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Kirloskar-Steinbach, Monika

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prof.dr. M.A. Kirloskar - Steinbach

WHY DIVERSIFY PHILOSOPHY



prof.dr. M.A. Kirloskar - Steinbach

WHY DIVERSIFY PHILOSOPHY

Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van bijzonder hoogleraar Actuele Themas, vanwege de Stichting Bijzondere Leerstoelen VU, aan de Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam op 13 april 2022.

Why diversify philosophy?

Dear Rector, colleagues, friends, students, and family members present here and on zoom, thank you for being here today for my inaugural lecture! The format of an inaugural lecture suggests that audience members will at the end of the lecture be able to take home some thoughts about the exact nature of the problem being discussed, its larger context and the professor's own work within that broader field. I hope to be able to deliver on all those scores. Allow me to begin with an anecdote.

When our daughter was in kindergarten in a German city, she came home one day to say that her friends wanted me to confirm that I was a 'real' German. We began a conversation on concept use in general and on this concept in particular. I was a 'German with a migration history' for the German state I said, adding that the state's application of this concept on me had implications for her life too. She was for that state a 'German with a migration history' too. This answer did not go down well. Whatever a concept was, that concept was inaccurate on several counts, she baldly claimed. She had two parents, not one. Moreover, it did not capture the history of her father's family. In addition, she was born in that city, unlike her parents. In short, she was the only member of the family *without* a history of migration. I was also told that what I had marked out as a 'concept,' did not reflect who she was. Much like that unique combination of her first and family names, she was that person who was linked to both, to the specific city in which we lived and to other regions of the world. Sometimes, like in kindergarten, she only needed her neighborhood and that city in which we lived to understand what was happening around her; on other occasions, like for family gatherings, she had to understand those other parts of the world in which the relatives lived. I was asked to officially write a complaint letter on her behalf to Chancellor Merkel about the state's inaccurate use of categories. She was resolved, she said, to monitor this human activity for the rest of her life.

Accompanying her in her life as a parent, I have come to realize that her biography is not unique; similar questions are being asked of other parents not only in Europe, but in other parts of the world. Many such students, both from philosophy and from other disciplines, both with what is popularly called histories of migration as also without, attend my courses. Many of them are not wholly convinced that the current philosophical canon will equip them to take sufficiently informed decisions as members of their highly differentiated societies, and of an interconnected world. Now, if a philosophical department were to take this concern of such students seriously today, how could it go forward, if changes were to be implemented? This question is pertinent in a field in which one is typically taught to abstract from diverse and local standpoints, not to focus on them.

One strategy found in ongoing debates suggests 'content diversity'. Accordingly, philosophy can be diversified through curricular changes that would draw in different philosophical traditions. Another strategy votes for 'practitioner diversity,' that is to say, changes in the composition of faculty. The latter

is predominantly endorsed by philosophers working in US-American, British and Australian institutional contexts. They analyze available statistical data about philosophy practitioners to ascertain whether, and how, the positionality of the academic philosophers influences their philosophizing. The reason being, interpretations of statistical data indicate that academic philosophers are homogenous across several social indicators.

From what I can see, strategies for diversifying philosophy are currently underexposed in standard outlets that publish European philosophical scholarship. The literature on the topic is relatively sparse. Diversifying philosophy tends to be associated with what one intellectual historian in another context called “American multiculturalist criticism” (Stuurman 2000: 152). In that publication, this author had boldly argued more than twenty years ago that it is not plausible to diversify the curriculum to reflect the current demographical setup of liberal societies. If minor changes were needed at all, they could only be implemented by those who stand in a direct line of inheritance to the European tradition of ideas (however that is understood). Only these thinkers possess the methodological tools to transform the profession, this author claimed (Stuurman 2000). Colleagues working on canonical philosophy seem to shy away from engaging even such bold positions. Rather, references to diversity tend to obliquely favor a status quo (cf. Peters 2021).

