

Less Manifesto, More Philosophy

KAREN TALIAFERRO

Arizona State University

Why should American philosophy departments assign non-Western philosophers? There are at least two justifications for doing so. The first revolves around diversity: one might argue that assigning non-Western philosophy can serve as an antidote to White Privilege or as a necessary adjustment to changing demographics and an increasingly globalized world. Another argument could begin from the nature of philosophy itself. Partisans of this angle might suggest that the finitude of the human mind requires that we examine sources from not only across time but also across space and cultures. The love of wisdom, in other words, requires that we cast a wide literary and cultural net in order to attain our goal; truth is not the purview of one civilization or heritage.

Bryan W. Van Norden’s *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* primarily argues from the first angle, suggesting that the primary problems with those philosophers (as well as politicians) who close themselves off from non-Western sources of wisdom are their presumed racism, chauvinism, and general closed-mindedness. At the same time, however, his book provides an exploration of such timeless questions as, What is philosophy? Where can we seek wisdom? How do we read a tradition? In so doing, it suggests—albeit in a quieter way than his explicit “manifesto” against White Privileged faculty lounges—that those who love wisdom must also look beyond their own city walls to find it.

The book’s five relatively brief and eminently readable chapters detail Van Norden’s critiques of American universities’ nearly universal tendency to ignore or outright reject non-Western philosophy as worthy of the moniker “philosophy,” thereby excluding such sources from their departmental course catalogues. But Van Norden also tackles what he sees as trends in contemporary public discourse—particularly right-wing political discourse—to denigrate multiculturalism (chapter 3, “Trump’s Philosophers”) as well as philosophical study and thought in general (chapter 4, “Welders and Philosophers”). Out of these combined critiques emerges a vision for a truly globalized society and academy, one that heeds Van Norden’s call to “take

inspiration” from the Biblical narrative of Jericho, in which the walls dividing two peoples miraculously fell down (108–109).¹

Of course, as anyone familiar with the book of Joshua knows, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down so that the Israelites could defeat, not engage or befriend, the Canaanites inside—and even that sort of meeting of civilizations required divine intervention. This is hardly a model for multiculturalism, and one wonders why Van Norden, who must certainly be aware of the Joshua narrative, invoked it for a multicultural project. Perhaps it is a subtle hint that Van Norden’s vision is less easily realized than one might hope, that perhaps walls do not come down so by education alone. Indeed, in his attempt to tear down the walls that divide cultures, Van Norden himself retains and even fortifies walls that exist within American culture itself, as I discuss below. Nor is this entirely unintentional, it would seem: Van Norden states outright that his work is intended to be “polemical” and “cheeky.” He admits to being “openly partisan” and deliberately prescinds from the level of formality characteristic of normal academic work “in the hope that [the book] will incite discussion and raise awareness” (xxiii–xxiv).

This cheekiness does indeed incite, and the book delivers strong punches against critics who would disagree. But one is hard pressed to know exactly who these critics are. In other words, where exactly do we locate the xenophobic problem that Van Norden identifies? Is it at the level of the academy, as his general criticisms of syllabi and hiring practices (chapter 1) seem to indicate? Or is it restricted to the general public, to whom Van Norden seems to be addressing his cheeky tone and relaxed standards of argumentation? The answer to this question is not entirely clear. Had Van Norden limited his audience to academic philosophers, his critique would have been damning indeed: as he points out, only six of the top fifty Ph.D.-granting philosophy departments in the U.S. have at least one full-time faculty member who teaches Chinese philosophy (2), and figures are hardly more promising for other non-Anglo-European traditions. However, his treatment of non-Western philosophy weaves in and out of the academy, sometimes entreating “fellow philosophers” to lend their ears (108) and sometimes addressing politics or public discourse in general (see the book’s the numerous discussions of the 2016 Republican presidential primaries). For instance, chapter 1 spills a good portion of its ink responding to the comments section of Van Norden and Jay Garfield’s *New York Magazine* article that argued for diversity in philosophy departments’ teaching repertoires. The comments certainly did reflect an

