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The Conversation of Philosophy: A Polemical Response to Carine Defoort



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In “‘Chinese Philosophy’ at European Universities,” Professor Defoort criticizes the institutional “place” of Chinese and “non-Western” studies at European universities. In order to demonstrate the problem, she describes the situation at the KU Leuven Department of History and its Institute of Philosophy (of which I am proud to be a staff member). Regarding many of the important issues Defoort raises, I do not feel sufficiently competent to respond. For I am caught in Schwitzgebel’s vicious circle (see Defoort’s endnote 14): completely ignorant about non-Western philosophy and lacking the required language skills, I cannot engage, as a philosopher, with non-Western texts. At the end of her article, however, Defoort makes a number of recommendations to remedy the situation that touch upon broader issues, including the relation between philosophy and politics. After some preliminary remarks, I briefly query Defoort’s view of this relation¹ and steer the discussion toward the sorts of arguments in favor of Chinese or non-Western philosophy that I expect may have cogency.

Professor Defoort’s general complaint is that there is too deep an institutional divide in Europe between area- and language-focused studies of the “non-West” on the one hand and the social sciences or other humanities on the other. She illustrates this divide with a description of the prevailing situation at the History department. Predictably, the uneasy institutional location in-between disciplines places scholars of non-Western sources at a disadvantage (when it comes to obtaining funding or being accepted by prestigious journals or publishers). However, Defoort’s main concern pertains to education. Students interested in Chinese sociology, economics, politics, or history are perfectly capable of completing their university education without ever acquiring either the language skills or the methodological expertise that are essential to doing interesting work on these topics.

I cannot judge whether this divide is real, although I have no reason to doubt it. Nevertheless, I would have thought that acquiring the language skills and local knowledge required to interpret non-Western sources was a daunting enough assignment as it is for a three-year bachelor’s program. At any rate, KU Leuven offers various so-called “bridging” programs² that allow students with a Bachelor’s degree in Chinese or Japanese to enroll directly in a Master’s program in political science or to obtain, after only one additional year, a second Bachelor’s degree, for example in philosophy.

Professor Defoort’s main concern is indeed with the situation at philosophy departments such as KU Leuven’s Institute of Philosophy. Her incisive conclusions are undisputable. The Institute of Philosophy offers electives on non-Western philosophy, but students can graduate without having taken any of these courses. A student

can certainly write a Master's thesis on non-Western philosophy. However, she will be very much on her own, for the topical expertise required to guarantee detailed supervision is barely available.

Nevertheless, the Institute has begun to implement some of the changes Professor Defoort proposes. For example, a scholar of Arabic philosophy holds an admittedly very minimal appointment (10 percent). And we have begun adapting our rhetoric. Adroitly, Defoort confronts us with some of our blurbs advertising a "comprehensive" program covering "a large field of philosophy." Although the intention of these phrases was to publicize that we teach both Continental and analytical philosophy, coming from an institute that offers very little non-Western philosophy it could be interpreted to suggest that we exclude non-Western sources from our conception of what constitutes "philosophy." So, in our 2016 *Facultaire beleidsvisie Onderwijs* (our "Education Mission Statement"), we explicitly acknowledge that our programs are overwhelmingly restricted to Western philosophy (without denying the input or significance of other sources).³

Supporters of non-Western philosophy will no doubt view these hesitant changes as too little, too late. They will see the ignorance to which I confessed in the first paragraph as being only too typical of the Institute's staff. And they will be right. But let me add two remarks to this confession. First, I by no means believe that what I do not know is not worth knowing. I wish, for instance, that I knew more about the Chinese authors Defoort provides in her long list of names ("there is a total absence of expertise on Confucius, Mozi, Mencius . . . [etc.]")—surely, we should not define "philosophy" in a way that excludes these authors. Second, there are a zillion things I wish I knew or understood, but do not. Everyone in philosophy or history or the humanities ought in all honesty to admit that they are ignorant of an abundance of material worth knowing, have not read books or seen pictures that merit study, and so on. My ignorance is, therefore, in a sense unjustifiable but also, to my mind, unavoidable.

For Professor Defoort, however, the situation is unjustifiable in a different sense. The deplorable state of non-Western philosophy at philosophy departments in Europe is the result of *unfair* exclusion and *irrational* resistance. Finding rational argument "increasingly futile," Defoort seems to abandon hope of any reasonable discussion on the matter. This is clear from the development of her paper. Early in the paper (section 1.1), she lists seven arguments in favor of Chinese philosophy. By the end, however, only the political arguments remain, namely the values of pluralism and respect for "others" as well as the increasing power of China and India. The *philosophical* or intellectual arguments have been discarded. In her concluding remarks, Defoort therefore calls for an explicitly *political* intervention and hopes that (political) power will force the Institute of Philosophy "to open up to the world."

