APA Newsletters

ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHIES

FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

HISPANIC/LATINO ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY
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FROM THE EDITORS

Editors’ Introduction: Buddhist Modernism and Its Discontents

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I. OVERVIEW

Evan Thompson’s new book, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, is a provocative, insightful, and challenging critique of what he calls “Buddhist modernism” (1), a broad religious, cultural, and intellectual movement that he regards as “the dominant strand of modern Buddhism” (1). Like Bertrand Russell’s “Why I Am Not a Christian” and similarly named texts like Kancha Ilaiah’s Why I Am Not a Hindu, Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist is, among other things, a critique of the place of the Buddhist modernist movement in our world, especially Europe and North America, today. Unlike those texts, however, Thompson’s target is not Buddhism in its entirety. Nor is his critique purely negative or antagonistic. He neither contends nor asserts, for instance, that Buddhism has no place in the contemporary world. Rather, Thompson’s critique is conceived and formulated from the perspective of a “good friend to Buddhism” (2, 189), one who wishes for Buddhism “to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community” (2). Such a community brings together in deep engagement different religious, philosophical, literary, artistic, social, economic, political, and scientific traditions. Thompson himself, of course, has been a valuable contributor to these conversations between Buddhism, Western philosophy, and the cognitive and brain sciences, beginning with his influential co-authored book, The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience, and then as part of the Mind and Life Institute over the last two decades. Thompson’s main argument is that Buddhism’s contributions to a “modern cosmopolitan community” (2) are diserved by core assumptions and commitments of Buddhist modernism. If Buddhism is best to play its part in this cosmopolitan conversation, a conversation between contemporary science and various religious, philosophical, intellectual, and contemplative traditions, then it must question these assumptions and commitments, “destabilize” (180, 184) them, and eventually repudiate them.

The two key terms in Thompson’s argument are “Buddhist modernism” (1, 172) and “cosmopolitanism” (165–89). That is where much of the cut and thrust occurs between Thompson and his interlocutors in this issue. We will set out briefly how Thompson conceives of these two fundamental concepts and then move to the arguments made by the other contributors to the issue.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM

Thompson uses the term “Buddhist modernism” in much the same way as David L. McMahan does in The Making of Buddhist Modernism, which is to pick out an interrelated set of tendencies and themes in contemporary (largely) Euro-American Buddhist thought. The term is not intended as a definition or to specify a set of necessary or sufficient conditions for an entity (whether a person, community, tradition, culture, movement, concept, conception, viewpoint, theory, argument, commitment, practice, discourse, rhetoric, or apologetics) to be a Buddhist modernist one. Rather, it is meant to highlight some common and recognizable ideas from a complex and diverse tradition arising from the collision of modernism in its broadest and most pluralist sense and the varied histories of different Buddhist traditions. As Thompson makes clear in his “Replies to Critics,” especially his response to Abraham Velez de Cea, he takes Buddhist modernism not to have a “unique [ideological or doctrinal] essence,” defined by a set of rules, tenets, theories, or principles, but rather to be “a broad cultural movement having many variants . . . [and] constituted by clusters of traits or properties,” of which Buddhist modernist traits or properties there is, in general, “a frequency distribution.” The traits or properties with which Thompson concerns himself are those specifically relevant to Euro-American Buddhist modernism and not, say, to the political or nationalistic forms of Buddhist modernism found in Myanmar (formerly Burma) or Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon).

The particular ideas that Thompson targets are relevant to two themes in the philosophy of science and religion. The first theme is the “encounter” (76), “interaction” (179), “exchange” (10), or “dialogue” (48) between Buddhism and modern science, particularly neuroscience. The second theme is the relation between Buddhism and various conceptions of religion as the concept of religion was (and religions themselves were) transformed through (European) Enlightenment secularism. Thompson’s main target is what he calls “Buddhist exceptionalism” (23–55). Thompson defines it as “the belief that Buddhism is superior to other
religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of “mind science,” therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation (2). Buddhist exceptionalists hold that Buddhism is epistemically superior to other religions or to religions generally when religion is understood a certain way. It is held to be superior given an epistemology according to which contemporary science provides us with the standard for rationality and for empirical content and support.

Buddhist exceptionalism, Thompson avers, rests on false or confused assumptions about science and about religion. Chapter 1 of Why I Am Not a Buddhist, “The Myth of Buddhist Exceptionalism,” sets out these issues in broad strokes. In chapter 2, “Is Buddhism True?,” Thompson argues against one Buddhist modernist way of legitimating certain interpretations of Buddhist assertions. Exemplified in Robert Wright’s book Why Buddhism Is True, this approach contends that Buddhism is uniquely supported by evolutionary psychology. Wright’s book is a good example, argues Thompson, of how certain prominent strands of Buddhist modernism tame and domesticate Buddhist ideas by trying to fit them into a limiting naturalistic and scientistic framework. In treating Buddhism as “inherently rational and empirical” (2), as “inherently rational and scientific” (24), and as “inherently more scientific than . . . other religions” (52), Buddhist modernism misses out on what is truly exceptional about (though not unique to) Buddhism, namely, its capacity to challenge commonly held assumptions, to “invigorate our thinking” (85), to “reinvigorate contemporary philosophical debates” (86), and thereby to contribute to an ongoing cosmopolitan discussion.

One influential form that Buddhist exceptionalism takes is “neural Buddhism” (12-13, 19, 52, 87, 144, 163, 192, 227), which Thompson critiques in chapters 3–5. Neural Buddhists take certain interpretations of key Buddhist doctrines and practices such as no-self, awakening (enlightenment), and mindfulness to be corroborated by contemporary cognitive science, particularly neuroscience. They also take a reductive view of relevant concepts associated with those doctrines and practices, treating them as definable solely in terms of brain states or processes. Mindfulness meditation just is brain training; awakening just is a particular brain state (12). Neural Buddhism, Thompson submits, fails on two counts. First of all, it assumes an overly reductive view of our cognitive capacities. Thompson instead champions “4E cognitive science,” which maintains that “cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive” (131) and which grows out of the “enactive approach” articulated and defended in The Embodied Mind (131). He contends that the 4E perspective on cognition is better able to understand the mind and to put Buddhist ideas in dialogue with cognitive science. Secondly, neural Buddhism takes an overly simplistic and highly selective view of the religious, ritual, and traditional aspects of Buddhism. The scientistic fetish for neuroscience is coupled with a reductive Protestantism about all religions that focuses on the individual’s relation to themselves and to (modernized) quintessential Buddhist ideas like awakening at the expense of the depth of historical, exegetical, and faith-based aspects of different Buddhist traditions.

These two commitments support each other. The Protestant individualization of Buddhism enables the excessive and scientistic focus on the individual’s psychology and brain “as seen through neuroimaging technologies” (139) apart from the physical, social, and cultural environments in which the psychology and the brain, indeed the whole embodied being, are embedded. Conversely, the naturalistic framework of the cognitive sciences, including psychology and neuroscience, mandates a naturalistic and individualistic reading of the role and benefits of mindfulness meditation and associated conceptions of awakening that cannot but ignore or downplay interpretations or conceptions of aspects of reality that are necessarily embedded in a larger physical, social, or cultural structure.

This Protestant aspect of Buddhist modernism also underlies, Thompson argues, a particular tangle of conceptual confusions surrounding the idea of awakening or enlightenment. Buddhist modernists are committed to awakening being “psychologically plausible” (149-50, 157), that is, explicable in naturalistic terms as a particular state of the brain, mode of attention, et cetera. Simultaneously, they are committed to the claim that Buddhism is exceptional in not relying on faith in the divine or supernatural, and the claim that awakening is a nonconceptual intuitive state. But, Thompson contends, in order to have some specifiable content to the notion of awakening such that it can be investigated and understood scientifically, it cannot be (purely) nonconceptual. And if one wants to give such specifiable content to the notion while remaining sensitive to the longstanding and ongoing disputes as to the nature of awakening in Buddhist traditions, one cannot do without reference to the notion of nirvana, the reality of which is accepted by Buddhists as a matter of faith. Thompson’s broader point in bringing out this dialectic is to emphasize the importance of the material, embodied, and sociocultural contexts for understanding key Buddhist ideas and putting them in conversation with modern science and other religious, philosophical, and intellectual traditions. Abstracting away from these contexts, as Buddhist modernism does, is to remove the ground on which we stand and grasp those ideas in their fullness, as having meaning other than that which our default scientistic worldview gives them. This broader point brings us to Thompson’s cosmopolitanism.

III. COSMOPOLITANISM

The problem with Buddhist modernism, or so Thompson argues, is that the above Buddhist modernist commitments undermine Buddhism’s potential contributions to a wider cosmopolitan culture. As he outlines in chapter 6, “Cosmopolitanism and Conversation,” cosmopolitanism for Thompson is not limited to the European universalist conception articulated by Hugo Grotius and Immanuel Kant. With reference to the Sanskrit cosmopolis beginning around the start of the Common Era theorized by scholars like Sheldon Pollock (21, 51, 117, 170–72), Thompson identifies cosmopolitanism with “processes and practices of transregional affiliation” (172) that carry with them a normative commitment to respecting and engaging with the variety of particular human ways of living that are ways of instantiating our common humanity. Cosmopolitanism for Thompson, who follows Kwame
Anthony Appiah, involves a deep conversation with others in their particularity.9

Conversation is central to Thompson’s argument. Conversation across different communities and traditions, that is, conversation among individuals with ties or attachments to different communities and traditions, is both the process that constitutes cosmopolitan identities and the means by which cosmopolitanism as a practice generates insights and directions for inquiry. A true cosmopolitanism, on this view, demands a particular kind of conversation, one where the parties truly allow, perhaps even welcome and encourage, the other voices in that conversation to challenge and “destabilize” (180, 184) their deepest commitments, including their “assumptions, positions, and arguments” (77). This is consistent, Thompson claims, with retaining those commitments. He insists, in section III of his “Replies,” that he does not conceive of cosmopolitanism as sketching an abstract or purely liberal space of discussion outside one’s commitments. But, he maintains, one cannot merely address others while remaining squarely within one’s commitments, cherry-picking what they say only to adorn, validate, or otherwise bolster one’s own views. Cosmopolitan conversation fails when it falls into “embellishment” of one’s views with the picked cherries such as metaphors, similes, analogies, and allusions taken from another tradition or into “justification” of one’s views by the theoretical frames, methodological approaches, knowledge-generative discourses, or epistemic practices taken from another tradition (180, 185). Not to fall into either of these traps involves being cognizant of the depth and variety of commitments within any given tradition and of the past and ongoing conversations in which those commitments have been and continue to be discussed, debated, negotiated, amended, and approved.

Buddhist modernism, in Thompson’s view, is uncospolitan because it falls short of these norms of conversation. It embellishes Buddhist teachings by cherry-picking certain strands of the cognitive sciences. It takes what modern science (understood in the most metaphysically and epistemologically reductive terms) tells us as the gold standard of truth and, in doing so, does not allow that reductionist scientist to be properly challenged in a cosmopolitan manner by Buddhist ideas. And, to make Buddhism more scientifically tractable, it simplifies and occludes the rich traditions and intellectual debates that underpin certain Buddhist commitments, thus falling short of the demand of a cosmopolitan sensitivity to the depth and variety of historical traditions. Instead, Thompson argues, for Buddhism to be a full player in this wider cosmopolitan conversation, it ought not to be subsumed into or under a modern scientific worldview and its full resources as it has developed them over centuries of intellectual and cultural engagement ought to be brought into the conversation.

Part of Thompson’s point here is historical. Buddhism was at the center of the Sanskrit cosmopolis of the first millennium of the Common Era. In its different historical forms, it has been part of ongoing cosmopolitan conversations for centuries. In more recent times, Buddhist modernism has opened the door to cosmopolitan conversations with modern science. Given this history, Buddhist modernists ought to want Buddhism to continue to contribute in this way. Insofar as commitments to this kind of conversation are internal to Buddhist modernism itself, Thompson suggests, Buddhist modernism is self-defeating. The very commitments that made it at first amenable to dialogue with modern science have closed off possibilities for deeper and more challenging conversations, thus thwarting the purpose it was designed to serve. As Thompson puts it in his “Replies,” “much of Buddhist modernist thinking, particularly Buddhist exceptionalism, is untenable by Buddhist modernists’ own lights, that is, by their own criteria of truth, rationality, and evidence, and the cosmopolitanist values they espouse.” Thompson’s call in his book is for Buddhism to realize its full cosmopolitan potential, to continue radically to challenge the overarching individualism and scientism of our time.

IV. THEMES FROM THE COMMENTARIES

In line with Thompson’s own expressed desire to open conversation, this issue includes nine commentaries on his book from philosophers and scholars of religious studies. Some of these commentators are longtime interlocutors of Thompson’s who raise anew issues aired in other contexts; others come to his work with fresher eyes. Together, their comments draw out the complexities and nuances of the various philosophical issues raised by Thompson, challenge him on many of his points and commitments, and bring to light some of the underlying historiographical and interpretive background to his views. The comments range across Thompson’s varying commitments. In particular, they all raise questions and issues about either one or both of the central themes of Thompson’s book—Buddhist modernism and cosmopolitanism. For the sake of explication, we shall group them into two sets corresponding to the two themes.

The first set of comments raises questions about Thompson’s arguments against Buddhist modernism. Bronwyn Finnegan asks for clarification about the “distinctive contours” of Buddhist modernism and who counts as a Buddhist modernist.10 Accepting the goals of cosmopolitan dialogue between Buddhism and science, she wonders whether it is true that fruitful cosmopolitan conversation must take a Thompson-endorsed deep contextualist form or whether there are forms of conversation that productively abstract ideas away from the traditions and debates in which they were developed.11 Jay L. Garfield’s comments push Thompson on whether there are forms of Buddhist modernism that are still naturalistic without being neuroessentialist. Such a “moderate Buddhist modernism” challenges Thompson’s arguments to the effect that there is a “very strong tension,” albeit not a “fatal inconsistency,” between naturalism and traditional Buddhist ideas such as rebirth, karma, nirvana, and awakening. Louise Williams disputes Thompson’s claim that Buddhist modernism rejects the notion of faith. She suggests that Buddhist modernists can be understood as having faith, but faith in future science rather than in the reality of the transcendent. Sonam Kachru’s comments delve into Thompson’s historiographical and interpretive claims about Buddhist modernism and Buddhist exceptionalism. Kachru asks, using B. R. Ambedkar as a key comparison,12 exactly what kinds of modernist reconstructive interpretive methodologies are subject to Thompson’s critique of Buddhist modernism.
Is it the fact of a reconstructive methodology per se or the goals to which such a methodology is put and the framework or worldview in which it takes place? Kachru raises questions about the relations between modernity, Buddhist exceptionalism, and the kind of separation from tradition that Thompson thinks impedes cosmopolitanism.

The second set of comments focuses on Thompson's conception of cosmopolitanism, the kind of conversation he thinks profitable, and the commitments that underlie that kind of conversation. Jonardon Ganeri—sympathetic to Thompson's cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan vision of Buddhism as "one of humanity's great religious and intellectual traditions" (1) since Buddhism, Ganeri notes, has always been cosmopolitan—asks what a truly cosmopolitan conversation between Buddhism and science might look like. It would be another error, he claims, for that conversation to begin from a Eurocentric and Orientalist conception of science. Science, he argues, is better understood in a cosmo-religious sense as a special form of inquiry, aiming at the production of public knowledge, that is constrained and guided by an idealized conception of the common good. Extending Christopher I. Beckwith's work, Ganeri argues that Buddhism in South and Central Asia was part of the development of science insofar as it was part of the transmission of methods of question and answer that were taken up first by Arab scholars and then by Western medieval scholars. Ganeri’s comments serve as an example of the kind of historically informed and detailed cosmopolitan conversation that Thompson suggests as a model. Abraham Velez de Cea argues that a moderate cosmopolitanism of Thompson’s sort, one that allows for pluralism about value and way of life and partiality to particular individuals and groups, may be inconsistent with certain universalist Buddhist ethical tenets. He also suggests that Buddhist modernists may not necessarily be Buddhist exceptionalists or neuroessentialists and that emphasizing the variety and equality of Buddhist traditions amounts to a kind of “postmodern Orientalism.” Laura P. Guerrero argues that Thompson’s critique of Buddhist modernism is itself anti-cosmopolitan because it is an external critique that does not fully respect the cosmopolitan commitment to individual choice of a way of life. Cosmopolitanism, for Guerrero, should not involve taking up “some acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere from which to arbitrate among diverse participants.” Neither should it be inconsistent with or hindered by exceptionalist claims to truth of whatever stripe. Constance Kassor, while sympathetic to Thompson’s cosmopolitanism, wonders whether Thompson’s conception of Buddhist modernism is too narrow insofar as it reflects Thompson’s own personal concerns with bringing Buddhism into fruitful conversation with Western science. There are other forms of Buddhist modernism, Kassor notes, that ought not to be held to this standard. So, Kassor asks in a clarificatory spirit, who is the intended audience for this book? Christian Coseru, in the cosmopolitan spirit of dialogue that Thompson proposes, argues that Thompson’s rejection of evolutionary psychology as a suitable framework for analyzing Buddhist moral psychological ideas and for relating Buddhism to science is unwarranted and that Thompson’s apparent Madhyamaka commitments are themselves not well suited for pursuing the Buddhism-science exchange, especially for engaging in a debate about progress in science.

The preceding summary only skims the surface of a host of important issues raised by Thompson’s book, the commentaries, and his “Replies.” Many of the comments also touch on Thompson’s views about the no-self doctrine and its relation to modern science, on the relation between Thompson’s personal history and personal commitments and the larger cultural and philosophical points that he wants to make, on the distinction between faith and confidence, and on the relationship between naturalism and the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective on the mind. Thompson responds to each of these issues in some depth and analytical detail in his “Replies.” The contents of this issue are themselves a contribution to building the kind of philosophical and cosmopolitan conversation that Thompson exemplifies so eloquently and we will leave the reader to see how the conversation continues to play out.

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NOTES
5. Compare McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism, 21: “This portrait of Buddhist modernism . . . is not one that attempts to cover every contour and capture every color of this widely diverse movement. Certain features are rendered in bright light; others are left in shadow with vague outlines coming through. The colors are refraeted through the developments that have been prominent in the West, especially North America, where Buddhism has proven most successful.”
6. This is not to make the sociological claim that Thompson’s conception of Buddhist modernism is held or proposed only by Westerners. The Dalai Lama’s claims about “Buddhist science” are an explicit target of Thompson’s critique (26, 48-50, 54-55, 185) and in the background of several of Thompson’s explicit targets is D. T. Suzuki’s Romanticist/Transcendentalist-influenced conception of Zen Buddhism (27-28). Other important Asian Buddhist modernists include Anagarika Dharmapala, S. N. Goenka, Chögyam Trungpa, and Thich Nhat Hanh (Thompson, “Replies,” note 3). Thompson considers this issue in chapter 1 of the book. The political and nationalistic Buddhist modernist strands


9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007). In Cosmopolitanism, Appiah articulates and defends an attractive cosmopolitan position, which he dubbs “partial” or “rooted” cosmopolitanism (xvii). Partial cosmopolitans “take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hardcore cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality” (xvi-xvii). Rooted cosmopolitanists affirm that “loyalties and local allegiances . . . determine who we are” and that “a creed that disdains partialities of kinfolk and community may have a past, but it has no future” (xviii). In accordance with Appiah’s crisp formulation of cosmopolitanism as “universalism plus difference” (151), cosmopolitan virtues include concern for others on account of shared human dignity and respect for legitimate differences in thought and action (xiv), whereas cosmopolitan commitments include commitments to universal truth, tolerance, pluralism, and fallibilism (144). Pluralism, Appiah asserts, is the truth that “there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them”; for pluralists, it is neither surprising nor undesirable that different people and different societies subscribe to different values (144). Fallibilism, which Appiah also calls “epistemic humility,” is the view that “our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence”; knowing they do not have all the answers, fallibilists are humble enough to think they may learn from others (144). Appiah-style commitments to universal truth, tolerance, pluralism, and fallibilism (epistemic humility) share a strong family resemblance to confidence in reason, intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, and intellectual humility as delineated by Richard Paul and Linda Elder in their celebrated model of critical thinking. See Richard Paul, The Thinker’s Guide to the Nature and Functions of Critical and Creative Thinking (Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2008); Richard Paul and Linda Elder, Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005); Richard Paul and Linda Elder, The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools, 6th ed. (Tomba, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009); Linda Elder and Richard Paul, “Critical Thinking: Developing Intellectual Traits,” Journal of Developmental Education 21, no. 3 (1998): 34-35. See also A. Minh Nguyen, “Transformation Through Study Abroad: Critical Thinking and World Citizenship,” in Preparing Tomorrow’s Global Leaders: Honors International Education, eds. Mary Kay Mulvaney and Kim Klein (Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council, 2013), 21-43; A. Minh Nguyen, “Study Abroad’s Contribution to Critical Thinking and World Citizenship,” Think: Philosophy for Everyone 11, no. 31 (2012): 27–40.

10. The phrase “distinctive contours” is taken from Sonam Kachru’s comments. In his contribution to this issue, Kachru poses questions that “seek to clarify the distinctive contours of Thompson’s target,” i.e., Buddhist modernism.


ARTICLES

Précis of Why I Am Not a Buddhist

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This précis presents the main themes and ideas of my book, but without summarizing the arguments for them. I begin with an overview of the book, followed by brief chapter summaries.

OVERVIEW

Buddhism is one of humanity’s great religious and intellectual traditions. It is, and deserves to be, a participant in the secular and liberal democratic societies of our modern world. It is, and deserves to be, a contributor to a cosmopolitan community, one in which people participate in relationships of mutual respect and cooperation, despite their differing beliefs. Throughout its history, especially in South and East Asia, Buddhism has played this role of contributing to cosmopolitan societies. It has enriched the religious, intellectual, and artistic worlds of its pluralistic host cultures. Now Buddhism also enriches the modern world. In North America, Asian immigrants and European and American converts have created new kinds of Buddhist communities, rituals, and artworks. Buddhism’s influence on popular culture is widespread. Buddhism continues to be one of our most vibrant traditions.

Nevertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as “Buddhist modernism,” is full of confused ideas. They coalesce around what I call “Buddhist exceptionalism.” Buddhist exceptionalism is the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of “mind science,” therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation. These beliefs, as well as the assumptions about religion and science on which they rest, are mistaken. They need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community. Cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to one community that can and should encompass different ways of life, provides a better framework for appreciating Buddhism and for understanding religion and science than Buddhist modernism. That is the argument of my book.

Buddhist exceptionalism is central to Buddhist modernism, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism that downplays the metaphysical and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism while emphasizing personal meditative experience and scientific rationality. Buddhist modernism presents itself as if it were Buddhism’s original and essential core, when in fact it’s historically recent, originating in the nineteenth century.
“Religion” is a term created by European scholars; it isn’t native to the languages of premodern Asia. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the scholarly study of religion, Buddhism qualifies as a religion, and it’s no more or less inherently compatible with science than any other religion. Religions consist not just of beliefs and doctrines but also of social practices of meaning-making, including rituals and contemplative practices, such as prayer and meditation. Religions instill a sense of transcendence, a sensibility for that which exceeds ordinary experience. Every form of Buddhism, including even so-called secular Buddhism, contains these elements.

Science isn’t a monolithic edifice of final principles and established facts. Rather, it’s a system of orderly and testable public knowledge comprising multiple and sometimes rival views about the universe, life, and the mind. It includes not just experimental investigations with increasingly sophisticated technologies but also epistemology, linguistics, logic, and mathematics. In a broad sense, science is a form of public knowledge based on testable, empirical observations and rational principles that can be intersubjectively agreed upon.

Science can devolve into narrow-minded ideology no less than religion can, and religion can nurture and inspire science. Asking whether science and religion are compatible or incompatible is like asking whether art and science or art and religion are compatible or incompatible: it all depends on the larger culture that contains them.

Buddhist exceptionalism presents Buddhism as uniquely suited to the modern world, but we can sanitize any religion in this modernist way. Consider modern Christian humanism, which stresses the humanity of Jesus, unites Christian ethics with humanist principles, promotes science, and calls attention to the Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek sources of scientific ideas such as the “laws of nature.” Or consider Liberal Judaism, which regards the Torah as written by human beings, not written by God and given to Moses on stone tablets, and emphasizes the progressive Jewish intellectual tradition.

Religion and science have never been separate and autonomous spheres, or “nonoverlapping magisteria” in Stephen Jay Gould’s famous phrase. On the contrary, they constantly intersect, usually with friction. Often the friction leads to conflict; sometimes it leads to cooperation and new insights. The culture and historical epoch determine the forms that conflict and cooperation will take. Gould’s proposal to reconcile religion and science by treating them as independent realms, each with its own authority, is a nonstarter.

The New Atheists recognize that religion and science can’t be separated in the way that Gould proposes, but their campaigns to stamp out religion in the name of science misunderstand the meaning-making activities of religion. Religions don’t explain the universe as science does; they create meaning through rituals, communities, textual traditions, and ways of understanding life’s great events—birth, aging, sickness, trauma, extraordinary states of consciousness, and death. The New Atheists also misunderstand science. They fail to see that when science steps back from experimentation in order to give meaning to its results in terms of grand stories about where we come from and where we’re going—the narratives of cosmology and evolution—it cannot help but become a mythic form of meaning-making and typically takes the structures of its narratives from religion.

Buddhist modernism encourages a kind of false consciousness: It makes people think that if they embrace Buddhism or just pick out its supposedly nonreligious parts, they’re being “spiritual but not religious” when, unbeknownst to them, religious forces are impelling them. These forces include the desire to be part of a community organized around some sense of the sacred, the desire to find a source of meaning that transcends the individual, the felt need to cope with suffering, or the desire to experience deep and transformative states of contemplation. The actions people undertake to satisfy these desires, such as practicing meditation or going on retreats, are also religious. People use the word “spiritual” because they want to emphasize transformative personal experiences apart from public religious institutions. Nevertheless, from an outside, analytical perspective informed by the history, anthropology, and sociology of religion, “spirituality without religion” is really just “privatized experience-oriented religion.”

Buddhist modernism is now replete with appeals to the supposed authority of neuroscience. It has claimed that neuroscience confirms the truth of the Buddhist idea that there is no self, that neuroscience shows that mindfulness meditation “literally changes your brain,” and that enlightenment has “neural correlates.” These ideas aren’t just wrong; they’re confused. The self isn’t a brain-generated illusion or nonexistent fiction; it’s a biological and social construction. Anything you do “literally changes your brain”; evidence for mindfulness meditation leading to beneficial changes in the brain is still tentative; and mindfulness meditation is a social practice whose positive or negative value depends on social facts beyond the brain. “Enlightenment” isn’t a singular state with a unique brain signature; it’s an ambiguous concept whose different and often incompatible meanings depend on the religious and philosophical traditions that give rise to them. Contrary to “neural Buddhism,” the status of the self, the value of meditation, and the meaning of “enlightenment” aren’t matters that neuroscience can decide. They’re inherently philosophical matters that lie beyond the ken of neuroscience.

Since I’m a modern Westerner who does not wish to renounce the world and become a monastic religiousist, there is no way I can be a Buddhist without being a Buddhist modernist. But Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound, so I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without acting in bad faith. That is why I’m not a Buddhist.

My book has a critical part and a positive part. The critical part is a philosophical critique of Buddhist modernism. I argue against Buddhist exceptionalism and the mistaken ideas about science and religion on which it rests. I also
argue against neural Buddhism, which is a scientistic version of Buddhist modernism. The point, however, is not to argue that Buddhist modernism is less “authentic” than “traditional” Buddhism. Such arguments are nonstarters. There is no one traditional Buddhism. Buddhism is an evolving tradition that has taken innumerable forms over the millennia in Asia and now in Europe and North America. Trying to go back to the “original teachings of the Buddha” is a typical Buddhist modernist move (and one that Buddhism modernism shares with the equally modern phenomenon of religious fundamentalism). The move flies in the face of the fact that we have no direct access to what the Buddha thought and taught. To be inspired by the early Buddhist texts and construct out of them a message for today is one thing; to try to legitimize one’s construction by claiming historical veracity for it is another. Buddhist modernists typically take the second step and thereby undermine their case.

We shouldn’t conflate Buddhist modernism and Buddhism in the modern world. Buddhist modernism is only one way to be a Buddhist in the modern world. There are also traditional monastic forms of Buddhism throughout the world and traditional Asian lay forms of Buddhism. There is also Buddhist fundamentalism (for example, in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand). These forms of Buddhism aren’t insulated from one another; rather, they intersect in complex ways. Nevertheless, Buddhist modernism can be singled out as a recognizable historical movement and a widespread contemporary phenomenon. As historian David McMahan observes in The Making of Buddhist Modernism, “Buddhist modernism is becoming the lingua franca of Buddhism as it is presented in transnational, cosmopolitan contexts.” The language of Buddhist modernism is becoming a “met-langauge” for how to interpret the fundamental elements of Buddhism and situate them in the modern world. Although the context of my critique is Buddhism in the modern world, the scope of my critique is Buddhist modernism or, more precisely, Buddhist modernism in Europe and North America since Asia is evolving its own unique forms of Buddhist modernism. My critical arguments apply to European and American Buddhist modernism, not to every form of Buddhism or Buddhism as a whole.