animus towards non-Western philosophy (e.g., labeling Van Norden and Garfield’s impetus “an ooshy gooshy need to pretend that all cultures are equally advanced”; another asks “Does anyone want to fly in a plane built with non-Western math?” (11–12)), but they in no way implicate actual academic philosophers or philosophy departments (except in those rare cases in which the commenting reader identified herself as an academic philosopher). Likewise, “Trump’s Philosophers” and “Welders and Philosophers” (chapters 3 and 4, respectively) deal with mainstream partisan politics, whether in America or China, and only tangentially addresses the university at all, sometimes veering so far as not to seem relevant to the topic of the book. “Trump’s Philosophers,” for instance, includes discussions of the Republican Party’s track record on LGBT issues as well as elite universities’ legacy admissions practices (106–107), giving the appearance that the manifesto may be more political than philosophical—and thereby less relevant to academic philosophy departments.

Of course, there is the possibility that Van Norden aiming at both the academy and public discourse with one blow—and that he is doing so precisely because he sees a link between the two: namely, that public discourse is informed by elite academic culture. Stating this outright, though, would have raised what may be the strongest obstacle for Van Norden’s thesis, namely, that while students should (absolutely!) be exposed to and take seriously the thought and philosophy of cultures not their own, there is still reason, in an American university, to favor Western² philosophy—the simple reason being that Western philosophy is more salient in the roots of American life and consequently to the lives of American students. Thus, if part of the task of a university is to educate students to function well as members of society, it seems reasonable that they be educated to function first (but not exclusively) well in *their* society.³

But here, Van Norden would likely disagree. He comes close to addressing this point in his comments on Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, which called for an education grounded in a traditional liberal arts education largely informed by Western texts. Bloom wrote that “Men must love and be loyal to their families and their peoples in order to preserve them” (103, citing Bloom 37). Van Norden labels this belief “ethnocentrism” (103), and then accuses Bloom of a “fundamental incoherence” when, in advocating reading the Bible, Bloom adds that one might substitute “a book of similar gravity” in order to supply the student’s mind with what it needs to assist her as a citizen. To Van Norden, this escape clause gives the lie to Bloom’s Western-centric argument—what matters is not that we read the books that have informed *our* civilization,

but that we read good books of *any* culture. “If reading the Bible intently and seriously gives breadth and depth to one’s mind,” Van Norden asks, “why not also the *Mengzi*? or the *Bhagavad Gita*? or *Chūshingura*? There is more than one ‘great conversation’ in the world, and more than one way to furnish a soul” (105).

Van Norden’s statement is certainly true, and I take no issue with it as such. But in the context of Bloom’s book and the challenges it poses to Van Norden’s project, it misses the point. Bloom suggested that a person must love first *her* family and *her* people in order to preserve them—not, importantly, that she remain ignorant of other families or peoples, nor that there might not be something more to life and civilization than preservation alone. Rather than betraying the “ethnocentrism” of which Van Norden accuses Bloom (103), I submit that Bloom’s view simply acknowledges the embedded nature of human life. We are incapable of participating in the lives and cultures of distant peoples to the same extent that we participate in the lives of those around us—and efforts to pretend otherwise often end in violence of some sort. Acknowledging this embeddedness in no way precludes engagement with other cultures; it simply aims to equip students and citizens to live in and serve their own communities well. As an illustration, an American mother may speak to her son exclusively in French in the hopes that he will grow up bilingual, yet be nevertheless more concerned that he learn English because that is the language of the culture and society in which he will (most likely) live the majority of his life. None of this requires that she consider English to be a superior language, nor America to be superior to France; she simply wants her child to be equipped to live in the world in which he lives and to understand its heritage without translation.