In light of the dearth of scholarship on the continent on this topic, I will bring to the table three interrelated arguments that endorse diversifying philosophy. Proponents of the first argument direct attention to the manner in which academic philosophizing is routinely conducted since the onset of modern European philosophy. Those who forward the second argument focus on the consequences that homogenous conceptual frameworks have on structural minorities. The third argument is favored by those who endeavor to contain the authoritarian tendencies emanating out of philosophy departments. After sketching these arguments, I will briefly highlight those transnational endeavors that implement diversification in philosophy.

The Making of Modern Philosophy

The first argument directs attention to the period in which modern European philosophy was made. Way back then, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Europe engaged in colonial and imperial practices. Europe’s geopolitical power enabled it to position itself as the center of the world. An abstract philosophizing could thrive. A “transcendental delusion” in European philosophy arose, as Linda Martín-Alcoff puts it (Martín-Alcoff 2017: 399). This delusion allowed certain male, propertied European bodies to posit themselves as the sole repositories of academic philosophy. These were the bodies that were, in Charles Mills’ view, projected as being “disincarnate and abstract” (Mills 2014:

32). To continue quoting him, “Philosophy is what happens when this body encounters and theorizes the world; its problems are general” (ibid.). The fallout of this delusion is still with us, they say.

Philosopher of religion, Richard King, spells out the consequences of abstract philosophizing in the study of what are called ‘world religions.’ By designating world philosophies as ‘world religions,’ the former were allowed to enter the European intellectual conversation. A closer look at the designation itself reveals something more though. It projects these ‘religions’ as particular and local, perhaps even retrograde, phenomena in the light of academic philosophy’s self-projection as a secular discipline (King 2009: 44-45). In addition, the designation ‘religion,’ he analyzes, also sustains the impression that academic philosophy as a discipline has remained wholly untouched by the entry of few, select positions from world-philosophical traditions. Purported universal philosophical arguments can then be pursued as if they were bereft of a geopolitical locus, while world philosophies—meaning the different ways in which peoples in the past and the present, sought, and seek, to make sense of their philosophical experience by using the concepts available to them—were contained by fixing them on a point in the spatiotemporal spectrum. Depending on their placement on this spectrum in the story the discipline tells about itself, they either became mere precursors to European philosophy, or hit-and-miss attempts that were unable to even make it to the precursor status. The monopoly over academic philosophy is maintained.

Now, if philosophy were to be diversified, tools could be developed within the discipline that would enable philosophy practitioners to dismantle the transcendental delusion that affects their profession. To this end though, simply adding content from world philosophies to the current philosophy program will not suffice. Rather, what is needed is, in the words of Martín-Alcoff, “a decolonizing of the way in which we interpret, and teach Western philosophy, and indeed, every form of philosophical thought (Martín-Alcoff 2017: 400).

On the basis of what I have said so far, one could presume that a diversification of philosophical content would suffice for the task at hand. By drawing from different philosophical traditions, one could decolonize the manner in which academic philosophizing is conducted. But some proponents of this first argument hold that content diversity alone will not do. The reason being that academic philosophy in Europe and North America has become an organized, exclusive group of professionals with an internal sense of cohesiveness. Much like erstwhile guilds in Europe, this group seeks to protect and maintain the monopoly over the goods they produce and distribute. Indeed, as historian Sheilaigh Ogilvie reminds us, it would be naïve to claim that all the guilds across different locations in Europe operated in a uniform way in their almost thousand-year existence (Ogilvie 2021). And yet, the manner in which the group is formed around shared identity markers, its ways of retaining its status and recruiting younger apprentices, does suggest parallels. If the manner of academic philosophizing is to

be decolonized thoroughly, it would have to diversify its pool of philosophy practitioners too, some proponents hold.