The positive part of this book is an argument for cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to a single community, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. In the Mediterranean philosophical narrative, this idea goes back to Epictetus, a first-century Stoic philosopher who said, “Never, when asked one’s country, answer, ‘I am Athenian or Corinthian,’ but ‘I am a citizen of the world.’” Cosmopolitan thinking stretches from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Age of Enlightenment and into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. South Asia and East Asia have their own versions of cosmopolitanism, as does Africa. The historian Sheldon Pollock uses the term “the Sanskrit cosmopolis” to describe the classical South Asian world of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and later Islam, in which Sanskrit was the language of literature. In East Asia, the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism coexisted and cross-fertilized one another.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently reinvigorated cosmopolitanism. He argues that the values worth living by are many and not one, that different people and societies can and should embody different ways of life, that we ought to care about the welfare of the individuals engaged in those different ways of life, and that the insights of any one tradition are not the exclusive preserve of that tradition or any other.

Cosmopolitan thinkers move across different religious, scientific, philosophical, and artistic traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions. Cosmopolitanism offers a perspective from which to adjudicate the complex relationship between religion and science. It provides a better way for us to appreciate Buddhism’s originality and insights than Buddhist modernism.

My title for this book—Why I Am Not a Buddhist—recalls the title of Bertrand Russell’s famous essay “Why I Am Not a Christian,” which he originally gave as a lecture to the National Secular Society in London on March 6, 1927. I admire Russell’s philosophical brilliance and his courage as a social critic and political activist. There are important differences, however, between his aims and mine in this book. Unlike Russell, I’m not concerned to argue against religion. His view that fear is the foundation of religion and that science can help us to get over this fear is simplistic. My feelings toward Buddhism aren’t hostile as his were toward Christianity. Nevertheless, I approve of his words at the end of the essay: “We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it.” I argue that the Buddhist intellectual tradition can help contribute to this effort in a cosmopolitan world without our having to accept the dubious claims of Buddhist modernism.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

INTRODUCTION

The above overview is drawn from the Introduction, which also presents my personal history of involvement with Buddhism, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. Because of my involvement in this dialogue, many people assumed I was a Buddhist and were usually surprised when I said I wasn’t. I wrote the book to present my perspective on Buddhist modernism, to explain why I am not a Buddhist, and to correct what I thought were the ways that Buddhism, science, and religion were often mischaracterized in the Buddhism-science dialogue, principally as a result of Buddhist exceptionalism.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MYTH OF BUDDHIST EXCEPTIONALISM

This chapter discusses the historical and intellectual movement of Buddhist modernism and the role that Buddhist exceptionalism plays in it. I argue that Buddhist exceptionalism distorts Buddhism, religion, and science.

CHAPTER TWO: IS BUDDHISM TRUE?

This chapter presents a critique of Robert Wright’s Why
Buddhism Is True. Wright uses evolutionary psychology to legitimize a naturalistic version of modern North American Buddhism. I argue that evolutionary psychology is not the right framework for understanding the human mind or the right framework for relating science to Buddhism, that naturalistic Buddhism is not compelling because it distorts the normative and soteriological commitments of Buddhism, and that the question “Is Buddhism true?” is not the right one to ask when “truth” is understood as “scientific truth.”

CHAPTER THREE: NO SELF? NOT SO FAST
I argue for two principal claims concerning how to relate the Buddhist theory of no-self to cognitive science and contemporary philosophy. First, cognitive science does not indicate that the self is an illusion; it suggests that it is a construction. So when Buddhist modernists claim that science demonstrates the truth of the Buddhist view that there is no self, they are mistaken. Second, it is facile to think that the Buddhist no-self theorists are superior to the Brahminical self-theorists in being more “scientific” or rational and empirical. The Brahminical theorists are just as committed to rational and empirical inquiry as the Buddhists. So Buddhist exceptionalism—that Buddhism is superior in being uniquely scientific—is unwarranted.

CHAPTER FOUR: MINDFULNESS MANIA
I argue against two widespread ideas about mindfulness meditation practices. One is that mindfulness is essentially an inward awareness of one’s own private mental theater. The other is that the best way to understand the effects of mindfulness practices is to look inside the head at the brain. Instead, I argue that the cognitive capacities on which mindfulness relies are metacognitive and belong to social cognition, that mindfulness consists in the integrated exercise of a host of cognitive, affective, and social skills in situated action, that brain processes are necessary enabling conditions of mindfulness but are only partially constitutive of it, and that they become constitutive only given the wider context of embodied and embedded cognition and action.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RHETORIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT
This chapter targets the Buddhist modernist idea of “awakening” or “enlightenment,” understood as a kind of nonconceptual insight or epiphany, or as a scientifically comprehensible psychological state with identifiable neural correlates (or both). I argue that enlightenment is an ambiguous concept, that what it refers to is not a singular state, and that its many Buddhist meanings are often incompatible. Enlightenment is concept-dependent in the sense that any experience called an “enlightenment experience” is concept-dependent. So the idea that some state could inherently be an enlightenment state outside of concepts, language, history, and tradition makes no sense.

CHAPTER SIX: COSMOPOLITANISM AND CONVERSATION
This chapter discusses philosophical cosmopolitanism, especially in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. I argue that the cosmopolitanist viewpoint, as sketched above in the overview, provides a better way for us to appreciate the Buddhist intellectual tradition and its importance today than does Buddhist modernism.

NOTES

On Pursuing the Dialogue Between Buddhism and Science in Ways That Distort Neither

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I. INTRODUCTION
It is not uncommon for engagements with Buddhism to be motivated by the conviction that its various claims about the mind, knowledge, and the nature of reality are, in effect, true. In such instances, “Buddhist” can sometimes attach to those with expertise in, say, Abhidharma in the same way that “Catholic” can attach to Thomists. My general impression, however, is that, at least among philosophers of European descent, the label indicates expertise rather than conviction (the two, of course, are not mutually exclusive). And while there are many reasons why one might not want to be associated with the object of one’s scholarly endeavors, two in particular stand out. First, since scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is not incompatible with upholding a particular religious or
ideological view, one might want to avoid getting boxed in as a doctrinaire thinker. Second, the ascendency of science and the scientific method as the most effective way to gain reliable knowledge means that traditional religions have had to adapt and seek new relevance, often by claiming to be the repositories of wisdom or knowledge that falls outside the purview of science. And few have been more successful in responding to this challenge than Buddhism. Of course, Buddhism’s encounter with modernity tells a complex story of adaptation and change. But the global explosion of the mindfulness movement in recent decades, backed by a cross section of the scientific and religious studies establishment, means that large segments of the educated public now regard Buddhism as a tradition that, in effect, has got its principles and methods right.

This new brand of recognizably Buddhist apologetics cloaked in a scientific aura is the second reason why one might deliberately resist the label “Buddhist.” It is also the main reason behind Evan Thompson’s new book, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, a refreshing, original, and insightful contribution to our understanding of “Buddhist modernism,” the now widely shared belief that Buddhism is a kind of science of the mind whose insights have been experimentally tested and confirmed over millennia through meditative practice. There is much that Thompson and I agree on about the best way to engage Buddhism and bring it into dialogue with contemporary thought. But since my role here is that of a critic, I will focus on two areas where, I think, most of our disagreements lie: (i) the suitability of evolutionary psychology as a framework for analysis of Buddhist moral psychological ideas and (ii) whether a Madhyamaka-inspired anti-foundationalist stance can serve as an effective platform for debating the issue of progress in science.

II. BUDDHISM AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY: MATCHING PARTNERS OR INCOMPATIBLE BEDFELLOWS?

Critics of Buddhist modernism have so far argued that the seemingly self-evident claims made about Buddhism—that is not a religion but a practical guide to living, that it is a method of self-analysis compatible with modern psychology, that it is egalitarian and democratic, and that meditation is its core practice—are a modern construct. Thompson’s contribution to this critique has two primary targets: (i) the mindfulness movement, which is inspired by, and strongly endorses, neuroessentialism or the view that the best and most definitive way to explain human psychology is by reference to the brain and its activity; and (ii) the evolutionary psychology paradigm used to legitimize a naturalized version of Buddhism favored by many Europeans and North Americans, as found, inter alia, in Robert Wright’s best-selling Why Buddhism Is True. I think Thompson is spot-on in his assessment of Buddhist modernism as an ideological expression of the mindfulness movement. But his critical stance on evolutionary psychology and the project of naturalizing Buddhism is less convincing. Indeed, much of Thompson’s critique of Buddhist modernism turns on his rejection of some of the foundational premises of evolutionary psychology. And he takes issues with those who appeal to evolutionary psychology as the right framework for relating Buddhism to science. Is he right? Undoubtedly, as an enterprise that attempts to explain most mental traits as adaptations or functional products of natural selection, evolutionary psychology is not without controversy. But Thompson, I will argue, relies on some common misconceptions about the field and its overly critical reception, mainly among philosophers of biology.

First, Thompson argues that evolutionary psychologists operate with a skewed conception of evolution, which regards organisms “as passive recipients or passive effects of natural selection” (65). A better alternative, he suggests, is to regard organisms as able to “exert an influence over their own evolution by actively shaping their environments” (65)—an idea favored by what evolutionary ecologists call “niche construction theory” (65). But this way of framing the issue plays on a misconception that evolution and adaptive behavior or learning represent different explanations. To claim that some traits—for instance, the human fear of snakes—are evolved does not mean they are present at birth. Rather, it is to claim that humans have an evolved learning mechanism that makes it more easily in their case to acquire a fear of snakes than of other things in the environment. Furthermore, learning itself is enabled by neurocognitive processes that are themselves the product of evolution.

Consider perception, one of the modalities by which we learn to navigate the environment. In order to understand how perception works, we must look to the causal processes that have configured our perceptual systems. While cats and human infants have similar perceptual systems, the difference between the way cats and human infants perceive is largely a function of their evolved brain-based mechanisms. Lastly, evolution and learning operate at different levels of explanation. In the middle of the last century, Ernst Mayr suggested that we understand biology as an enterprise in the pursuit of two sets of questions: (i) proximate, concerned with the matter of structure and mechanism (that is, with the immediately preceding mechanisms that lead an organism to do what it does on a given occasion); and (ii) ultimate, concerned with why organisms are the way they are (that is, why organisms tend to have a system that responds that way). Mayr thought the former were the province of functional biologists, while evolutionary biologists were mainly concerned with the latter, even though the study of adaptive functions of traits is central to evolutionary explanations. The confusion these notions created led the ethologist Niko Tinbergen to frame biology as actually concerned with four types of questions, now known as “Tinbergen’s Four Questions.” Two are about ontogeny (How does a specific trait develop in individuals?) and mechanism (What is the structure of the trait?). The other two are about phylogeny (What is the trait’s evolutionary history?) and adaptive significance (How have trait variations influenced fitness?) Although these two sets of questions may lead to conflicting explanations, they are not necessarily incompatible: To single out a specific trait as a product of evolution says nothing about how the organism exhibiting that trait will behave during its lifespan. For instance, in the case of some butterfly pupae turning brown rather than green, we can tell a story about
how a shortened photoperiod leads to the release of a chemical that turns off the green pigment. But we can also say that butterflies have this system because butterflies that lack it would have produced green pupae in the winter, which would have resulted in higher rates of predation.

Second, Thompson thinks evolutionary psychologists unfairly privilege one period in our evolutionary history—the Pleistocene—as the source of all our important psychological adaptations” (65), downplaying the role that cultural transmission has played in human evolution. As an alternative proposal, he suggests that “gene-culture coevolution theory” (65) is better suited to show how “changes in genes can lead to changes in culture, which can then influence genetic selection” (66). In Thompson’s view, making room for the “cultural transmission of tools and concepts” and the “inheritance of culturally shaped environments” (66) gives this theory an added explanatory advantage. But this alternative proposal begs the question: If our ability to act in ways that go beyond our genetic heritage is not itself a product of evolution, then where does this ability come from? Tools and concepts have certainly served as proximate factors of cultural transmission, but our ability to fashion them and to adopt behaviors in keeping with their function must itself have been made possible by the forces of evolution. Of course, not all aspects of human behavior fit neatly the current approach favored by evolutionary psychologists. But progress in explaining a wide range of human behavior, from parenting and cooperation to perception and cross-cultural differences in social behavior, mitigates against this wholesale dismissal of evolutionary psychology as a deeply flawed enterprise.

Third, Thompson targets the hypothesis, favored by many evolutionary psychologists, that the mind has a modular cognitive architecture composed of computational processes that are innate adaptations. He thinks there is no evidence from neuroscience in support of this hypothesis. Against the evolutionary psychology hypothesis that cognition is mostly domain-specific, Thompson proposes that we interpret the evidence from neuroscience as providing support for an alternative hypothesis, namely, one that regards brain areas and networks as specialized for performing “a variety of functions depending on the context” (67) and as exhibiting “flexible tendencies to respond across a wide range of circumstances and tasks” (68). Whereas the massive modularity hypothesis puts forward an image of the mind as modular through and through—including both low-level systems underlying perception and language and high-level systems responsible for reasoning and decision-making—the alternative, emergentist hypothesis that Thompson favors understands cognition as a function of dynamic interactions among various modules, not as a result of their activation. In short, there are no “dedicated, special-purpose cognitive modules instantiated in specific brain structures” (69) of the sort evolutionary psychologists assume to be the case.

But this way of framing the issue glosses over a rich history of debate in both cognitive science and the philosophy of mind going back to Jerry Fodor’s landmark book *The Modularity of Mind*, which first introduced the term “module” and its cognates. As that debate shows, the question of the modularity of the mind is far from settled. For advocates of the massive modularity hypothesis, the advantage modular systems have over their alternatives lies in their problem-solving capacity. That is, adaptive problems are more readily and efficiently solved by modular systems than by non-modular systems, which explains why evolution has favored this type of cognitive architecture. Critics of the hypothesis single out things like neuroplasticity, high-level cognitive capacities such as mind-reading, and positive correlations among ostensibly distinct cognitive abilities as evidence against the view that the mind essentially consists of a collection of distinct and adaptively specialized modules for different cognitive tasks. But even critics often concede that despite the ensuing debate, the concept of modularity has wide relevance beyond cognitive science and the philosophy of mind. Indeed, in epistemology, it is often invoked to defend the legitimacy of a theory-neutral type of observation, and hence the possibility of some degree of consensus among scientists with divergent theoretical commitments.

Fourth, Thompson joins the chorus of critics who point out that the hypotheses of evolutionary psychology aren’t confirmed by evolutionary biology. The problem, in this case, is said to lie in their approach. That is, “evolutionary psychologists look for what they consider to be design in the makeup of our psychological traits and then present a scenario involving natural selection that would have led to the formation of those traits” (69). What makes this approach problematic, according to critics, is a series of mistaken assumptions: (i) that all traits have evolved by natural selection; (ii) that adaptations are properly defined as traits; and (iii) that certain cognitive traits can be shown to be widespread in human beings with the right experimental framework (70). But this way of framing the debate paints evolutionary psychologists as something they explicitly are not: genetic determinists. As evolutionary psychologists such as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby make quite clear, evolutionary psychology is not behavioral genetics: “Behavior geneticists are interested in the extent to which differences between people in a given environment can be accounted for by differences in their genes. Evolutionary psychologists are interested in individual differences only insofar as these are the manifestation of an underlying architecture shared by all human beings.” This underlying architecture is what mediates an organism’s phenotypic expression, which in turn can be explained in terms of adaptations that were selected for, which are present because they are in turn causally coupled to traits. The question is not whether genes or the environment are more (or less) important in determining an organism’s phenotype. Rather, as Cosmides and Tooby clarify, “*Every aspect of an organism’s phenotype is the joint product of its genes and its environment. To ask which is more important is like asking, Which is more important in determining the area of a rectangle, the length or the width? . . . Genes allow the environment to influence the development of phenotypes* but *what effect the environment will have on an organism depends critically on the details of its evolved cognitive architecture.*
As for the view that evolutionary hypotheses are mainly post-hoc storytelling or “just-so” stories—a seemingly unscientific process of noticing something special about human behavior, concocting a convenient (read: evolutionary) explanation about it, and defending the explanation without further experimental work—the response from evolutionary psychologists is quite categorical: This is nothing but a widespread misconception. While it is true that generating a hypothesis without deriving or testing any new predictions based on it might open one to the charge of just-so storytelling, as I noted above, evolutionary psychologists have made progress in explaining a wide range of human behavior. Part of the problem is that critics assume scientific enterprises that have a historical component such as evolutionary psychology somehow trade in unfalsifiable hypotheses. But if that were the case, the hypotheses of all scientific disciplines with a historical component—e.g., astrophysics, cosmology, and geology—would amount to nothing more than just-so storytelling. The crucial point is to generate novel predictions about previously unobserved phenomena “that can be tested in the present day.” Science, as we all know, is an open-ended enterprise whose conclusions are subject to revision in light of new findings and better theorizing.

Regardless of Thompson’s critical stance on the viability of evolutionary psychology as a scientific enterprise, it is a further question whether evolutionary psychology is an appropriate framework for relating Buddhism to science. The aggregate view of human experience, a focus on latent disposition as subpersonal or subconscious conduits to conscious cognition, and the paramount importance of causal rather than justificatory accounts of reasoning certainly speak in favor of this corroboration. Does that mean there is no room for competing approaches, specifically for the embodied and enactive cognitive science that Thompson favors? Certainly not. I myself have argued in favor of the usefulness of the latter in accounting for certain aspects of the Buddhist epistemological account of perception, attention, and reasoning. Whether naturalistic Buddhism is compelling depends on whatever conception of naturalism is in play. A naturalism fine-tuned to accommodate mental phenomena is precisely what Varela’s neurophenomenological project advocates for in putting forth a vision of cognition as embodied, embedded, and enactive, and thus as seemingly continuous with the environment of which it is a part.

Since Thompson has assiduously defended this vision in his work; he ought to find compelling a conception of naturalism that aligns Abhidharma Reductionism with the neurophenomenological enterprise. And, as his summation of the enactive approach testifies, it seems that he indeed does: “Cognition is embodied sense-making; it is the enactment or bringing forth of a lived world of meaning and relevance in and through embodied action. . . . Instead of applying a scientific framework to Buddhism from the outside, we engage in a two-way exchange with Buddhism, including developing a version of embodied cognitive science that incorporates ideas from Buddhist philosophy” (71-72). But in order to find out whether the proposal he puts forward is a viable one, we must consider two things: first, whether the school of thought Thompson turns to—that of Madhyamaka (Middle Way), associated with the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nâgârjuna (ca. 150–250 CE)—does indeed capture Buddhism’s core teachings; and second, whether that school of thought provides a viable framework for advancing positive knowledge claims about cognition and the mind.

III. MADHYAMAKA AND THE REAL WORLD

Madhyamaka metaphysics, as Thompson rightly points out, is anti-foundationalist: “Madhyamikas argue that knowable phenomena are concept-dependent in this technical sense. This implies that it doesn’t make sense to think of knowledge as grasping how the world is in itself apart from the mind” (74). To think of human experience in Madhyamaka terms, then, is to think of its various cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects as lacking any ultimate ground or foundation whatsoever: “Cognition as enaction means that cognition has no ground or foundation beyond its own history, which amounts to a kind of ‘groundless ground’” (74). That’s all fine and good. But Thompson does not understand his two-way exchange with Buddhism as a project in metaphysics simpliciter. Rather, the goal is to advance cognitive science in ways that can better account for human experience. So, the question is: Can Madhyamaka deliver? That is, does Madhyamaka provide the sort of stabilizing framework that allows for various theoretical perspectives (physics, biology, psychology, etc.) to be integrated into a unified worldview?

The answer, in this case, is a categorical “no.” Let me explain. As a knowledge enterprise, science is predicated on a reliable method (the scientific method) and on open-ended modes of inquiry that allow for its hypotheses to be falsified. Furthermore, the advancement of science has meant the diversification of explanatory frameworks to accommodate ever-expanding classes of observable phenomena. Biology alone now branches out into some two dozen subfields, including biophysics, evolution, genetics, and, most consequentially for our times, virology. Each one of these domains contributes to a burgeoning conceptual vocabulary that, in many cases, is domain-specific. Can an anti-foundationalist metaphysics contribute the kinds of hypotheses that would be required to ground scientific inquiry across various domains?

Before venturing an answer, I need to clarify one important aspect of Madhyamaka, specifically its two truths doctrine. The general idea is that there is an ordinary, conventional way of seeing things, and an ultimate, correct way, which takes those things to be empty in the specific sense that they lack a nature of their own and are instead brought about by multiple causes and conditions. This way of mapping out the epistemic domain recalls Wilfrid Sellars’s conception of philosophy as the cultivation of a “stereoscopic vision” that takes in at once both the scientific and the manifest images of the world. But the two truths framework is far more radical than it may seem at first blush. Conventionally speaking, there are tables and chairs and people. Ultimately, there are no such things, not because what we ordinarily call a chair is just some material (e.g., wood, plastic) arranged chairwise as a result of multiple causes and conditions,
but because no phenomena, in effect, come into being. As Nāgārjuna famously declares in his Foundation of the Middle Way Verses, to think of something “as produced by causes and conditions” is to think of it as a “product” (15.1cd). But something that is a product could not be a stable and intrinsically existent thing, for if it were, it would not be a product. Nor could its existence be due to extrinsic factors, “for an extrinsic nature is said to be the intrinsic nature of another existent” (15.3cd). And since “an existent is established given the existence of either intrinsic nature or extrinsic nature” (15.4cd), if it follows that, absent these two singular ways to establish what exists, there can be no existent.26 That is, no phenomena either come into being or go out of existence. And if that wasn’t radical enough, consider the notion that commitment to “it exists” or “it does not exist” (15.7ab) with regard to any entity whatsoever is a slippery slope to either eternalism or nihilism, positions that a Mādhyamika strives to avoid by following the middle way.27

Hence, from a Mādhyamaka standpoint, there is no fundamental explanatory framework to account for the way different things (e.g., spacetime geometry, atoms, molecules, enzymes, honey bees) appear or function the way they do. If the ultimate truth is that no phenomena come into being as ordinarily conceived, then this is not something that can be conveyed in language. In short, the Mādhyamaka standpoint—to the extent that “standpoint” can be coherently applied in this case—is that reality has an inarticulable structure. Specifically, Nāgārjuna thinks that the conceptual schema implicit in the commonsense view of the world presupposes the existence of a world of stable and self-sustaining objects and processes. Hence, his method consists in demonstrating that existential presuppositions about a world of such stable and self-sustaining objects and processes are never true. To see things from the standpoint of ultimate truth is to call into question the conventions of our everyday world, including our understanding of causation as the relation that links objects and events, and ultimately to show them to be misleading.28

This notion that ordinary objects and events, and the conventions we employ to assess their ontological status, are not what they seem to be when subjected to rigorous analysis should strike most readers as sensible enough. But as some have argued, in lacking a commitment to revising and reforming the conventional ways of seeing things, Mādhyamaka falls short of allowing for sophisticated theoretical ideas and explanations of a scientific nature. Tom Tillemans makes this point quite clear while reflecting on an influential Mādhyamika philosopher’s efforts to rescue conventional truth: “Saying, as does Candrakirti repeatedly in debates with Sāmkhya and his fellow Buddhists, that rice just leads to rice rather than barley, may well be a very good answer to the various metaphysicians who think either that the effect must really be present in the cause to ensure that causality is not haphazard or that cause and effect must be completely separate real entities. It is of course, however, a bad answer to a plant scientist inquiring about genetic features in rice that explain its growth, yield, color, form, resistance to disease, and so on.”29 In short, dumbed-down conventional truth of the sort Mādhyamaka trades in was not terribly attractive even to fellow Buddhist thinkers and their historical rivals, let alone to scientifically informed and philosophically savvy modern audiences.30

Given this unsophisticated conception of the conventional and the view of the ultimate as explanatorily inarticulable, there is little that Madhyamaka can contribute to debates about the best and most effective ways of mapping out a reality that is structured differently at different levels of organization. The problem for Mādhyamaka is not just the inadequacy of its two truths framework. Rather, the dialectical progression leading up from conventional to ultimate truth itself is fraught. We can’t overcome the pure conventionalism of the first dialectical step without some epistemology.31 In short, claiming, as Mādhyamika philosophers do, that the conventional level of truth and/or reality is empty won’t do, since such an assertion can only be made from the standpoint of the truth that defines the quality of being empty, and this assertion presupposes that one first gets the conventional right. And Mādhyamaka, it seems, provides no resources (of a conceptual or any other sort) for achieving that goal; there is no master argument for emptiness. If the question of what counts as an oasis is confusing, then what counts as a mirage? Indeed, as Eviatar Shulman notes, “Nāgārjuna’s critique of any notion of existence is unrelenting; all bhāva, existence, must go. . . . This leaves him with very few positive things to say, aside from likening reality, or different aspects of reality, to illusions.”32

I would suggest that the only way for Thompson to rescue his proposal is to abandon the cosmic illusionism of the Perfection of Wisdom literature and the Mādhyamaka paradigm that grew out of it. In doing so, he would be in keeping both with the trajectory of Buddhist thought in India and with the unfolding of the scientific study of the mind for the past century and a half.33 It is, after all, common knowledge that Nāgārjuna’s writings and his concerted effort to discredit some of the fundamental concepts of Abhidharma had relatively little impact on the subsequent development of Buddhist thought in India (Abhidharma continued to flourish well into the second half of the first millennium with no perceived need on the part of Abhidharma thinkers to defend their theories against his criticism). Nor did Nāgārjuna’s radical critique of the very possibility of grounding knowledge in reliable sources have any impact on the epistemological agenda of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, which dominated Indian Buddhist intellectual circles and was engaged by Brahmanical philosophers well into the early modern period. Indeed, as Richard Hayes notes, “[a]side from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed.”34

These points of criticism aside, Why I Am Not a Buddhist should be welcomed as an invaluable and timely corrective to the ideological excesses of Buddhist modernism. As I see it, the book’s most important contribution lies in its rather unique vantage point. Thompson has been involved with the Mind and Life Institute (one of the key organizations responsible for spearheading the rapprochement between Buddhism and science) from its inception, and so he is in a
privileged position to reflect critically both on its successes and on its excesses. Over more than three decades, the Mind and Life Symposia have hosted large cohorts of scientists, philosophers, Buddhist scholars, and Tibetan contemplatives, all under the watchful eye of the Dalai Lama. Thompson’s own reportage on these intellectually stimulating but often ideologically motivated ventures is that of an insider concerned about having unwittingly participated in an enterprise aimed at remaking Buddhism in the image of modern science. And part of that mea culpa should be a celebration of Thompson’s prodigious and important work, which promotes a way of thinking that embodies the very best of cosmopolitan philosophy.

NOTES
1. This paper is an abridged version of my essay “The Middle Way to Reality: On Why I Am Not a Buddhist and Other Philosophical Curiosities” (see Coseru forthcoming), which engages a broader set of themes prompted by Thompson’s book. Both my essay and Thompson’s detailed response to it are forthcoming in Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions.
14. Currie and Sterelny, “How to Think about the Modularity of Mind-Reading.”
17. Cornwell et al., “Introductory Psychology Texts as a View of Sociobiology/Evolutionary Psychology’s Role in Psychology.”
19. Ibid.
26. As Siderits has convincingly argued, the claim that everything originates in dependence on causes and conditions cannot be used to prove that nothing has intrinsic nature. Indeed, Abhidharma thinkers held both that things originate in dependence on causes and conditions and that they have intrinsic natures, since possessing an intrinsic nature says nothing about how that nature was realized. “Consequently, its coming into existence in dependence on causes and conditions is not by itself incompatible with its having an intrinsic nature.” Siderits, “Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopis Know,” 170.
30. Other interpreters of Madhyamaka, most notably Jay Garfield, have argued that it would be a mistake to think that Madhyamaka, at least as articulated by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Tsongkhapa, “eschews reliance on or an account of epistemic authority” (Garfield, “Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality,” 29). But as Garfield himself acknowledges, Madhyamaka rejects an “account of epistemic instruments . . . according to which the instruments are taken to be foundational to all knowledge” because such a position “would undermine his account of emptiness” (ibid., 26–27). However, an account of epistemic instruments that works to demonstrate the thesis of emptiness is not exactly a neutral way to advance knowledge claims. The possibility that a revised and reformed account of epistemic authority could end up invalidating the thesis of emptiness might be precisely why Madhyamikas resist this approach. For to forgo the thesis of emptiness means that one must return to the hard (Abhidharma) job of categorizing the dharmas by way of figuring out how epistemic instruments ground our knowledge of particulars.
33. For a detailed discussion of whether cognitive science poses a particular problem for realism because the subject matter of cognitive science includes mental states and processes that are not mind-independent, see Saatsi, “Realism and the Limits of Explanatory Reasoning”; and Wray, “Success of Science as a Motivation for Realism.”
34. Hayes, “Nāgārjuna’s Appeal,” 299.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


To be honest, I was a bit dismayed when I first learned the title of Evan Thompson’s latest book. It was not because I had previously thought he was a Buddhist (I didn’t think this). Nor was it because I believed one should be a Buddhist in order to engage insightfully and rigorously with Buddhist philosophy (I don’t believe this). It was because the title, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, invites speculation about the reasons why, and it seemed to me that the most natural speculation is that he thinks there is something wrong with Buddhism, and that if one accepts his reasons for rejecting it, one would reject it also.1 Now, there is nothing wrong with arguing against Buddhism. But I work in a discipline that is already indifferent to it (at best). Academic philosophy does not value Buddhism (those who work in this field must continually make the case for Buddhism’s relevance to contemporary philosophical concerns. Evan is highly regarded in this community. His work on 4E (embodied, enactive, embedded, extended) cognition is ground-breaking and has deeply penetrated the philosophy of mind and cognitive science. That his early writings relate this work to Buddhist philosophy has both promoted Buddhism as a worthy interdisciplinary partner and created new avenues of cross-cultural research. Evan’s scholarly engagement with Buddhism is also some of the clearest and best in the field. He’s one of my intellectual heroes and I’ve always considered him to be a great friend to Buddhist philosophy. For him now to be perceived as denouncing Buddhism and retreating from these earlier views creates a challenge for those following in his wake. It might appear that we’ve lost a champion, an influential one, and those already indifferent to Buddhism might take it as further reason not to engage with it at all.

