

Professor Van Norden, Western Philosophy is Not Racist

by Paul Austin Murphy (April 2018)



Plato and Aristotle. Detail from Raphael's fresco *The School of Athens*, 1511, The Vatican

In late October, 2017, a professor by the name of Bryan Van Norden had an essay published in the magazine *Aeon*. It is called [“Western Philosophy is Racist.”](#) The piece has been debated throughout the internet. As of this writing, it has been shared 36,646 times on Facebook and generated 466 responses in the comments section.

Professor Van Norden himself, [according to Wikipedia](#), is a

translator of Chinese philosophical texts, scholar of Chinese and comparative philosophy, and public intellectual [who] taught for twenty years at Vassar College but is currently Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple Visiting Professor at Yale-NUS College in Singapore.

Professor Bryan Van Norden began his essay in rhetorical mode. He wrote:

Mainstream philosophy in the so-called West is narrow-minded, unimaginative, and even xenophobic.

Thus, in this response-piece, I want to return fire by partially replicating Van Norden's own political rhetoric with some of my own. (Not that rhetoric and argumentation can't sometimes live together in the same space.)

A ccusing people, groups, or institutions of racism seems to be a sport (or fashion) for far too many academics nowadays. It's almost as if it's seen as a safe way of proving one's anti-racist credentials before some even purer and more zealous anti-racist puts the boot in. This often means that the more racist people, groups, or institutions one can find, the more anti-racist and politically pure one becomes. Indeed, this sport of anti-racism has become so omnipresent and extreme that the anti-racist revolution has even begun to eat some of its own children. Thus, we have many and various anti-racist inquisitions on our hands.

It seems that Professor Bryan Van Norden himself has felt the need to add his own little bit to this pious anti-racism blood sport.

The title of Professor Bryan Van Norden's essay is "Western Philosophy is Racist." The sub-heading states:

Academic philosophy in 'the West' ignores and disdains the thought traditions of China, India, and Africa. This must change.

The title is itself racist (or at least *Westophobic*) in many ways.

For starters, the West has been more open to other cultures, traditions, and epochs than almost any civilization in history.

Still, it's clear that Van Norden and many others don't apply the same logic to other traditions and cultures that they vigorously apply to the West. That means that racism elsewhere will never become apparent simply because it's never broached. As is often the case, the West has categories and judgments applied to it which won't be applied to any other culture or tradition.

Van Norden would quickly find (if he doesn't already know) that numerous other cultures or traditions have been just as introspective and indeed just as racist as the West. Unless, that is, it's definitionally impossible for non-white (or non-Western) cultures to ever be racist. Indeed, many left-wing academics and theorists have attempted various versions of

that definitional/theoretical trick. Thus, just as in America today, if "only whites can be racist," then so it may also be the case that only Western philosophy can be racist. (Perhaps non-Western cultures are "prejudiced, though not racist.")

Isn't it about time left-wing or "progressive" academics and intellectuals either looked in the mirror or attended a course in self-referential logic? Alternatively, since Van Norden is a fan of Edward W. Said (more later), it can be said that his words come perilously close to being outright Occidentalist in nature.

Van Norden's Political Thesis

According to Professor Van Norden, "mainstream philosophy" is "narrow-minded, unimaginative, and even xenophobic" because it ignores the "rich philosophical traditions of China, India, Africa, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas."

Indeed it's "nothing but a temple to the achievement of white males." It's also strange that Van Norden uses the phrase "the so-called West;" which hints at the possibility that the West doesn't really exist. He then goes straight ahead and generalises about the West as if it most certainly does exist. Indeed, it seems that Van Norden's *West* exists in a very determinate and severely circumscribed form.

All this essentially means that Professor Van Norden's case against Western philosophy is political, not philosophical. Indeed, he lays his political cards on the table when he calls

his position ["a multicultural manifesto."](#)

In terms of another of his political positions, Van Norden writes:

When the ancient philosopher Diogenes was asked what city he came from, he replied: 'I am a citizen of the world.'

Van Norden backs up his *multicultural manifesto* when he says that

to attract an increasingly diverse student body, and to remain culturally relevant, philosophy must recover its original cosmopolitan ideal.

As an antidote to racism, Van Norden wants Western philosophers to study "African-American, Christian, feminist, Islamic, Jewish, Latin American, and LGBTQ philosophies."