Concept Possession and Distribution

The second argument for diversifying philosophy is directed toward those affected by the concept-distribution mechanisms of European and Euroamerican scholarship. In one of its older renditions, the African American social philosopher and intellectual WEB Du Bois pointed out that concepts are not neutral carriers of word-meaning. In practice, they carry information about the particular social group in which they arise. Moreover, their distribution depends upon the positionality of this group in relation to other groups. Du Bois observed in 1903 in his *The Souls of Black Folk* that social groups in his contemporary US-American society were segregated through the “Veil of Race” (Du Bois 2014 [1903]: 43). The veil segregated privileged white individuals who attributed self-consciousness and agency solely to members of their group. This self-ascription was said to set them apart from those who by virtue of their racialization inhabited a “world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness” (Du Bois 2014 [1903]: 2). In addition, these privileged people claimed to have captured the truth about the lives of those who were veiled off from them. The ensuing “caste segregation” had ramifications on the lives of African Americans, especially in the US-American South (Du Bois 2007a [1940]: 66). Segregation led to a group of “entombed souls,” “hindered in their natural movement, expression and development” (Du Bois 2007a [1940]: 66). But these ‘entombed souls’ were not restricted to the US-American South.

According to Du Bois’ analysis of the international context in his contemporary world, the geopolitical status of both Europe and USA in the twentieth century impacted the setup of educational institutions worldwide. In different locations around the globe, Eurocentric curricula became the default way of imparting knowledge to the next generation. Through them, the belief was sustained that self-consciousness and agency were possessed solely by European and Euro-descended peoples. A critical reflection about this belief did not occur. For education around the world was so arranged that “the deeply pious and philanthropic receive their training and comfort and luxury on the condition that they neither question the source of their comfort and luxury nor interfere with the legal props which rest on a pitiful human foundation of writhing white and yellow and black and brown bodies,” Du Bois observes in 1921 in his *Manifesto of the Second Pan-African Congress* published in the journal *Crisis*. Du Bois was optimistic though that the veil could be lifted, if the systematic asymmetry in concept distribution was rectified adequately.

Drawing upon Du Bois’ insights, some publications on epistemic injustice analyze the epistemic costs that a society incurs when—to paraphrase José Medina—epistemic habits of dominant social groups “protect cultural expectations” (Medina 2011: 26). This scholarship can be read as making a case for

content diversity. If curricular changes were tailored such that they factored in concepts distilled from the experiences of structural minorities within that society, conceptual frameworks in play would become more nuanced. They would then possibly enable members of all social groups to grasp their own experiences better. However, a more thorough reading of the transnational Du Bois' illustrates that content diversity alone will not suffice. It will have to be backed up by practitioner diversity. As my own research illustrates, Du Bois calls upon members of structural minorities to mindfully appropriate concepts from other cultural contexts. He hoped that such an appropriation would allow them to imagine a non-oppressive space that, in a further step, would help them to free themselves from conceptual exclusion.

Containing the Fallout of Philosophical Theories

A third interrelated argument for diversifying philosophy was launched by philosophers in postwar Europe who sought to contain the authoritarian tendencies emanating from philosophical departments in the decades after the Holocaust. One prominent example is Theodor Adorno. Alongside Max Horkheimer, Adorno worked to create a critical mass of intellectuals in postwar Germany who would resist the lure and power of collectives, statist or otherwise. Adorno strove to create intersubjective public spaces through which societal norms could be altered and aligned with democratic values. In this regard, he set his hope on specially designed teacher-training courses. If teachers' critical self-consciousness were to be trained, they could help to build up a new society that consciously moved away from the authoritarian mode of being to a democratic one, he held. An education that facilitated critical self-reflection was deemed to be highly significant. It would contribute to creating conditions viable for valuing democratic freedoms (Adorno in Tiedemann 2003: 21-22).

Adorno's essay 'On the Question: What is German?' pithily reflects his skepticism about philosophers and intellectuals. The presumption that they will not succumb to the powers of 'group think', is not warranted, he stated there. As the recent track record of the discipline attested, even conceptions of individual autonomy could be easily fed into theories that deify the state. Intellectual traditions were used by groups for "self-idolatry." They were then paraded as cultural possessions that belonged only to their group (Adorno 1985: 124). Taking the German philosophical tradition to be a case in point, Adorno wrote that members of this tradition "are quickly seized with indignation when even the slightest critical word is dropped about a famous name which they want to confiscate and exploit as a brand-name product 'made in Germany'" (Adorno 1985: 122).