Now, of course, this is not what Evan argues in Why I Am Not a Buddhist and is the very opposite of his intention. Evan repeatedly insists that he is, and wishes to be, “a good friend to Buddhism” (2, 189). “[I]t’s unquestionably true,” he writes, “that Buddhism possesses a vast and sophisticated philosophical and contemplative literature on the mind” (37). He claims that “modern interpretations” of the Buddhist denial of self have “reinvigorated contemporary philosophical debates” and that this “confluence of cross-cultural philosophy and cognitive science has proved to be fertile for thinking about the self” (86). He also defends a form of cosmopolitanism that includes Buddhist philosophy as a conversational partner worthy of respectful intellectual interest. But Evan ferociously denounces what he calls ‘Buddhist modernism’. The claims of Buddhist modernism, he argues, are “biased” (104), “confused” (18), “dubious” (22), “specious” (28), “nonsensical” (45), “superficial” (119), “facile” (88), and “misguided” (121).

The arguments advanced in its support, Evan contends, are based on limited concepts (36) and erroneous ideas (64), involve conflation (20), and turn on distinctions that are impossible to maintain (49). He concludes that the core tenets of Buddhist modernism are “philosophically and scientifically indefensible” (189) and so are to be thoroughly rejected.

Evan identifies Buddhist modernism as a view typical to Buddhist participants in the Mind and Life Dialogues with the Dalai Lama initiated by Francisco Varela. He argues that it is advanced by S. N. Goenka and presupposed by the vipassanā or insight meditation movement. And he locates it in the popular writings of several public intellectuals who promote Buddhism in relation to science. Buddhist modernism is no straw dummy. There is a genuine target for Evan’s critique. It is tempting to think, however, that academic cross-cultural Buddhist philosophy falls outside its purview. None of the Cowherds are explicitly mentioned or targeted, for instance. Nor are any well-regarded and philosophically trained Buddhist scholars. Moreover, according to Evan, a central tenet of Buddhist modernism is that Buddhism is superior to all other religions and, because of its unique rationalism and empiricism, counts as a science and not as a religion. While some academic Buddhist philosophers do discuss its methodological features and do reconstruct and defend naturalized forms of Buddhist thought, you rarely find them doing so in the service of this comparative and scientific position. And that they take truth as their evaluative standard for defending Buddhist claims is surely not a flaw. But academic Buddhist philosophy does not get off so lightly. Evan includes Thomas Metzinger and Miri Albahari in the class of Buddhist modernists (106-110). Metzinger and Albahari are university-based academic philosophers. Does Evan think they are isolated cases that just happen to share the views that he critiques? Or does he think they exemplify...
a broader problem with cross-cultural Buddhist philosophy in general? Who else counts as Buddhist modernists beyond those mentioned in the book? What views, arguments, and methodological approaches should we include under this heading and similarly dismiss, and which views does Evan think are genuinely worthy of respectful intellectual conversation? Evan clearly has a lot of time for historical Buddhist philosophy and its exposition. But does any positive engagement with Buddhism that seeks to interface with science survive this critique?

To answer these questions, we need to consider the arguments contained in the book. To some extent, that is what I will now do. But let me flag from the outset that my response is mixed. Evan is an extremely clear writer. His scholarship in the philosophy of biology, cognitive science, and Buddhist thought is exceptional. I agree with some of the expositions he provides in relation to these fields. Some of his arguments resonate with some of my own. And I agree with others that I hadn’t considered. But I also find that the rhetorical strength with which Evan articulates his views often suggests that he is arguing for much stronger and more restrictive positions than I think his reasons warrant. Indeed, I find that many of his arguments admit of two interpretations: a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not. These different versions of his argument have different implications for what counts as an appropriate way to engage with Buddhist philosophy, and thus for who is a target of his critique. I will attempt to demonstrate this in what follows, and I will conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which version of his views he intends. I will start, however, by both articulating and endorsing what I take to be a central argument of the book and considering its positive upshot for contemporary Buddhist philosophy.

Evan rejects the Buddhist modernist claim that Buddhism is proven true by modern science. Indeed, he argues that the question “Is Buddhism true?” is the wrong question to ask. One of the main clusters of reasons offered for this claim relates to the diversity of philosophical positions we find in the historical Buddhist tradition. This is also a theme of my own work. The question “Is Buddhism true?” invites treating Buddhism as a systematic whole. But while all Buddhists sought to be consistent with the Buddha’s teachings, there was considerable debate about how they are to be interpreted, what they entail, and what texts should be accepted as authoritative. And these debates are reflected in distinct Buddhist traditions (Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna), distinct philosophical schools (Abhidharma, Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, Pramāṇavāda), as well as differences amongst thinkers within each of these traditions and schools. These debates are also shaped by the different cultures and intellectual traditions prevalent in the countries into which Buddhism was transmitted. There is thus no singular Buddhist position on most debated issues by Buddhist philosophers; there are many Buddhist views on many substantive philosophical issues. It follows that one cannot answer the question “Is Buddhism true?” without first clarifying which interpretation of Buddhism and which philosophical analysis of it that one has in mind. The question “Is Buddhism true?” is underdetermined. Evan is right—it is not the right question to ask.

Evan goes further. He argues that Buddhism, if taken as a whole, contains many radical ideas that are typically overlooked by those who argue that Buddhism is proven true by science. He focuses on the idea that liberated awareness (nirvāṇa) is unconditioned, nonconceptual, and nondual. Evan denies that such awareness is possible. He also insists that it does not fit easily with modern science. To argue that Buddhism is true, however, requires engaging all of it, creating a narrative that justifies all Buddhist claims, including this idea of nirvāṇa. We might even wonder whether such a comprehensively justifying narrative is possible. Centuries of debate have resulted in a diversity of competing and even conflicting viewpoints. Buddhism, if taken as a whole, is thus inconsistent. How could Buddhism be both internally inconsistent and true? Evan additionally points out that those who claim that science proves Buddhism to be true often exclude karma and reincarnation, as if all else would remain the same. However, he argues, these ideas are so tightly integrated with important Buddhist ideas that their exclusion does not leave all else the same but requires constructively re-interpreting Buddhist thought.

What is the upshot of these arguments for contemporary Buddhist philosophy? It is certainly not that Buddhism is wrong or that questions of truth are misplaced. Rather, if one seeks to positively defend Buddhist thought in dialogue with science and other philosophical traditions, one should make clear which Buddhist position one is defending and be reflective and explicit about the extent to which one is reconstructing that position. But to clarify which Buddhist position one is defending requires first understanding that there is a diversity of interpretative options. And it seems that one reason Evan advises engaging with Buddhist philosophy is precisely to gain this perspective. He seems not to have a problem with positive reconstructions of Buddhist positions or with innovating new forms of Buddhist thought and practice to solve new problems. But attempts to legitimize one’s viewpoint as reflecting “the original teachings of the Buddha” are firmly ruled out. “To be inspired by the early Buddhist texts and construct out of them a message for today is one thing; to try to legitimize one’s construction by claiming historical veracity for it is another” (20). The former is OK, whereas the latter is not.

So far, I strongly agree. Since I take this to be a main argument of the book, I endorse its central message. But I have some reservations about some of the subsidiary arguments that appear to allow for two interpretations: a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not.

Throughout the book, Evan emphasizes the importance of context for appreciating Buddhist thought. But it seems to me that there are two ways to understand his point. Moderately, it is the claim that recognizing and understanding the philosophical and historical context of Buddhist ideas is important for understanding those ideas, particularly if those aspects of context are presupposed by Buddhist arguments. More strongly, however, it is the claim that Buddhist ideas do not make sense at all, that they lose their meaning entirely, if extracted from their philosophical
and historical context. These are not the same claim and have different implications for how one might legitimately engage with Buddhist thought. Consider the following two examples.

Evan calls "naturalistic Buddhism" the idea that Buddhism is consistent with scientific naturalism if one omits karma and reincarnation. He argues, however, that Buddhist theories of mind "lose their point" if one extracts them from this framework (11). This might be understood as the moderate claim that to understand (all, most, or some) Buddhist ideas about the mind, one needs to recognize that they are tightly integrated with ideas of karma and reincarnation and that to omit them requires some reconstruction. This sounds right. It could be read more strongly, however, as claiming that reconstructions of Buddhist views about the mind that do not mention and integrate karma and reincarnation have no point and make no sense. But this seems unduly restrictive. There are different degrees with which Buddhist ideas about mind integrate with karma and reincarnation. Some are more tightly connected than others. Surely it is admissible to selectively focus on those that are a bit more distant (such as the possibility of reflexive awareness) and to put such ideas into interdisciplinary dialogue without necessarily mentioning, emphasizing, or including the Buddhist commitment to karma and reincarnation.

Consider also Evan's discussion of the importance of engaging with non-Buddhist Indian philosophical views for appreciating the Buddhist tradition. Evan seeks to refute the Buddhist modernist idea that the Buddhist position of no-self is superior to that of the Brahmanical traditions in classical India, which hold that there is a self. He does so by showing that classical Nyāya philosophers identified two important problems with the Abhidharma Buddhist reductionist analysis of no-self; and that these problems are still significant for contemporary cognitive science (105). The moderate upshot of this discussion is that Buddhism is not the only intellectual tradition with rigorous and important arguments relevant to science. "[T]he Brahmanical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists" (105). Further, if one seeks to defend the truth of Buddhism, it pays to engage and respond to the most pressing objections. And the Brahmanical traditions are important sources of targeted critique. So far, I strongly agree. But Evan draws a stronger moral, namely, that "we need a nonsectarian and cosmopolitan philosophical perspective to appreciate the Buddhist intellectual tradition in general and its no-self theory in particular" (105). He claims that "Buddhist philosophy must be seen in the dialectical context of its engagement with the other South Asian philosophical traditions" (105) and that "to privilege the Buddhist view in isolation from its dialectical interdependence with other traditions is to engage in Buddhist apologetics" (117). These remarks suggest that one cannot make sense of the Buddhist idea of no-self, let alone plausibly defend it, if one does not also consider objections raised against it by historical Brahmanical philosophers. This is unwarranted, however. Certainly, if Buddhist arguments for no-self presuppose Brahmanical ideas, then it follows one cannot properly appreciate them without considering those ideas. But just because Brahmanical philosophers had targeted objections does not mean that we cannot understand or appreciate the ideas they target independently. It does not mean that there is something wrong with putting Buddhist claims into interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy and science without, at the same time, engaging the Brahmanical traditions or, indeed, any other worthy conversational partners that have a stake in the debate. Evan identifies Jonardon Ganeri as a paradigm of the approach he is championing. He writes, "I find his cosmopolitan, pan-Indian perspective to be much more productive for cross-cultural philosophy than a strictly Buddhist view" (117). I am also inspired by Ganeri's work. It is worth noting, however, that his 2017 book, Attention, Not Self, restricts itself to reconstructing and defending Buddaghosa's Theravāda Buddhist conception of the mind in dialogue with the philosophy of mind. And this strikes me as perfectly legitimate. While I strongly agree with the moderate upshot of Evan's observations, I find the stronger versions unduly restrictive.

I have similar reservations about Evan’s critique of the attitude towards science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism. The question "Is Buddhism true?" assumes a standard of assessment. And naturalistic Buddhists take this to be modern science. According to Evan, the view of science it assumes is a form of realism that holds that there is "a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world" (48). Evan claims to be both puzzled and frustrated by the attempt to make Buddhism fit science as conceived. Puzzled, because he thinks it fails to recognize that the more radical Buddhist ideas undermine this realist assumption. Frustrated, because he thinks it is a missed opportunity for a "genuine encounter" (77), which he takes to involve distinct traditions challenging one another by focusing on their points of difference. He also seems to be a bit frustrated that the view of science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism is not the innovative 4E version that he himself champions.

There are some very reasonable points here. First, one should not uncritically assume the current state of modern science (or some image thereof) as one’s standard for assessing what counts as plausible or true. Modern science is neither monolithic nor complete. Its methods, assumptions, positions, and arguments are not uncontested. There is much work to be done and much work being done. The possibility of science being radically transformed by an encounter with Buddhist philosophy is entirely missed if you simply exclude, from the outset, those elements that don’t fit with the current state of science. And if one takes on board the earlier point about making explicit the Buddhist position one is defending, then one should also make sure that the commitments of that position are consistent with the image of science one is making it fit. Evan draws a parallel between his 4E approach to cognition and Madhyamaka Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is also a Madhyamaka Buddhist. But Madhyamaka is radically anti-foundationalist in its ontological commitments (at least on standard accounts). So, a scientific naturalism that assumes ontological realism is not going to readily prove this form of Buddhism to be true.
Evan diagnoses the attempt to make Buddhism fit with scientific realism as a symptom of Buddhist modernism and thus poorly motivated. But this is too hasty. There is good reason to think, for instance, that Abhidharma Buddhist philosophers also assumed that there is “a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world” (48). If this characterizes the realism of scientific naturalism, then Abhidharma has this in common. Of course, you might argue, as Evan does, that Abhidharma is problematic and contains normative ideas that are not consistent with science. You might also argue, as Evan does, that Madhyamaka Buddhism is preferable. But that Abhidharma Buddhism and scientific naturalism have this realist assumption in common is nevertheless a more plausible and charitable source of motivation to attribute to the naturalistic Buddhist than a simple appeal to authority grounded in a naïve conception of science.

This last issue, in closing, points to a broader theme in Evan’s critique of naturalistic Buddhism, namely, whether a “genuine encounter” between Buddhism and science must engage their radical points of difference or whether interdisciplinary dialogue could still be productive if interlocutors emphasize points of similarity (at least initially). Several remarks Evan makes in the book suggest he thinks the former. And I entirely take his point that encounters that emphasize radical points of difference have the greatest potential for transformation. But it strikes me that there are other modes of interdisciplinary dialogue that are just as legitimate and also potentially fruitful. One might, for instance, put some aspect of Buddhist thought into dialogue with some existing scientific model and assess the degree of fit. If it is close, one might use this as grounds to explore what other related Buddhist ideas could add to this model or whether subtle differences on the periphery or in the background provide grounds for revision on either side of the dialectic. Or, if there are competing scientific models of some phenomenon, the fact that some Buddhist ideas seem to support one model rather than the other might lend some weight to contemporary discussions. Of course, this won’t be decisive. They might be similar or consistent but both false for all that. One needs to remain mindful that scientific models are models and so whatever warrantability they might ascribe to Buddhist views will depend on their theoretical virtues (rather than a proof of correspondence with mind-independent reality). Admittedly, the outcomes of these methodological approaches are also likely to be more modest than the radical transformation Evan envisions. But they nevertheless seem to be equally legitimate modes of interdisciplinary dialogue. So, I conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which versions of his arguments he intends and to provide some additional justification if he had the stronger forms in mind.

NOTES
2. The Cowherds is an international collective of Buddhist philosophers and scholars. It consists of Amber Carpenter, Georges Dreyfus, Bronwyn Finnigan, Jay L. Garfield, Charles Goodman, Stephen Jenkins, Guy Martin Newland, Graham Priest, Mark Siderits, Koji Tanaka, Sonam Thakchoe, Tom Tillemans, and Jan Westerhoff.
3. Aside from Robert Sharf, whom he endorses.

Buddhism after Buddhist Modernism: Comments on Evan Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist
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Evan Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist is a devastating and comprehensive critique of the thesis that “Buddhism is not so much a religion as a science of the mind,” or—if one is unwilling to go that far—then at least the thesis that “Buddhism is superior among world religions in being inherently rational and empirical.” Thompson uses the labels “Buddhist modernism” and “Buddhist exceptionalism” as names for these two formulations of his opponents’ view, what Sanskrit logicians call the pūrva-pākṣa. While there have been and continue to be influential advocates of this view, I doubt that it will continue to seem attractive with the publication of this book.

Rather than seeking to legitimize Buddhism with far-fetched claims as to its exceptional status, Thompson recommends a cosmopolitan approach to the relationship between Buddhism and science, a “viable cosmopolitanism that isn’t Eurocentric or Americentric” but in which we “draw from the concepts and vocabularies of many religious and philosophical traditions.” The relationship between Buddhism and science should be a “conversation,” one whose “guiding image is that of a ‘circulation’. . . . where each one flows into and out of the other, and back again.”

In the final pages of the book, Thompson prioritizes the idea that the main theme of this conversation is “the ethics of knowledge,” the idea that any mode of inquiry is already infused with value. “[T]he conversation between science and Buddhism,” he writes, “has to concern the intentions motivating knowledge. The conversation has to be about the ethics of knowledge and the different forms of human life. What kinds of lives do we wish to lead, and what kinds of knowledge should we seek?” And Thompson makes the very valuable observation, in the final page of the book and without further elaboration, that “[t]he Buddhist intellectual tradition has the resources to mount its own critique of Buddhist modernism.” “The question I would pose to Buddhists,” he writes, “is whether they can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists.”

Having myself argued in favor of the need for a “cosmopolitan turn” in philosophy on many occasions, I am deeply sympathetic to the idea that cosmopolitanism provides a better model for the conversation between Buddhism and science than so-called “Buddhist modernism,” and indeed that it is a better template for the discipline of philosophy as such today. I, too, am skeptical of the motivating idea that
drives Buddhist modernism’s claim that “Buddhism is . . . a science of the mind,” namely, that Buddhist meditation is a sort of internal microscope enabling the meditator to observe, without distortion or transformation, the inner workings of their mind. It was, after all, that very idea that Hubert Dreyfus objected to in his review of the first edition of The Embodied Mind, Dreyfus arguing that the book thereby falls in its “attempt to reconcile transformation and discovery.” In his introduction to the revised 2016 edition of this classic text, Thompson admits this as a flaw in the original presentation and adds the following:

As a philosopher, I also feel duty bound to declare that Buddhist philosophy is every bit as abstract, theoretical, and technical as Western philosophy, so the idea that Buddhist philosophy is somehow closer to direct experience and thereby more immediately phenomenological—as we state at certain points in the text—is misguided. Moreover, being able to be abstract, theoretical, and technical is a strength of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and also of the Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions overall.

The thought is echoed in this new book, too. A Buddhist critique of this cardinal tenet of Buddhist modernism would begin, perhaps, with the early Pāli Buddhist theory of vipallāsa, or “distortion” (A iv.49). Partially overlapping with the phenomenon cognitive scientists now call “cognitive penetration,” distortion is something to which not even the Buddha was immune (M i.359–60), and for normal human beings the most serious form of distortion is that of mistaking pain for pleasure (M i.507). There is, again, in the philosophy of perception of Yogācāra thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti a Buddhist discussion of the interrelationship between attention and imagination that bears on any claim that introspective attention is, for Buddhists, pristine. The best hope for Buddhists to be modern without being Buddhist modernists is, I would suggest, to draw upon the full range of concepts and ideas in Buddhism’s immensely rich and diverse intellectual history to engage on equal footing in a dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind and other branches of contemporary philosophy, including contemporary work in the history of philosophy.

So Buddhism is not a first-person “science of the mind” in the way Buddhist modernists would have us believe. Neither is it “exceptional” in its adherence to norms of rational, indeed scientific, inquiry. As any scholar of those Indian philosophical traditions that partly constitute the Sanskrit cosmopolis knows, non-Buddhist schools like Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā are as profoundly committed to rational inquiry as it is possible for a philosophical school to be. One need only attend to the scope of Nyāya, as set out in the opening sūtra of its text, the Nyāya-sūtra: “The highest good is reached through an understanding of the true nature of [the distinction between] honest, dishonest and destructive debate, of false reasoning, tricks and checks in debate, of [the pattern of sound investigation, whose components are] doubt, purpose, examples, assumed principles, syllogisms, suppositional reasoning and decision, and [finally] of the ways of knowing and the knowables.”

For the later interpreter Gaṅgeśa, the Nyāya philosophy itself had cosmopolitan ambitions, the teachings intended for the benefit of “the entire world” (jagat), including, arguably, women and śūdras. Indeed, and somewhat in the same spirit as early Buddhist modernists like Siegmund Feniger (aka Nyanaponika Thera), the Scottish Orientalist James Ballantyne composed a treatise entitled Synopsis of Science: From the Standpoint of the Nyāya Philosophy, in which he attempted to demonstrate the scientific nature of the Nyāya system, largely as a way to persuade brahmans that they should study Western science insofar as it is a fulfillment of the scientific ambitions of their own heritage.

What, then, might a cosmopolitan conversation between Buddhism and science look like as we move beyond the misguided impulses of Buddhist modernism? There is, of course, another error we must be careful not to fall into, namely, the defining error of Eurocentrism, which is to think of science as a uniquely Western achievement and thus to view any conversation involving Buddhism and science under the rubric of a conversation between East and West. The standard view has been that a scientific conception of systems of public knowledge is a European achievement, and the acceptance of that view is what lends continuing significance to a question first posed by Joseph Needham some fifty years ago: “Why did modern science, the mathematization of hypotheses about Nature, with all its implications for advanced technology, take its meteoric rise only in the West at the time of Galileo? . . . [The question is] why modern science had not developed in Chinese civilization (or Indian) but only in Europe?” Needham, a sympathetic chronicler of the achievements of Chinese intellectual culture, was fully conscious of the fact that “between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., Chinese civilization was much more efficient in Chinese intellectual culture, was fully conscious of the fact that “between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., Chinese civilization was much more efficient than occidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs,” but he took it as uncontroversial that science is a uniquely European accomplishment. Indian intellectual culture does not share with Chinese the alleged emphasis on “practical human needs,” and it is, as Thompson emphasizes, “abstract, theoretical, and technical,” but it can equally be maintained that its achievements in the period up to the seventeenth century in astronomy, spherical astronomy, and linguistics outstripped those of Europe by a considerable margin. Needham’s question calls us to ask what Europe had that Asia didn’t, and there has been a plethora of proposals as to the lacuna, including the Protestant ethic, the mathematization of nature, and capitalism’s facilitation of ties between academia and craftsmen.

There is in all this a “European exceptionalism,” as deeply rooted as the “Buddhist exceptionalism” that Thompson decries. Most fundamentally, there is an implicit assumption about what science ought to be. It used to be the case, and was certainly the case in the 1960s when Needham framed his question, that science was conceived of as a purely value-free enterprise, a special mode of inquiry in which values play no part in the determination of research agenda or matters of scientific significance. The aim of science, it was imagined, was to provide a comprehensive description of the truth of nature unconstrained by the limitations of social or political imperatives. Such a view about science is
easily traceable to the first exponents of scientific inquiry in seventeenth-century Europe, who presented themselves as “gentlemen, free and unconstraining,” asking questions for the sake of asking questions and unconcerned with the implications for society at large. Needham is right, I think, that no such self-conception of scientific practice ever gained a grip among Chinese or Indian intellectuals. What we should dispute is the idea that this “standard model” of the nature of science is correct as an account of the actual place of science in society. Scientific inquiry is fundamentally value-laden, insofar as it aims at the production of such knowledge as is deemed by an ideal public to be of value to humanity’s ambition to live well.24 So Needham’s puzzle is wrong-headed because in Asia the forms of inquiry aiming at public knowledge were understood all along as constrained by values grounded in the common good.

The myth that science is a uniquely European invention, a myth that Needham’s question seems to presuppose and one that is also presumed by those who seek to answer the question by providing explanations in terms of European exceptionalism, has received a much-needed corrective with the publication of Christopher I. Beckwith’s Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World.25 Beckwith aims to show that the scientific method “was transmitted . . . to medieval Western Europe from Classical Arabic civilization, and how the Central Asian Muslims had earlier adopted [it] from Buddhist Central Asian civilization.”26 The actual medieval scientific method, he argues, was not the experimental method but rather a recursive argument method known to the Latin West as quaestiones disputatae. Its earliest appearance in a text composed in Latin is in Robert of Curzon’s De usura (c. 1208–1215), and it was brought into medieval Western Europe with the translation of Ibn Sina’s Kitāb al-shifā, the translation from Arabic to Latin prepared in the middle of the twelfth century by Avendauth and Dominicus the Archdeacon. Beckwith traces a second, earlier, transmission, from Central Asian Buddhism to the Arab world, identifying the Bactrian-Gandhāran Vibhāṣa, a Sarvāstivāda text from the first-century Kushan empire, as the earliest example of the method.

I would argue, however, that the scientific method’s origins are not in Central Asian Buddhism but lie further back in a Buddhist text from Magadha, what is now central-eastern India. That text is the Kathāvatthu, whose author Tissa Mogaliputta (c. 327–247 BCE) supervised the Third Buddhist Council, held at Pāṭaliputra in 253 BCE.26 The Council sought to establish concord by resolving disputed questions of doctrine between the Sthāvīravāda and Sarvāstivāda sects. Mogaliputta composed a text whose analytical method took as its starting point various disputed questions and proceeded in a systematic manner to consider the arguments pro and contra.

The recursive argument method identified by Beckwith has the following structure.27 A topic (T) is presented, usually in the form of a question, “It is asked whether . . .” There then follows a series of subarguments W₁, X₁, Y₁, Z₁, each of which is pro or contra the topic. These arguments are followed by another series of subarguments W₂, X₂, Y₂, Z₂, each of which is pro or contra the preceding arguments. At some point, the author’s view argument (A), an argument in favor or against the topic, is interjected and itself subjected to recursive argumentative scrutiny. Thus, the structure of a recursive argument can be formulated as follows:

\[ T : W₁X₁Y₁Z₁ : A : W₂X₂Y₂Z₂ \ldots \]

My point is that the Kathāvatthu exhibits exactly such a structure of recursive argument, there called vādayuttī. There is a given point at issue, for example, “whether a person is a real and irreducible entity” (a fundamental point of controversy among the Buddhist sects in the Third Council). The discussion is then divided into “openings” (mukkha), possible readings of the point at issue. Each such opening proceeds as a separate argument, divided into five stages: the way forward (anuloma), the way back (patikamma), the refutation (niggaha), the application (upanayana), and the conclusion (niggamana). In the anuloma, the proponent solicits from the respondent the endorsement of an argument, and then tries to argue against it. In the patikamma, the respondent turns the tables, soliciting from the proponent the endorsement of the counter-argument, and then trying to argue against that. In the niggaha, the respondent, continuing, seeks to refute the subargument that the proponent had advanced against the argument. The upanayana and niggamana repeat and reaffirm that the proponent’s subargument against the respondent’s argument is unsound, while the respondent’s argument against the proponent’s counter-thesis is sound. One of the various readings of the topic is identified as the author’s view. Schematically, the structure is as follows:

\[ T : W₁X₁ : W₂X₂ \]
\[ T’ : W₁X₁ : W₂X₂ \]
\[ T” : W₁X₁ : W₂X₂ \]
\[ \ldots \]

What is clear is that this argument method is recursive exactly in Beckwith’s sense, and not merely dialogical, because it consists in a set of nested subargumentation strategies pro and contra the topic.28 So if Beckwith is correct in his claim that a type of quaestiones disputatae is the original scientific method, then we can trace the original of that method back to the Third Buddhist Council.

The Kathāvatthu became extremely influential in early first milenial Buddhism. The importance given to it is indicated by the fact that it came to be included as one of the seven texts that constitute the canon of the Theravāda Abhidhamma Pitaka, this despite the fact that it does not purport to record the actual words of the Buddha. Insofar as the author’s view argument here is that of Sthāvīravāda, and the principal target is Sarvāstivāda, it is certain that Central Asian Sarvāstivāda will have known of this work.

All this is to agree with Thompson when he says that “[t]he Buddhist intellectual tradition has the resources to mount its own critique of Buddhist modernism.”

The Embodied Mind drew on one set of resources,
Vasubandhu’s elaboration and critique of the Abhidharma in the Abhidharmakosabhāṣya and Nāgārjuna’s anti-foundationalist classic, the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā. I have indicated how another Abhidharma treatise, the Kathāvatthu, should be brought into any conversation about Buddhism and science. Insofar as there are already scientific elements available within the Buddhist textual corpus, this conversation should not be characterized as one between Buddhism and science. Indeed, if what I have argued here is correct, then Buddhism’s role in the development of science is itself a good example of the sort of cosmopolitan to-and-fro of ideas that Thompson’s book advocates, and of how, as philosophy goes global, it is such entanglements, interconnections, and networks of intellectual exchange that come to the fore.

NOTES
2. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 72–73.
6. Ibid., 183–84.
7. Ibid., 189.
8. Ibid. Given Thompson’s evident sympathy for Buddhism and his openness to there being varieties of modern Buddhism that are not Buddhist modernism, the title he chooses for this book strikes me as jarring and inappropriate. Better, perhaps, would have been Why I Am Not Only a Buddhist.
10. Thompson, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, 27.
13. Thompson, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, 43.
15. Ibid., 143–46.
20. Ibid., 190.
25. Ibid., 1.
26. For discussion of the precise dating of the Kathāvatthu, see Charles Willemen, Bart Dessein, and Collett Cox, Savarśtvāvā Buddhist Scholasticism (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Akira Hirakawa, A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 90–91.
27. Ibid., 15–18.
28. Ibid., 16.
30. Thompson, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, 189.