Indeed, as Norden says, all this is really about "greater diversity," not philosophy.

Van Norden continues his political theme by citing Peter K. J. Park's book, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon*. As most people now know, the Progressive Academy—which doesn't yet include Philosophy departments (i.e., if Van Norden's thesis is correct)—got to work on the Western "literary Canon"

decades ago. So, now it must be time for philosophy! That left-wing “hegemony” (to use [Antonio Gramsci’s word](#)) isn’t quite complete yet. This means that philosophy is next in line. (At least in those American departments that aren’t devoted to post-structuralism/Deconstruction, Continental Philosophy, postmodernist philosophy, etc.) And that’s Van Norden’s political purpose—both in this essay and generally in his professional life.

Despite all the above, many people will question my bifurcation of philosophy and politics; and that in itself is—at least in part—a political position. That denial of any separation of philosophy (or anything else for that matter) from politics has, of course, become *de rigueur* and hugely widespread in the last 30 years or so (especially in British and American universities). It’s had a far more negative affect on philosophy (i.e., its politicisation and “dumbing-down”) than any ostensible racism toward non-Western philosophy. Indeed, embracing the idea that “everything is political” has given activists the perfect excuse to *make everything political* (in some kind of self-fulfilling prophesy). That means that there’s nothing to hold academics or philosophers back once they accept the essentially Marxist catechism that *everything is political*; that seems to be what Van Norden has himself done.

Western Philosophy’s Racist Turn

This is where Van Norden’s “Whig history” comes to the fore. So, let’s put Van Norden’s words and positions in the context of this passage from [Professor David Cannadine](#):

Whig history was, in short, an extremely biased view of the past: eager to hand out moral judgements, and distorted by teleology, anachronism and present-mindedness.

Thus, Van Norden quite literally blames the racism of Western philosophy on the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and those he calls his “defenders.”

First Kant; Van Norden claims that Kant was “notoriously racist”.

So, here’s a professor parading his 20th century scientific wisdom and 21st century political piety by applying such things to a philosopher who lived in the 18th century. Yes, Van Norden states (or perhaps hints) that Kant *should have known* that race isn’t a “scientific category.”

Now, for the *defenders* of Kant

Here we also have a professor indulging in the most crude *ad hominem* possible: one aimed at philosophers. Namely, Van Norden states that Kant’s defenders

consciously rewrote the history of philosophy to make it appear that his critical idealism was the culmination toward which all earlier philosophy was groping.

In terms of racism, Van Norden then tells us that

European intellectuals increasingly accepted and systematised views of white racial superiority that entailed that no non-Caucasian group could develop philosophy.

This, again, is anti-racist Whig history. Van Norden is applying the “cultural logic” of the early 21st century (to rephrase words from Fredric Jameson) to Kant (who died in 1804) and early 19th century philosophers. That is, he’s claiming that these people were racists in the 20th century sense of the term. He’s also applying values and judgements which belong to the 21st century to philosophers of the 18th and early 19th centuries. This pious retrospectivism is something that countless (often left-wing/radical) theorists and academics—from historians to anthropologists—have frowned upon when the victims/subjects were non-white people. However, it seems to be okay when the victims/subjects are Dead White Males who lived in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Van Norden does indeed move on to the early 20th century and the racism of the English philosopher, G.E. Moore.

Van Norden writes:

When the Indian philosopher Surendra Nath Dasgupta read a paper on the epistemology of Vedanta to a session of the Aristotelian Society in London, Moore’s only comment was: ‘I have nothing to offer myself. But I am sure that

whatever Dasgupta says is absolutely false.'

This is an off-the-cuff comment from Moore. As far as I know Moore never wrote a paper dismissing Indian philosophy. He never claimed expertise when it came to this subject. Thus, what he said about it is pretty much *irrelevant*. If Moore had written a paper on Indian philosophy (or even discussed it in a paper), then that would have been a different matter entirely. (Incidentally, G.E. Moore [had an important influence](#) on the "progressive" Bloomsbury Group—a group which had "very modern attitudes" toward feminism, sexuality, pacifism, and economics.)

