy, we now know that the claim of the Greek origin of philosophy also has its own historical origin; it is in fact a revisionist claim in the face of ample contrary textual evidence historically available to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, who engaged in the revisionist effort to construct an exclusively Western genealogy of philosophy, echoed by Heidegger and Derrida among many others.¹¹ Their effort obviously has been successful, since this revisionist history of philosophy has been preserved and perpetuated in nearly all of the academies in the West, and has now become intuitively true to many of us philosophers, even among those with sinological training. It is a family myth that has been taught to us and passed on in perpetuity since its revisionist inception in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Take a quick look at the compulsory requirements for philosophy majors, and one is bound to find the requirement on the history of philosophy, which usually has three components—Ancient, Medieval, and Modern philosophy—and all of the courses are taught strictly and exclusively as Western, usually divided into three historical periods starting with the pre-Socratic Greeks, then moving to the Middle Ages, and then to the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, from

Descartes onward, as if philosophy, bypassing the rest of the world, only started with the ancient Greeks and straightforwardly moved on to the philosophical developments of the Anglo-European world. This is the story that has been fed to us philosophers wherever we are trained in the West regardless of whether or not the program itself has additional non-Western components. It is indeed no surprise that the claim of the Greek origin of philosophy seems intuitively true even to sinologists.

Little did we know that the seemingly “natural” division of the history of philosophy into three historical periods in the West was in fact constructed by Hegel in his lectures on the history of philosophy.¹² Despite the ample contrary textual evidence historically available to him at the time and despite his own knowledge and interest in Indian philosophy, Hegel nevertheless proceeded to construct an exclusively Western genealogy of philosophy, a progressive genealogy that worked in tandem with his larger philosophical project of spirit, where the abstract universal becomes the self-conscious universal concretely realizing its own essence, which is freedom.¹³ This progressive kind of development is only possible in the West. To Hegel, the African character is one of slavery; not only are Africans sold by Europeans as slaves, but Africans themselves exist in their natural state as slaves and allow themselves to be sold without knowing the rights or wrongs of that practice.¹⁴ The “Oriental” character is one of fear and despotism where freedom is realized only by the despot, and, hence, a lack of freedom still characterizes the East despite its somewhat higher degree of development compared to the state of slavery of Africans.¹⁵ Americans are feeble savages.¹⁶ Only the West has the right kind of temperament, the right kind of political and social institutions for freedom to emerge, and since to philosophize for Hegel requires the freedom of self-consciousness, only the West can philosophize. The history of philosophy for Hegel is the same as the progressive development of reason itself, and since only the West is able to progress, the genealogy of philosophy can only be exclusively Western and Germanic in particular, excluding not just the entire non-Western world, but also the Slavic.¹⁷

Obviously, Hegel’s history of philosophy is informed by his theory of race, where humanity is divided into four distinct races: African, East Asian, American, and European.¹⁸ However, Hegel was not the first to articulate such a view. Thanks to the works of Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, Robert Bernasconi, and many others, now we have a better understanding of how the “scientific” concept of race came about in the late eighteenth century, in no small part through the persistent effort of critical philosophers such as Kant.¹⁹ But more importantly, we now understand how the theory of race factors into their larger philosophical projects, which have become canonical to contemporary philosophers like us. For instance, as shown earlier, Hegel’s history of philosophy is made possible only through his theory of race, where each of the four races is generalized according to a set of

developmental characteristics, which in turn correspond to the sort of social/political institutions that are deemed possible given these inherent racial characteristics. The understanding of the intertwining of Hegel's history of philosophy and his theory of race surely gave rise to a new understanding of the famed master-slave struggle for recognition in Hegel's larger philosophical project of spirit. Slavery for Hegel, although it is unjust, is historically necessary for the full development of the *Geist*. This is a case where the understanding of the context of origin helps us to understand the philosopher's larger philosophical project, which in this case by and large has been sanitized.

The same goes for Kant as well; the division of humanity into four races correlating with four geographical localities and with four distinctive skin colors, in large part, is made possible through the more-than-three-decade teaching and writing career of Kant, an important figure in the discipline of philosophy of both his time and today. Kant's three *Critiques* are "must reads" in the philosophical canon, and his critical philosophy is synonymous with the object of the discipline of philosophy itself, which at the basic level is to foster critical thinking. Yet, Kant's role in the formation of the "scientific" concept of the four races that influenced Hegel's history of philosophy, which in turn gives us the exclusively Western genealogy of philosophy, is still largely unknown in the larger philosophical community. As Van Norden notes, not until he attended Park's conference presentation in 2017 did he come into contact with the depth of Kant's racism.²⁰

Unfortunately, Van Norden's late introduction to Kant's racism is not that atypical. As late as 2018, when I did a conference presentation on Kant and race, even a Kantian scholar in the audience didn't know about Kant's own writings on race and the extent to which the theory of race plays a role in Kant's larger philosophical project. To make a long story short, the concept of race for Kant is a regulative concept that we impose on nature so that it is possible for us to grasp the world as a system, and it is this racialized system that forms the basis for Kant's progressive concept of history and provides empirical evidence for the validity of his teleological judgment in the third *Critique*, which in Kant's own words is the completion of his "entire critical enterprise."²¹ Kant's writings on race are not an unfortunate oversight by a great philosopher who had a temporary lapse in judgment, or the result of Kant having been swayed by the prejudice of his time; Kant in fact is one of the key thinkers who helped construct the concept of race that many today take as inherently true.