Throwing Out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist

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I. LAUDATORY INTRODUCTION
Evan Thompson has given us another lovely book. Like Waking, Dreaming, Being,1 Why I Am Not a Buddhist creatively mixes memoir, philosophy, cognitive science, and cultural commentary to illuminate the interface between religion, science, philosophy, and human life, candidly explaining how Evan got to where he is.2 There is a lot to learn from this volume and a lot to enjoy.

Evan and I are used to disagreeing deeply about fundamental issues, but here I find myself in agreement with nearly everything he says. As a fellow veteran of several Mind and Life Dialogues, I recognize the discomfort with which one emerges from those often very stimulating exchanges that nonetheless fail to be entirely satisfying for the reasons that Evan so ably scouts. And as a fellow non-Buddhist working on Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, I recognize the complicated set of pressures that position generates: One is tempted to identify with Buddhism on pain of not being taken seriously by one’s religious interlocutors. One is also tempted to distance oneself from practice in order to be taken seriously by one’s philosophical interlocutors. And each side encourages the odd enthusiasm for the incoherent mélange of Buddhism and cognitive or physical science that we find in Buddhist modernism. I congratulate Evan on having mapped those tensions with such candor...
and care, and on having diagnosed many of the important problems with such acuity.

But while I have not come to bury Evan, nor have I come to praise him. So, I will now put aside my genuine admiration for Why I Am Not a Buddhist to take issue with a few strands of Evan’s critique. In what follows, I will split hairs, but to quote our late colleague in Buddhist philosophy, Sandy Huntington, “the finer the hair, the more important it is to split it.” I want to talk first about naturalism in Buddhism, suggesting that Evan may underestimate the resources for a legitimately naturalistic reading of some Buddhist philosophical traditions. I will then turn to an area in which Evan and I are long friendly antagonists: the idea of no-self, where I will argue that Evan may miss the most important issue in Buddhist critiques of the idea of self. I will then turn to the topic of awakening. There I will suggest that, just as he underestimates the possibility of a naturalistic reading of some Buddhist traditions more broadly, Evan underestimates the possibilities for legitimately naturalistic understandings of awakening by modern Buddhists. I will conclude with some more optimistic thoughts about Buddhist modernism as a religious and social movement, and with an explanation of my own more prosaic reasons for not being a Buddhist.

II. REHABILITATING NATURALISM IN BUDDHISM

There is a lot to like in Evan’s discussion of Buddhism and naturalism, and I leave aside the material with which I agree. Evan brings his discussion of Buddhist naturalism to a head with the following remarks:

I can now . . . say why I think that naturalistic Buddhism is not compelling. Naturalistic Buddhists uncritically accept philosophically problematic forms of naturalism and realism. They fail to see how the deepest and most radical insights of the Buddhist intellectual tradition undermine these ideas. To wit: “the mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two.” [Vimalakīrti Nīrdeśa Sūtra] . . . Naturalistic Buddhists proceed as if the mind can be grasped, as if it can be pinned down and identified as essentially the “biological reality” of the brain. . . . The deep question is whether it’s possible for science to be mindful of the mind’s ungraspability. . . .

Naturalistic Buddhists fail to recognize, let alone appreciate, the fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism. Robert Sharf puts it this way: “Liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved.” (77-78)

Evan argues that the failure here rests on the Buddhist conception of nirvāṇa as unconditioned, and reads unconditioned as entailing that nirvāṇa “can’t be the result of any cause and specifically can’t be the result of any mental cause. But this implies that nirvana can’t be the result of following the Buddhist path” (78). It follows, he argues, that there is a fatal inconsistency between being a Buddhist and being a naturalist: One must accept as a Buddhist the possibility of a causeless state and as a naturalist the idea that all phenomena have causal explanations.

The remark quoted above from the Vimalakīrti Nīrdeśa Sūtra is used to make a slightly different argument: Naturalists about cognition, Evan argues, see cognitive states as (at most) narrowly supervenient on brain states; most or all Buddhist philosophers of mind see them either as substantially distinct from any physical state or as broadly supervenient; so most or all Buddhist philosophers of mind reject a central plank of naturalism about the mind.

Both of these arguments are unsound. Seeing why they are unsound allows us to appreciate a naturalism that pervades much (though not all) of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. That naturalism offers the prospect for a modernist Buddhism that is both naturalistic and continuous with (some) strands of classical Buddhist thought.

Let us begin with nirvāṇa. Any discussion of this issue must begin by acknowledging the many occurrences in Buddhist literature of statements identifying the causes of achieving nirvāṇa. And these are frequent in both Śrāvakāyāna and Mahāyāna texts (although the identification of the precise causes is different). We hear about accumulations of wisdom and merit, about the achievement of perfections, about the Noble Eightfold Path, etc. So, while there are schools (particularly the East Asian schools that revel in paradox) that see the characterization of nirvāṇa as unconditioned as contradictory to its being achieved as the result of causes and conditions, this is not universal in Buddhist traditions, and is rather alien to Indian, Tibetan, and Southeast Asian traditions. And this makes sense, given that the principal pillar of Buddhist metaphysics is the doctrine of pratītyasamutpāda, of universal interdependence, one aspect of which is causal interdependence.

In these traditions, the term unconditioned is meant to indicate one of the following two things: First, once nirvāṇa is achieved, no further conditions such as supporting conditions are required to sustain it; that is, it is irreversible. Second, once one achieves nirvāṇa, one’s mind is free from the particular network of conditions that perpetuate saṁsāra. Now, we might fight about whether there is such a state, about whether it is possible to enter a state that is necessarily irreversible, etc. And those are interesting philosophical discussions to have within the tradition. But the point is that the term unconditioned does not immediately lead to paradox, even in the context of a tradition committed to the universality of interdependent co-origination.

Of course, one might embrace paradox, and that might even be reasonable. But note that even if one does so, that by itself is not a recusal from naturalism tout court. This is because the paradox is only generated by juxtaposing the claim that nirvāṇa is unconditioned with the fact that everything is conditioned, and that practice is its cause. While that might seem to require rejecting naturalism, it also requires endorsing it. So, either way, naturalism in the sense of a commitment to universal causal explicability is not undermined by Buddhist theories of nirvāṇa.

Now, back to the mind and its supervenience base. Evan is right that some naturalists in the Buddhist modernist camp—most often philosophically naïve neuroscientists
enamored with colorful fMRI images—take psychological states (including those identified in the Abhidharma, and even more improbable candidates, as Evan documents) to be narrowly supervenient, or even to be identical with brain states. And Evan is right both that this is crazy and about why it is crazy.

But that is only one possible position. I have argued elsewhere that a widespread Buddhist position regarding cognitive and affective states is one of very broad supervenience, and that position is well-attested within nearly every Buddhist position, Buddhist modernist neuroscientists to the contrary notwithstanding. Moreover, as Evan well knows, many of us in the philosophy of cognitive science have independently defended the broad supervenience of psychological states on the physical. And there is nothing non-naturalist about this. Identity theory, reductionism, and narrow supervenience have no monopoly on naturalism. So, even if some neuroscientists who take themselves to be vindicating Buddhists are identity theorists, that does not exhaust the range of naturalistic Buddhist positions.

A naturalistic Buddhism is, as Evan points out, threatened from both sides: One could fallaciously infer from naturalism to an identity theory regarding psychological states and brain states or to the narrow supervenience of the mental on the physical, and so find oneself at odds both with good sense and with Buddhism. Or, one could—as many, but not all, Buddhists do—adopt a strongly dualist position with regard to some psychological phenomena. The position of some with regard to what many Buddhists call subtle consciousness comes to mind. Either of these would threaten the naturalistic strain in Buddhist modernism. My point is just that being a Buddhist and being a naturalist entail neither of these problems. There is space between Scylla and Charybdis in this domain, and that is the space that a Buddhist modernist ought to and can occupy.

III. A MORE CHARITABLE READING OF NO-SELF

Evan develops a sustained critique of a blithe acceptance of Buddhist critiques of the idea of a self, and of a blithe acceptance of the idea that this is somehow more scientific than a Brahminical self theory positing a substantial atman.

I do not have space in this comment to do justice to his entire discussion. And much of it is very compelling. But when Evan concludes that “the Brahminical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists” and that “to single out the Buddhas as more ‘scientific’ is partisan and simplistic” (105), I must part company.

Evan’s principal route to this conclusion is not the endorsement of a Brahminical view. Those views are very hard to square with science, or to defend as “rational and empirical,” and Evan’s direct assessment of those views concedes as much. They are substantialist, and they posit a continuing convention-independent entity that persists through (and beyond) the entity’s biological life, and that functions as a non-natural owner of the psychophysical constituents of a person. Instead, he argues that “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn’t the only way to understand the meaning of ‘self,’ so denying that there is this kind of self doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (105).

That is, he changes the subject, conceding the Buddhist success in targeting the Brahminical conception, and suggesting that we can redefine the English term used to translate the Sanskrit atman so as to deliver a referent other than the one that Buddhists have in mind.

The problem isn’t just that this is an embrace of equivocation. It is that by taking himself to defend the self against Buddhist critiques, Evan distorts classical Buddhist positions, understates the value of Buddhist critiques, and fails in his attempt to locate a problem for Buddhist modernism in this terrain, all of this despite a very sensitive account of the range of positions one might take with regard to the construction of personhood, an account with which I take no issue.

In Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra), Candrakīrti (7th c. CE) gets at this point through an example to which Evan refers in another context. He admonishes that a philosopher refusing the existence of a self should not be like a man who is worried that a snake is hiding in the wall of his house and reassures himself of his safety by failing to find an elephant. This is the example that kicks off later Tibetan discussions initiated by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) about the object of negation in Madhyamaka Buddhist analysis. The point of the example is that we must be very careful in identifying the thing the existence of which we are trying to refute, to refute that, and not to refute anything else.

Candrakīrti, as Hume was to do a millennium later, carefully distinguishes the self (atman/bdag) from the person (pudgala/gang zag) or mere I (nga tsam). The former is the object of negation, the target of Buddhist no-self arguments; the latter is the conventional person. To affirm the existence of the former is to fall into the extreme of reification; to deny the existence of the latter is to fall into the opposite extreme, that of nihilism. The metaphysical tightrope that Madhyamaka philosophers try to walk involves not confusing these two: Mādhyamikas deny that there is any convention-independent self of the kind that the orthodox Indian schools accept, which is taken by most Buddhist philosophers—classical and modern—to be a philosophical ramification of our innate sense of our own existence. At the same time, they accept the conventional reality of persons, with the understanding that their existence is merely conventional. Moreover, as Evan himself emphasizes, to exist conventionally, on this view, is not to be non-existent; rather, it is a way of being existent.

When Evan talks about narrative selves, constructed selves, social selves, enacted selves, and embodied selves, he is talking not about the self that is the target of the Buddhist analysis, but about the person that remains. In doing so, he is correctly drawing our attention to the many dimensions of interdependence that give rise to our identities as persons, as role players. But when he calls these alternative versions of the self that Buddhists attempt to refute—versions that evade that refutation—he confuses the snake with the elephant, substituting the person for the self as the object of negation. He thus effectively concedes the
Buddhist refutation of the self on the one hand, while accusing Buddhists of having failed in virtue of the fact that the person survives that critique. But his Buddhist interlocutors, such as Candrakīrti, have no quarrel with the conventional reality of the person. There is, however, good reason to worry about the serpent of the self; it is no straw serpent if Buddhists are even close to being right about our psychology and if many of its ramifications in Western philosophy of mind—classical and contemporary—are pernicious. Clarity requires keeping these conceptually distinct. And neither modern psychology nor modern neuroscience vindicates the reality of the self at which Buddhist critiques are aimed.

The modern Buddhist, then, is correct to assert that the Buddhist position is more in harmony with contemporary psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind than is the Brahminical position, and correct to see no-self not only as one interesting idea that Buddhism brings to the table, but also as a deep insight that can contribute to contemporary conversations. In this respect, modern Buddhism is in harmony both with classical Buddhist thought and with contemporary science.

IV. GETTING WOKE

Evan correctly calls our attention to real muddles in Buddhist modernist thinking about awakening (bodhi). But once again, I fear that he goes a step too far in his critique. He writes:

Traditional Buddhists accept the reality of the Buddha’s awakening and the possibility of their own awakening as a matter of faith. They have trust or confidence in the Buddha’s way of life as a way of leading to awakening. Having this faith is an essential part of what it means to be a Buddhist.

Buddhist modernists, however, try to make awakening consistent with their understanding of the scientific worldview. Many of them use a two-pronged approach. The first prong is to dehumanize awakening by turning it into a rationally comprehensible psychological state. The second prong is to romanticize awakening by turning it into a kind of intuitive and nonconceptual epiphany.... Neural Buddhists take a further step and think that we can get a better understanding of such epiphanies or “awakening experiences” by finding their “neural correlates” in the brain.

I think the Buddhist modernist concept of enlightenment is incoherent. Either you embrace faith in awakening and nirvana, which, according to the tradition, transcend conceptual thought ... or you choose to believe only in what can be made scientifically comprehensible, in which case you have to give up the idea of enlightenment as a nonconceptual and intuitive realization of the “fullness of being” or the “suchness of reality,” for these aren’t scientific concepts. You can’t have it both ways. (143-44)

A great deal of the argument that follows is dedicated to showing that the concept of awakening (or enlightenment, if you prefer that Protestant term) has meaning only in a cultural and conceptual context, and that, like terms such as “love” and “money,” cannot denote anything that is not conceptually or culturally determined. With that argument, I have no problem. But the central argument I quoted above is a chain of non sequiturs.

Let us begin at the beginning where we have a serious equivocation on translation. Evan sometimes translates śrāddha as faith, sometimes as confidence. These are not synonymous in contemporary English. And the choice of which to use is important. In the context of many Buddhist texts, I prefer the latter. In many Buddhist discussions, śrāddha is introduced as an attitude regarding belief in that to which one has only indirect cognitive access through the testimony of the Buddha or another highly realized being. These are the relevant contexts in this discussion of awakening. In such cases, śrāddha is justified on the grounds that we know the source to be reliable because we can verify their accuracy regarding things to which we do have access. This is thus a reliability argument for the veridicality of a witness. This is not the sense of faith parodied by Mark Twain as belief in what you know ain’t so.

This is important because the claim that Buddhists have śrāddha in the Buddha’s awakening and in the possibility of their own is confidence in this sense, not faith in the belief-without-reason sense. But it is the latter sense that animates Evan’s claim that “[h]aving this faith is an essential part of what it means to be a Buddhist” (144), despite the fact that it is confidence that underlines refuge and so is “essential” to being a Buddhist. While the tension between being a Buddhist and having confidence in science (much of which for most of us is also confidence born of a sense of the reliability of witnesses) might arise on the faith reading of śrāddha, it is not at all clear that it might or does on the confidence reading. One can have confidence in science to tell us about a lot of things, and confidence in the Buddha to tell us about some other things regarding which science is currently silent. This does not, of course, mean that anything in science entails the possibility of awakening, or that anything in Buddhism entails the truth of anything discovered or discoverable by science; that, Evan is correct in saying, is claptrap. But it does suggest consistency with being a Buddhist and having śrāddha in science. And that is the core of this aspect of Buddhist modernism as I see it.

Finally, even if nirvāṇa and awakening transcend conceptual thought in some sense, this is no reason to think that a belief that they are possible is inconsistent with confidence in the value of science. That would be to commit a crude intentional fallacy. Moreover, nothing in any scientific theory of which I am aware, or in any account in the philosophy of science that I would be prepared to endorse, entails that there are no states or other phenomena that transcend human conceptual capacities. Note, for instance, that Kant, who had immense confidence in science, thought that noumena were beyond our conceptual ken. Schopenhauer thought that the will was. Wittgenstein in the Tractatus thought that the nature of reality was. And they were friends of science as well.
However grand science is, its success does not entail that the human mind is capable of conceptualizing all that there is or, for that matter, that the content of a naturally explicable belief must itself be consistent with naturalism. So, once again, I disagree with Evan: One can be a friend of science and still be confident that it is possible to achieve states of which one cannot conceive. One just can’t think that any scientific theory guarantees that. Mad-dog Buddhist modernism according to which Buddhism and the one true theory in cognitive neuroscience are equivalent might be out, but not moderate modernism according to which they might be mutually consistent.

V. MODERATE BUDDHIST MODERNISM

So, while much of Evan’s critique of Buddhist modernism and more particularly of certain Buddhist modernists is on target, I don’t think that it undermines the Buddhist modernist project as a whole. Buddhism, like all other religious traditions, gives rise to conceptual tensions, and these are often the tensions that animate debate within the tradition and between Buddhists and their non-Buddhist interlocutors. Modernist Buddhism is continuous with classical Buddhism in this respect. There is no special incoherence in this modern movement, just new epicycles on old conceptual difficulties. And there is nothing exceptional about Buddhism in this regard. Modernist movements in all religious traditions encounter similar tensions.

These tensions—as Evan grants—do not undermine the fact that Buddhist philosophy is replete with insights and arguments that make it a worthwhile dialogical partner with Western philosophy, just as it has for centuries been a dialogical partner with non-Buddhist Asian philosophies. Nor do they undermine the fact that Buddhism has proven to be a religious tradition that offers insight and the opportunity for personal cultivation to people in the modern era, just as it has for centuries. But nor again does it follow that there is a necessary tension between the Buddhist tradition and science. There is enough in the Buddhist tradition that is of philosophical and religious value and that is consistent with a naturalistic, scientific outlook to allow one to be a Buddhist and a friend of science in good faith. One can be a moderate Buddhist modernist.

What does moderate Buddhist modernism look like? A moderate Buddhist modernist accepts certain core ideas articulated in Buddhist philosophy, such as the Four Noble Truths, the universality of dependent origination, the doctrine of the two truths, the three natures, and the notion that the moral ideal encoded in the four brahmavihāras is compelling, even if it is not a complete abdication of morality in the contemporary world. That is already a lot of distinctively Buddhist doctrine. And the moderate Buddhist takes seriously the philosophical arguments developed in the Buddhist tradition for the truth of these doctrines in the way that a good Kantian takes seriously Kant’s arguments, or a good Aristotelian take seriously Aristotle’s arguments: She does not simply parrot them, but works through them, amends them, and endorses some version of them.

A moderate Buddhist modernist may take some Buddhist doctrines that were taken literally by many traditional Buddhists in more metaphorical senses. For instance, the realms of rebirth may be interpreted psychologically; rebirth itself might be taken to indicate a moral continuity between generations, etc. And a moderate modernist may reject some things believed by ancient Buddhists—for instance, Buddhist cosmology—just as serious modern Aristotelians reject Aristotle’s cosmology.

And a moderate Buddhist modernist has conviction that science is the best pramāṇa we have for a detailed investigation of the physical and psychological world. She takes seriously a kind of naturalism according to which the world is explicable without reference to supernatural forces, that reason and perception are good guides to truth, and that the fact that they are good guides is itself explicable. And finally, a moderate modernist may think that Buddhist philosophy may offer insights into the philosophy of science and that science is an important corrective to Buddhist speculative doctrine. I see nothing incoherent in this outlook.

VI. WHY I AM STILL NOT A BUDDHIST AND WHY I STILL LIKE THIS BOOK

Nonetheless, like Evan, I am not a Buddhist, not even a modernist Buddhist. But for a different reason. I think that religious traditions, like nations or clubs, get to set their own criteria for membership. To respect a tradition is to respect their criteria. You can’t just declare yourself a Jew—you have to have a Jewish mom or undergo a conversion ceremony; you can’t just declare yourself a Catholic—you have to be baptized. And you can’t just declare yourself a Buddhist: You have to take refuge in the Triple Gem. That is, you must take the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as your only protection from the ills of samsāra.

And I can’t. I don’t sincerely believe that buddhahood, Buddhadharma, and the community of Buddhist practitioners are my only route to a satisfactory life. Others do. I do not regard that belief and its associated practices as irrational; they are just not mine. My reason for not being a Buddhist modernist is hence not that I find it incoherent, as does Evan, but that I can’t be a Buddhist. I am just not religious in that sense (although, as many know, I do take the Buddhist philosophical tradition very, very seriously; on the other hand, I am probably more a post-modernist than a modernist).

But I do like Evan’s book. It is a penetrating look at the Buddhist modernist movement as we see it today, and a penetrating critique of some of the most problematic aspects of that movement. It is sympathetic, generous, and honest. It is full of insight, and a great read. And it will spur debate. That is a good thing. A good debating partner is hard to find, and I always appreciate Evan Thompson in that role.

NOTES

I. INTRODUCTION

Evan Thompson begins his book, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, by noting that “Buddhism is one of humanity’s great religious and intellectual traditions. It is, and deserves to be, a participant in the secular and liberal democratic societies of our modern world. It is, and deserves to be, a contributor to a cosmopolitan community” (1). He goes on to state, however, that “[n]evertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as ‘Buddhist modernism,’ is full of confused ideas” (1). As the adverb “nevertheless” indicates, Thompson’s view is that Buddhist modernism’s confusions make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism. He claims that these confusions “need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community” (2). He thus concludes the book by suggesting that Buddhists “find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists” (189).

It is ironic that Thompson characterizes his argument against Buddhist modernism as a “positive ... argument for cosmopolitanism” (21) because his book actually undermines the pluralistic values that are at cosmopolitanism’s core. Even if Buddhist modernism is confused in the ways that Thompson argues it is, it still can, and should, have a valued seat at the cosmopolitan table. By disparaging Buddhist modernists and characterizing them as unworthy conversation partners, Thompson fails to demonstrate cosmopolitan respect for the many people who are Buddhist modernists.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Buddhist modernism, Thompson explains, “downplays the metaphysical and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism, while emphasizing personal meditative experience and scientific rationality” (15). He adds that it “presents itself as if it were Buddhism’s original and essential core” (15) and as “exceptional” (1) in the sense of being “superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical” (2) or in the sense that it “isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation” (2). Since, according to Thompson, Buddhist modernism cannot justifiably claim to be Buddhism’s essential and original core, claim scientific confirmation, or jettison religious elements, he concludes that Buddhist modernism “distorts both the significance of the Buddhist tradition and the relationship between religion and science” (188) and is “philosophically and scientifically indefensible” (189). These confusions, Thompson argues, are antithetical to cosmopolitanism.

The cosmopolitanism that Thompson takes himself to be defending is the one articulated and defended by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers. Cosmopolitanism, as Appiah understands it, involves having universal concern for all people while at the same time respecting cultural and religious differences among people. For Appiah, while we ought to think of ourselves as part of a global humanity, it is important that at the same time we retain and celebrate the cultural differences that the variety of our histories, environments, and stories has shaped. Appiah points out that “[h]umanity isn’t; in the relevant sense, an identity at all . . . engagement with strangers is always going to be engagement with particular strangers” (98). People are always already culturally embedded individuals who carry with them the conceptual and cultural ideas associated with their particular history. Showing universal concern for all of humanity thus necessarily requires showing concern and respect for particular individuals and their particular identities.

Thompson’s claim that Buddhist modernist confusions “need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community” (2) is troubling from a cosmopolitan perspective because [1] it generalizes Buddhism as one monolithic tradition that has one (i.e., “its”) rightful place within a cosmopolitan community when in fact there are many Buddhisms that will occupy different places within a global cosmopolitan community; [2] it introduces the idea that there is a “rightful place,” and thus a single right and wrong way for Buddhists to participate in a cosmopolitan community, when in fact there are many appropriate ways for diverse communities to participate; and [3] it presents the notions of “rightful place” and “valuable contributor” as barriers to inclusion by instructing one of those groups, namely, Buddhist modernists, to change their views (presumably so as to be right) in order to be considered valuable contributors (suggesting they are not currently valuable) when in fact there are no such barriers to inclusion. Constructive participation in a cosmopolitan community requires only a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with diverse others. In suggesting otherwise, Thompson undermines the pluralistic values that are at cosmopolitanism’s core.

III. MANY RIGHTFUL PLACES FOR BUDDHISMS

With respect to point [1], Thompson acknowledges that there are many forms of Buddhism that have evolved and changed over its history, especially as Buddhisms took root in culturally different places. He claims that he is not arguing that Buddhist modernism is any less authentic a form of Buddhism than any other form. Yet Thompson still envisions a “rightful place” for Buddhism and singles out Buddhist modernism for failing to take it. Given the extraordinary diversity among Buddhists, especially in the United States, it is difficult to make sense of what the “rightful place” for a Buddhist could be. In A New Religious America, Diana
L. Eck presents the diversity of Buddhisms in the US and notes that “Buddhism in America today is experiencing its own internal struggles with pluralism as cultures and generations express their different understandings of what it means to be Buddhist” (150). She describes the challenges that pan-Buddhist organizations face in trying to achieve consensus about what is of central importance to the Buddhism that they all share. If pan-Buddhist groups, which often organize with the explicit purpose of representing themselves in cosmopolitan exchanges, struggle to determine what the Buddhist position should be in those discussions, Thompson is certainly not in a position to decide it either. Part of respecting another’s identity in cosmopolitan exchanges is allowing each participant to determine for themselves what their identity is and how to represent it. Appiah explains, for example, that “[i]t is up to those who want to sail under the flags of Christianity or of Islam to determine (and explain, if they wish) what their banners mean” (147). Likewise, it is up to Buddhists to decide for themselves what is original or insightful in Buddhism and how to represent that to others. Given the wide variety of Buddhisms, they will likely occupy many “rightful” places in cosmopolitan exchanges.

IV. EXCEPTIONALISM IS NOT A BARRIER TO A GOOD COSMOPOLITAN CONVERSATION

Thompson’s assessment of what Buddhism’s rightful place is seems related to his assessment of Buddhist modernism as confused, which brings us to point [2]. The idea seems to be that any Buddhist tradition can take its rightful place at the cosmopolitan table so long as it is not confused in ways that make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism. The two confusions that Thompson explicitly cites are claims to historical veracity and exceptionalism. Thompson complains that Buddhist modernists, like religious fundamentalists, attempt to legitimize their form of Buddhism by claiming that it uniquely reflects the true core of the Buddha’s teachings when no such claim of historical veracity can be substantiated (20). He further complains that Buddhist modernism is anti-cosmopolitan because “[i]t is partisan Buddhist exceptionalism undermines its universalistic rhetoric” (172). Buddhist modernists, like most Buddhists, claim to be universally concerned about all sentient beings. However, Thompson argues that insofar as Buddhist modernism takes itself to be “exceptional,” i.e., superior to other worldviews, it thereby undermines its claims of universal concern. In both of these instances, Thompson takes Buddhist modernists’ partiality and commitment to the truth of their own worldview as rendering them incapable of participating in cosmopolitan discussions in the right kind of way. He claims that “[a] genuine encounter is one in which each tradition gets to challenge the other’s assumptions, positions, and arguments” (77), that “conversation destabilizes one’s background assumptions and commitments” (180), and that participants ought to “allow their viewpoints to become unsettled” (185). Thompson complains that Buddhist modernists resist having their views unsettled and so are bad cosmopolitan conversation partners (11-12, 185-86).

The problem with this view is that most Buddhist traditions (and other religious and ideological traditions for that matter) claim historical veracity and many of their adherents are committed to the truths of their particular tradition. Contrary to what Thompson suggests, these attitudes are not the exclusive purview of anti-cosmopolitan fundamentalists. Here Thompson is picking up on Appiah’s mistaken notion that fallibilism is a requirement of cosmopolitanism. Appiah assumes that only those who are less than fully committed to the truth of their own worldview could respect others who believe differently than they do. Appiah is concerned that those who “think that there is one right way for all human beings to live” cannot respect or be tolerant of people who do not share their commitments (even if they can, or care to, understand them) (144). However, as he himself highlights in his book (chapter 5, “The Primacy of Practice,” 69–85), in practice people are often willing to engage and get to know one another, to work together for the common good of the community—locally or globally—even if they think those with whom they share that community are woefully wrong in their worldview commitments. As the interfaith work of Diana L. Eck and Eboo Patel demonstrates, for example, many committed religious people—including a wide variety of Buddhists—are actively engaged in pluralism-building projects (both inter- and intra-religiously) despite being committed to the exclusive truth of their own traditions. Such people are not fallibilists, yet they are some of the most active and inspiring builders of a pluralist community. Thus, fallibilism is not a necessary cosmopolitan commitment. To insist that it is would exclude a large number of otherwise willing and valuable participants from the cosmopolitan project.

Eck (2001) and Patel (2016) can help us see why it is a mistake to see ideological commitment as antithetical to cosmopolitanism. They both draw an important distinction between diversity and pluralism that allows them to draw further distinctions among various different ways that individuals can respond to diversity. These distinctions allow us to see that ideological commitment is not the defining feature of fundamentalism.

For Eck and Patel, diversity is just a fact. Any place in which a variety of people with different worldviews, histories, religions, and/or cultures live is diverse. Diversity is neither positive nor negative and it can exist, as with Buddhism in the U.S., within traditions as well as among them. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a particular way to engage that diversity, one that involves, in Patel’s words, “the energetic engagement of diversity toward a positive end” (92). “Pluralism,” Eck explains, “is not a given but must be created” (70). It requires the sustained efforts of individuals and communities to engage difference, religious or otherwise, with the goal of generating understanding, building community, and promoting the common good.

