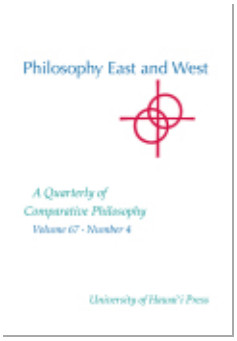
Outrageously Irrelevant Remarks of a Girl in a Closed Conversation: A Reply to Tim Heysse



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Philosophy East and West, Volume 67, Number 4, October 2017, pp. 1086-1091 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0094

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

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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

courses (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Politicians in the U.S. and Europe, along with their voters, declare the whole tradition of philosophy a total fiasco for its inability to prevent the crisis or to show a way out. Because of this lack of funding and respect, philosophy no longer exists as an academic discipline in the mid-twenty-first century, but only as a private hobby of maladjusted, wealthy eccentrics.

At the same time, China has become so confident and rich that ample funding for research on the "masters" is provided. A Western lover of philosophy with vision and courage—let us call him Julian West—applies for funding arguing that Aristotle was also some sort of "master." His application is turned down, of course, because Aristotle had nothing to say about Yao's abdication to Shun, nor about Tang and Wu's apparent acts of regicide. But West keeps trying to convince the members of the funding committee with arguments that might appeal to them. He therefore reinterprets Aristotle's work in a fashion that is both painfully distorting and refreshingly novel, reading the early Greek thinker in a way that might convince the Chinese committee, and perhaps even attract Western intellectuals who had lost interest in philosophy. Despite West's serious attempts to produce a strong and well-written Chinese application, the committee is not convinced. Academic quality and the political freedom of their decisions are their greatest concern. Even the fact that up until the early twenty-first century philosophy had been an age-long thriving intellectual enterprise and might even contribute to the reflection on Chinese masters does not make them budge. But after a few generations, some committee members become generous and open-minded enough to provide support for projects that do not strike them as entirely relevant to the ongoing conversation. As a result, research on Western philosophy occasionally gets funded again, even without trying to make Aristotle sound like a "master."

This fictive story could go on. But anyone in the field of non-Western philosophy can enhance this thought experiment with examples from his or her current predicament. If Feng Youlan (1895–1990), one of Chinese philosophy's earliest promoters, was the Chinese Julian West, then I am that later applicant who has enjoyed the support of generous committee members without even trying to be paradigmatically philosophical. Hence, with little to complain about, I nevertheless value the occasion to speak up in a conversation that has thus far been remarkably sealed off. What really pleases me is that Tim Heysse, the vice-dean for education of my university's Institute of Philosophy, elaborates on two papers by Michael Oakeshott (1901–1991): "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" (referred to below as Oakeshott 1959) and "The Study of Politics in a University" (referred to below as Oakeshott 1961).[1] The former was the subject of a course that I attended at the Institute in the 1980s taught by one of its most inspiring professors, Arnold Burms. It is with delight and gratitude that I continue the conversation in line with Heysse's reflections. But first I want to reformulate my view.

Heysse is dismayed by the "striking lacuna in Defoort's argumentation," namely the lack of "*philosophical* or intellectual arguments" (his italics) that "might have cogency" and that could induce philosophers to welcome non-Western ideas into

their current conversation. He believes that in philosophy "there is plenty of room for new ideas, concepts, insights, and arguments." All we have to do is capture an audience for them and steer the conversation in a new direction. Hence, we should present the best ideas in Chinese philosophy, to which philosophical experts will then patiently lend their ear. "Once this is achieved, and the success of non-Western material in enriching philosophical conversation is unmistakeable," the problem will be solved. Heysse's trust in philosophers' mental openness is touching and so overwhelming that he simply overlooks the topic of my article. It is not about Chinese thought at all; it is about us. The last decades have provided more than enough academic contributions full of philosophical arguments in favor of Chinese (and other non-Western) philosophy. The contribution of my article is a description of one possible cause for the almost total failure of these ideas to capture the attention and steer the conversation, namely the institutional context that obstructs non-Western content and that limits mental openness at Philosophy departments to a small scope of texts compared to what is available in the world.