Relatedly, my own doctoral supervisor and mentor Hubert Schleichert decried the practice through which academic credibility was accrued in philosophy. In an obituary piece written in 1971 to commemorate his doctoral supervisor Béla Juhos from the Vienna Circle, he sharply observed that

philosophical reputation was built up through self-posturing tactics. One gestured toward the grandiosity of one's own philosophical endeavors, engaged in polemics to discredit philosophical opponents and wrote in such a dry and academic style that a general reader would out of sheer boredom not read the publication till the end. This was not an academic philosophy that was aligned with the needs of humanity. To achieve that end, philosophy would have to become self-critical and not be lured by the promise of glory. Humanity needs skepticism, critique and humaneness, he wrote, not the intoxication and labyrinths of the philosophical absolute (Schleichert 1971: 12).

In my reading, both Adorno and Schleichert would agree that habitual ways of doing academic philosophy had to be discontinued in a postwar Europe, should this region—and the world—live in peace. To this end, critical individuals would first need to understand how the authoritarian mode of academic philosophizing manifests itself and then work out practices to discontinue it. When such practices were continued over time, a change in academic habits would set in, hereby facilitating a democratic access to theory-making.

Some of Adorno's publications can be read as endorsing content diversity, not practitioner diversity (see Kirloskar-Steinbach and Mika 2019). But an endorsement for practitioner diversity could be teased out by docking onto James Tully's understanding of 'civil philosophers.' In Tully's understanding, these philosophers allow for a "robust degree of democratic participation" (Tully 2014: 319). In their meaning-making endeavors, they strive to explore "the commonwealth of all forms of life in which human citizenship has its home" (Tully 2014: 371). They strive to increase participation of their societal co-members. When they realize that their own practices are interpreted by the hitherto excluded as reproducing past exclusionary practices, these philosophers work together with these co-members to find ways that can curtail this domination. Importantly, Tully's civil philosophers are not necessarily trained in academic philosophy. They are citizens who have become more aware about how meaning-making practices can become ambivalent. They realize that to make meaning with others, we need to share, to some extent, a common conceptual repertoire with them. Yet, our own way of explicating these resources and making sense of them with other co-members can render this process hegemonic and authoritarian. This happens when habituated ways of understanding are taken as the sole way of understanding a phenomenon. In my reading, Tully's civil philosophers will endorse and work to implement both, content and practitioner diversity. Their combination will facilitate an exploration into the plurality of modes of life (see Kirloskar-Steinbach 2019). Schleichert would have seconded this view (see below).

World Philosophies: An Emerging Field

Much of the recent fledging work on world philosophies that reflects upon the power-encoded spaces that one inhabits when one does philosophy, draws from all the three arguments sketched here.

Authors working in this mode though do not focus so much on *why* philosophy should be diversified, but rather on *how* that can be done. Their scholarship does not deploy European philosophy as a lens to track philosophical activity across the world. Some of it follows Charles Mills' call to pluralize the social ontology of philosophy. Building up on cross-cultural feminist philosophical research pioneered by the likes of scholars like Linda Martín Alcoff, Vrinda Dalmiya, María Lugones, Ofélia Schutte and Sylvia Wynter, some scholars endorse that the epistemic habit of mapping world philosophies in the surveyor-model mode be discontinued. This mode was typically used during European imperialism and colonialism to understand world regions. If deployed today, it tends to reproduce those patterns that posited Europe as the center of the world. Through this methodological move, these authors seek to halt the expansionist vision of Europe that informs the current canon. In a related vein, others seek to dismantle their own Eurocentric epistemic habits in a bid to counter the ubiquity of Eurocentrism in material and discursive realities across the globe. And yet others, seek to bring to the forefront so-called atypical philosophers and philosophical positions in their work. The latter include those that were dismissed in the past for purportedly lacking philosophical content either due to lacunae in scholarship or due to their purported association with atypical philosophical knowers, meaning those knowers that have been located outside the boundaries of philosophy through the narrative the discipline sustains about itself. The group of atypical philosophical knowers is said to include: those whose social life does not, and probably will not, intersect with the world of academic philosophy, as also those academically-trained diverse philosophy practitioners who Kristie Dotson calls "concrete flowers" (Dotson 2011). Growing out of the cracks of poured concrete, these flowers strike out of an environs not meant for their growth and cultivation. Social factors like gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency in non-hegemonic European languages etc., make these philosophers concrete flowers in the relatively monolithic landscape of professional academic philosophy. It would perhaps not be far-fetched to claim that this emerging—but diverse—scholarship on world philosophies is united in its commitment to create a space in which one can develop plural, non-hierarchical ways of being human. Through my involvement in some of these projects, the chair 'Diversifying Philosophy' will seek to put the spotlight on scholarship that shares this commitment.