Cosmopolitanism, as Appiah characterizes it, clearly has this kind of pluralism as its end. Yet Appiah often conflates diversity with pluralism in giving his account of cosmopolitanism. He says, for example, that “cosmopolitanism isn’t hard work” because living in association with people who are different from ourselves is simply a fact of our lives, given the ways people have historically moved and traded (xx). Here Appiah equates cosmopolitanism with what Eck describes as diversity,
as simply a fact about us. In other places, Appiah clearly presents cosmopolitanism as a goal and an achievement. Appiah’s characterization of cosmopolitanism as “an adventure and an ideal,” for example, fits better with Eck’s characterization of pluralism as an achievement (xx). In a similar vein, Appiah says that “[t]here is a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge,” specifically, the challenge of balancing universal concern for all people and respect for their particularity (xxv). A cosmopolitan society is here presented by him as a diverse society that thus faces the problem of figuring out how to engage diversity in positive ways that foster respect and concern, reflecting the challenges of achieving pluralism as a goal.

Distinguishing between diversity and pluralism is helpful because it creates a space for identifying alternative ways one might engage diversity other than pluralism and can thereby help us understand fundamentalism as a particular kind of response. Eck and Patel categorize various approaches to diversity. One can adopt an exclusionary approach that does one of the following: (i) build barriers between people, amplifying differences and disagreements in scurrilous and antagonistic ways; (ii) use violence in an attempt to eradicate difference; or (iii) build bunkers to insulate one’s own worldview from interaction with and influence from diverse others. Alternatively, one can (iv) adopt an assimilationist approach that is simply indifferent to and dismissive of the distinctive aspects of other worldviews that are valued by their members without actively excluding others through antagonism, violence, or bunker-building. Fundamentalism, on this more nuanced view, has less to do with what a person believes, or the commitments they hold, and more to do with a person’s adoption of exclusionary behaviors and attitudes. The problem is not that fundamentalists think their view is exclusively right, but that they use that conviction to justify acting in ways that disparage, exclude, and/or harm other groups. Many similarly committed people do not share these fundamentalist attitudes or engage in these exclusionary behaviors but rather adopt a pluralist approach, as the work of Eck and Patel (among others) shows.

Productive engagement of diversity thus does not require that participants go into the exchanges desiring to challenge their own commitments or those of others. In fact, Appiah explicitly says that the point of cosmopolitanism is not to engage in this kind of debate. He says that

... we go wrong if we think the point of cosmopolitanism is to persuade, and imagine it proceeding as a debate, in which points are scored for the Proposition and the Opposition... practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace... it’s enough that it helps people get used to one another. (84-85)

The point of cosmopolitanism, for Appiah, is getting used to one another so that we can live together in peace. For Patel, this involves gaining appreciative knowledge about, having positive attitudes toward, and building relationships with diverse others—even, and especially, with those with whom we fundamentally disagree (100-103). Getting to know and appreciate others in this way is difficult in the context of debate.

It is also worth remembering that cosmopolitan exchanges often occur across unequal power dynamics that make the destabilization of the participants’ background assumptions and commitments more precarious for some groups than for others. Spurious appeals to reason have also been used historically by those in power to dismiss colonized and/or racialized others as irrational, something Appiah seems to be responding to in his book (42-43). Appiah’s conversation model mitigates the threat marginalized groups, such as Asian Buddhist modernists, might otherwise justifiably feel in entering into cosmopolitan exchanges.

V. WHO IS TO JUDGE?

I have shown [1] that there is reason to doubt that there is one rightful place for Buddhism in a cosmopolitan community and [2] that a commitment to the exceptionalism of Buddhist modernism is not sufficient to accuse Buddhist modernists of not being cosmopolitan in the right, valuable kind of way. That Thompson introduces the notions of “rightful place” and “valuable contributor” as barriers to inclusion invites some very difficult questions about who Thompson envisions is the judge of what a tradition’s rightful place is or what its value is to a global cosmopolitan community. This brings us to point [3]. Rightful according to whom? Valuable to whom? Troublingly, Thompson often writes as if the cosmopolitan perspective constituted some acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere from which to arbitrate among diverse participants. He writes, for example:

Cosmopolitan thinkers move across different religious, scientific, philosophical, and artistic traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions. Cosmopolitanism offers a perspective from which to adjudicate the complex relationship between religion and science. It provides a better way for us to appreciate Buddhism’s originality and insights than Buddhist modernism. (21-22)

Here Thompson characterizes cosmopolitan thinkers as those who can move across and explore different traditions as if they themselves were not part of any tradition. He characterizes cosmopolitan views as ones that “interweave ideas and insights from multiple traditions” (117), further suggesting that cosmopolitan thinkers have no roots of their own. What role does Thompson envision the cosmopolitan thinker’s own history, assumptions, culture, and religious orientation play in how they move across and explore the views of others? In how they interweave ideas and insights? He writes in a way that suggests that cosmopolitan thinkers have somehow transcended their own cultural identities and that those identities play no role at all. However, cosmopolitan thinkers are always, as Appiah emphasizes, particular historical and cultural individuals (98). The nature of the conversations cosmopolitan thinkers engage in—how those diverse individuals engage and explore one another’s identities—is negotiated through the conversations and engagements themselves, which
are always embedded in the particularities, perspectives, and commitments of the people who participate in them.

In presenting cosmopolitanism as a kind of neutral perspective, what Thompson is in effect doing is masking his own view as an author, which is not acultural or ahistorical. Under the guise of “the cosmopolitan thinker,” he presents himself as being in a better position to judge the value and correctness of a particular Buddhist tradition than Buddhists themselves and then uses this assessment to call into question the value of the contributions these particular Buddhists make to cosmopolitan conversations. Instead of treating Buddhist modernists as equal cosmopolitan conversation partners, Thompson puts himself in the false position of a neutral judge. In doing so, he obscures the role his own historical and cultural identities play in his “adjudication” and “appreciation” of Buddhism.

VI. CONCLUSION
We can achieve cosmopolitan pluralism only when we engage diverse others as equal and respected conversation partners, allowing each participant to represent their identity as they see fit and allowing the terms of the discussion to be negotiated by all participants, not dictated by a few. From a cosmopolitan perspective, while Thompson is certainly entitled to disagree with a Buddhist modernist’s views and to articulate his reasons, as he does in the book, he is not entitled to disparage Buddhist modernists, either as Buddhists or as cosmopolitans. That response shares more in common with exclusionary approaches to diversity than it does with the pluralism of cosmopolitanism.

NOTES

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Some Questions for Friends of Buddhism
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I
When Bertrand Russell delivered his talk “Why I Am Not a Christian” on March 6, 1927, at Battersea Town Hall, England was an overwhelmingly Christian country. When Kancha Ilaiah wrote Why I Am Not a Hindu and (after much struggle) published it in 1996 in India, the vast majority of the population considered itself Hindu. The subtitle of Ilaiah’s book is “A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy.” The title Why I Am Not an X can suggest a critique of X, where X, by the lights of the author, is a majority standpoint, associated with deleterious social and epistemic effects. Surely, Thompson does not feel this way about Buddhism in North America?

As happens so often in this excellent book, Thompson has anticipated his reader’s questions. He knows that Buddhism is not in the majority and that it has no such coercive power. More importantly, while it may not make much sense to speak of its being scientifically true—for many reasons outlined in the book—he does not wish to censure it for that or for being a religion. On the contrary, he criticizes those who would not allow Buddhism to be a religion.

In the hands of another critic, this could well be damning. Kumārila Bhāṭṭa, who worked in either the sixth or seventh century CE, criticized the Buddhist category of omniscience (and perfection more generally) because it was unintelligible. It did not make sense to him as a possibility since the world does not admit of the infinite perfectibility of capacities. Nor did it make sense to him as an ideal—why would one want the Buddha to be able to respond automatically to the wishes of his auditors without intention or thought? In Kumārila’s memorable phrase, it could seem attractive as an ideal “only to a devotee.” Thompson, like Kumārila, wishes to emphasize the normativity of Buddhist concepts. Unlike Kumārila, Thompson’s emphasis is an act of philosophical friendship.

In this book, friends don’t let contemporary Buddhist friends be Buddhist modernists. According to Thompson’s careful use of this historiographical category, Buddhist modernism is a stance, a mode of interpreting what it means to be Buddhist, plotted along three axes: exegetical, epistemological, and comparative. Exegetically, unfettered by traditional chains of transmission and methods of contesting exegeses, it claims privileged access to what the Buddha, a person of history, really meant and what he took to be essential to his tradition. Epistemologically, it claims that these essential claims of the Buddha are true in the following sense: They either are supported by or coincide with the findings of modern science. And, comparatively, it claims that Buddhism is uniquely so supported.

I have three questions about this iteration of “Buddhist modernism” and how to use it. I acknowledge Thompson’s point that Buddhist modernism, as he motivates the category in this book, is not the only way to be Buddhist in a modern world and that his critique applies largely to European and American Buddhist modernism (20-21). Out of sympathy with many of his concerns and arguments in the book, my questions seek to clarify the distinctive contours of Thompson’s target.

II
B. R. Ambedkar’s modern form of Buddhism is constituted by the reinterpretation of what he took to be the historical Buddha’s teachings. It does so with the help of arguably modern vocabularies, saliences, and patterns of emphases. Thus, we find talk of (social) justice, inequality, rights, and
so on, attributed to the Buddha as the meanings of his sentences or as the aims of his actions. Ambedkar thought that any religion in the modern world would have to be consistent with science. He sometimes expressed the belief that Buddhism was so consistent and perhaps uniquely so. So far, so modernist, by the lights of many historians of Buddhism and even, perhaps, by Thompson’s lights. But Ambedkar’s position is not as textually naïve as the Euro-American Buddhist modernism with which Thompson is concerned.

At times, Ambedkar could resist identifying what the Buddha taught with modern concepts. He sometimes claimed only continuity, saying, in effect, that in an Indian context what the Buddha taught was poised (though not uniquely so) to serve as a precondition for the applicability and intelligibility of modern concepts in the life of Indian citizenry, given that it had already served the role of a religious precondition for political reformation with the Mauryans. Call this the Continuity Thesis. At other times, he did speak as if one could assign modern concepts as the meanings of the Buddha’s utterances. Call this the Identity Thesis. While Ambedkar could speak as if such identification were a fait accompli, he could also maintain that doing so required work. Basing himself on a long line of colonial-era Indian Buddhists, he employed traditional scholastic modes of reconstructing scripture to get at his preferred meanings. It takes the following form: The Buddha must have meant X when he said y, because Y, what y prima facie appears to mean, either is or entails something that is inconsistent with what we hold to be true.

Ambedkar’s Continuity Thesis is part of his sophisticated historiographical commitments. One knows how to evaluate these. Ambedkar’s Identity Thesis is trickier. Consider that it can be (though it need not be) treated as a sincere expression of faith. The ascription of reconstructed content to the Buddha guided by what one takes to be true is a mode (though not the only mode) of practicing doctrinal innovation long used by Buddhists as part of being Buddhist; it is not a tool to conceal faith, but to express what it consists in: Reconstruction collapses the distance between what the Buddha appears to have said then and what Buddhists might need him to say now and what they trust him, as it were, to have anticipated.

My first question is this: What do we do when the content is new but the means of ascribing content to the Buddha and justifying such ascription is traditional? Why should content count for more than method? Ambedkar’s Buddhism is admittedly distant from premodern Buddhism. But so too, in the ninth century, was any Buddhist magician in the courts of Pāla Bengal from Linji Yixuan. How should we measure epistemic distance?

Perhaps our ascription of exegetical accuracy has to do not with items of belief taken piecemeal but with a whole pattern of (possibly inferentially linked) commitments with which reconstructed content (R) must interact. Think of the number of commitments with which R might be prima facie inconsistent and how one deals with inconsistency. Are premodern reconstructions different in that they are inconsistent with fewer commitments, and/or they can allow for the reinterpretation of prima facie inconsistent commitments in line with R, whereas modernism, less like a lens filter and more like a broom, either is unwilling to make or cannot make any room for reinterpretation, sweeping out a very great number of traditional commitments in the process? That might show that, despite appearances, there has been change even in the reconstructive stance.

Does Thompson think this is something like what has happened? If so, does this have to do with the source for the content of the reconstructions (say, contemporary science or political culture), or the background for the attitudes of those doing the reconstructions? And, further, one might surmise, perhaps this change in the reconstructive stance has to do with the interaction between Buddhism and the knock-on effects of the Reformation, given its emphasis on the regimentation and salience of beliefs, the attenuation of sources for belief, and the rationalization of everyday life?

If the answer to the last question is “yes,” what would that allow us to say? Changes in stances do happen as part of the history of religions. Protestantism may be severe, but it is no less a form of Christianity than is Catholicism. Were we to try and provide criteria for right-headed rather than wrong-headed changes to patterns of commitment, we’d better steer clear of the Buddhist modernist’s game of identifying what is and what is not essential to Buddhism. If one believes (as I do) that there is not really any Buddhism, only Buddhists, this is not easy to do.

Buddhist exceptionalism about the self, says Thompson, takes the form of maintaining that “cognitive science indicates that the Buddhist no-self view is right and that other religious or philosophical views of the self are wrong” (87). But isn’t there a more basic form Buddhist exceptionalism might take? One might claim that there are very few non-Buddhist premodern and/or non-scientific models which, firstly, emphasize broadly cognitive experiences, functions, and factors as a domain of theoretical and practical interest and which, secondly, eschew a self as the owner of experiences or the agent of (overt or mental) activity. The Cārvāka premodern naturalists also did not believe in a self. But they didn’t believe in the mental as a domain of interest. Whether right or not, Buddhist models of selfless experience, particularly as enshrined in Buddhist scholastic (Abhidharma) interpretive schemas, are as radical as they are distinctive, rejecting even the grammar of natural language sentences as a guide to the intelligibility of experience. Where else, apart from some interpretations of contemporary science, do we find such radical revisionism enshrined as a collective norm?

I agree with Thompson that Buddhist scholasticism is a normative enterprise bound up with exegesis of scripture. But traditionally, the status of selflessness as a truth bound up with normative considerations, as distinct from a narrowly empirical truth, may entail its being exceptional. Here’s how. Against modernist Buddhists, some traditional Buddhists claim that the truth of selflessness, unlike that of
impermanence, is not narrowly empirical. I mean this: The fact of impermanence is available to all individuals. One does not need Buddhism to experience it. Not so the fact of there being no self, the availability of which is thought to require, firstly, a Buddha’s revelation; secondly, a tradition making available the Buddha’s words under the right interpretation; and thirdly, access to that tradition by virtue of one’s historical and social location. Why? Because, the argument goes, the doctrine so profoundly goes against the grain of our habits of experience, as enshrined in our categories, our language, and our cultural institutions, that, without a Buddha’s prodding, it is almost impossible to get into view under the right interpretation (as something other than nihilism, for example).

Dharmakīrti did think that there is another sense in which selflessness is natural: Once taught to see it, we will not easily lose sight of it. This is so, Dharmakīrti argues, because of his belief that the mind is typically truth-tracking unless primed otherwise by affective and cognitive conditioning. But even Dharmakīrti would not think that, absent Buddhist texts and tradition as a horizon, one could expect simply to have glimpsed what the Buddha meant by there being no self.

Hence the exceptionalness of no-self as a doctrine. For traditional Buddhist philosophers, recognizing such exceptionalness created pressure to develop and debate meta-conceptual models and concepts designed to address the nature and intelligibility of common-sense-revising metaphysical claims. These tools are arguably useful even when thinking of this age’s revisionary claims. Could Thompson be at all inclined or willing to concede that Buddhists in modernity would not entirely be without justification were they to emphasize the comparative exceptionalness of Buddhism as a religion on this score? I think it would not be inconsistent with his interest in encouraging the following questions: “What do we find in Buddhism that we don’t find in other traditions? . . . How can debating with Buddhists . . . invigorate our thinking?” (85).

IV
Is the modern period a unique source for the bad faith Thompson associates with Buddhist modernists?

Consider that “science” need not be confined to the cooperative and defeasible enterprise that values prediction and explanation. As Thompson notes, it is the Buddhist modernists who reify contemporary empirical science (45–46). More capaciously understood, Buddhism has not had to wait for the modern period to interact with what we would call science nowadays; it has long overlapped and contributed to the history of medicine, for example, or linguistics, even as it did with premodern sciences such as alchemy and astrology. One premodern public epistemic culture to which Buddhists have contributed and to which Thompson alludes (50) is of particular interest to me. I have in mind the cultivation of epistemology as a discipline in South Asia, beginning late fifth/early sixth century CE, pursued as a multifigenerational endeavor in which claims made by individuals belonging to different traditions—such as “Inference occurs when X, Y, and Z”—were taken account of and debated using a public vocabulary, one available to all and not rooted in the scriptures of any tradition. This theoretical discipline is concerned with the knowledge necessary for successful activity on the part of a new kind of individual, on the basis of whom a particular notion of rationality became available.

By a new kind of individual, I mean the idealized rational actor who wants to know how to maximize the chances of success in activity. Such an actor is thought to possess a complement of logical tools and rely on epistemic criteria in their decision-making process. Rationality is defined as what makes sense for this ideal-type subject to believe and to do to maximize success. (Such an ideal agent may prove to be distinct in kind from the normatively thicker notion of a sage, or someone possessing wisdom, at least insofar as the ideal of a sage may at times be articulated with the help of tradition-specific vocabularies and values.)

Here’s the point. It was open to a Buddhist philosopher to claim the following: (1) that they could express some (if not all) of the commitments that mattered to being Buddhist in those “public” terms (though this could be challenged, as by Kumārila, among others, as we have seen); (2) that they could defend Buddhist claims that were not initially evident as being, in fact, rational; and (3) that, for the purposes of social standing and debate, they could identify with only those publicly rationalizable claims while keeping other claims, as it were, off the table.

My question to Thompson is this: Would such appeal to a public epistemic culture to make claims about Buddhist discourse and in an attempt to justify it involve “false consciousness,” as does Buddhist modernism, given its appeals to empirical science on Thompson’s account? It feels odd to say so, independent of the success of such a venture. But if not, wherein lies the difference?

V
Consider the title of Thompson’s book. What is the connection between being an X (or wanting to be an X) and X’s being true? The Buddhist modernist does not look elsewhere than science for truth. Does Thompson?

He actually wants us to give up on asking “Is Buddhism true?” (85). That, and the questions he would have us orient ourselves with—questions such as “What does Buddhism have to teach us?” (85)—will work for the cosmopolitan friend of Buddhism. But what of the modern Buddhist today who does not wish to be denounced as a Buddhist modernist in the pejorative sense? Are there respectable routes to Buddhism other than heritage or (merely) aesthetic or psychological varieties of preference?

Truth, narrowly understood, has to do with the relationship between things we say and think and the way the world is. Premodern Buddhist philosophers could recognize this while seeing that there is another valence to truth, particularly evident when speaking, for example, of the reason to pursue a religion, including thereby the overriding beauty or power it may involve, or the eloquence one’s smallest gestures may achieve when one is taken apart and put together again through training in a way of life taken
to express some truth or reality. Is there any room for a modern Buddhist to speak like this? This larger sense of truth concerns more than the relation between an individual and a chosen way of life. Authenticity, which is Thompson’s suggestion for the norm operative in the reconfiguration of one’s life that Buddhists have in mind in speaking of awakening (82), may not go farther than that. Truth in the larger sense concerns the normative claims someone’s being Buddhist may press on another. That’s a distinctive way to chart the range of things being Buddhist can come to collectively mean outside of any one person’s head or life.

I’d like to hear Thompson say more about truth and authenticity, or what, in place of truth, might play a comparable normative role for modern Buddhism. Finishing this extraordinary book, I was left to wonder whether any such norm could be consistent with modern Buddhists, as individuals, practicing the kind of effortless authenticity, or what, in place of truth, might play a role in their normative cosmopolitanism Thompson so consistently exemplifies. I don’t know: Is what is good for friends of Buddhists always good for Buddhists?

NOTES

2. Evan Thompson, Why I Am Not a Buddhist (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 22. Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book unless the context indicates otherwise.

Thompson Is Not a Buddhist, But What about the Rest of Us?

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In the final chapter of Why I Am Not a Buddhist,1 Evan Thompson describes the Mind and Life Dialogues as sites of productive conversation between Buddhists and scientists, suggesting that, at their best, the dialogues have lived up to the ideal of a conversation guided by the ethics of knowledge. This happens when the individual representatives of the traditions allow their viewpoints to become unsettled in the service of the conversation. The conversation itself becomes a form of knowledge—a collective mode of knowing—with its own ethics of mutual respect and getting to know one another. (185)

This is the ideal of cross-cultural dialogue. If conversations among individuals, or among representatives of different ways of thinking, can lead to the unsettling of respective viewpoints and become “a collective mode of knowing,” participants in such conversations not only get to know one another more deeply, but also collectively make new discoveries and produce new kinds of knowledge.

This, I think, highlights the broader point that Thompson makes in his book. Buddhist traditions, he argues, have a lot to offer to the world, but they need to be understood and appreciated in terms of the broader contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist, with all of their nuances and complications. To fail to recognize such contexts and nuances is to essentialize Buddhism, which can lead to the mistaken view that Buddhist traditions are somehow superior to, more rational, or more scientific than other traditions. This mistaken view, Thompson argues, is the hallmark of so-called Buddhist modernism. The antidote to Buddhist modernism, Thompson contends, is cosmopolitanism, which he defines as “the idea that all human beings belong to one community that can and should encompass different ways of life” (2). By understanding Buddhist traditions in light of cosmopolitanism, one can appreciate and learn from Buddhist thought, and engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue that can lead to genuinely new forms of knowledge.

What I appreciate about Why I Am Not a Buddhist is that it actively participates in a cosmopolitan project by considering and inviting interlocutors of its own. Thompson’s writing is exceptionally clear, and his book is well suited to sparking conversations among readers from different backgrounds, which has the potential to lead to new and different collective forms of knowing. By encouraging discussion, this book is engaging in precisely the kind of thing that we ought to do when we do philosophy, especially when we engage in cross-cultural philosophy.

I wish to begin my comments here by admitting that I genuinely enjoyed this book, and I found myself nodding in agreement with much of it. But in the spirit of cosmopolitanism, and because I have been invited to offer a critical response to Thompson’s work, I will offer two of my own (admittedly minor) critiques of this book. First, I will address Thompson’s treatment of the Buddhist no-self doctrine in chapter 3. Then, I will consider his overall framing of the book. While I do not disagree with many of the points that Thompson raises about Buddhist modernism...
and its problems, I do think that he could have been a bit clearer about just who this book is intended for.

My first point of critique is Thompson’s third chapter, “No Self? Not So Fast.” The Buddhist theory of no-self is, as Thompson rightly points out, a topic that has received considerable attention from Buddhist modernists, as well as from non-Buddhist thinkers who engage with Buddhist philosophy. In brief, Thompson frames the no-self theory as follows: “[T]here’s nothing in your physical and psychological makeup that amounts to or qualifies as a real inner subject and agent. There’s the feeling of self, but no real self to match the feeling. So, the self is an illusion” (87). Thompson goes on to say that Buddhist modernists cite neuroscience and psychology in attempts to give scientific credence to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, and to suggest that other theories about selves are, therefore, wrong.

The Buddhist modernist view, Thompson argues, is simplistic in part because of the ways that we think about selves in Euro-American philosophy and cognitive science. He writes that a full story of the Buddhist account of selflessness “should take account of other ways of thinking about the self, especially in philosophy today, and it should consider the criticisms leveled at the Buddhist viewpoint by other classical Indian philosophers” (88). While I agree with the second part of Thompson’s assertion here (that we must consider other classical Indian philosophers if we are to fully understand Buddhist no-self theories), I do not agree with the first part (that we need to consider still other ways of thinking about the self if we are to fully understand Buddhist no-self theories).

I will begin with my point of agreement. In order to fully understand and appreciate the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, or anātman, one must also understand and appreciate Indian Buddhists’ interlocutors who espouse a view of a self, or ātman. In the context of this conversation, when Buddhists negate the existence of the self, they negate something very specific: a permanent, stable, unchanging essence. This essence is presumed to be the thing that makes me who I am, independent of my mind or my body. Early Buddhist debates with non-Buddhist interlocutors interrogate this specific concept of self as essence. Buddhists do not, however, reject the idea that we have an innate sense of self, a feeling of what it is like to be me. Thompson points out that Buddhists make a distinction between the self—ātman—and the sense of self, or the person—pudgala—and that, according to Buddhist philosophers, the former is an illusion, whereas the latter is a construction.

This is the crux of the classical Buddhist no-self doctrine. But Thompson goes on to suggest that it is better, for our present purposes, to think of the self as a construction as opposed to an illusion, because English-speaking Euro-American philosophers and cognitive scientists don’t think about selves in terms of essence. He writes, “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn’t the only way to understand the self, especially in the context of cognitive science and philosophy today. So, denying that there is this kind of self doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (91). It is true that there are many different ways of understanding the self, but classical Buddhist arguments of no-self only focus on this specific idea of self as essence. To conflate this specific point of argument with broader understandings or definitions of selves is to confuse the point of the Buddhist argument altogether.

This is where I disagree with Thompson. After concisely and skillfully unpacking some of the nuances in the debates around self as ātman between Indian Buddhists and other classical Indian philosophical traditions, he then states that Euro-American philosophers and cognitive scientists talk about the self in terms of “an embodied and socially embedded subject of experience” (105). This is a perfectly acceptable way for some people to define a self, but this is not the self that Buddhists refute. The “embodied and socially embedded subject of experience” (105) is closer to the sense of self—the ātman—with which many Buddhists do not take issue. Thompson reasons that “[i]n our contemporary context, . . . the distinction [between ātman and pudgala] seems forced, given the many and varied meanings of the word ‘self’ in philosophy and psychology” (113-14). As a result, he wishes to reframe the discussion and talk about selves as constructions rather than as illusions.

Here is the problem with Thompson’s view: If we wish to be truly cosmopolitan and involve Buddhist philosophy in the debates around selves, then we need to be clear about the distinctions that Buddhists make, and understand how Buddhist philosophers define the term “self.” In other words, in order to fruitfully engage with Buddhist philosophical ideas about selves, we must demand that there be specificity in terms of the distinction between ātman and pudgala. To fail to do so is to give too much credit to “our contemporary context” (more on that below), and to discount real terminological distinctions that are actually very important in Buddhist philosophy. This is an issue that I often find myself reiterating when I teach introductory undergraduate courses on Buddhist thought: Many of my students struggle with appreciating Buddhist arguments against the self, simply because they don’t conceive of selves in terms of essence. They argue, “Well, I don’t think of myself as a permanent essence. I think of myself as a constantly changing subject of experience. So what’s the big deal?” In order to help students to fully appreciate the nuances of classical Buddhist no-self arguments, I must remind them of the broader philosophical contexts in which these South Asian philosophers lived and debated, and get clear on the distinction between ātman and pudgala. The no-self theory targets something specific, and it is a mistake to move that target. By arguing that “selves” are constructions rather than illusions, Thompson seems to suggest that Euro-American philosophers, cognitive scientists, and those influenced by Buddhist modernism are incapable of understanding this terminological nuance, simply because “self” can mean so many different things in English. But if I can expect undergraduates who have never previously encountered Buddhist thought to be able to grasp this nuance, surely we can expect professional philosophers to do the same.
Now to my larger point about the book, which might not be a critique of Thompson’s work, as much as it is an encouragement or invitation for readers of this book. Why I Am Not a Buddhist is, first and foremost, a rejection of Buddhist modernism. Buddhist modernists try to superimpose a scientific sort of perspective onto Buddhist traditions, which results in distorting Buddhism, science, and religion. Thompson’s aim is not to suggest that conversations between Buddhism and science are impossible—in fact, he is sympathetic and open to these kinds of discussions—but to suggest that, instead of taking a modernist approach, we ought to take a more cosmopolitan approach to understanding Buddhism. My question, though, is this: Who, specifically, are the “we” to whom Thompson is referring? Cosmopolitanism considers multiple perspectives, which is a useful and necessary kind of approach when one engages in cross-cultural philosophical discussion. But in considering multiple perspectives, one must also be aware of one’s own positionality.

Of course, Thompson is exceptionally clear about his own perspective in this book. As evidenced by his autobiographical introduction, his position is a particular one. And he specifies that his critical arguments apply specifically to European and American flavors of Buddhist modernism. But there are times throughout the book where he shifts a bit too easily from talking about his own perspective, background, and experience to making claims about “our contemporary context.” I appreciate Thompson’s self-reflective approach in this book, and I suspect that his perspective is one with which many readers of Why I Am Not a Buddhist might very well identify. But there are many different positions from which to approach Buddhism, and from which to approach conversations between Buddhist ways of thinking and other traditions. If the main thrust of this book is to argue for cosmopolitanism, then the intended audience of this book ought to be made explicit.

Thompson seems to be talking to Euro-American philosophers, cognitive scientists, and other highly educated North American and European academics. Perhaps convert Buddhists can be included in this intended audience as well. For such audiences, cosmopolitanism is likely a good way to understand Buddhist philosophy. But is this the best approach for everyone interested in interrogating Buddhism? What about, for example, Asian American Buddhist practitioners born into Buddhist families? Or Buddhist monastics or other Asian academics whose education took place in Buddhist countries? Is Thompson’s book intended for them? Is cosmopolitanism the best approach for these groups of people as well?