Yet, as philosophers, we know or care so little about all these things, since philosophy as it is taught to us is about the great Western canon as defined institutionally, not about the context of origin; it is about the rational unfolding of arguments, not about personal prejudice. But by ignoring the context of origin and a philosopher's own prejudice, we are bound to dismiss a great deal of the philosopher's own writings as irrelevant and thus

handicap our own understanding of the philosopher's entire philosophical system. Worse yet, this incomplete understanding of the conscious involvement of Western philosophers in the making of a revisionist history of philosophy or the "scientific" concept of race leads to an unfounded sense of superiority where the image of Western philosophers is of rational, systematic, and reflective thinkers compared to other parts of the world where thinkers are deemed intellectually inferior in part due to their perceived involvement in perpetuating some oppressive social/political practices. For instance, in the feminist discourse Confucianism has long been faulted for its perceived causal connection to misogynistic practices in China and elsewhere. Until quite recently, with the publication of a series of anthologies on comparative feminist studies, the incorporation of Confucianism into any feminist theorizing has long been rejected by feminists.²² To "regular" philosophers, the field of comparative feminist studies usually arouses more suspicion than intellectual curiosity. Yet, there is no comparable rejection when it comes to the incorporation of Kant's ethics or cosmopolitanism into modern discourse despite Kant's persistently racist and misogynistic writings. This disparity in approaching Western and non-Western philosophical texts only works to reinforce the notion of racial hierarchy formulated, in large part, by Kant.

As Hegel points out, each philosophy is indicative of a particular stage of development of reason, and each philosophy derives its meaning from its specific place in the entire system.²³ Hegel's exclusively Western genealogy of philosophy serves its purpose by lending support to his progressive movement of reason, starting in Greece where the freedom of self-consciousness first emerges and then unfolds itself in the rest of the Germanic world, which in turn enforces the superiority of his own Germanic identity in conformity with his race theory. The purpose of Hegel's history of philosophy is clear. But what, then, is our purpose in continuing to enforce Hegel's exclusively Western genealogy of philosophy and in perpetuating Kant's racial hierarchy? How does the utterance of the Greek origin of philosophy contribute to our own identity as philosophers in this already racialized world? As Bernasconi writes, back in 1995, on Heidegger's involvement in perpetuating the myth of philosophy as Western and Greek in origin, insofar as we choose to repeat this revisionist history of philosophy, we are all implicated.²⁴ It is time for us philosophers to think about how the discipline of philosophy is structured in our own home institutions and what sort of methodology it is that we use to discern what is genuinely philosophical or relevant when we teach the great canons.

Surely, philosophers both past and present are only human; we make mistakes and we have our own unexamined assumptions and personal prejudices, which expose our all-too-human aspects in spite of our persistent philosophical façade of always being in possession of rational, systematic, and reflective thinking. Each philosopher we revere is bound to fail us

morally or conceptually. But if we ignore topics that might not fit our narratives of great philosophers, past or present, we do it at our own peril. The day of reckoning for philosophy is now; it is not just that we need to recognize the value of other ways of thinking that fall outside our family resemblance by taking in adopted children who more or less can fit into our preconceived notion of what a philosopher should do. We need to take a critical look inward and see how intertwined our self-identity as philosophers is with the way in which philosophy is structured and the sort of topics that we deem as philosophically worthy.

Given that the composition of the discipline of philosophy—with 86 percent of Ph.D. degree holders being white males and only 20 percent of full professors being women—it is no surprise that the topics of race and gender are deemed irrelevant in our study of the great philosophical canons. Kant's writing and teaching on the topic of race, for instance, spanned more than three decades, and yet the way that we were taught about Kant and the way we continue to teach Kant excludes a critical analysis of the role played by race in Kant's entire philosophical system. The same goes for the topic of gender as well, which is only taught in a few designated courses and then conveniently excluded from other "regular" courses where the great canons and philosophers are studied, reflected upon, and analyzed. Feminist philosophy, even today, is considered by many "regular" philosophers as not worthy of investigation. This is even worse for those of us who are engaged in comparative feminist studies; it is a subfield that occupies the margin of an already marginalized field that is not taught in 90 percent of the 118 graduate programs in North America.²⁵ What all this adds up to is a picture of a discipline that is persistent in preserving the myth of philosophy as a rational, systematic, and reflective way of thinking that has a universal appeal and yet at the same time is the culturally specific achievement of a particular group of great white men.