Van Norden’s charge of ethnocentrism against Bloom may seem like a small matter, but I think it is rather a telling indicator of his approach in this book—as well as an indicator of what I termed earlier “relaxed standards of argumentation.” Laying aside Jay Garfield’s introduction (xiii), which labels an anonymous critic as emblematic of White Privilege (without knowing this individual’s own ethnicity—nor, more importantly in my view, did Garfield take on the critic’s actual charge), Van Norden suggests that all philosophy departments not teaching non-Western philosophy are “ethnocentric” and challenges their “chauvinism” without bothering to demonstrate that their lack of non-Western offerings are due to ethnocentrism or chauvinism rather than, say, a dearth of qualified scholars on the market.⁴ Such labeling is irresponsible in the current political climate, in which explicit ethnocentrism and chauvinism have made significant gains in recent years; it is

important that actual chauvinism not be minimized by accusations against those who teach Kant in place of Krishna in their classrooms.

But beyond the political implications, is Van Norden not concerned that his argument—*viz.*, that American philosophy departments are largely chauvinist—is not backed by sufficient evidence (say, interview or survey data beyond the comment sections of a magazine)? If not—if this “manifesto” is intended only to “raise awareness” and “incite discussion” without leading to any particular conclusions—then it is unclear why we are talking about *philosophy* rather than politics, rhetoric, or even journalism. But if Van Norden is concerned about the standards of argumentation of his discipline, then the tendentiousness that appears at various points in this otherwise thought-provoking book is a problem. Van Norden’s invocation of the late Justice Antonin Scalia’s dissent in *Obergefell v. Hodges* is exemplary. There, as Van Norden notes, Scalia lampooned the majority opinion as “having descended from the disciplined legal reasoning of John Marshall and Joseph Story to the mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.”⁵ To Van Norden, this fortune cookie reference signals clear Western centrism. Why? Because Chief Justice Anthony Kennedy had quoted two great thinkers of antiquity, Confucius (551–479 BCE) and Cicero (106–43 BCE). “Notice,” Van Norden advises the reader, “that Scalia said nothing that could might be interpreted as an aspersion upon Cicero; only Confucius earned his contempt” (12–13). But of course, Scalia mentioned nothing of either thinker; rather, he merely decried the legal reasoning of the Court as equal to “the mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.” Upon closer examination of Scalia’s dissent, the move from “fortune cookie” to “Confucius” is even less justified, which would have been clear had Van Norden cited the entire footnote in which Scalia’s alleged “contempt” against Confucius appears:

If, even as the price to be paid for a fifth vote, I ever joined an opinion for the Court that began: “The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity,” I would hide my head in a bag. *The Supreme Court of the United States has descended from the disciplined legal reasoning of John Marshall and Joseph Story to the mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.*

The “mystical aphorism” referred to here is *not* the quotation from Confucius but the rather what Scalia considered “silly extravagances ... of thought and expression” contained in the Court’s official opinion. It is admittedly possible that somewhere in Scalia’s mind, knowingly or unknowingly, it was really the Confucius quote that had so stoked his ire (and Van Norden is not alone in assuming that it was). Given the difference in substance between Chief Justice Kennedy’s *ratio legis* and that of Scalia, however, it seems more plausible—and certainly a more charitable reading of the late Justice’s dissent—to assume that this was not the case. Nor is it fitting of a philosopher, who certainly knows that correlation (Kennedy refers to Chinese thinker, Scalia disparages allegedly Chinese “fortune cookie” aphorisms) in no way equates to causation (therefore it is the Chineseness of Kennedy’s opinion that provoked Scalia’s comment—and, furthermore, that Scalia holds Confucius in “contempt”).

Again, Van Norden is explicit about the partisan and polemic nature of this work, so in some respects this tendentious argumentation should not come as a surprise; he is not aiming for scholarly standards. Still, I question the merit of this tactic for achieving the desired end, at least if we understand the ultimate end of writing a “multicultural manifesto” to be not merely provoking discussion for discussion’s sake but to change the minds of those who are not yet convinced that philosophy departments ought to teach non-Anglo-European philosophy. In other words, my chief complaint with the “manifesto” aspect of this book is that it makes the overall project less likely to succeed. I should note that in my own case, Van Norden is preaching to the choir; I already incorporate non-Anglo-European sources from my own area of study (Islamic philosophy) as well as those I am less comfortable teaching, including Confucianism and Hinduism, into my syllabi. I also share most, if not all, of his objections to popular (and partisan) disdain for philosophy and confusion over its merits. Even as such, I found the tone and direction of the book sufficiently off-putting that I, a sympathetic reader, was more inclined to look for ways to disagree with Van Norden than ways to agree with him, which is hardly promising for the book’s potential to change minds of less sympathetic readers.