As Thompson points out in his conclusion, in the Buddha’s time, there were many different philosophical traditions and groups of people talking, debating, and thinking together. There was a certain kind of cosmopolitanism in India 2,500 years ago, and there is room for a kind of cosmopolitanism now in contemporary discussions of Buddhist philosophy and other traditions. And while I am sympathetic to most of Thompson’s claims throughout this book, I think that it is necessary for us, as readers, to turn the lens back on ourselves.

While Thompson admits that his reasons for this book’s title are a nod to Bertrand Russell’s “Why I Am Not a Christian,” I can also understand and appreciate why he would choose to use the first person in the title of this book. It is, in part, a reflection on his own positionality with respect to the Buddhism-vs-science debates with which he has been involved for the entirety of his philosophical career. But in sliding from “I” to “we” so freely throughout the book, I fear that Thompson is too easily assuming that his own experience aligns with the experiences of others who engage with his writing.

Thompson makes a compelling case for why he is not a Buddhist. He is not a Buddhist because he is not a Buddhist modernist. He is a philosopher and, as he puts it, someone who wishes to be “a good friend to Buddhism” (2, 189). So perhaps our task, as readers of this book and potential participants in cosmopolitanism ourselves, ought to be to consider who we are in these debates and discussions, and why. By considering our own positionality with regard to contemporary Buddhism-vs-science debates in light of cosmopolitanism, perhaps we can allow for our own viewpoints to become unsettled as well, and contribute to collective modes of knowing alongside Thompson.

Deconstructing Buddhist Modernism Without Postmodern Orientalism?

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I. WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THOMPSON’S BOOK
I am not a scientist or a philosopher of science and I cannot state whether Evan Thompson’s critique of Robert Wright’s use of evolutionary psychology to legitimize the truth of Buddhism has merit. Similarly, I am not qualified to judge whether embodied cognitive science offers a better framework than evolutionary psychology for relating science to Buddhism as Thompson suggests. As a scholar of Buddhism, however, I can say that I agree with Thompson’s critique of a naturalistic conception of nirvana as a mere psychological state, that is, as a mental state whose subject or possessor experiences feelings without being conditioned by craving. Nirvana is described in Buddhist texts not only in psychological terms but also as a reality beyond causes and conditions, thus transcending samsara. I also agree with Thompson when he asserts that nirvana “entails a total reconfiguration of our existence as governed by the norm of authenticity, not simply a change to our mental states and traits as psychology conceives of them” (82).1

I enjoy Thompson’s understanding of the early Buddhist doctrine of no-self and his objections to reductionist
interpretations of no-self in classical Indian thought and contemporary analytical Buddhism. Thompson rightly explains that the Buddhist notion of no-self targets a particular conception of the self as a personal essence that is in control of the aggregates and that is permanent and unconditioned. Rejecting this particular understanding of the self, however, “doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (91, 105). Thompson brilliantly demonstrates that the Buddha’s doctrine of no-self in the Nikāyās does not presuppose “a pure awareness or pure consciousness that transcends the aggregates and isn’t conditioned by them” (93). Yet Thompson does not endorse reductionist interpretations of the doctrine of no-self, that is, interpretations that reduce the self to a mere illusion. For Thompson, viewing the self as an illusion rests on a tendentious concept of the self as “an unconstructed personal essence or independent thing” (113). According to Thompson, and I agree with him, not all philosophers conceive the self in that way. Some philosophers conceive the self as a developmental and social construction. Rather than seeing the self as an illusion, Thompson prefers to see it as “a multifaceted construction, made out of different kinds of self-awareness” (113). This understanding of the self as a construction, Thompson contends, is compatible with the existence of selfless states and the illusory sense of self as if it were “an unchanged and independent personal essence” (114). I find Thompson’s comparison of the notion of the self as “a multifaceted construction” (113) with the Buddhist concept of a person (pudgala) intellectually stimulating and potentially capable of igniting new discussions about this neglected and often misunderstood Buddhist concept.

As a scholar of Buddhism, I appreciate Thompson’s critique of simplistic interpretations of mindfulness. Thompson rightly states that “Buddhism offers multiple and sometimes incompatible conceptions of mindfulness” (120). I sympathize with Thompson’s proposal to understand mindfulness from the standpoint of “4E cognitive science,’ according to which cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive” (131). Thompson is right when he suggests that mindfulness cannot be reduced to “an essentially inward awareness of your own private mind” (121) or “a kind of private introspection of a private mental theater” (138). I find his conception of mindfulness as “the metacognition and internalized social cognition of socially constituted experience” (138) more plausible than neurocentric and brainbound interpretations that superimpose mindfulness onto brain areas.

Despite agreeing and sympathizing with many ideas and interpretations of Thompson, I have reservations about the fundamental argument of his book and about his main constructive proposal. In what follows, I limit myself to three friendly objections, which can be summarized in this way: Thompson (1) holds a problematic view of Buddhist modernism, (2) advances a problematic reason for not being a Buddhist, and (3) makes a problematic suggestion to adopt cosmopolitanism.

II. PROBLEMATIC VIEW OF BUDDHIST MODERNISM

My first friendly objection to Thompson is that his critique of Buddhist modernism is based on questionable assumptions about this “dominant strand of modern Buddhism” (1). Thompson assumes that “Buddhist exceptionalism is an inherent part of Buddhist modernism” (16) or that “Buddhist modernism typically goes together with Buddhist exceptionalism” (28). Although he does not state it explicitly, Thompson also assumes that neural Buddhism is one of the “core tenets” of Buddhist modernism (188-89).

However, assuming that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are inherent parts of Buddhist modernism is problematic. As Thompson himself points out, Buddhist modernism is an “older and broader movement” (15). As a movement, Buddhist modernism has many expressions. I do not deny that some contemporary Buddhist modernists believe in both Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism, but this does not imply that all Buddhist modernists hold either of these views or that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are inherent parts of Buddhist modernism.

Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism seem typical of secular Buddhists in Europe and North America. But they are not thereby core tenets of Buddhist modernism. Buddhist exceptionalism can also be considered typical of Protestant Buddhists and Buddhist fundamentalists in Asia. But again, Buddhist modernism is broader than both Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist fundamentalism. It is simply not the case that all people who hold modernist ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism are Buddhist fundamentalists, Protestant Buddhists, or secular Buddhists, and it is simply not the case that all Buddhist modernists, whether in Asia or the West, advocate Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism.

The multiple expressions of Buddhist modernism may show family resemblances, but they are not necessarily identical across countries, cultures, and Buddhist traditions. Thompson himself acknowledges a distinction among different types of Buddhist modernism when he states that his critique applies to “Buddhist modernism in Europe and North America, since Asia is evolving its own unique forms of Buddhist modernism” (20). Because Buddhist modernism is not monolithic, assuming that it possesses an ideological essence constituted by Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism does not do justice to the doctrine of Buddhist modernism.

In order to demonstrate that it is possible in principle to hold modernist ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism, I will discuss the case of the Dalai Lama. That the Dalai Lama does not advocate the first belief of Buddhist exceptionalism—namely, that “Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical” (2)—can be inferred from his book Toward a True Kinship of Faiths. There the Dalai Lama distinguishes among ethical, cultural, and doctrinal levels of religion. He admits that religions are ultimately different at the level of doctrines but suggests
that they are similar at the level of ethics. He elaborates as follows: “[O]n this level, the purpose of all religions remains the same: to contribute to the betterment of humanity, to create a more compassionate and responsible human being. Not only are the ethical teachings of the religions essentially the same, the fruits of love and compassion are the same as well” (151). For the Dalai Lama, no religion is superior to others at the ethical level. It is true that the Dalai Lama understands Buddhist ethics as rational and empirical, but that does not make him a Buddhist exceptionalist with regard to the ethics of religions. With regard to the doctrinal level, and referring specifically to diverse Buddhist teachings, the Dalai Lama affirms that “a Buddhist cannot say, when relating to the Buddha’s teaching, ‘this is the best teaching,’ as if one can make such evaluations independent of the specific contexts” (155). This seems to imply that, for the Dalai Lama, one cannot claim that a particular form of Buddhism is uniquely superior to others in absolute and universal terms. Similarly, when the Dalai Lama says that Buddhism is better than other religions, he qualifies his statement in a way that avoids Buddhist exceptionalism: “For me Buddhism is the best, but this does not mean that Buddhism is the best for all” (158).

That the Dalai Lama does not advocate the second belief of Buddhist exceptionalism—namely, that “Buddhism isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation” (2)—can be inferred from Thompson’s book. Thompson refers to the Dalai Lama’s distinction between “Buddhist science” and “Buddhist religion” (48-49). Thompson contends that the Dalai Lama’s distinction is not possible, but this is not the point that concerns us here. What is relevant here is that, for the Dalai Lama, Buddhism is not just a science of the mind because he also acknowledges the religious dimension of Buddhism.

That the Dalai Lama does not advocate neutral Buddhist can be inferred from the fact that he believes in Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika philosophy. Buddhist philosophies of mind in general reject materialist or reductionist standpoints; therefore, they cannot agree with attempts to reduce nirvana or mindfulness to brain states or brain training. Whether the Dalai Lama believes that the doctrine of no-self has been corroborated by Western science is something that I do not know. A traditional Buddhist, even one with modernist ideas like the Dalai Lama, does not seem to need the validation of science in order to believe in the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. This, however, does not mean that traditional Buddhists with modernist ideas like the Dalai Lama disregard what contemporary science has to say about their beliefs. Quite the opposite; the Dalai Lama once affirmed that he would be willing to stop believing in rebirth if science disproved it. The rational, empirical, and open-minded attitude that the Dalai Lama instantiates when he says that he is willing to change his beliefs if proven wrong is not a modernist tactic to enhance the prestige of Buddhism among Westerners. Nor is it a consequence of the influence of modern Western values and attitudes. The Dalai Lama has obviously been influenced by his encounter with Western modernity, but it would be an exaggeration to credit the West for the rational, empirical, and open-minded attitude that the Dalai Lama demonstrates.

European and American scholars who deconstruct Buddhist modernism and go as far as to claim that it is a Western creation or invention are engaging in what I would call “postmodern Orientalism.” Like Orientalists of the past, deconstructionists of Buddhist modernism project into Buddhism their own postmodern assumptions about what is “real” and “authentic” Buddhism. Rather than emphasizing the idealized Buddhism of texts and its rational, ethical, empirical, and pragmatic aspects as Orientalists of the past did, postmodern Orientalists emphasize now a myriad of particular and different manifestations of “anthropological Buddhism” or “Buddhism in practice.” The problem with this new emphasis on “real” and “authentic” Buddhism in practice is that it legitimizes an alternative and equally normative interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism that I would call “Buddhist postmodernism.” Thompson does not advocate Buddhist postmodernism, but his book seems to have been influenced by the negative view of Buddhist modernism characteristic of postmodern Orientalists. Whether Buddhist postmodernism offers a better interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism than Buddhist modernism is not our concern here. Likewise, whether Buddhist modernism represents a projection of modern Western values into Buddhism or the rediscovery of genuine and neglected trends within Buddhist traditions is not the point of this response. What concerns us here, and that’s also my point, is that the Dalai Lama’s understanding of Buddhism allows us to conclude that it is possible in principle to be a traditional Buddhist with modernist ideas without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neutral Buddhism.

III. PROBLEMATIC REASON FOR NOT BEING A BUDDHIST

My second friendly objection to Thompson is that the primary reason he gives for not being a Buddhist is problematic. Thompson presents a dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist. His reasoning is straightforward. He cannot be a traditional Buddhist and, for him, Buddhist modernism is “full of confused ideas” (1) and “riddled with philosophical problems” (16); therefore, he cannot be a Buddhist. I provide two quotes to illustrate his reasoning:

Since I didn’t want to join a traditional Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan Buddhist monastery, the only way to be a Buddhist was to be a Buddhist modernist. But Buddhist modernism is riddled with philosophical problems. (16)

Since I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without being a Buddhist modernist, and Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound, I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without acting in bad faith. That is why I’m not a Buddhist. (19)

Needless to say, Thompson’s journey is unique and his reasons for not being a Buddhist deserve the utmost respect. I am simply suggesting that his reasoning for not being a Buddhist is problematic. The problem with Thompson’s reasoning is that it presupposes a false dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist.
The dilemma is false because Buddhist modernism is not necessarily separated from traditional Buddhism. In fact, many traditional forms of Buddhism, whether Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan, contain modernist elements as well as individuals with modernist views of the Buddha and Buddhism. It does not seem reasonable to present traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism as mutually exclusive as Thompson does. Donald S. Lopez argues thus: “Unlike previous forms of national Buddhism, this new Buddhism does not stand in a relation of mutual exclusion to these other forms. One may be a Chinese Buddhist and also be a modern Buddhist. Yet one may also be a Chinese Buddhist without being a modern Buddhist.”

The dilemma between traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism is also a false dilemma because it fails to do justice to the complexity and the multifaceted nature of each. Neither traditional Buddhism nor Buddhist modernism is monolithic. Traditional forms of Buddhism, like all other religious traditions, have multiple dimensions, including experiential, ritual, mythic, doctrinal, social, and material dimensions. There are many Buddhist traditions with each one exhibiting multiple variations of the aforementioned dimensions. Moreover, Buddhist traditions have different kinds of practitioners, not all of them with the same ideas, level of understanding, commitment, or spiritual development. Similarly, Buddhist modernism has many forms and expressions, at least as many forms and expressions as traditional Buddhism. Given that there are many ways of being a traditional Buddhist and many ways of being a Buddhist modernist, and given that some of those ways might be interrelated, Thompson’s dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist is, at the very least, simplistic.

I share with Thompson a critical attitude towards certain aspects of traditional Buddhism as well as his skepticism about “Americanized” approaches to Buddhism. Like Thompson, I have never been able to see myself joining a traditional Buddhist monastery and I have always been skeptical of “Americanized” forms of Buddhism. But being unable to join a traditional Buddhist monastery or having reservations about “Americanized” Buddhism did not prevent me from being a Buddhist. In other words, having a critical attitude towards “Americanized” Buddhism and objecting to certain aspects of traditional Buddhism need not lead someone away from Buddhism. It may lead someone away from Buddhism like in the case of Thompson, or it may not lead someone away from Buddhism like in my own case.

From the fact that someone cannot be a traditional Buddhist, it does not follow that that person can only be a Buddhist modernist, and from the fact that someone disagrees philosophically with Buddhist modernism, it does not follow that that person must be a traditional Buddhist. There is a wide spectrum of possibilities between being a Buddhist modernist and being a traditional Buddhist, including the possibility of being a Buddhist with both traditional and modernist ideas such as the Dalai Lama. It is simply not the case that there are just two options to choose from in the contemporary Buddhist landscape: either in Asia or in Europe and North America.

**IV. PROBLEMATIC SUGGESTION TO ADOPT COSMOPOLITANISM**

My last friendly objection to Thompson’s book is that his constructive proposal for Buddhists—namely, to discard Buddhist modernism in order to adopt cosmopolitanism as a framework to better appreciate Buddhism and its relationship with science—is problematic. The first problem with cosmopolitanism is that it is not a universal, objective, neutral, or value-free framework that can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting key Buddhist ideals. Following Kwame Anthony Appiah, Thompson advocates a “partial cosmopolitanism” that affirms “our need to be partial to particular people and groups” (174-75). I wonder how this ethical ideal of Appiah’s brand of cosmopolitanism can be reconciled with the Buddhist ethical ideals of universal compassion and loving-kindness, which in their most advanced manifestations are accompanied by equanimity or emotional impartiality towards particular people and groups.

Thompson summarizes Appiah’s cosmopolitanism as follows. “He argues that the values worth living by are many, not one; different people and societies can and should embody different ways of life; we ought to care about the welfare of the individuals engaged in those different ways of life” (21). Again, I fail to understand how the pluralism about ultimate ethical value and way of life that Appiah’s cosmopolitanism entails can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting mainstream Buddhist ethics. For instance, can Buddhist traditions accept ethical values and ways of life that contradict the ethical standards and the ideals of human flourishing exemplified by buddhas and bodhisattvas? More specifically, can any Buddhist accept, as a matter of principle, ethical egoism and a way of life that fosters greed and selfishness? Cosmopolitanism, in contrast, seems to be able to accept ethical egoism and ways of life that foster greed and selfishness as long as they allow people to harmonize two kinds of cosmopolitan ethical commitments: those toward all human beings and those toward particular human lives, communities, and traditions (174-75).

Whereas cosmopolitanism is a particular and historically conditioned way of thinking about ethics and political philosophy, Buddhist modernism is a particular and historically conditioned way of understanding or speaking about the Buddha and Buddhism. Neither Buddhist modernism nor cosmopolitanism provides a universal hermeneutical framework. That is why they can only appreciate Buddhism and understand the relationship between religion and science from their respective situated and limited perspectives or horizons of understanding.

The second problem with Thompson’s proposal is that he portrays cosmopolitanism as “respecting and valuing our differences, including our felt attachments to different communities and traditions” (175). However, is it not inconsistent with the tolerant and pluralist spirit of cosmopolitanism to ask Buddhist modernists, or any kind of Buddhist for that matter, to abandon their beliefs about the Buddha and Buddhism? Do not those beliefs make Buddhist modernists different from other types of
Buddhists? How is it possible to speak about “respecting and valuing our differences” and at the same time request Buddhist modernists to abandon the way of thinking that makes them different and unique as Buddhists?

In conclusion, I sympathize with the pluralist, tolerant, and dialogical spirit of cosmopolitanism, and I reject Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism as well as their assumptions about religion and science. However, I do not think that it is accurate to conflate Buddhist modernism with either Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism, and I do not believe that cosmopolitanism is fully compatible with Buddhism. Cosmopolitanism has its own set of assumptions, values, and truth claims. As such, cosmopolitanism competes with the assumptions, values, and truth claims of other philosophical and religious traditions, including those found within Buddhism. Modernist interpretations of the Buddha and Buddhism might be right or wrong, better or worse than others, but disagreeing with Buddhist modernism is not a powerful reason for not being a Buddhist any more than disagreeing with liberal Christianity is a powerful reason for not being a Christian.

NOTES

Buddhist Modernism: Let’s Be Suspicious But Not Because It Lacks Faith

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I. OVERVIEW
Evan Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist might be better titled Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist. Readers who open this book thinking they will get some general insight into why one would reject Buddhism at large are likely to be disappointed. Instead, Thompson focuses on a distinctly contemporary flavor of the tradition: Buddhist modernism. This flavor is committed to what Thompson identifies as Buddhist exceptionalism. “Buddhist exceptionalism,” Thompson writes, “is the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation.” While Thompson doesn’t explicitly discuss how those committed to Buddhist exceptionalism might go about distinguishing Buddhism from other religions, it is suggested in the text that a major player is the role of faith. Here the thought is that religious worldviews usually rely on faith as a key component of the traditions, but, according to Buddhist exceptionalists, Buddhism has no such commitments. Buddhist modernists, according to Thompson, are largely focused on reinterpreting core Buddhist insights using empirical facts without any reliance on faith. Ultimately, Thompson rejects Buddhist exceptionalism and thus Buddhist modernism.

In what follows, I will first briefly review the general shape of Thompson’s argument. I will then take issue with two points Thompson makes throughout the text. The first is Thompson’s view about the relationship between Buddhist modernism and traditional forms of Buddhism. Thompson denies that we can respond to the Buddhist modernist by claiming the view is not authentically Buddhist. I argue that this general strategy has much more promise than Thompson suggests. My second critique is about Buddhist modernism’s relationship to faith. While Thompson critiques Buddhist modernism on the grounds that it lacks the required faith-based beliefs, I argue that faith in future science is foundational to Buddhist modernism. This may be a way for the modernist to push back against Thompson’s core criticisms.

At no point throughout the book does Thompson lay out exactly what would be required for him to identify as a Buddhist. However, we are given enough information to identify two major requirements for any flavor of Buddhism that would be palatable to Thompson:

1. The account maintains coherency given the larger Buddhist worldview.
2. The account does not rely on any faith claims.

One challenge for any flavor of Buddhism is that the Buddhist worldview is quite complex. It is critical for Thompson, and I assume for anyone else philosophically inclined, that any palatable version of this tradition can maintain internal coherency with the Buddhist picture as a whole. This leaves room for new interpretations of key aspects of the Buddhist tradition, but it rules out ad hoc reinterpretations since those are very likely to clash with other philosophically significant elements of the worldview.

While Thompson focuses much of the text on Buddhist modernism, the second major element listed above applies more broadly. I think that Thompson’s rejection of Buddhism at large comes much more from this concern about faith claims than the specific reasons he rejects Buddhist modernism. I take it that Buddhist modernism is the only flavor of Buddhism that attempts to be free of faith claims and that is why Thompson engages so extensively
with it. However, it appears that any Thompson-friendly flavor of Buddhism would need to be free of any claims based in faith.

One way to understand Thompson's book is that it focuses extensively on the first requirement at the expense of the second. Thompson points out two major problems for the Buddhist modernist and the first requirement. To begin with, while the Buddhist modernist largely attempts to reinterpret key elements of the Buddhist tradition in empirical terms, they often misunderstand the empirical data that they are attempting to map onto Buddhist concepts. A second major challenge for the Buddhist modernist is reconciling their novel interpretations of key Buddhist concepts with the larger Buddhist picture. According to Thompson, either many of the interpretations on offer from the Buddhist modernist are too underdeveloped or they are a direct threat to foundational elements of the Buddhist worldview.

As to the second requirement, Thompson argues that faith is a foundational component of the Buddhist worldview. Thompson points out that many Buddhist modernists misunderstand faith in very simplistic terms. This further exacerbates the modernist's problem since, according to Thompson, faith is foundational to the Buddhist worldview. Buddhist modernism's attempt to do away with faith threatens its internal coherence. As it turns out, Thompson is exceedingly skeptical that any flavor of Buddhism could meet this second requirement while simultaneously meeting the first requirement.

II. LET’S BE SUSPICIOUS

If the Buddhist modernist is not really a Buddhist, then the modernist is not responsible for being consistent with the general Buddhist worldview. Since many of Thompson’s critiques of Buddhist modernism point to its inconsistency with this larger worldview, he pushes back against this strategy of separating Buddhist modernism from “authentic” forms of Buddhism. According to Thompson, the major challenge of attempting to sort through flavors of Buddhism in this way is the sheer diversity found within the tradition. One of the key ways that Buddhism has spread throughout the world is by incorporating elements of local traditions and maintaining high levels of flexibility. Although Thompson doesn’t go into the philosophic foundation of this flexibility, we might connect this strategy to upaya or “skillful means.” Here the bringer of Buddhism meets folks wherever they are in their current understanding with the aim of bringing them slightly closer to truth. Given the important role of upaya within the Buddhist world, it seems like sorting out what counts as “authentic” Buddhism from “inauthentic” is a lost cause.

Instead of attempting to separate the real Buddhists from the fakers, I propose that we can sort flavors of Buddhism by the degree of suspicition we should reasonably hold for their claim to be Buddhist. Qualities like consistency with the Buddhist worldview will factor into where any particular supposedly Buddhist account will fall on this spectrum. On this view, our goal is not to separate the authentic Buddhists from the fakers, but to determine how suspicition we should be of a tradition’s claim to be Buddhist. If this is a viable way to sort out flavors of Buddhism, then Thompson’s critiques of the modernist’s inconsistency with the tradition help inform where Buddhist modernism should fall on the spectrum. The modernist does not escape from Thompson’s critiques simply by falling out of the category of Buddhism. Instead, their inconsistency may contribute to our reasons to reject the claim that the view is in fact Buddhist.

There are several factors we might consider in evaluating where a particular flavor should land on our suspicion spectrum. One factor is how much the account pays respect to key philosophical issues within the Buddhist worldview. If the tradition appears to be formulated without regard to major debates, then we should be more suspicous of it. Here we can imagine rejecting this criterion on the grounds that there are ancient traditions, perhaps ones that we should hold with very little suspicition, which were formulated without regard to major debates. Of course, identifying which specific traditions would meet this criterion would require some debate on its own, but even if such traditions exist, we would need to unpack the details of a given tradition’s access to information about such major debates. Since Buddhist modernism has been developed in the modern world, we know the founders of this tradition by and large had access to information surrounding major debates within Buddhism. This is a direct result of the increased availability of quality translations of important texts and the general ease of access to information that the Internet provides. Obviously, ancient traditions had a much more difficult time accessing all of the relevant philosophical debates; we should, therefore, evaluate their status in a different way than we do the Buddhist modernist. If we evaluate each flavor of Buddhism given the resources of the founders, then we can easily overcome this objection.

Another reason we might be suspicous of a flavor’s claim to be Buddhist is that the flavor is actively causing harm to the Buddhist tradition at large. A core insight of the Buddhist tradition is that we should strive to reduce suffering. This means any tradition that is actively causing harm to other traditions is failing to live up to this value. This should make us more suspicous of their claim to be Buddhist.

There are two major reasons to think that Buddhist modernism should land on the very suspicous side of the spectrum. I’ll briefly lay them out here and then go into more detail in what follows. First, many of the tenets of Buddhist modernism seem to be articulated in complete ignorance of centuries-long debates within the Buddhist tradition. Second, many of the moves of the Buddhist modernist reek of cultural appropriation. This cultural appropriation causes harm to the Buddhist tradition at large. Since this violates a core insight of the Buddhist tradition (i.e., live so as to reduce suffering and not to cause harm), we have more reason to be suspicous of Buddhist modernism.

Thompson does a good job in the text supporting this first reason. At one point, he takes nearly a dozen pages to explore basics of the major debates within Indian philosophy. This is necessary because Buddhist modernism is so poorly developed that it fails to be sensitive to many of these key philosophical debates. Throughout the book, Thompson points out that the answers that the Buddhist
Buddhist modernism is dependent on the abandonment of faith. I argue against Thompson that the key element of any coherent flavor of Buddhism is faith. He argues that Buddhist modernism decontextualizes these insights from the Buddhist tradition and dressing them up in the clothes of science. Thompson quite convincingly argues that Buddhist modernism decontextualizes these insights from foundational philosophical debates in the name of interpreting the main claims of Buddhism in empirical terms. If cultural appropriation involves taking elements from a tradition without regard to the meaning of these elements from within the tradition, then this certainly seems like a case of cultural appropriation. If you think that cultural appropriation of Buddhist ideas causes harm to Buddhism, then it appears that Buddhist modernism causes harm to the Buddhist tradition. One reason we might think this move causes such harm is that it promotes an incoherent version of the account as representative of what Buddhism is. This may cause harm by discouraging folks from investigating other flavors of Buddhism or, even more egregiously, it may lead to discriminatory behavior toward Buddhists on the basis that their views are silly. This should minimally give us more reason to be suspicious of Buddhist modernism’s claim to be Buddhist.

Another problem Buddhist modernism faces is in the way it uses key concepts from the Buddhist tradition. One way we can understand Buddhist modernism is a bunch of largely white, Western folks decontextualizing key insights from the Buddhist tradition and dressing them up in the clothes of science. Thompson quite convincingly argues that Buddhist modernism decontextualizes these insights from foundational philosophical debates in the name of interpreting the main claims of Buddhism in empirical terms. If cultural appropriation involves taking elements from a tradition without regard to the meaning of these elements from within the tradition, then this certainly seems like a case of cultural appropriation. If you think that cultural appropriation of Buddhist ideas causes harm to Buddhism, then it appears that Buddhist modernism causes harm to the Buddhist tradition. One reason we might think this move causes such harm is that it promotes an incoherent version of the account as representative of what Buddhism is. This may cause harm by discouraging folks from investigating other flavors of Buddhism or, even more egregiously, it may lead to discriminatory behavior toward Buddhists on the basis that their views are silly. This should minimally give us more reason to be suspicious of Buddhist modernism’s claim to be Buddhist.

Now a Buddhist might object to this cultural appropriation claim. There is a concern that if we accuse Buddhist modernism of cultural appropriation, it may turn out that many of the flavors of Buddhism are also guilty of cultural appropriation. However, presumably one can take the perspective of a non-Buddhist in evaluating Buddhist modernism’s relationship to less controversial flavors of Buddhism. While a Buddhist might find the modernist’s strategy palatable, in part because of things like upaya, the non-Buddhist might find it problematic. For those of us non-Buddhist white folks who have a long legacy of causing harm through mechanisms like cultural appropriation, we should be especially sensitive to the problems surrounding this kind of strategy. If we find it morally objectionable to decontextualize insights from a rich philosophic tradition, then this alone might be grounds to maintain suspicion of Buddhist modernism’s claim to be Buddhist. Cultural appropriation might reasonably be grounds to think that this is a novel account that is designed to serve the goals of the authors of the tradition and not to participate in the Buddhist tradition at large.

III. FAITH IN FUTURE SCIENCE
Thompson argues that a key element of any coherent flavor of Buddhism is faith. He argues that Buddhist modernism fails to be coherent in part because of its proponents’ abandonment of faith. I argue against Thompson that Buddhist modernism does not abandon faith, but rather replaces the traditional Buddhist kind of faith with faith in future science. If this is right, then the reason the Buddhist modernist account is incoherent is not because of a failure to incorporate faith into their system, but because it fosters faith in a way that does not support the philosophical structure of the Buddhist picture. This has a further implication for Thompson’s argument. It seems that part of Thompson’s motivation for engaging with the Buddhist modernist is because it is a flavor of Buddhism that does not rely on faith. It turns out that the Buddhist modernist fails to live up to that claim, so the door is still open for a more coherent version of Buddhism to be articulated that is truly independent of any faith claims.