As daunting as the task might seem of changing the entire discipline of philosophy methodologically and structurally, things have changed, at least among philosophers with sinological training; Defoort's 2017 essay "'Chinese Philosophy' at European Universities: A Threefold Utopia," published in *PEW*, is now an impassioned call for a greater inclusion of Chinese philosophy at European universities; and Van Norden's 2017 multicultural manifesto urges an inclusion of not just Chinese philosophy but all non-Western philosophy into the curriculum. These developments are indicative of the gradual, but important, changes that at least some philosophers have made over the last two decades in getting non-Western philosophy not just taught, but recognized as philosophy in its own right. As a Confucian feminist, I would urge sinologists also to engage feminists and feminist communities to reciprocally engage the Asian and Comparative communities. Just as philosophy, as Heidegger writes, when traced to its linguistic

source is found to be "*philosophia*," then shouldn't we philosophers as lovers of wisdom follow the beloved wherever it takes us, regardless of the geographical locality in which wisdom is found?²⁶

But to recognize the wisdom of a beloved who speaks with a different accent requires more than just sufficient linguistic skills. It requires a rethinking of the myth of the great white men clothed in the race theory that has been handed down to us, the progeny of the European Enlightenment in this postcolonial world that has been conventionally dissected into the categories of third world, developing, and developed world—a common division that more or less corresponds to the notion of racial hierarchy cemented by great philosophers such as Kant and Hegel. In this hierarchy European descendants occupy the highest stage of human development, followed by the "Orientals," who exhibit limited development, and at the bottom are the Africans, who are still in the undifferentiated stage of childhood. With this racial map in mind, it would be hard for us lovers of wisdom to see philosophical wisdom in these inferior races, who are alleged to produce inferior intellectual traditions as well. Before we philosophers can become genuine lovers of wisdom, we will have to rid ourselves of this racial map of the world and reclaim a sense of the intellectual curiosity that once so often accompanied intercultural exchanges before the rise of race theory in the late eighteenth century. After all, the ancient Greeks had no problem crediting the Egyptians for their knowledge of philosophy; and the seventeenth-century Jesuits, when they first translated the Chinese Classics, had no problem recognizing Confucius as a philosopher.²⁷ We moderns need to do better.

Notes

- 1 – [Van Norden 2017](#), p. 2.
- 2 – [Ibid.](#), p. 7; [Cherry and Schwitzgebel 2016](#).
- 3 – [Haslanger 2013](#).
- 4 – [Ibid.](#); [Cherry and Schwitzgebel 2016](#).
- 5 – [Defoort 2001](#), pp. 396, 407.
- 6 – [Ibid.](#), p. 396.
- 7 – [Rosenlee 2003](#), pp. 609–613.
- 8 – [Yearly 2002](#), p. 239; [Van Norden 2002](#), pp. 230–231.
- 9 – [Raud 2006](#), p. 622.
- 10 – [Defoort 2001](#), p. 396.
- 11 – See, e.g., [Bernasconi 1995](#), [Park 2013](#), and [Van Norden 2017](#).

- 12 – Knox and Miller 1985, p. 183.
- 13 – See, e.g., Moellendorf 1992, Bernasconi 2000, and Park 2013.
- 14 – Moellendorf 1992, pp. 246, 253.
- 15 – Knox and Miller 1985, p. 173.
- 16 – Ibid., p. 51.
- 17 – Park 2013, p. 121.
- 18 – Bernasconi 2000, p. 195.
- 19 – See, e.g., Eze 1997, Louden 2006, Bernasconi 2002, Eigen and Larrimore 2006, Mikkelsen 2013, and Vial 2016.
- 20 – Van Norden 2017, p. 169 n. 65.
- 21 – Pluhar 1987, p. 7, Critique of Judgment [170].
- 22 – See, e.g., McWeeny and Butnor 2014, Pang-White 2016, and Foust and Tan 2016.
- 23 – Knox and Miller 1985, p. 49.
- 24 – Bernasconi 1995, p. 251.
- 25 – Garfield and Van Norden 2016.
- 26 – Kluback and Wilde 1955, p. 29.
- 27 – Bernasconi 1995, p. 241; Defoort 2001, p. 395; Raud 2006, p. 619.

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Response to Comments by Bret Davis, David Kim, and Lisa Rosenlee on *Taking Back Philosophy*



Bryan W. Van Norden

School of Philosophy, Wuhan University; Division of Humanities;
Yale–NUS College; Philosophy Department, Vassar College
brvannorden@vassar.edu

Let me begin by saying that I am extremely grateful to Sarah Mattice for organizing this symposium on my book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, and to the three reviewers, each of whom read my work with great care and offered feedback that is extremely generous and insightful.¹

Response to David Kim

After providing a clear and sympathetic summary of my book, David Kim raises two questions. First, how should the study of what I have called the Less Commonly Taught Philosophies (LCTP) be incorporated into the curriculum of philosophy departments?² Kim suggests five degrees of incorporation, in order of increasing rigor:

1. Make electives on the LCTP available to students in philosophy departments.
2. Require for the major or advanced degree in philosophy a course on any one of the LCTP.