In fairness, Van Norden does acknowledge that lack of awareness of non-Western philosophy is not only a conservative problem (e.g., 13); still, his engagement with those with ideological and, to put a finer point on it, political, convictions that clash with his own rarely goes very deep. This is most evident in the opening chapter but borders on hypocriticism in chapter 3, “Trump’s Philosophers,” which purports to take to task all those who want to distinguish the West from the

rest (or between China and the rest, or between any one alleged civilization and any other): “They,” Van Norden writes, “are all in the business of building walls.” This is followed on the very next page by a criticism of President Donald Trump’s supporters for “separat[ing] ‘us’ from ‘them’” (86–87). While it is fair to criticize those who seek to divide civilizations, as this is the project of the book, Van Norden’s polemic itself tends towards divisiveness. The label “they” to capture a wide intellectual and political swath of people, philosophers and not, is telling; one wonders whether it is helpful to lump an ardent supporter of the proposed physical wall between the U.S. and Mexico together with a philosopher who wants to stress the importance of classical Western sources in philosophy curriculum. Likewise, later in chapter 3, Van Norden moves between terms like “contemporary conservatives” and “fundamentalist” homeschooling parents and free market enthusiasts without considering whether there might be important differences among these categories.

This partisan, polemical tone of the book is a great shame, though, because beyond the “manifesto” aspect, Van Norden’s book is a fascinating read that serves as an excellent entrée into Chinese and Confucian philosophy for the lay person who, like myself, would like to incorporate more Chinese thought into her syllabi but who lacks the expertise to conduct more than a cursory reading on her own. The book is at its strongest in the second chapter, “Traditions in Dialogue,” which demonstrates, through exegesis and analysis of well-chosen texts and topics, that Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy can be woven seamlessly together, whether in teaching or scholarship. Most notable, perhaps, is Van Norden’s detailed exploration of the idea of weakness of will (*akrasia*). Van Norden draws from the Neo-Confucian text *The Great Learning* in showing how a distinction between “genuine knowledge” and “common knowledge” can inform the debate—present in the Neo-Confucian sources as in Plato and Aristotle—over whether weakness of will exists (see 72ff). This chapter deals a strong rebuke to Van Norden’s critics and other skeptics of non-Western philosophy and thought; his comparisons of various aspects of Chinese philosophy and politics with their analogues in the West betray a love of both in such a way that Van Norden could likely win over even the most Anglophile of philosophers. The book leaves the reader wanting to revisit the *Analects* with a fresh eye and certainly recommends his excellent list of Less Commonly Taught Philosophies on his website.

Chapter 2, then, achieves through enactment what Van Norden sets out to achieve through argumentation in the rest of the book, namely, to persuade the reader that non-Western thought