The chair will seek to extend and intensify the ongoing diversifying work at the VU done by Angela Roothaan and Annemie Halsema. It will cooperate with Doug Berger and his team's work at the Center for Global and Comparative Philosophy at Leiden University and strengthen their solid scholarship. I will continue my work on the ethics of immigration within the scope of the chair's activities. Pluralistic societies have members with what Carlos Sanchez calls "postimmigrant experiences." These experiences belong to individuals who might not have migrated into these societies themselves but for whom the migration experience is a part of their lived experience (Sanchez 2011: 36).

To conclude this part of my speech: I began with my daughter's query that signaled a disconnect between standard concept use and our lives in highly complex, diverse societies nested in an interdependent world. In many liberal democracies, institutionalized processes of meaning making (like philosophy, for instance), work on the presumption that only a select number of relatively homogenous conceptual frameworks suffice to understand all relevant aspects of human experience in this world. The three interrelated arguments sketched here illustrate the trenchant critique of academic philosophizing that is to be found since at least a century. And the third argument has been present in postwar Europe for several decades now. So, the call to diversify philosophy (or the academy in general) cannot be dismissed as a mere 'import' that has no relevance for Europe.

In the following part of the lecture, allow me to thank those who through the years have provided encouragement, support and also spice to life. Today's ceremony, that marks the appointment for the chair 'Diversifying Philosophy,' would have been special for my mentor, Hubert Schleichert. That the VU, a university from Spinoza's birthplace, establishes a unique chair in Europe and then appoints his own student as chairholder for that specific chair, would have made him very happy. Schleichert considered Spinoza to be that exemplary philosopher whose commitment to intellectual freedom had allowed him to develop a critical philosophy even under conditions of group hostility. Furthermore, he was convinced that a postcolonial Europe would have to diversify philosophy to adequately understand its responsibility in our contemporary world.

More than twenty-six years ago, when I asked Schleichert whether he would be ready to supervise my doctoral thesis, he hesitated at first. He initially declined claiming that he had an atypical way of doing philosophy. From his understanding of the philosophy of Vienna Circle, it followed that the search for plausible ethical justifications in postwar European societies should not be entrusted to academic philosophers alone. Accordingly, Schleichert began to focus on philosophical sources outside mainstream philosophy. He was concerned that if a first-generation female migrant to Europe (like me) were under his supervision to adopt his mode of philosophizing, albeit partially, that person's career prospects in the European academy would very likely diminish significantly. Schleichert changed his mind though. He realized, he said, that a thorough de-centering of European academic philosophy would have to involve an in-depth understanding of how imperialism and colonialism have impacted the study of world philosophies. And in this respect, European philosophers might not be able to accomplish the task adequately. They might, even if inadvertently, possess epistemic habits that might occlude them from fully understanding the aforementioned impact. My training in diversifying philosophy began there.