So why think that Buddhist modernism is committed to a kind of faith? Well, the modernist attempts to read all of the key claims of the Buddhist tradition in empirical terms. However, we know that currently science is not complete. In fact, Thompson points out several situations where the claims that the modernist makes about how to make sense of empirical data are insufficiently supported by our current evidence. For example, in evaluating the modernist’s understanding of the no-self doctrine, he states that “cognitive science doesn’t show that the self is an illusion.” However, Buddhist modernism is dependent on the notion that we can understand key Buddhist ideas in purely empirical terms. The only way we can know that Buddhist ideas can track empirical evidence is if we are confident about what the future evidence will be. Thus, the Buddhist modernist has faith that the products of future science will continue to track with Buddhist ideas.

Since Buddhist modernists have faith in future science and in the tracking relationship between the products of future science and Buddhist ideas, one of Thompson’s major critiques against Buddhist modernism is in jeopardy. Thompson says that faith plays a foundational role in the Buddhist philosophic system and that the modernist’s abandonment of faith threatens the coherence of the entire picture. In order to know if this critique holds, we need to know if faith in future science can do the kind of philosophic work that Thompson believes traditional Buddhist faith does. Unfortunately, Thompson doesn’t explore the concept of faith in sufficient detail for readers to evaluate whether the modernist kind of faith can play this role. Without further explanation, we might be tempted to think that Buddhist modernism is not actually in trouble when it comes to coherency, because Buddhist modernists can just interpret the faith claims of more traditional flavors of Buddhism as faith in future science.

If I am right, and if Buddhist modernism is actually committed to a kind of faith, then two things happen. First, any Buddhist modernist who believes their view is superior on the grounds that it is devoid of faith claims is mistaken. Thompson suggests that developing a flavor of Buddhism that is completely devoid of faith claims is an explicit goal of the modernist. The modernist strives to remove all faith claims as a direct result of their commitment to Buddhist exceptionalism and their general goal to separate Buddhism from other religions. If the main reason we are drawn toward Buddhist modernism is its promise to abandon any claims based in faith, which Thompson seems to think
is an appealing aspect of the account, then we may not have much motivation for accepting Buddhist modernism over other flavors of Buddhism. Second, we need to know whether the kind of faith promoted by the Buddhist modernist can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism. Thompson's book does not give us enough details about faith in the traditional role to really evaluate this second question.

NOTES
3. Thompson, Why I Am Not a Buddhist, 93–104.
4. Ibid., 89.

Replies to Critics

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I would like to thank my interlocutors for reading and responding to Why I Am Not a Buddhist.2 Their rich and stimulating essays raise many points and intersect in complex ways, so doing justice to them requires a lengthy response. I have organized my response according to the main topics the essays address. Each section heading lists the authors I discuss in that section. When I engage with a particular author, I highlight their name in bold typeface.

I. MY TITLE AND AUDIENCE [FINNIGAN, GANERI, KASSOR, VELEZ, WILLIAMS]

Several authors comment on my title. It dismays Finnigan; Ganeri suggests the book might better have been called Why I Am Not Only a Buddhist; Williams thinks it should have been called Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist. When my friend and Buddhist Studies colleague, Robert Sharf, read the manuscript, he joked that it should have been called How to Be a Better Buddhist.

The issue of the title is related to my reasons for writing the book, my identity as an author, the social context of my writing, and the book’s purpose and intended audience—matters about which a number of critics raise concerns (Finnigan, Kassor, Velez, Williams).

The Introduction gives my personal story so the reader will know how I came to be involved with Buddhism and my motivation for writing the book. I will not repeat the details of that story here. Suffice it to say that, over the course of almost four decades in North America, Europe, and occasionally India, I have been involved in the dialogue between Buddhism, especially Buddhist philosophy and meditation, and Western philosophy and the cognitive and brain sciences. In the past two decades, this work has included participating in the Mind and Life Dialogues with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist scholars and religious teachers, helping to design and serving as the academic chair and a faculty member of the Annual Mind and Life Summer Research Institute, being one of the core faculty members of the Annual Zen Brain Retreat (now Varela Symposium) at the Upaya Zen Center, and attending intensive Buddhist meditation retreats designed especially for scientists. Because of my participation in these events, those who attended and many of my academic colleagues assumed that I was a Buddhist. Apparently, the assumption was that I would not have gotten so immersed in these activities unless I had been a Buddhist. So people were generally surprised when I said that I was not a Buddhist, and they wanted to know why not. This was how the title of my book first came to me: I felt called upon to explain why I am not a Buddhist. I realized that the explanation would have to include describing how I grew up in a North American countercultural milieu that was strongly influenced by American and Asian Buddhist teachers, how at various times I came close to becoming a Buddhist, and what held me back from taking this step. I would need to discuss Buddhism, religion, and science, which increasingly I came to think were often mischaracterized in the dialogues in which I was participating. Indeed, it was precisely because my experience and personal history were intersecting with larger philosophical and cultural issues about Buddhism, religion, and science that I thought the book was warranted. Although I did not conceive of the book as a memoir, I had to tell my personal story in the Introduction and return to it in the last chapter to make clear both the context of and the motivation for my writing.

Nevertheless, Kassor thinks I “could have been a bit clearer about just who this book is intended for.” The book is intended for anyone who is interested in modern Buddhism in general and the Buddhism-science dialogue in particular. It is addressed specifically to European and American Buddhist modernists (as I write on 20-21), so the target of my critique is not (quoting Kassor) “Asian American Buddhist practitioners born into Buddhist families” or “monastics or other Asian academics whose education took place in Buddhist countries,” except to the extent that their thinking partakes of the Buddhist modernist ideas I criticize (see the ideas listed in (i)-(iii) in the following section). Many people interested in the Buddhism-science dialogue will likely share some of my experiences. For example, a large number of students, scholars, scientists, and Buddhist teachers from many countries have now attended the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute since it began in 2004. Of course, there will also be differences among us. Certainly, my childhood immersion in North American “spirituality” and my subsequent experience as an academic will be different from the experiences of my Asian partners in the Buddhism-science dialogue. One point of the dialogue, however, has been to get to know one another, and that happens when people share their experiences and perceptions, which I do in the book.

Although most of the book concerns the Buddhism-science dialogue, I also use this dialogue as a lens for looking at the relationship between science and religion, so the book is also intended for people concerned about this relationship.
Finally, although I did not address the book specifically to philosophers, I tried to make it a worthwhile contribution to anglophone cross-cultural philosophy.

Philosophers especially will recognize the allusion to Bertrand Russell’s “Why I Am Not a Christian” in my title. The allusion came to me as an afterthought after I had already conceived my title for the reasons just mentioned. I comment on my title in relation to Russell’s in the last paragraph of my Introduction (22), but let me reiterate and expand on those comments here.

Unlike Russell, who completely rejects Christianity, I am not trying to persuade anyone not to be a Buddhist. I am also not concerned to argue against religion. Instead, I am giving a philosophical critique of “Buddhist modernism,” which is a culturally prevalent form of Buddhism today, especially but by no means exclusively in the West. Buddhist modernism typically involves what I call “Buddhist exceptionalism,” the idea that Buddhism is or contains a “mind science,” and so occupies a special (unique and superior) position in the encounter between science and religion. My aim is to show that Buddhist modernism, especially Buddhist exceptionalism, suffers from philosophical problems and needs serious reform. I aim to correct misconceptions about Buddhism and the relationship between science and religion, and to describe my own cosmopolitanist philosophical perspective.

Let me emphasize that my aim is not to convince Buddhists not to be Buddhists or to argue more generally that one should not be a Buddhist. I never argue against anyone’s affiliating themselves with Buddhism. My reasons for not being Buddhist (given as part of my personal story in the Introduction) are not offered as reasons to convince others not to be Buddhist. (This point is relevant to Velez’s section “Problematic Reason for Not Being a Buddhist.”) My cosmopolitanism explicitly upholds the importance of the Buddhist tradition and its presence in the world today. I have learned an enormous amount from Buddhist texts, from Buddhist scholars, and from living Buddhist teachers and communities. I believe that the world is a richer and better place thanks to Buddhism. It is no part of my message that the conversation between science and Buddhism, or between Buddhist philosophy and other philosophical traditions, precludes one’s being a Buddhist. Instead, my message is that Buddhist modernism now impedes these conversations. This brings me to my critics’ responses to my critique of Buddhist modernism.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM [GANERI, GARFIELD, GUERRERO, KACHRU, VELEZ, WILLIAMS]

Scholars use the term “Buddhist modernism” to refer to a broad movement beginning in the nineteenth century that reinterpreted Buddhism using modern ideas from Asian Buddhist reformers and European Orientalist writers, and the conversation between them. My critique targets the following contemporary Buddhist modernist ideas: (i) “Buddhist exceptionalism,” the idea either that Buddhism is not essentially a religion but rather is essentially a philosophy, way of life, therapy, or “mind science,” or that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being especially rational and empirical in its doctrines and practices; (ii) “neural Buddhism,” the position that cognitive science, especially neuroscience, has corroborated the Buddhist view that there is no self, that mindfulness meditation practice consists in training the brain, and that awakening or enlightenment is a brain state or has a unique neural signature; and (iii) the idea that awakening or enlightenment is a nonconceptual experience outside language, culture, and tradition. I argue that all these ideas are mistaken: (i) and (ii) rest on misconceptions about Buddhism, religion, and science, whereas (iii) involves philosophical confusions about the relationship between what is conceptual and what is nonconceptual in experience.

Let me begin with what Buddhist modernism is and is not. Kachru gives an excellent description of what it is:

Buddhist modernism is a stance, a mode of interpreting what it means to be Buddhist, plotted along three axes: exegetical, epistemological, and comparative. Exegetically, unfettered by traditional chains of transmission and methods of contesting exegeses, it claims privileged access to what the Buddha, a person of history, really meant and what he took to be essential to his tradition. Epistemologically, it claims that these essential claims of the Buddha are true in the following sense: They either are supported by or coincide with the findings of modern science. And, comparatively, it claims that Buddhism is uniquely so supported.

Now to what Buddhist modernism is not. Contrary to Williams, Buddhist modernism cannot be accurately described as just “a bunch of largely white, Western folks decontextualizing key insights from the Buddhist tradition and dressing them up in the clothes of science.” Rather, Asian Buddhists have been central to the creation and propagation of Buddhist modernism from the nineteenth century down to the present time. Buddhist modernism, generally speaking, is not a case of a dominant culture appropriating elements from a disadvantaged minority culture. On the contrary, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Asian Buddhist modernists did precisely the opposite: They took Western ideas from Protestant theology, romanticism, transcendentalism, existentialism, empiricism, and pragmatism and used them to recast Buddhism. This is not to say that Orientalism, exoticism, and cultural appropriation are absent from Buddhist modernism. But it would be a mistake to think that Buddhist modernism is just a product of these things. Buddhist modernism was never exclusively Western or Asian; from its inception, it has always been a transcultural hybrid. It is also important to remember that Buddhism from the beginning has been a missionary religion and constantly seeks expansion. So it continually evolves and fakes on new cultural forms. Buddhist modernism is one of the latest iterations in Buddhism’s ongoing transmission and transformation.

Williams suggests that Buddhist modernism can be regarded as not really or authentically Buddhist. I cannot accept this suggestion. (Ironically, as Kachru notes, the attempt to specify what is and what is not essential to
Buddhism is a Buddhist modernist game.) As Garfield writes, religious traditions get to set their own criteria for membership, so it is not for me or any other philosopher analyzing things from the armchair to say who is and who is not a Buddhist. Every Buddhist modernist I discuss in the book identifies as a Buddhist and is recognized as a Buddhist by other Buddhists. Buddhist modernism is not reducible to cultural appropriation for the reasons already given. There is no single “Buddhist worldview” with which to evaluate Buddhist modernism; rather, there are numerous Buddhist worldviews across many cultures and historical periods. Williams writes that many Buddhist modernist tenets “seem to be articulated in complete ignorance of centuries-long debates within the Buddhist tradition,” but it is unclear how she understands the referent of the term “the Buddhist tradition,” given that Buddhism contains many traditions with divergent viewpoints. Her statement can also be applied to premodern Buddhist cultures and historical periods; for example, certain classical Indian Buddhist debates were unknown to medieval East Asian Buddhists.

Velez reads me as thinking that Buddhist modernism has an “ideological essence.” But this is not what I think. In retrospect, I probably should have stated this explicitly in the book. Buddhist modernism is not a philosophical theory or religious doctrine defined by a set of theses or tenets. It is a broad cultural movement having many variants. It has no unique essence but rather is constituted by clusters of traits or properties. Not every Buddhist modernist possesses every Buddhist modernist trait. For example, many Buddhist modernists are not neural Buddhists. I focus on neural Buddhism because it is a recent and highly visible trend in contemporary North American Buddhist modernism. In general, there is a frequency distribution of Buddhist modernist traits. The crucial point, however, is that Buddhist exceptionalism, my principal target, is widespread and typical among them.

Let me say more about what I mean by “Buddhist exceptionalism.” The analogy is with “American exceptionalism.” This term does not mean simply that the United States is different from other countries or that it is unique. Every country or nation is unique in some respect. Rather, the term means that the unique features of the United States make it superior and not subject to analysis or understanding in terms of the political and sociological frameworks that apply to other nations. Similarly, “Buddhist exceptionalism” does not mean simply that Buddhism is different from other religions or that it is unique. Every religion is unique and different from every other religion in some respect. Rather, Buddhist exceptionalism is the idea that Buddhism is an exception among religions in being inherently rational and empirical according to scientific standards. Buddhism is held to be epistemically superior, to stand apart from other religions, and to not be analyzable in terms of concepts such as faith or supernatural agency that apply to other religions. Buddhist exceptionalism belongs to the historical origin of Buddhist modernism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as part of a clever conceptual and rhetorical strategy for countering European colonialist Christianity. It runs throughout certain strands of modern Japanese Zen that became popular in the West. It is found in numerous twentieth- and twenty-first-century Asian and Western Buddhist authors (many of whom I cite). It continues to exert a very strong influence on the Buddhism-science dialogue today.

Velez offers the Dalai Lama as an example of a Buddhist modernist who is not a Buddhist exceptionalist. This conception of the Dalai Lama, however, is simplistic. It simplifies a complicated situation in which Buddhist exceptionalism plays a significant role. For example, as I discuss in the book (48-50), the concept and rhetoric of “Buddhist science” is prominent in the Dalai Lama’s presentation of Buddhism to scientists and philosophers at the Mind and Life Dialogues. The Dalai Lama appears to believe that Buddhism is true and that science will prove it is true (or at least will prove the truth of certain fundamental Tibetan Buddhist beliefs). Velez misses the point when he writes, “for the Dalai Lama, Buddhism is not just a science of the mind because he also acknowledges the religious dimension of Buddhism.” The point is precisely that the Dalai Lama asserts that Buddhism, despite having a religious dimension, is also a science of the mind, and he does not (to my knowledge) characterize any other religion this way. The Dalai Lama may not think that Buddhism is ethically superior to other religions, but presumably he thinks—or at least it follows from what he says—that Buddhism is epistemically exceptional, that it is unique and superior in its knowledge by virtue of being or having a mind science, and one that Western science will eventually confirm.

I certainly believe that Buddhist epistemological theories and contemplative practices are unique in various respects, but I do not think they are exceptional in being scientific and for that reason superior to the epistemological theories and contemplative practices of other religious traditions (such as Thomist or Nyaya epistemology, or Christian or Hindu contemplative practices).

Although I agree with Velez that “it is possible in principle to be a traditional Buddhist with modernist ideas without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism,” I am not convinced that the Dalai Lama demonstrates the point in the case of Buddhist exceptionalism. In any case, it certainly seems logically possible to be such a Buddhist. Indeed, I write at the end of the book: “The question I would pose to Buddhists is whether they can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)” (189). To rephrase the question in terms that may be more acceptable to Velez: Can Buddhists find other ways to be modern without being Buddhist exceptionalists? Velez says they already have, but I am not convinced by his example, and in any case, Buddhist exceptionalism continues to be a prominent and typical Buddhist modernist trait. So my statement that Buddhist exceptionalism is an inherent part of Buddhist modernism is a true empirical generalization, even though there may be occasional counterexamples or it may be possible to remove the former from the latter.

Guerrero writes that I am “not entitled to disparage Buddhist modernists.” I agree. As far as I can see, however, I do not disparage them, and I certainly do not intend to disparage them. I do not belittle or denigrate them. I
do not regard them as of little worth. On the contrary, I acknowledge the creative power of Buddhist modernism as a cultural, religious, and intellectual movement in Asia and the West from its inception down to the present day. I describe the huge role that it has played in creating the science-Buddhism dialogue. I present individual Buddhist modernists in charitable and sometimes sympathetic terms. I describe how they have enriched my own life and work. At the same time, I disagree with Buddhist modernism, particularly in its contemporary Euro-American forms. I take issue with many of its ideas, which I argue are philosophically unacceptable and now hinder the Buddhism-science dialogue and cross-cultural philosophy, despite having been productive in earlier decades. Every one of my arguments consists of fair criticism and is not derogatory. If Guerrero thinks otherwise, she needs to identify specific passages and explain why she thinks they are disparaging to Buddhist modernists.

Finnigan writes that academic Buddhist philosophers rarely defend Buddhist exceptionalism. This is true. Nevertheless, Buddhist exceptionalist elements do find their way into academic Buddhist philosophy, where they often go unremarked and are uncritically accepted by readers. For example, Mark Siderits, whose work I greatly admire, writes in Buddhism as Philosophy:

Buddhism, then, a religion, if by this we mean that it is a set of teachings that address soteriological concerns. But if we think of religion as a kind of faith, a commitment for which no reasons can be given, then Buddhism would not count. To become a Buddhist is not to accept a bundle of doxines solely on the basis of faith. And salvation is not to be had by just devout belief in the Buddha’s teaching... Rather, liberation or nirvana... is to be attained through rational investigation of the nature of the world. As we would expect with any religion, Buddhist teachings include some claims that run deeply counter to common sense. But Buddhists are not expected to accept these claims just because the Buddha taught them. Instead they are expected to examine the arguments that are given in support of these claims, and determine for themselves if the arguments really make it likely that these claims are true. Buddha’s revere the Buddha as the founder of their tradition. But that attitude is meant to be the same as what is accorded a teacher who has discovered important truths through their own intellectual power.

Every sentence in the preceding passage except the first one expresses Buddhist modernist revisionism, is historically problematic for premodern Buddhist philosophy, and is conceptually problematic from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of religion. First, Buddhism is presented as not requiring faith. As I argue in my book, however, this is questionable and depends on how faith is understood and on what kind of Buddhist one is. Siderits describes faith in exclusively fideist terms as entirely independent of or opposed to reason, but this is not the only conception of faith in monotheistic religions or the philosophy of religion (see my response to Garfield below). Second, Siderits ignores the forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in which liberation can be attained only through devout belief in and devotion to the Buddha conceived as a cosmic, deity-like savior. Hence, being a Buddhist may indeed require faith—and sometimes only faith—in the Buddha. Third, for many Buddhists, including the Mahāyāna philosophers Siderits discusses, it is not the case that liberation is to be attained through rational investigation of the world; rational investigation is not sufficient and may not even be necessary. Rather, liberation requires a kind of nonconceptual insight or gnosis attained through nondiscursive types of meditation. In some cases, rational investigation may help to prepare the way for such insight, but it is arguably not strictly necessary, at least according to some Buddhist thinkers. Of course, one could argue that such meditative insight qualifies as rational, but this move looks like special pleading. I am inclined to think that such insight is best described as arational rather than rational or irrational. Finally, although the rhetoric of Buddhist philosophers is to encourage critical examination of the Buddha’s teachings, it nonetheless remains unthinkable to contradict the Buddha’s words. Hence, new teachings of the Buddha have to be unearthed or received in heavenly realms, teachings that are taken to supersede earlier ones (as in the case of the philosopher Asanga and Mahāyāna Buddhism in general). In addition, the Buddha’s cognition is considered to be supramundane (world-transcendent) and (according to some Buddhists) omniscient. Hence, to determine for oneself whether the Buddha’s arguments are likely to be sound requires accepting the testimony of others in a way that passes the buck back to the transcendent insight of the Buddha (or to the insight of someone the tradition considers to be a fully awakened being). The Buddhist modernist project of sanitizing premodern Buddhism, specifically premodern Buddhist philosophy in the case at hand, combined with Buddhist exceptionalism, influences even academic Buddhist philosophy.

To be clear, I have no problem with revisionism per se. On the contrary, I think that the project of rationally reconstructing classical Indian Buddhist philosophy in contemporary terms is worthwhile and important, and I myself have contributed to this effort. Siderits is one of the finest analytical philosophers pursuing this project. Buddhism as Philosophy is an excellent work. What I object to, again, is the unnecessary Buddhist exceptionalism that gets attached to this project. Buddhist exceptionalism in academic philosophy distorts premodern Buddhist philosophy and treats other religious philosophical traditions unfairly. Medieval Islamic, Christian, and Hindu philosophers are no less rational than medieval Indian Buddhist philosophers, and their philosophies are just as much capable of modern revision and rational reconstruction in contemporary terms.

These points are relevant to another question Finnigan raises about whether I think it is possible to reconstruct Buddhist views of the mind without mentioning karma or rebirth, since I write that “Buddhist theories of the mind lose their point if they’re extracted from the Buddhist normative and soteriological frameworks” (13). Here the issue is whether it is possible to articulate a Buddhist normative and soteriological framework without the notion of karma or rebirth. This issue arose in my recent exchange
with Amod Lele, who presents a version of “eudaimonistic Buddhism” that has this aim. I would not say that it is impossible to do this, but I think it is much harder to do than Buddhist modernists usually realize for the reasons I give in my exchange with Lele.⁶

Kachru asks about the “distinctive contours” of my Buddhist modernist target in his rich and admirable essay. One of his questions arises out of reflection on B. R. Ambedkar’s modern form of Buddhism. Ambedkar radically reinterprets Buddhism, jettisoning karma, rebirth, the Four Noble Truths, and enlightenment, while recasting the Buddha’s teachings to be about justice and social equality. Kachru reads Ambedkar as sometimes speaking as if the modern meanings he articulates had only a “continuity” with those of the Buddha’s statements, and sometimes speaking as if there were an “identity” of meaning between the Buddha’s statements and modern concepts. Yet Ambedkar uses “traditional scholastic modes of reconstructing scripture to get at his preferred meanings.” Kachru asks: “What do we do when the content is new but the means of ascribing content to the Buddha and justifying such ascription is traditional? Why should content count for more than method?”

I agree that both content and method should count. Kachru describes Ambedkar as using traditional (premodern) exegetical methods to formulate his version of Buddhist modernism, but I submit that Ambedkar also uses traditional methods in the service of a modernist methodological framework, namely, thinking that the methods of philology and textual history enable one to bypass the Indian Buddhist tradition altogether and get back to what the Buddha as “a person of history” actually thought. So this makes Ambedkar’s method, like his content, modernist, even if it is also partly traditional.

Ambedkar uses his traditional-cum-modernist method to argue that Buddhism is the most rational and scientific of the religions, and hence is the best religion for the modern world, so his Buddhist modernism exhibits the Buddhist exceptionalist trait. For this reason, he could be seen to fall within the contours of my critique. Nevertheless, his Buddhist exceptionalism occurs in a very different context from the one of concern to me, and for that reason I cannot apply my critique to him. My context is the contemporary Buddhism-science dialogue and European and North American Buddhist modernism. Ambedkar’s context is India’s political struggle for independence, his campaign for social equality, especially for Dalits, and his vehement criticism of orthodox Hinduism for its caste ideology and discrimination. Needless to say, my book speaks to none of these concerns or their ongoing reverberations in India today. So it would be presumptuous of me to extend my argument to Ambedkar’s version of Buddhist modernism.

Kachru asks how we are to measure epistemic distance—between Ambedkar’s modern Buddhist and premodern Buddhism, between the Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism of the Bengali Pala Empire and Linji Chan Buddhism in the ninth century, and so on. I have no general answer to this question other than to say that I agree with Kachru that it would not be a matter of taking beliefs severally but rather of examining whole patterns of intertwined commitments along with styles of reasoning and discursive practices. I would not want to try to “provide criteria for right-headed rather than wrong-headed changes to patterns of commitment,” if that meant providing general criteria that are supposed to function invariantly across all contexts. Context matters. Again, my argument is not with revisions, reforms, or changes of stance in and of themselves. Rather, it is with certain particular forms they have taken in Buddhist modernism, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. I would not wish simply to extrapolate my evaluative criteria outside the context of that discussion.

Kachru asks whether my objections to Buddhist modernist attempts to legitimize Buddhism using science apply to attempts to legitimize it using the rational norms and rules of debate of a public epistemic culture of the sort we see in South Asia beginning in the sixth century of the common era. “Public” in that context meant not based on the scriptures of any tradition and using rules of inference and conceptual vocabularies available and agreed to by all. Given a contemporary version of such a public epistemic culture, what is the difference between using its epistemic resources, which of course would include empirical science, to argue for Buddhism and the Buddhist modernist appeals to science that I reject?

The difference is that, in the former case, the debate would be taking place in the space of epistemology, or rather philosophy, and hence it would be understood and recognized that whether scientific theories and data are relevant to any given issue is itself something open to debate. One could not take science for granted as the definitive framework for understanding or promoting Buddhist concepts. One could not assume the truth of philosophical positions such as naturalism, physicalism, or scientific realism; instead, one would have to argue for them. The debate would also be taking place in the space of what I call the “ethics of knowledge,” where we ask, “What kinds of lives do we wish to lead and what kinds of knowledge should we seek?” (183-84; see also Ganeri). Most importantly, such a public epistemic culture would necessarily be reflexive; it would be concerned with its own nature, status, and conditions of possibility (as was the South Asian public epistemic culture of the sixth century onwards).

For these reasons, my answer to Kachru is “no, my objections would not apply in this case.” On the contrary, arguments for Buddhism would be entirely acceptable, indeed welcome. These arguments could appeal to science, especially if the history and nature of science were reconceived in the way Ganeri forcefully presents. The parties would always know and respect the fact that the move of appealing to science could be challenged, that justification for it could be demanded, so there could be no reliance on the kind of scientistic rhetoric that permeates much of contemporary Buddhist modernism.

Indeed, when I ask whether Buddhists “can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)” (189), my hope is that the Buddhist
intellectual tradition can participate in helping to create a new kind of modern public epistemic space, one that respects science and religion, but does not try to justify religion using misguided ways of appealing to science, as contemporary Buddhist modernists do. As Ganeri writes, “The best hope for Buddhists to be modern without being Buddhist modernists is, I would suggest, to draw upon the full range of concepts and ideas in Buddhism’s immensely rich and diverse intellectual history to engage on equal footing in a dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind and other branches of contemporary philosophy, including contemporary work in the history of philosophy.”

One reason I wrote my book is to try to reorient the Buddhism-science dialogue in precisely this direction. It is why I describe myself as trying to be “a good friend to Buddhism” (2, 189). I take Ganeri to be doing the same kind of thing when he shows a way of bringing the Kathāvāthu into the conversation between Buddhism and science.

Taking this step—trying to create a new kind of public epistemic culture for religion, philosophy, and science, and drawing from the full range of the Buddhist intellectual tradition to help do so—would be to work toward precisely the kind of pluralistic cosmopolitanism that I uphold in Why I Am Not a Buddhist and that Ganeri eloquently describes in his essay. The Sanskrit philosophical cosmopolis to which Kachru refers, that I mention in my book (170-72), and that Ganeri foregrounds in his essay and many of his books is an inspiring example of a cosmopolitan public epistemic culture. Those who promote such cultures recognize and value the plurality of viewpoints, and they value exchanges and debates among traditions, either as a way of honing one’s own tradition or as a way of remaining open to the thought that one’s beliefs and commitments may need revision given further evidence and what the exchanges and debates themselves may bring to light. These are the reasons for the last sentence of my book: “A viable cosmopolitanism would be Buddhism’s greatest ally” (189). With these thoughts we arrive at the topic of cosmopolitanism.

III. COSMOPOLITANISM [GANERI, GUERRERO, VELEZ]

Guerrero takes issue with the assumptions and convictions that she perceives in my advocacy of cosmopolitanism and my criticism of Buddhist modernism, and argues that I undermine the pluralistic values at the core of cosmopolitanism. Unfortunately, she misreads me, makes inferences from what I write that do not follow and misattributes them to me, and describes me as believing things I do not believe. Getting into view the important questions she raises about cosmopolitanism requires clearing away a large amount of misunderstanding.

Guerrero begins by saying that when I write, “Nevertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as ‘Buddhist modernism,’ is full of confused ideas” (1), the word “nevertheless” indicates that I think (in her words) “Buddhist modernism’s confusions make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism.” This is incorrect. The word “nevertheless” simply signals that Buddhist modernism contains confused ideas in spite of the fact that Buddhism is one of the world’s great intellectual traditions. There is no implication that Buddhist modernism is mutually incompatible (“antithetical”) with cosmopolitanism. I never assert or imply this. Indeed, Buddhist modernism can be described as a cosmopolitanist form of Buddhism. I quote David McMahan who makes that point (20). I suggest that the Dalai Lama’s aim to modernize Buddhism and promote it as a positive cultural force involves a cosmopolitan worldview (54). My discussion of Francisco Varela and his pioneering role in the Buddhism-science dialogue indicates that he was both a Buddhist modernist and a cosmopolitanist. I describe the Mind and Life Dialogues as an effort at a cosmopolitanist conversation that sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails. So it should be evident that my view is not that Buddhist modernism and cosmopolitanism are antithetical, but rather that Buddhist modernism falls short as a form of cosmopolitanism, and that the kind of cosmopolitanism I argue for provides a better way of appreciating the value and importance of the Buddhist tradition, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue, than does Buddhist modernism.