Heysse's spontaneous expectation to be provided with yet another set of arguments in favor of Chinese philosophy has steered his reading in directions that are somewhat puzzling. I expressed my worry that students at our university can graduate in almost any department with no knowledge at all about China or any non-Western region; my worry is *not* that students interested in China can complete their university education without acquiring the necessary language skills or the methodological expertise. Such knowledge of China, I admitted, is indeed, exceptionally, dispensable. Heysse, moreover, finds the acquisition of language skills and local knowledge to interpret non-Western sources daunting enough for a three-year bachelor's program. But I show that this view takes our institutional setting for granted, and that other educational systems provide such acquisition in combination with disciplinary training at the outset of a student's education. And finally, Heysse also points out that KU Leuven offers disciplinary training in, for example, political science or philosophy for area-studies students. This is indeed the case, and I have no worries about students in Area studies failing to obtain a disciplinary training. They usually do. The point of my article was that the Institute in general, just like this specific response of its vice-dean, is unconsciously steered to see things in a very limited way. This point is worthwhile bringing in to the conversation for the sake of philosophy itself.

But let us focus on what I applaud in Heysse's response. First he indicates that the Institute has begun to adapt its universal rhetoric and is becoming increasingly explicit in its regional restriction to Western thought. I consider this an honorable option, even though I prefer the decision of Leiden University (Netherlands) to hire specialists of non-Western thought in its Philosophy department. Second, Heysse points out that the situation at the Institute is slowly changing: the 10 percent appointment for Arabic philosophy is indeed good news. I would have looked forward to a collaboration with Arabic Studies were it not that our university has just now decided to diminish Arabic language courses on the MA level, along with the total abolishment of Slavonic Studies.

Third, I welcome Heysse's defense of philosophy as a conversation, "a 'meeting-place' where diverse voices or kinds of discourse 'acknowledge each other'." Instead of a neutral forum or universal sphere of argumentation, it is a process "with a distinct ethnocentric dimension." Heysse worries that the intrusion of political power "can only interrupt the conversation or create an embarrassing silence." I agree with this metaphor inspired by Oakeshott's work, and also with his rejection of undue political pressure on academia. But I think that the conversation has expanded during the last century, whether my colleagues at the Institute like it or not. We must uphold some of the virtues that have always characterized a decent conversation, such as a degree of humility, curiosity, and politeness and, above all, a capacity for reflection. Of course, I hope, together with Heysse, that at some point in the future, some Chinese (or non-Western) texts manage to appeal to Western scholars' interest. That, however, will depend not only on the content of these texts but also on the quality of the reflection entertained at Philosophy departments. By restating my proposal in line with Oakeshott, I want to show that two types of external power might be able to enhance this quality: mild political pressure and occasional disruption.

As for the former, Heysse agrees that a certain degree of political influence is inevitably part of the academic enterprise. But he worries that the insistence on creating institutional space for experts in non-Western thought who have not yet piqued their colleagues' attention might curb intellectual freedom at the Institute. We also both agree that Oakeshott's insights ought to be adapted to the current age. The mid–twentieth-century conservative philosopher's treatment of the gender issue, for instance, is remarkably outdated. Oakeshott exclusively writes about education in male terms (he, himself, a man, a schoolboy), only twice referring to women: once to "a girl bunching flowers" (Oakeshott 1961, p. 224) and once to a girl making "an outrageously irrelevant remark" in order to escape the conclusion of an argument (Oakeshott 1959, p. 198). Both comments are meant to favorably illustrate interruptions into the exclusively argumentative mode. Oakeshott's point is well taken, but for a contemporary reader his innocent sexism causes a mixture of feelings, such as relief that those days are (at least partially) over, incredulous wonder about a very recent past, a sense of historical contingency, and a pleasant liberation from the current political correctness that insists on using "she" as a default, a fashion that Heysse also submits to. Much like women, other cultures are largely invisible in Oakeshott's reflection about voices that can contribute to the conversation, which is also understandable in the pre-global world of half a century ago. Heysse indicates that Oakeshott's notion of conversation can be broadened to include other cultures: "Surely, we should not define 'philosophy' in a way that excludes these [Chinese] authors." "Philosophy as a conversation must include different voices." As soon as they are able to capture philosophers' interest and demonstrate their unmistakeable contribution to the enrichment of the philosophical conversation, the problem will be solved of itself.