can be just as philosophical as Western thought and therefore merits a place within the halls of Western universities' philosophy departments. But this raises a basic question behind Van Norden's entire project, one he leaves unanswered: What is at stake in labeling a given figure a "philosopher" rather than a "thinker"? Van Norden seems to conflate definitional and qualitative distinctions; that is, he seems to take disputes over what philosophy *is*, or what types of activities fall into the category of philosophy, as disputes over what forms of thought and literature are good and worthwhile. For instance, he takes to task both Heidegger and Derrida for claiming that philosophy, properly speaking, is Greek or European in origin; in Derrida's words, "China does not have any philosophy, only thought" (cited in Van Norden 25). This, to Van Norden, is equivalent to "condescending ... talk of 'noble savages.'" But is it really? If it is, then there must be something very special about philosophy that elevates it over all other forms of thought, or at least over those forms of thought that Derrida and Heidegger saw in China. This may be true—but it may not; one need only recall medieval disputes over the proper ordering of philosophy and prophecy (see, e.g., Maimonides, Aquinas, and Al-Ghazali) to see that this is not to be taken for granted. In any case, it would be helpful if Van Norden had explained what was at stake in specifically identifying (in this case) Chinese "thought" as specifically "philosophy." Why, in other words, can't we read both "philosophy" and other forms of "thought" and consider them both important? Should we not read Confucius and Proverbs (and Plato, and Ibn Rushd, and Kant) because these texts and the ideas in them are in some important way texts and questions worthy of our attention—because they raise and address timeless questions about human nature, political life, existence, knowledge, etc.—rather than because they are "philosophy"?

I anticipate two objections to my suggestion. First, one may point out, those texts that raise important questions about existence, knowledge, and politics are almost always categorized as philosophy. But surely this is not true. Even restricting ourselves to prose, innumerable thinkers fall outside of philosophy as a discipline but address these exact issues. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, has never really been considered a philosopher (a sociologist, usually—but also a "travel-writer," I have been told), yet his insights into democratic life rival those of any *bona fide* political philosopher. Friedrich Nietzsche, likewise, was a philologist whose works range from the aphoristic to the short story to the rant—hardly typical forms for philosophy—but his insights into the philosophy of language and its implications for both epistemology and ethics are beyond dispute. In other words, it seems that the fact of being philosophy is neither a necessary nor

sufficient condition for something to be worth reading. So why does it matter if we label Confucius or Plato or Heidegger a philosopher or something else, so long as we read them?

But this question leads directly into what would likely be Van Norden's own rejoinder: calling Confucius a "philosopher" is a prerequisite for his appearing on philosophy departments' syllabi, and this, in turn, will inform the broader culture's exposure to and understanding of the thought/wisdom/philosophy of non-Western cultures. True. However, it would seem that doing so requires us to come up with a definition of philosophy, which is no easy feat. Van Norden does eventually proffer one such definition, though he rather curiously waits until the final chapter to do so. (Curious, that is, because the primary argument of the book seems to be that non-Western thought should be considered by philosophers to be philosophy—whatever that is.) And even then, he is careful to stress that his definition pertains to philosophy as we practice it today and is not a timeless definition. Philosophy, then, is "dialogue about important *unsolved* problems" (142, emphasis Van Norden's), where "unsolved" means a lack of agreement on method (143).⁶ Van Norden contrasts philosophy with other disciplines in which "there is (generally) agreement about what counts as reliable evidence, good arguments, and well-established conclusions" (143). Philosophy, he implies, is prior to this. In other words, philosophy is a meta-discipline; we practice philosophy when we dispute those questions which we do not have shared criteria for answering. For instance, asking "What is the good life?" requires agreement over what constitutes "good" and "life," both of which are themselves issues of contention.

But does this definition work? Two problems arise when we place it under the microscope. It would seem that philosophy, as a discipline, *does* have some shared notions of what constitutes a good argument and reliable evidence, at least to the extent that other non-empirical disciplines can be said to have such criteria. The basic rules of logic, including truth of premises and validity of reasoning, could be starters.⁷ Even if one takes issue with these criteria, she would have to answer how there can be departments of philosophy with their own journals, graduate students, university press editors—the very disciplinary contours which, by taking aim at them, Van Norden implicitly accepts as existent.

The second problem with Van Norden's working definition of philosophy becomes clear when we operationalize it. If philosophy as such has no general agreement as to what counts as reliable evidence or good arguments, there is no immediate reason why either Confucius or Plato should be either included or excluded—and consequently the debate over whether something "counts" as

philosophy is beside the point. Again, by petitioning those within the Philosophy Guild to admit such worthy members as Confucius and Dai Zhen (14), Van Norden thereby acknowledges that belonging to the guild *means* something; in other words, there must be some “agreement about what counts as reliable evidence, good arguments, and well-established conclusions” (143, above), after all.