By calling for political measures and retaining only political arguments, Professor Defoort highlights a tension that philosophers too readily ignore—a tension articulated by the two words in our faculty's name: "Institute" and "Philosophy."⁴ The Institute of Philosophy is part of an educational system that is, fortunately, almost entirely public. This means that all but an infinitesimal part of its funding is derived

from taxes levied by the Flemish regional government. Consequently, our Institute and the education it provides have undeniably *political* dimensions. Moreover, given that the Flemish government is democratically legitimate, it is entitled to impose democratically unobjectionable political measures, for instance measures such as Professor Defoort recommends: forcing us to hire certain people or to include courses within our curriculum.

As a democrat and a civil servant of a democratic and liberal state, I cannot reject the general principle that the Institute is subject to political authority and to that authority's policies. As an academic fortunate enough to find employment as a philosopher, however, I cannot but adhere to another principle: that such political measures cannot include anything within the *philosophical* part of the curriculum. Much that the state or its government does, is philosophically interesting, but state of government action cannot dictate the significance of topics or sources for philosophy. As a philosopher, I must believe in the independence of philosophy.

But we must be careful. Let us not be duped by a traditional interpretation of this independence. On such an interpretation, philosophy is independent from politics and power because it is the mouthpiece of Universal Reason. Professor Defoort attributes this interpretation to some of her opponents allegedly posing as the "champions of open-mindedness," laying "claim to a placeless place" and attempting "to transcend the parochial." Defoort rightly wonders how these opponents reconcile this understanding of philosophy with the exclusion of non-Western philosophy.

This is not my idea of philosophy. In fact, the history of philosophy is a haphazard process, shaped in part by "gatekeeping practices and institutional resistance," by "dominant paradigms, discursive regimes, and symbolic violence" that determine the relevance of what people study. It is a process, moreover, with a distinct ethnocentric dimension. And while philosophy often tries (with varying success) to keep its distance from people in control of the state and/or public debate, Western philosophy nevertheless forms an integral part of European history, including its centuries of imperialism and colonialism.

Without taking back a single word from the previous paragraph, however, I do not see how I could continue to cherish philosophy if we cannot claim for it a form of independence. This is the independence of conversation used in the sense introduced by Michael Oakeshott (1991b; 1991a, pp. 304–305). Conversation, according to Oakeshott, is a "meeting-place" where diverse voices or kinds of discourse "acknowledge each other" (Oakeshott 1991b, p. 198). To be sure, he speaks of (1) *the* conversation of mankind (2) consisting of basic kinds of discourses "with each voice a reflection of a human activity": practical activity, science, poetry, history. But I see no reason not to broaden the notion. Rather than one conversation of humankind, we recognize several conversations (taking place consecutively or simultaneously at different places). "Conversation" so understood can then be a term to characterize not only the history of general culture but the history of at least some of the particular voices within general culture—for instance, the history of art, literature, or philosophy or of philosophy in a particular region of the world. The crucial fact is that

such conversation is unthinkable in the absence of a diversity of “idioms of human utterance.” Philosophy as a conversation must include different voices (some of them would be characterized by Professor Defoort as “paradigmatically Western,” others “partly Western” or “non-Western”).

In a conversation, every contribution has “a proper occasion of utterance.” What is successful at one moment (the nimble change of topic, the incisive point made, the devastating ridicule of another person’s argument or claim) may fail at a different moment. Skillfully executed at the right time, moreover, a locution has “cogency” in the sense that it sends the conversation off in a certain direction (Oakeshott 1991b, p. 198). This constitutes a “normativity of conversation”; what is apposite now may not be so later. Nevertheless, it is a form of normativity that respects the diversity of voices. It “neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another,” and there is neither one goal (the discovery of truth, the demonstration of a conclusion) nor one set of criteria:

There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. (Oakeshott 1991b, p. 198)

In order to understand philosophy’s independence from power, we must understand this normativity of conversation. On the one hand, Oakeshott forgets to mention that absence of hierarchy and openness does not mean that just anyone can participate; most conversations are indeed held “among the members of a restricted club.” (When ladies converse, for instance, no contributions are expected from the footmen pouring tea.) On the other hand, success in conversation depends only on what is internal to conversation. It depends on the rhetorical force of a conversational remark that sufficiently piques the interest of others as to be taken up by them. It is the interest a remark holds for other participants that makes it conversable and thereby determines the further course of the conversation. The normativity of conversation is rhetorical; it is the normativity of interest.

