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Diversified Philosophy

Aili Bresnahan

When I was an undergraduate philosophy major in the late 1980s at Columbia University in New York, there was a philosophy library in the back of the main library on campus. It was a small room, and the bookshelves were stacked with old and dusty texts, primarily from what used to be considered the core canon of philosophy proper. At that time, way back in the 1900s, the books that lined those shelves were authored by philosophers who were predominately male, white, and from Europe or the United States. I fell in love with texts by Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Nietzsche, Kant, and Hegel. It did not yet occur to me that this might be a tradition in which I might not belong. So much for the ignorance of youth, a fault that one gets over soon enough.

Soon enough, I discovered that the resources that canonical philosophy offered for addressing contemporary problems of justice were slim. Soon enough, I learned that “aesthetics” was often confined to discussions of beauty and the sublime. Soon enough, I learned that if I wanted to write as myself, and to philosophise from my own vantage point, I had better come to grips with the fact that this self may not speak in the sort of language recognised by the Academy or have things to say that are of interest to it.

I am a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, abled woman. This is a fairly common and privileged position to be in. And yet it is still fairly uncommon to philosophise from this

vantage point. It is also fairly uncommon to philosophise in non-standard ways, such as engaging in applied philosophy, experimental philosophy, interdisciplinary philosophy, and philosophy that acknowledges they body and lived experience as legitimate sources of evidence for claims.

The good news is that more and more I am finding that there are margins, corners, and spaces where I can say precisely what I want to say and how. This magazine is one of these spaces. Nor is it alone. This is true because philosophy is diversifying. It is diversifying in terms of who is writing and teaching philosophy, it is diversifying the subject matter upon which philosophy philosophises, and it is diversifying the range of what kinds of methods count as philosophical.

If one looks at recent job listings for philosophers in the U.S. for this academic year one finds a noticeable uptick in departments looking for philosophers in traditionally underrepresented groups (particularly women and racial minorities). There is also an increase in departments who are seeking philosophers with specialties in the following:

- 1) environmental and sustainability philosophy,
- 2) non-Western philosophy,
- 3) applied ethics,
- 4) socio-political philosophy, and
- 5) philosophers who are capable of working in interdisciplinary contexts within and outside of the humanities.

Conferences and other projects which encourage interdisciplinary discourse are taking place. In philosophy of mind, for example, there are numerous projects in which philosophers work with researchers in cognitive science and neuroscience to better understand things like the nature of consciousness, perception, and creativity. There are moral and ethical philosophers working with psychologists to better understand phenomena such as moral belief, habits, and behaviour. There are philosophers working in philosophy for children projects, philosophers working on hospital ethics boards, philosophers working in communities of disabled and displaced persons, and philosophers working in prisons. There is also a small but mighty cadre of dance philosophers.

In addition, in many university contexts philosophy departments are being asked to justify and demonstrate their impact on public thought and on communities outside of academia. This has led to an increase in public and popular philosophy, philosophical humour sites, podcasts, and blogs. Philosophical ideas are also occurring in popular movies and in Ted talks. Sites like McSweeney's.net and Brain Pickings, the Noam Chomsky animated documentary film by Michael Gondry, *Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?*, popular philosophy books like *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar* and *On Bullshit*, and the prevalence and persistence of Trolley Problem memes attest to this. Even formerly staunch and staid university presses have been publishing philosophy anthologies and series in popular culture, addressing such subjects as fan fiction, Japanese *manga*, sports and outdoor athletic hobbies, cult movies, twerking, martial arts, hip hop, and more.

No philosopher worth their salt can proceed without addressing an objection to their central claim so here are a couple:

- 1) If these changes occur won't they water down the field?
- 2) Will philosophy even *be* philosophy anymore if this happens?

The answer to both questions is simply this: Yes. Old-school philosophy will still exist for those who prefer their philosophy straight from the bottle of tradition rather than on the rocks of popular language and taste or mixed with insights from a broader range of traditions and disciplines. Historical philosophy will still exist for those who want to read the "masters" of old. It will still be philosophy, just revised and expanded to better include the writing of underrepresented groups who were previously ignored.

These suggestions are just a beginning, and philosophy still lags far behind many other fields in its diversification efforts, but it is one that will continue. It will do so if for no other reason than that the motivating animus that drives philosophy is not to uphold tradition but a desire to understand the structure, nature, meaning, and value of the entities and phenomena of the world in all its complexity and context. If the canon becomes castor oil, it will not be willingly imbibed. And if we lose the will to philosophise about what truly is, to consume it, to live it, and to speak it, then philosophy will be, indeed, lost.

Aili Bresnahan is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Dayton in Ohio. She specialises in applied philosophy of dance and American pragmatism even though she has been warned that she ought not specialise in two weird things at once.