So, yes, it was "a joke between colleagues" uttered by a philosopher who never wrote on Indian philosophy and who never claimed to be an expert. Even Moore's "joke" wasn't about Indian philosophy *as a whole*. It was aimed at a single Indian philosopher (Surendra Nath Dasgupta) and what Van Norden himself calls a single "Indian philosophical system." Professor Van Norden is using extremely flimsy circumstantial evidential as a pretext for his huge political and academic call to arms.

Van Norden then cites two contemporary "racists:" Nicholas Tampio (a professor of political science) and D. Kyle Peone (whom Van Norden tells us "writes for the conservative journal *The Weekly Standard*").

Firstly Van Norden quotes D. Kyle Peone saying that

'philosophy' is a word of Greek origin, it refers only to the tradition that grows out of the ancient Greek thinkers.

Now, if that's racist, then so too are protons, hurricanes, and the number 5. The first statement is the literal truth; and even the second clause is fairly innocuous—though, obviously, not to an anti-racist like Van Norden.

The same is true of Van Norden's second paraphrase.

He tells us that Nicholas Tampio "pronounced that Philosophy originates in Plato's *Republic*."

Since earlier Peone stressed the word "philosophy," perhaps this is basically what Tampio means, too. Or, at the least, perhaps Peone was saying that *Western philosophy is, well, western*, not that philosophy itself *can only be western*. Yet, the same is also true of Chinese/Indian philosophy. That is, there'll be elements of Chinese/Indian philosophy that are utterly peculiar to it. Does that then mean that if a Chinese/Indian philosopher—or academic—stated this fact (or gave an example), then he too would be a racist?

Orientalism/Occidentalism

Van Norden informs us of one of his own political influences: Edward W Said. The professor is particularly inspired by Edward Said's theory of [*Orientalism*](#). Thus Van Norden quotes Said in this way:

The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different;' thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal.'

In terms of the specifics of Van Norden's essay and the influence of Edward Said, it can be said that the two writers view both negative and positive accounts of the "Orient" as being equally bad.

Van Norden even sees the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida within this Saidian context of "Western Orientalism." This may seem odd to many fans of Heidegger and Derrida. That's because both philosophers were influenced by what's often called "Eastern philosophy." (In fits of positive Orientalism, many commentators and philosophers have over-exaggerated this non-Western influence on both Heidegger and Derrida—particularly on Heidegger.)

Van Norden quotes the following passage from Heidegger, which he deems to be racist:

The often-heard expression 'Western-European philosophy' is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature . . . the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold.

Now, what about Jacques Derrida?

Strictly speaking, although Derrida is deemed to be racist (at least in terms of his position on non-Western philosophy), it would be better to class the following passage (in adherence to Van Norden's political theory) as being a case of *positive Orientalism*. As Van Norden himself puts it:

. . . on a visit to China in 2001, Jacques Derrida stunned his hosts (who teach in Chinese philosophy departments) by announcing that 'China does not have any philosophy, only thought.' In response to the obvious shock of his audience, Derrida insisted that 'Philosophy is related to some sort of particular history, some languages, and some ancient Greek invention . . . It is something of European form.'

This means that Van Norden (in contradistinction to many Heideggerians, fans of Derrida, and post-structuralists/Deconstructors generally) believes that both Heidegger's and Derrida's words on this subject

are as condescending as talk of 'noble savages,' who are untainted by the corrupting influences of the West, but are for that very reason barred from participation in higher culture.

This means that both Heidegger and Derrida would have to be trapped in Van Norden's pure/extreme anti-racist snare. Had Heidegger and Derrida *ignored* non-Western philosophy/thought, then Van Norden would have classed them as "racist." They didn't ignore it. Yet Van Norden still believes that they had a "noble savage" (i.e., positive Orientalist) view of non-

Western philosophy/thought. Therefore, either way, Heidegger and Derrida couldn't win. Indeed, Van Norden has placed himself in a holier-than-thou position in which even Derrida—the Prophet of the Other—is deemed to have been a racist.

Are these poetic passages (from Derrida's ['Violence and Metaphysics'](#)) also racist?

This thought calls upon the ethical relationship—a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other—as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics . . .

Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same. The ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession. 'If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power.' To violence and metaphysics see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same... providing an alibi for the historical violence of light: a displacement of technicopolitical oppression in the direction of philosophical discourse.

Yes, the anti-racist revolution is truly eating its own

children.