With these positive prospects, Heysse believes that political pressure is unasked for. Again, Oakeshott has to be somewhat adapted in order to defend philosophy's independence from power. Since success "is internal to conversation," Heysse is

convinced that "a conversational remark that sufficiently piques the interest of others" will be taken up by them. Oakeshott's ideal of a conversation, however, explicitly rejects hierarchy and "a doorkeeper to examine credentials" (Oakeshott 1959, p. 198), but Heysse has to admit that the history of philosophy is shaped by such practices. My own somewhat reluctant insistence on political pressure is not meant as a form of authoritarian control over research and education, but merely as a mild stir to a conversation that may have "been going around in circles for too long." As the vice-dean of an almost exclusively male philosophy department, Heysse does not complain about the external pressure that has led to the recent appointment of a few female colleagues at the Institute. Without this pressure, women for generations were unable to captivate the interest of the insiders. I trust that the quality of the conversation at the Institute has not suffered too much from this political intrusion.

My second argument in favor of outside intrusion into the conversation is that this can benefit philosophical reflection. The voices that Oakeshott is mainly concerned about are neither gender related nor linguistic or cultural, but variations in teaching and research. He tries to distinguish the "poetic" voice from that of "science" and "history" (Oakeshott 1959), and "university" education from that given in "schools" and "vocational" training (Oakeshott 1961). Philosophy's contribution is to reflect upon these voices. Similarly, the study of politics on the university level should be a reflection of the political voice within important texts, and not a collection of ideas, methods, predictions, or recommendations. However valuable on a vocational level, in an education worthy of the name "university," Oakeshott does not appreciate a study of, for example, Plato's *Republic* or Hobbes' *Leviathan* that searches for relevant ideas while presuming their political nature, based on a belief that they are "in some sense 'about politics' and therefore assumed to have a political 'ideal', or program, or policy, or device to recommend." The deplorable result of such teaching (at least at universities) is that the attention gets "narrowed down to listening either for the political *faux pas* [of such outdated books] or for the echoes of political modernity" (Oakeshott 1961, p. 324). What university education aims at is reflection on the political mode of thought in these texts, and not the discovery of notions highly appreciated today such as "natural law," "general will," "freedom," "the rule of law," "justice," or "sovereignty" (Oakeshott 1961, p. 331).

Much of what is taught at the Institute, however, is "vocational"—useful, pragmatic, and informative—in Oakeshott's terms. The courses that I attended sometimes began with some introductory reflections on the nature of philosophy before moving on to the real business: theories, concepts, insights, and debates. I usually found them very interesting, but there has been little reflection on the philosophical voice in important texts, lingering on the question of how philosophy is shaped in each of them, what is included or excluded, why, and how. I do welcome parochialism, especially if it reflects upon the self-established frontiers of its own sphere. During my almost four decades of rather close acquaintance with the Institute, I have never heard any reflection about the exclusion of Chinese (or other non-Western) texts, except for the simple comment that they contain wisdom, not philosophy—a statement that is hardly worthy of what Oakeshott considered a university. For the same

reasons, I have never given philosophical arguments in favor of the acceptance of Chinese philosophy, nor would I trace such entities as "natural law," "freedom," or "the rule of law" in these texts. Philosophically such endeavors are not particularly exciting because they are more concerned with proving a point and correcting a situation than with the delight of reflection.

Therefore, my appeal to outside pressure is not only a mild form of political correction but, more importantly, an appreciation of occasional intrusions in the conversation. The confrontation with a disturbing outsider might end up inspiring an insider to reflect upon the voice of philosophy—the nature and history of its cultural, regional, or linguistic demarcation—without necessarily trying to defend or emend it. I do not particularly worry about the future of the Chinese masters, whether or not they are being labeled philosophy. But I do worry about the unreflective attitude at my home institution. As an outsider to the Institute, but nevertheless closely connected, I disrupt the internal conversation to express my hope that our Philosophy department will at some point revitalize its reflection. The non-philosophical arguments in the conclusion of my article are admittedly as futile as the philosophical ones that I declined to offer. But they are directed toward that aim. I trust that in an inexplicable way—one that I cannot argue for convincingly—philosophical reflection one day will no longer exclude from the outset everything that is non-Western. What Western philosophy therefore occasionally needs is an outrageously irrelevant remark from a girl who does not belong in the closed club.

Notes

I want to express my gratitude to Nicolas Standaert and Sarah Schreurs for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this reply.

1 – These two essays are collected in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, [1962] 1977). See "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" on pp. 197–247 (originally published under that title in 1959 [London: Bowes and Bowes] and referred to in the present reply as Oakeshott 1959, and in Heysse's response as Oakeshott 1991b), and "The Study of Politics in a University" on pp. 301–333 (referred to in the present reply as Oakeshott 1961, and in Heysse's response as Oakeshott 1991a). The page numbers differ from the 1991 edition used by Heysse.