I suggest that we should read Confucius (and Al-Ghazali, Augustine, Gandhi, Du Bois, et al.) not because their works qualify as philosophy, or because doing so helps us check our required diversity boxes, but because they write things worth reading. Philosophy, whatever else it might be, should be at least the love of wisdom. If this serves as our guide, we have a globe’s worth of thinkers and writers to consider, and we are, I submit, least likely to be concerned about walls—whether building them to cordon off our own civilization from others or tearing them down prematurely in strained attempts to force assimilation where some measure of embedded, localized differences might better prevail. If, on the other hand, we read Confucius and Gandhi either because they “count” as philosophy in the same ways that Kant and Aristotle mysteriously “count,” or because we need our syllabi and library shelves to reflect a certain cosmopolitan diversity, then we will end by chasing ever-shifting goals, never sure that we have struck the right representational balance or avoided the sins of imperialism or cultural appropriation. This latter approach is also likely to prove a Trojan horse, importing a new divisiveness inside its attempt to unite, for in order to ensure appropriate representation of the different origins of philosophers, one must create labels for them (“Chinese philosophy” and “Islamic philosophy,” for instance), labels that distract and reinforce notions of “us” and “them” even as their partisans—including Van Norden—may initially intend the exact opposite.

Overall, *Taking Back Philosophy* provides a valuable exposition of the contribution, both in itself and in comparison, of non-Western philosophy. Van Norden’s bilingual and bicultural expertise is in lamentably short supply in philosophy (and other) departments across the country, and students and scholars alike would benefit enormously from reading “traditions in dialogue” with him. Unfortunately, because this book is heavy on the manifesto side and regrettably light on the very comparative work such scholars as Van Norden are uniquely fit to do, it seems that its impact will remain limited to “inciting discussion and raising awareness”—and likely ire, among some readers—rather than making a genuinely philosophical case for a topic worthy of philosophical treatment.

Notes

1. See Joshua 5–6.
2. I find this a fraught term but it carries sufficient cachet that I will adopt it here; the reader will likely be well acquainted with reasons why the term “Western” falls apart upon closer scrutiny. The salient point is that one should be educated in those texts that have most strongly influenced her own civilization—a civilization that, in America, is still referred to as “the West.”
3. This does, it is true, disregard the case of foreign students who will leave the U.S. after their studies. Still, a similar case could be made: if a student leaves his own country to study in another, it is presumably because there is ultimately something distinct about that country or its heritage that the student finds desirable and therefore worthy of study.
4. In the introduction (xii), Garfield assures the reader that answers are forthcoming, in Van Norden’s book, to non-chauvinistic objections to teaching non-Western philosophy, including lack of expertise in the relevant languages, or sufficient knowledge of the sources to judge the scholarship of job candidates who might be able to teach them. While Garfield promises that Van Norden address these “carefully and in detail,” as far as I can tell Van Norden spends one paragraph (33–34) on “the pipeline problem,” noting that the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy has over 600 members, “there are enough strong scholars currently doing research that we could double the number of top institutions teaching Asian philosophy overnight if there were the will to do so.” Perhaps, but as anyone who has sat on a failed search committee knows, numbers alone do not guarantee a hire.
5. Antonin Scalia, Dissenting Opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 US 8n22 (2015); <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/576/14-556/dissent5.html>.
6. Van Norden eventually revises this to add that “‘importance’ ultimately gets its sense from the question of the way one should live” (151).
7. Starters, that is, because I do not here wish to take up Van Norden’s (cheeky and polemical) claim that any “philosophy graduate student who casually threw around terms such as

‘logical reasoning’ and ‘empirical’ as if they were unambiguous and uncontroversial would be given a remedial reading list including the works of Pierre Duhem, Gaston Bachelard, Thomas Kuhn, Jean-François Lyotard, Paul Feyerabend, Michel Foucault, W.V.O. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, and Richard Rorty, for starters” (13).