

The Opinion Pages

If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is

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The vast majority of philosophy departments in the United States offer courses only on philosophy derived from Europe and the English-speaking world. For example, of the 118 doctoral programs in philosophy in the United States and Canada, only 10 percent have a specialist in Chinese philosophy as part of their regular faculty. Most philosophy departments also offer no courses on Africana, Indian, Islamic, Jewish, Latin American, Native American or other non-European traditions. Indeed, of the top 50 philosophy doctoral programs in the English-speaking world, only 15 percent have *any* regular faculty members who teach *any* non-Western philosophy.

Given the importance of non-European traditions in both the history of world philosophy and in the contemporary world, and given the increasing numbers of students in our colleges and universities from non-European backgrounds, this is astonishing. No other humanities discipline demonstrates this systematic neglect of most of the civilizations in its domain. The present situation is hard to justify morally, politically, epistemically or as good educational and research training practice.

We each — alongside many colleagues and students — have worked for decades to persuade American philosophy departments to broaden the canon of works they teach; we have urged our colleagues to look beyond the European canon in their own

research and teaching. While a few philosophy departments have made their curriculums more diverse, and while the American Philosophical Association has slowly broadened the representation of the world's philosophical traditions on its programs, progress has been minimal.

Many philosophers and many departments simply ignore arguments for greater diversity; others respond with arguments for Eurocentrism that we and many others have refuted elsewhere. The profession as a whole remains resolutely Eurocentric. It therefore seems futile to rehearse arguments for greater diversity one more time, however compelling we find them.

Instead, we ask those who sincerely believe that it does make sense to organize our discipline entirely around European and American figures and texts to pursue this agenda with honesty and openness. We therefore suggest that any department that regularly offers courses only on Western philosophy should rename itself "Department of European and American Philosophy." This simple change would make the domain and mission of these departments clear, and would signal their true intellectual commitments to students and colleagues. We see no justification for resisting this minor rebranding (though we welcome opposing views in the comments section to this article), particularly for those who endorse, implicitly or explicitly, this Eurocentric orientation.

Some of our colleagues defend this orientation on the grounds that non-European philosophy belongs only in "area studies" departments, like Asian Studies, African Studies or Latin American Studies. We ask that those who hold this view be consistent, and locate their own departments in "area studies" as well, in this case, Anglo-European Philosophical Studies.

Others might argue against renaming on the grounds that it is unfair to single out philosophy: We do not have departments of Euro-American Mathematics or Physics. This is nothing but shabby sophistry. Non-European philosophical traditions offer distinctive solutions to problems discussed within European and American philosophy, raise or frame problems not addressed in the American and European tradition, or emphasize and discuss more deeply philosophical problems that are marginalized in Anglo-European philosophy. There are no comparable

differences in how mathematics or physics are practiced in other contemporary cultures.

Of course, we believe that renaming departments would not be nearly as valuable as actually broadening the philosophical curriculum and retaining the name “philosophy.” Philosophy as a discipline has a serious diversity problem, with women and minorities underrepresented at all levels among students and faculty, even while the percentage of these groups increases among college students. Part of the problem is the perception that philosophy departments are nothing but temples to the achievement of males of European descent. Our recommendation is straightforward: Those who are comfortable with that perception should confirm it in good faith and defend it honestly; if they cannot do so, we urge them to diversify their faculty and their curriculum.

This is not to disparage the value of the works in the contemporary philosophical canon: Clearly, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with philosophy written by males of European descent; but philosophy has always become richer as it becomes increasingly diverse and pluralistic. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) recognized this when he followed his Muslim colleagues in reading the work of the pagan philosopher Aristotle, thereby broadening the philosophical curriculum of universities in his own era. We hope that American philosophy departments will someday teach Confucius as routinely as they now teach Kant, that philosophy students will eventually have as many opportunities to study the “Bhagavad Gita” as they do the “Republic,” that the Flying Man thought experiment of the Persian philosopher Avicenna (980-1037) will be as well-known as the Brain-in-a-Vat thought experiment of the American philosopher Hilary Putnam (1926-2016), that the ancient Indian scholar Candrakirti's critical examination of the concept of the self will be as well-studied as David Hume's, that Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Kwazi Wiredu (1931-), Lamé Deer (1903-1976) and Maria Lugones will be as familiar to our students as their equally profound colleagues in the contemporary philosophical canon. But, until then, let's be honest, face reality and call departments of European-American Philosophy what they really are.

We offer one last piece of advice to philosophy departments that have not already embraced curricular diversity. For demographic, political and historical

reasons, the change to a more multicultural conception of philosophy in the United States seems inevitable. Heed the Stoic adage: “The Fates lead those who come willingly, and drag those who do not.”

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Now in print: “The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments,” An anthology of essays from The Times’s philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

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