It is this normativity of interest that ensures the independence of conversation from power. No amount of political power can guarantee participation in a conversation, impose topics, or determine the course of the conversation. Power can only interrupt the conversation or create an embarrassing silence. To understand the history of philosophy as a conversation is therefore not to deny that philosophy is political or that it is shaped by gatekeeping practices, institutional resistance, and other manifestations of power. It is, however, to insist that it is only by virtue of capturing the interest of philosophers that a subject matter may contribute to and become part of the conversation of philosophy. Topics or ideas or arguments are only conversed about when they find a philosophical audience. Sometimes that takes a generation or two. And certainly it entails exclusion; even if, in an ideal world, everyone would be able to participate, not everyone would be able to converse about the topics that are of interest to them or maneuver the conversation onto terrain that they prefer. Consequently, it may very well be justified to exert political power to impose Chinese

philosophy on an institute of philosophy on the grounds of Realpolitik or social ethics. Such an imposition, however, cannot make Chinese philosophy part of the current conversation of philosophy of its own accord.

To insist on the independence of philosophy as a conversation is not to say that hiring a non-Western expert or including mandatory courses on non-Western philosophy as Professor Defoort recommends would endanger that independence. It is merely to indicate a striking lacuna in Defoort's argumentation—a lacuna all the more striking for the fact that it can only be filled by someone with the vast knowledge of Chinese or non-Western sources that Defoort possesses. In addition to the political arguments mentioned above, Defoort does present *philosophical* arguments. But these are limited to general remarks about the undoubted value of non-Western material, the benefits of engaging the unfamiliar (the "Other") and its capacity to unsettle our tacit assumptions and thereby prompt self-reflection.⁵

More specific arguments in favor of non-Western philosophy are required if we are to kindle the interest of philosophers. Such arguments are certainly being made. To mention two very recent examples, Richard Kim shows how contemporary moral psychology intersects with recent discussions of early Confucianism (Kim 2016, p. 474). And, writing from an African perspective, Polycarp Ikuenobe proposes a new conception of dignity that highlights the importance of community and responsibility rather than individual rights (Ikuenobe 2016).⁶

Surely there is no lack of topics about which present-day philosophers do not very well know what to say. Similarly, there is plenty of room for new ideas, concepts, insights, and arguments—or indeed old ideas, concepts, and insights that have to date been all too readily ignored—if only to kick-start a conversation that has been going around in circles for too long. Such an endeavor, however, demands capturing an audience for these new or old ideas and, in so doing, steering the conversation in a new direction once more. Once this is achieved, and the success of non-Western material in enriching philosophical conversation is unmistakable, more and more students will in turn want to learn the skills and knowledge needed to study that material. At that point, the personal interests of staff members at philosophy departments will no longer be of consequence. At that point, the inclusion of such material in their programs will indeed be imposed, just not by the exertion of political power but through philosophical conversation.

Notes

I am grateful to Antoon Braeckman for comments on an earlier draft and to Jeremy McKenna for improvements of my English.

- 1 – It goes without saying that silencing Professor Defoort's attempts to raise this problem in the media, as reported in her section on "Europe as a Locus of Study" and in her note 21, is unworthy of a university.
- 2 – For examples, see <http://www.kuleuven.be/toekomstigestudenten/publicaties/schakelbrochures.html> (accessed November 26, 2016).

- 3 – See <https://www.kuleuven.be/onderwijs/cobra/portaal/2015/nl/visies/facultaire-onderwijsvisie-en-beleidsplan-hoger.pdf> (accessed November 26, 2016).
- 4 – The Institute’s full name translates as “Higher Institute of Philosophy”; in French, the original language of teaching, “Institut Supérieur de Philosophie.”
- 5 – Are the unsettling effects that prompt self-reflection best obtained by studying non-Western philosophy? One sure way of forcing fledgling students of philosophy “out of their comfort zone” appears to be a stiff course in formal logic. We should not unthinkingly identify the “unsettling” with the “geographically remote.”
- 6 – See also Wong 2016.

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Outrageously Irrelevant Remarks of a Girl in a Closed Conversation: A Reply to Tim Heysse



Carine Defoort

Imagine: the Western world falls apart under political, financial, and social pressure. One result is that all funding for philosophy is suspended and diverted to STEM