When I informed Schleichert in 2014 that I had initiated an academic journal with the title *Journal of World Philosophies*, he was initially puzzled. What safeguards were built in, he wanted to know, that

this journal does not become one more of those disconnected academic projects that are unable to address Eurocentrism? It was based on the presumption that the search for plausible ethical justifications could not be delegated to members of societies in one single region of the world, I replied. This search had to be a transnational endeavor. My answer seemed to have somehow appealed to him. Rather than launching into a diatribe about so-called academic pedigree, as I had expected, he laughed loudly.

Through the years many other colleagues have provided invaluable support. Allow me to mention: Amy Donahue, Nader El-Bizri, Leah Kalmanson, James Madaio, Sarah A. Mattice, Carl Mika, Takeshi Morisato, Pascah Mungwini, Mickaella Perina, Omar Rivera, Carlos Sanchez, Rohan Sikri, Eddy Souffrant and Georgina Stewart. Not only do these colleagues share the burden of the editorial work at the *Journal of World Philosophies*, the *Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies* and the *Bloomsbury Studies in World Philosophies*; their own creative scholarship sustains that space too. In addition, Henry Rosemont Jr., and the journal's first team that included James Maffie, Geeta Ramana and Lukas Trabert from the publishing house Verlag Karl Alber contributed to making that journal into an international project. Doug Berger, the late Charles Mills, Michael Nylan, Lucius Outlaw Jr, Jim Tully and Helen Verran have been solid pillars of support since the journal was launched.

Here, at the VU, I would like to thank the Executive Board, the Board of the Humanities Faculty and the VU-Association for the trust conferred upon me. I will do my utmost best to fulfill the responsibilities associated with the chair 'Diversifying Philosophy'. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our Dean of the Humanities Faculty, Professor Susan Legêne, for her contribution in creating conditions that can sustain postcolonial academic spaces. Even within the short span of the time spent here, I have seen how those spaces enable critical conversations within the university and pave the way for a democratic access to theory-making. I am thankful to my colleagues at the philosophy department here and the Humanities Faculty of the Amsterdam University College for integrating me so well into their ongoing activities, especially to Marije Martijn for her collegiality. Thanks to funding from Clue+, we will soon launch a new workshop series on diversifying philosophy. Thanks are in order to the selection committee of the VU-*Startpremie* too. That seed funding will enable interdisciplinary projects aimed at diversifying philosophy within the VU, collaboration with other universities in the Netherlands, and international workshops to take off the ground. It will also enable me to complete my monograph on epistemic decolonization.

I would like to explicitly express my thanks all those students I taught (and teach) in European countries who persistently demanded (and demand) diversified course content in my courses. Without their insistence that they be taught a philosophy that is better suited for our interdependent world, I would not have come so far. Their joy, when they are allowed to engage with material from world-

philosophical positions, and their careful—albeit critical engagement—with material from mainstream philosophy, remains a constant source of motivation for me.

The life I lead today, would not have been possible without our parents. They taught their daughters to become aware of the fragility of democratic freedoms but also how citizen participation can make these freedoms flourish. The life I have led since I left India several decades ago, would not have been possible without the steady support and patience of my partner, Thomas, who has many a time has had to deal with the fallout of my academic exclusion. Our daughter added that right amount of spice to our lives and has grown up to become a humane but critical companion of her parents. Like in her childhood, she remains, in Dutch parlance, my valorization agency, that agency in my private life that evaluates whether there has been knowledge transfer from my academic activities to society for use in societal contexts. In her capacity as this agency, she closely monitors whether I in my academic life adequately address the intergenerational dimension of conceptual exclusion.

Recently, she mentioned that she had finally found a concept that helped to describe her identity: an intercultural citizen of the world. This concept appropriately reflected her embeddedness in a family that in its own way told a story about pre-and postwar Europe and postcolonial India. It also signaled her own openness and willingness to get to know the world. And then she nonchalantly added that this concept would be apt for me too. She had noticed, she said, that I sometimes offhandedly used 'Indo-German' to describe myself. Not only did this description unwittingly narrow the pool of possible options. It was inaccurate too, inasmuch as it was silent about the Dutch parts of her identity. If you have any suggestion for an apt response, do get in touch. The coffee would be on me.

Ik heb gezegd.

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