Where does Edward Said and Van Norden's position leave Western philosophers and other academics? Perhaps they should embrace Marxism, Freudianism, and the work of Michel Foucault—as Edward Said himself did. Perhaps only then would their comments on non-Western histories, peoples, and cultures be politically pure.

What Van Norden must be arguing, then, is that non-Western philosophy is (in at least many important respects) indistinguishable from Western philosophy. However, if he doesn't claim that, then how can he sustain his entire position as commented upon so far?

Let's recap Van Norden's political position.

Racists dismiss non-Western philosophy as not being philosophy at all. That, according to Van Norden, is obviously wrong. Positive Orientalists (like Heidegger and Derrida), on the other hand, say that non-Western thought is indeed something different; though still good and a worthwhile subject of study. According to Van Norden, that position is also wrong.

Oriental Occidentalism

In addition to all that, Van Norden appears not to realise that there's also been a long tradition of Occidentalism in the non-Western world. Edward Said himself—it can easily be

argued—simply added to that Occidentalist position. (As did, for example, the black “essentialist,” Franz Fanon.)

Here’s one definition of Occidentalism:

Occidentalism refers to dehumanizing stereotypes of the Western world, Europe, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Just to give a couple of examples.

In China we have the case of “Traditions Regarding Western Countries” in the *Twenty-Four Histories* (from the 5th century onward) in which Chinese knowledge of the West didn’t venture beyond Syria. (At least [according to Dr Alastair Bonnett](#).) In this period, then, China’s knowledge of the West was severely limited. Indeed, curiosity about—and research into—the West was frowned upon by China’s rulers until the 19th century. Not surprisingly, Westerners were seen as “barbarians” long before the Chinese had experienced the British empire.

It’s also the case that “stereotypes” about the West and Westerners [can be found in Japaneses, Chinese and Indian art](#).

Perhaps more relevantly, much of the politics of “anti-colonialist” theorists are very Occidentalist in nature. However, Marxists/left-wingers and Edward Said himself would have said that all this was an entirely *reactive* response to

“Western imperialism.” (Can that really be said of Chinese Occidentalism, which dates back hundreds of years before British empire?) In that case, perhaps much of Western Orientalism was reactive, too.

One can also find much [Occidentalism in Islam, Chinese Maoism, and Japanese nationalism](#). Were all these *reactive* in nature? Namely, are left-leaning academics claiming that Western Orientalism *isn't* reactive; whereas non-Western Occidentalism is *reactive*? Wouldn't that be another neat, racist (i.e., anti-Western/white), and Manichean division?

Conclusion

Let's give one final example from Bryan Van Norden.

He tells us that a philosophy professor (“in a mainstream philosophy department in the US Midwest”) once said:

This is the intellectual tradition we work in. Take it or leave it.

Now, every faculty on the planet has its own focus and specialities—such as Black Studies or what's studied at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. Yet, according to Van Norden, this rejection of non-Western philosophy (Chinese philosophy, in this case) is an example of “thinly veiled racism.” Really? If someone in a Russian

Studies Department wanted to be “inclusive” and broaden things out by, for example, including the Hungarian language or literature, would that also be *thinly-veiled racism* toward Hungarians if that request were rejected? Should the UK and US departments which concentrate on Subaltern Studies also be more inclusive? Or, more relevantly, should philosophy departments that concentrate on what’s called *Continental Philosophy* broaden their own horizons by allowing in professors who are experts on the analytic philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine, the (analytic) philosophy of science, or the (analytic) philosophy of mind?

I’ve just mentioned the specialist nature of, literally, all university departments.

Perhaps the fact (if it is a fact) that there are only a few Philosophy departments that specialise in non-Western thought is partly because many other university departments have taken over that job. In addition, there are countless university departments that offer “studies” which advance the political causes in which Van Norden believes. (For example, Black Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Subaltern Studies, Deconstruction, Critical Race Theory, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, etc.) In fact, these positions or studies rule the roost in many American university departments and even in the entire universities themselves.

Yet Professor Van Norden wants more!

He wants a multiculturalist *hegemony* which is much more loyal to his own “multicultural manifesto.”

In many respects that multiculturalist hegemony already exists and has since at least the 1980s. However, as I said, Van Norden wants a stronger, more widespread and more complete hegemony—one that must now also include all American and British Philosophy departments.

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