Guerrero writes, “By disparaging Buddhist moderiors and characterizing them as unworthy conversation partners, Thompson fails to demonstrate cosmopolitan respect for the many people who are Buddhist modernists.” I have already explained why I think it is wrong to say that I disparage Buddhist modernists. It is also wrong to say that I characterize them as unworthy conversation partners. Why would I converse with them throughout the book if I thought they were unworthy of conversation? Take Robert Wright’s Why Buddhism Is True,10 which I devote a chapter to. I present his arguments, state my sympathy for some of his ideas, and express my admiration for his book (84-85), while making clear why I fundamentally disagree with him.11 Or consider Francisco Varela. I emphasize the distinctive and philosophically rich aspects of his Buddhist modernism, which had a strong influence on me, while also pointing out that some of his ideas rest on questionable Buddhist modernist assumptions (181-82). Finally, it is not the case that I fail to show respect for Buddhist modernists. I show due regard by attending to them and taking them seriously. Showing respect to someone in the sense of giving them due regard is consistent with arguing that they are wrong or confused. To respect someone can also mean admiring them or holding them in high regard. I indicate that I have respect in this sense for certain individual Buddhist modernists (Stephen Batchelor, Francisco Varela, and Robert Wright).

Guerrero accuses me of treating Buddhism as one monolithic tradition and of thinking that Buddhism has only one “rightful place” in a cosmopolitan community. This accusation is based on misreading my first two paragraphs. She cites my use of the singular terms “Buddhism,” “rightful place,” and “valuable contributor.” Given what I go on to say in the Introduction, however, to say nothing of the rest of the book, it should be clear that these singular terms are functioning as collective nouns. “Buddhism” denotes the various ways people can be Buddhists. Since I discuss a variety of divergent Buddhist viewpoints from various historical periods and cultures, the statement that I treat Buddhism as one monolithic tradition is inaccurate. “Rightful
place” and “valuable contributor” denote the various ways that Buddhists deserve to be participants in and can be valuable contributors to a cosmopolitan community. My claim is that Buddhist exceptionalism is an impediment to Buddhists being able to be participants in and valuable contributors to a cosmopolitan community, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. (Guerrero and I disagree about this claim, as I discuss below.)

Guerrero says that I characterize the cosmopolitanist position as an “acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere” from which to arbitrate among diverse participants,” and that I describe cosmopolitan thinkers “as if they themselves were not part of any tradition,” as having “no roots of their own,” and as if they had “somehow transcended their own cultural identities and . . . those identities played no role at all.” She also writes, “In presenting cosmopolitanism as a kind of neutral perspective, what Thompson is in effect doing is masking his own view as an author.”

I reject all of this. Guerrero infers something that does not follow from what I write and misattributes it to me. That cosmopolitan thinkers move across different traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions does not entail that they do not belong to any tradition. On the contrary, one does these things while belonging to one or more traditions. One may belong to them at the same time or at different times, and one may belong to them in different ways. More precisely, one can do these things only by belonging to a tradition. Traditions always necessarily make up how we understand and interpret the situations in which we find ourselves. It is no part of my thinking, and it does not logically follow from anything I write, that cosmopolitanist thinkers stand outside of each and every one of the traditions, that they have no roots of their own, or that they have transcended their cultural identities. I do not present cosmopolitanism as an acultural, ahistorical, and neutral perspective. On the contrary, I present it as having multiple cultural and historical sources and traditions, and as involving commitments to various values, particularly the ones that make possible the kind of public epistemic culture described above. Finally, I cannot help but find shocking the statement that I mask my own view as an author, given that I describe my personal history and my role and perspective in the Buddhism-science dialogue as the viewpoint from which I am writing.

Let me turn to what I perceive to be the three substantial philosophical issues Guerrero and I disagree about. The first issue concerns Buddhist exceptionalism. Guerrero thinks that Buddhist exceptionalism is no barrier to constructive participation in cosmopolitanism, because such participation “requires only a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with diverse others.” In my view, however, a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with others is only minimally sufficient for starting and maintaining a conversation. Conversations evolve once they are up and running. In the anglophone world, the Buddhism-science dialogue has been going on since the 1970s, and the religion-science conversation since the nineteenth century. Buddhist exceptionalism functions as a serious impediment in these conversations.

It functions as an impediment to good conversation and constructive participation in cosmopolitanism. Although the Buddhism-science and religion-science conversations can be kept going in the face of Buddhist exceptionalism, they inevitably become biased and distorted. Compare: American exceptionalism is not necessarily a barrier to conversations about international social and political issues, but it is a serious impediment and needs to be removed for the conversations to happen in honest and beneficial ways. Guerrero treats the issue of conversation in abstract terms, but I contextualize it in actual, ongoing conversations, such as the Mind and Life Dialogues. Although Buddhist exceptionalism is clearly not a barrier to these conversations and other ones about Buddhism, religion, and science, it is an obstacle to progress and mutual understanding, and needs to be jettisoned for the conversations to move forward in honest and beneficial ways (a position Ganeri also supports).

The second issue concerns fallibilism. Guerrero writes that Kwame Anthony Appiah is mistaken to think that fallibilism, the commitment to understanding our beliefs as always revisable, is a requirement of cosmopolitanism. Her argument is that most traditions, including Buddhist ones, are committed to the truths of their particular tradition, and since cosmopolitanism requires only a willingness to understand and converse respectfully with others, it does not require being less than fully committed to the truth of one’s own worldview.

I am not sure, however, that it is correct to characterize fallibilism as being less than fully committed to the truth of one’s own beliefs. A lot depends on how one understands truth, commitment, and openness to being wrong or epistemic humility. It may be possible to be fully committed to the truth of one’s beliefs, in light of what one takes oneself to know or to have good reasons to believe, and to be open to the possibility that nevertheless one’s beliefs could turn out to be wrong and need revision.

Guerrero reads me as following Appiah’s fallibilism, though I do not explicitly discuss this matter. Appiah builds fallibilism into his conception of cosmopolitanism, but I am not sure whether he makes it a logical requirement for any cosmopolitanism. It seems that he could allow for the possibility of forms of philosophical cosmopolitanism in which at least some of the participants, maybe all of them, are not fallibilists, even if he thinks they should be fallibilists because their cosmopolitanism would be better if they were. In any case, although my personal way of being cosmopolitanist is fallibilist, I would not make fallibilism a logical or conceptual requirement of cosmopolitanism. For example, it seems coherent to believe in the truth of one’s own tradition and in the value of there being a public epistemic culture, in the sense discussed above, in which traditions converse and debate with one another and work toward common ends, including that there be such a public epistemic culture. As I noted above, entering into debate in such a public space can simply be a way of intellectually honing one’s own tradition. Nevertheless, if one conceives of the conversation as itself a form of knowledge (185), as instantiating a social and collective way of cognitively navigating the world, then one will conceive of it as more
than just sharing ideas and getting to know one another (as in the usual conception of interfaith dialogue), and one will be prepared to have one’s positions and arguments challenged, as well as one’s background assumptions and commitments destabilized (77, 180, 185). For these reasons, there will be significant epistemic and social pressure toward some kind of fallibilism, at least for certain elements of one’s tradition, if not its core convictions.

The third issue concerns who is supposed to be “the judge of what a tradition’s rightful place is or what its value is to a global cosmopolitan community.” In my view, the question “Who is to judge?” cannot be answered in general, abstract terms. In the particular case at hand—contemporary Buddhist modernism and the Buddhism-science dialogue—the judges are Buddhist modernists themselves and those whom they address, as well as the participants in the Buddhism-science dialogue. I do not intend to set myself up as a “neutral judge” of these conversations. Instead, I take myself to be a participant in them and to be arguing in that setting that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism do not make valuable contributions and are bad ways of participating in the conversations. Buddhist exceptionalism, let us recall, is not the position that Buddhism is unique or even that it is “true.” It is that Buddhism is uniquely rational and empirical by scientific standards, and for that reason superior to other religions. This claim is demonstrably false on both historical and conceptual grounds, and embodies confused thinking about the relationship between religion and science. For these reasons, Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are unacceptable by the criteria to which Buddhist modernists themselves typically appeal, namely, historical veracity, conceptual coherence, and scientific evidence.

These points also serve to answer one of Velež’s questions about cosmopolitanism: “[I]s it not inconsistent with the tolerant and pluralist spirit of cosmopolitanism to ask Israeli modernists . . . to abandon their beliefs about the Buddha and Buddhism? . . . How is it possible to speak about ‘respecting and valuing our differences’ and at the same time request Buddhist modernists to abandon the way of thinking that makes them different and unique as Buddhists?” It is possible to do this because much of Buddhist modernist thinking, particularly Buddhist exceptionalism, is untenable by Buddhist modernists’ own lights, that is, by their own criteria of truth, rationality, and evidence, and the cosmopolitanist values they espouse.

Velež also asks “how the pluralism about ultimate ethical value and way of life that Appiah’s cosmopolitanism entails can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting mainstream Buddhist ethics.” Appiah’s pluralism, however, stipulates that the values have to be worth living by, and it is open to Buddhists to argue that certain values are not worth living by and should not be accepted, even by those who are not Buddhists. For example, Buddhists—and not just Buddhists—can and should argue that “ethical egoism and a way of life that fosters greed and selfishness” are not worth living by and cannot be harmonized with “two kinds of cosmopolitan ethical commitments: those toward all human beings and those toward particular human lives, communities, and traditions.” Cosmopolitanism provides a general normative framework for traditions to co-exist while engaging one another in a public epistemic space (as Ganeri also discusses), but it does not specify the particular values worth living by (except those entailed by the existence of such a public space and the respect for traditions it requires); those values have to be worked out in conversation and debate. Clearly, Buddhist ethical traditions are fundamentally important and have many valuable contributions to make to such conversations.

IV. NO-SELF [FINNIGAN, GANERI, GARFIELD, KACHRU, KASSOR]

Kachru wonders whether I might be willing to concede that Buddhist modernists are justified in emphasizing the exceptionalism of Buddhism in the case of its no-self doctrine. The doctrine is not held by any other tradition, it goes against the grain of our ordinary habits of experience, and its philosophical elaborations entail a radical revision of our cognitive framework. He refers specifically to the no-self doctrine understood according to the “Buddhist scholastic (Abhidharma) interpretive schemas,” and asks, “Where else, apart from some interpretations of contemporary science, do we find such radical revisionism enshrined as a collective norm?”

I would argue that we find a comparable kind of radical revisionism in Sâmkhya philosophy. According to Sâmkhya, our habitual belief in a personal, agentic self is an illusion; there is really only the transformation of energetic nature; and the theoretical framework for specifying the elements and principles of nature’s transformation is radical and revisionary in the sense of going against the grain of our ordinary habits of experience and everyday cognitive framework. Of course, Sâmkhya also posits the existence of a transcendent consciousness, but this consciousness is not an agent or a person, and it is misleading to call it a subject, since it is beyond subject and object. The positing of such a consciousness is not an obstacle to being radical in the sense under discussion. So I submit that Sâmkhya is radical like Abhidharma. Furthermore, if we use the term “scientific” to mean a system of public knowledge for analyzing experience and investigating the world (see 50-51 and Ganeri), then Sâmkhya is also “scientific.”

Garfield disputes my statements that “the Brahminical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists” and that “to single out the Buddhists as more ‘scientific’ is partisan and simplistic” (105). But he does not read these assertions in the way I intend them. There are two distinct issues here. One issue is who qualifies as scientific in the sense of using rational argument and empirical evidence to support their position. Another issue is which scientific theories or positions are better supported by argument and evidence. Garfield conflates these two issues and addresses only the second one. Let me take them one by one.

I argue that it is a mistake—a typical Buddhist modernist one—to assert that the Buddhists are scientific, whereas the Brahminical theorists are not. Both are scientific in the sense that they appeal to reason and evidence. As Ganeri writes: “Neither is it [Buddhism] ‘exceptional’ in its
adherence to norms of rational, indeed scientific, inquiry. As any scholar of those Indian philosophical traditions that partly constitute the Sanskrit cosmopolis knows, non-Buddhist schools like Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā are as profoundly committed to rational inquiry as it is possible for a philosophical school to be.” It is false to say—as Buddhist modernists sometimes do—that the Brahminical theorists are less rational and empirical because they rely on scripture and testimony, whereas the Buddhists rely only on perception and inference. The situation is far more complicated. Some Brahminical philosophers reject testimony as a source of knowledge, and some Buddhists accept it; Brahminical philosophers who accept Vedic scripture know that they cannot appeal to it in their debates with Buddhists; it is unthinkable for Buddhists to contradict their own scriptures; and the debate about what constitutes a “knowledge source” (pramāṇa) is itself a “scientific” (epistemological) debate.

What about the second issue? Is it the case that the Buddhist no-self theory is better supported by argument and evidence, particularly in light of science today, as Buddhist modernists typically claim? That depends on how we understand the question. If we restrict it to whether science supports the inference that there is no self, in the precise but also restrictive sense of an unchanging and enduring substantial personal essence that is either a subject of experience or an agent of action, then the answer is “yes” (as I say in the book). But one of my key points, which Garfield and Kassor ignore, is that the question cannot be so restricted if we are asking about how to evaluate Buddhist versus Brahminical theories in relation to science and contemporary philosophical theories of the self. When the question is whether the Buddhist theory, which includes not just the denial of a self but also the Abhidharma no-self theory of how the mind works, is better supported by evidence, then simply negating the existence of a substantial personal essence does not decide the matter. Part of the issue, especially in the Indian philosophical context, is to explain how the mind and body work without a self as a principle of unity. Scientific theories and models are about explanation, and negating the existence of something does not suffice for explanation. The Brahminical Nyāya-vijñānīyas argue (correctly in my view) that the Buddhist Abhidharma reductionist model faces severe problems in accounting for what we would call perceptual binding and the apparent synchronic and diachronic unity of consciousness, and they propose an alternative model that is arguably better at explaining these phenomena than the Abhidharma Buddhist one. Furthermore, when certain Buddhists take steps to explain these phenomena by introducing constructs such as the “storehouse consciousness” (ālayavijñāna) and “reflexive awareness” (vasamvedana), they are accused by other Buddhists and Brahminical philosophers of smuggling a self in by the back door. In short, when we look at the issue from the perspective of evolving rival explanatory theories and models of the mind, it is facile to say that the Buddhist no-self theory is better supported by evidence and argument than the Brahminical ones. Rather, there is a complex dialectical situation in which there are evolving strengths and weaknesses on both sides (as I say on 51-52, 100-105).

Finnigan and Kassor assert that we can understand the Indian Buddhist ideas about no-self apart from the objections Brahminical philosophers raise to them and that we can put the Buddhist ideas into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and science without at the same time engaging the Brahminical ideas. Of course, I agree that this can be done, and it is fine for certain purposes. But it is not as good as understanding the Indian Buddhist ideas in their historical and dialectical context, and putting that larger dialectical framework into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. Doing this is especially important for thinking about a concept as rich and multifaceted as the concept of self. This is why I single out Ganeri’s The Self as a paradigm. Finnigan, however, points out that Ganeri’s more recent book, Attention, Not Self, “restricts itself to reconstructing and defending Buddhaghosa’s Theravāda Buddhist conception of the mind in dialogue with the philosophy of mind.” Ganeri’s treatment of Buddhaghosa is rich and fascinating, though I have some doubts about certain methodological and interpretive aspects of it. I see Buddhaghosa as writing first and foremost as a scriptural exegete, translator, and commentator. This does not mean that his texts are not rich in philosophical content. But unlike, say, Vasubandhu or Dharmakīrti, he is not writing under the dialectical pressure of needing to address rival Buddhist or non-Buddhist philosophical systems. For this reason, I do not find him as inspiring as a philosopher. I am more drawn to the way Ganeri interweaves many Buddhist, Čārvaka, and Nyāya ideas in The Self than I am to the reconstruction of the singular Buddhaghosa.

Garfield takes me to be arguing against the Buddhist no-self view and says that I change the subject and equivocate when I write, “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn’t the only way to understand the meaning of ‘self,’ so denying that there is this kind of a self doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (105). Kassor makes basically the same complaint.

Garfield and Kassor misunderstand my argument. I am not concerned to argue against the Buddhist denial of the self, in the precise and restrictive sense that Buddhists target, and I distinguish the various senses of “self” precisely to prevent equivocation. Indeed, I make the point myself that “from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, my argument that the self is a construction can be taken as an argument for the claim that the person is a construction” (113). The two principal claims of chapter three “No Self? Not So Fast” of my book are that it is facile to think that the Buddhist no-self theorists are superior to the Brahminical self-theorists in being more scientific, or rational and empirical (for the reasons given above), and that cognitive science does not indicate that the self is an illusion; it suggests that it is a construction (88-89). So when Buddhist modernists say otherwise, they are being simplistic and sloppy.

One reason why it is wrong to make the statement “Cognitive science shows that the self is an illusion” is that many cognitive scientists would be unwilling to restrict the meaning of the word “self” in the way that Buddhists do, and they also would not be willing to draw the self-versus-
person distinction in the way that Buddhists do. Indeed, some would regard an insistence on Buddhist usage as tendentious and partisan. The statement “Cognitive science shows that the self is an illusion” does not capture how many cognitive scientists themselves actually speak, so when Buddhist modernists say things like that, they are being careless and misleading. The statement expresses Buddhist modernist rhetoric, not careful reflection about a complicated scientific and philosophical terrain.

Garfield, it seems, does think that cognitive science indicates that the self is an illusion, if we understand “self” in the precise and restrictive sense that Buddhists target (the so-called object of negation). (Kassor may also think this, though she does not say so explicitly.) But caution is required here. Cognitive science provides no reason to think that there exists a self in the sense of an enduring (wholly present in each moment), substantial, personal essence. So cognitive science does not support the belief in such a self. For this reason, we are entitled to say the belief is false. Now, that belief, as just articulated, is an intellectual one. If we say it is an illusion, we are using “illusion” in an extended, metaphorical sense to say that the belief is false or distorted. But the Buddhist object of negation—the self as a personal essence—is not primarily the content of an intellectual belief; it is considered to be our default sense of self and the prime motivator of our behavior. The Buddhist claim is that we feel there to be such a self, but there is none, so that self is an illusion. Does cognitive science support this viewpoint? Does cognitive science indicate that our default sense of self and the prime motivator of our behavior is the feeling of self as a personal essence? I argue that it does not, for various phenomenological and psychological reasons (see 108-109). Garfield and Kassor do not address these reasons. Given that cognitive science has not established that our experiential sense of self is as the Buddhists say it is, it is unacceptable to declare that cognitive science indicates that the self—in the precise and restricted Buddhist sense—is a pervasive experiential illusion that structures our mental lives.

It is crucial to remember the point of my argument here. Again, I am not trying to refute the Buddhist no-self view. Instead, I am concerned to show that appealing to science to justify it does not work. The Buddhist modernist position that science unequivocally establishes the truth of the Buddhist no-self view is unacceptable. This does not mean that the Buddhist view is false or that there are no other philosophical, normative, or soteriological reasons in its favor. What I object to is the lax rhetoric of invoking science in the place of careful philosophical analysis and attention to what science actually indicates.

V. FAITH [FINNIGAN, GARFIELD, WILLIAMS]

When I argue that having faith is a crucial part of being a Buddhist, Garfield takes me to mean “faith in the belief-without-reason sense.” But I am not using “faith” in this restricted fideist sense, according to which faith is independent of or opposed to reason. As noted earlier, this is not the only conception of faith in monotheistic religions or the philosophy of religion. Generally speaking, “faith” means trust. Religious faith is a kind of trust that ventures beyond all the ordinary available evidence. In theism, religious faith is trust in God; in Buddhism, it is trust in the Buddha and the reality of awakening or nirvāna. Nirvāna transcends conceptual thought, sense perception, and the conditioned world, hence trusting in nirvāna entails going beyond the evidence available to the unawakened mind. So when Buddhist modernists say that faith is absent in Buddhism, unlike in other religions, they are wrong.

Garfield’s response is that the kind of faith that is crucial for Buddhists is confidence (his preferred way of translating śraddha), which he understands “as an attitude regarding belief in that to which one has only indirect cognitive access through the testimony of the Buddha or another highly realized being.” Such confidence can be justified by verifying the accuracy of the source regarding things to which we do have access, and inferring on that basis that the source is reliable.

Garfield does not face up to the problem here. Although we know how to apply the procedure he describes within the empirical world, we are now being asked to extend it beyond that sphere to testimony about the transcendent. What warrants that extension? It cannot simply be that we are confident about the source regarding things to which we have access in the empirical world. Rather, extending our confidence to the reality of the transcendent requires a different kind of trust, namely, faith.

Notice, also, that theists can make the same move. Some Christian philosophers argue that faith is a kind of knowledge based on experiences arising from the exercise of a distinct cognitive capacity for sensing the divine. Suppose that the person who reports having such experiences is reliable regarding things to which we have access. According to Garfield’s criterion, we can infer that the person is reliable and that we can be confident in their testimony about the reality of the divine.

Garfield might object that naturalists have no good reason to believe in such a special cognitive capacity for sensing the divine. But the same objection can be made to the Buddhist: Naturalists have no good reason to believe that there is such a thing as awakening or the realization of nirvāna.

In short, whether one calls it faith or confidence, the Buddhist relies on trust in something that goes beyond the available evidence and lies outside the sphere of naturalism. So Buddhist exceptionalism gets no purchase here.

I agree with Garfield that, as a Buddhist, “[o]ne can have confidence in science to tell us about a lot of things, and confidence in the Buddha to tell us about some other things regarding which science is currently silent.” But the issue I am addressing is not whether the Buddhist can have both faith in nirvāna and confidence in science. I am not claiming that those two things are inconsistent. Garfield accuses me of non sequitur, but he does not reconstruct my argument properly. My objection is to Buddhist modernists who try to have their cake and eat it too by propounding the following ideas: Buddhists do not need faith (trust in things that go beyond the available evidence and reside
outside the sphere of naturalism); Buddhists believe only in what is scientifically comprehensible; Buddhists can believe in awakening and nirvāṇa. One cannot believe all three ideas at once (unless you try to naturalize nirvāṇa as just a psychological state of well-being or a transpersonal mystical experience, but that move amounts to rejecting any traditional understanding of nirvāṇa). Garfield does not come to grips with this argument, and he slides back into Buddhist exceptionalism in thinking that Buddhists do not need the kind of faith that other religions do.

Williams interprets me as thinking that, for modern Buddhism to be acceptable, it should not rely on any faith claims. But I am not concerned to argue against faith, and I never suggest that it is wrong for Buddhists to have faith in the Buddha or nirvāṇa. Rather, my concern is to show that Buddhist modernists, in claiming not to rely on faith but only on scientific naturalism, are not entitled to maintain a belief in or commitment to the realization of nirvāṇa. To repeat the argument just made: if one is a scientific naturalist, then one is in no position to be able to put one’s trust in something that utterly transcends the naturalistic framework, as nirvāṇa does (unless, again, one naturalizes nirvāṇa as just a psychological state of well-being or a transpersonal mystical experience). To be clear, I think it is perfectly fine for modern Buddhists both to place their confidence in science for matters on which science is authoritative and to have faith (trust) in the reality of nirvāṇa; my objection is to Buddhist modernists who think that they can dispense with such faith, be scientific naturalists, and believe in awakening or nirvāṇa in any traditional sense, all the while asserting that Buddhism is exceptional (unique and superior) among the religions in being rational and empirical in this way. Such thinking is confused and incoherent.

Williams argues that Buddhist modernists actually do rely on faith, but it is faith in future science. She says this places my critique of Buddhist modernism in jeopardy, and it leaves open the question of whether this kind of faith in future science “can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism.”

These ideas, however, do not affect my critique. The kind of faith at issue is trust in something that falls outside the scope of scientific naturalism, namely, awakening or nirvāṇa. As I argue, concepts such as awakening, liberation, and nirvāṇa are not operationalizable (34). They are soteriological, not scientific, and thinking that there could be a scientific validation of soteriological concepts is a category mistake. So it is a conceptual confusion to think that faith in future science—ordinary epistemic confidence in future science—can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism, i.e., trust in that which transcends all conceptuality and all conditionality, and guarantees complete and irrevocable mental peace.

Finnigan says that I deny that nondual or nonconceptual awareness is possible, and hence that liberation or nirvāṇa is possible. If this were the case, then faith in liberation or nirvāṇa would be misplaced. But this is not my position. I never deny the possibility of a nondual or nonconceptual mode of awareness, and I never deny the possibility of liberation or nirvāṇa. Instead, I point out that there is no single, univocal, traditional understanding of what nirvāṇa is. I also argue that whether any nondual or nonconceptual awareness counts as “awakening,” “liberation,” or “nirvāṇa” is concept-dependent. There are two questions here: Is nondual or nonconceptual awareness psychologically or phenomenologically possible, and if it is, does it constitute liberation or nirvāṇa? The second question, I argue, cannot be answered by referring only to the intrinsic character of the nonconceptual experience; it depends also on the role that such an experience plays in the religious tradition and conceptual system.

VI. NATURALISM [COSERU, FINNIGAN, GARFIELD, KACHRU]

I begin with what “naturalism” means in this discussion. It means “scientific naturalism,” the position that science provides the best account of reality. Scientific naturalism has two components, one ontological and one methodological. The ontological component is physicalism, the thesis that everything that exists, including the mind, is completely physical in its nature and constitution. The methodological component is the thesis that the methods of empirical science give science a general and final authority about the world, and therefore science should be epistemically privileged over all other forms of investigation. Scientific naturalism is a philosophical thesis, not a thesis belonging to any of the empirical sciences themselves.

Garfield interprets me as arguing that there is a “fatal inconsistency” between being a Buddhist and being a naturalist, but that is not what I argue. I acknowledge that there are ways of making the two logically consistent. Instead, I argue that there is a very strong tension between them, and that naturalistic Buddhists severely underestimate what needs to be done to reconcile them, because they typically do not appreciate how radical the Buddhist ideas are.

There are basically two ways to reconcile being a Buddhist and being a naturalist. One way is to relegate the core Buddhist soteriological concepts and commitments to their own proper sphere (religion, faith) while giving science authority about the empirical world. This is a kind of “nonoverlapping magisteria” strategy, or rather a “partially overlapping magisteria” strategy, since it allows for intersection in the areas of logic, epistemology, and philosophical psychology. The other way is to try to naturalize the Buddhist soteriological concepts and commitments, substituting an empirical psychological construct of “well-being” for nirvāṇa, eliminating or radically interpreting the ideas of karma and rebirth, and so on. “Naturalistic Buddhists” such as Robert Wright take the second route.

Garfield targets two lines of thought in my description of the tension between naturalistic Buddhism and traditional Buddhism. He misreads both.

One line of thought arises from my quoting Robert Sharf’s statement, “Liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved,” which I say is “the fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism” (78). The thought is that liberation is
achieved—that is the whole point of Buddhism—but that it is impossible, because liberation is the realization of nirvāṇa, nirvāṇa is the “unconditioned,” and so it cannot be the result of any cause, specifically that of following the Buddhist path. Sharf’s discussion describes how the Chan tradition foregrounds this conundrum, refuses every attempt at rationally solving it, including the one Garfield delineates, and leaves it as an inescapable dialetheia, which itself is taken as constitutive of awakening. Garfield interprets me as arguing, first, that the enigma is a genuine paradox and, second, from the genuineness of the paradox to the impossibility of naturalistic Buddhism (because naturalists allow only causally conditioned states, whereas nirvāṇa is an unconditioned state). But I do not make this argument. Rather, I highlight the enigma so that I can discuss the ways in which traditional Buddhists recognize and respond to it, including the kind of response Garfield gives, but I take no stand on these responses or on whether the enigma is an irresolvable paradox. In particular, I do not assert the genuineness of the paradox as a premise in an argument for the inconsistency of Buddhism and naturalism. So Garfield’s assertion that I make an unsound argument is incorrect. Rather, my argument is that naturalistic Buddhists do not recognize the problem at all, and thus they do not grasp the radical character of Buddhist thinking and severely underestimate the tension between traditional Buddhist ideas and naturalism.

The other line of thought arises from my quoting the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra: “[T]he mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two,” which I use to illustrate the point that, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind exceeds, escapes, or transcends any attempt to grasp it, including grasping that it is ungraspable. Naturalistic Buddhists, however, especially neural Buddhists, proceed as if the mind could be grasped, particularly in terms of the brain. Garfield misunderstands the issue here as one about supervenience. He takes me to be asserting that naturalistic Buddhists are committed to the view that mental states narrowly supervene on brain states, and he rightly states that this is incorrect: A naturalistic Buddhist can and should adopt a wide supervenience conception of the mind-brain relation. But my complaint is not about narrow supervenience and Garfield’s response is beside the point.28 Vimalakīrti’s statement about nonduality is not a wide supervenience thesis. My complaint is that naturalistic Buddhists ignore the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of the mind as radically ungraspable. Naturalistic Buddhists treat the mind as a comprehensible cognitive system that can be grasped in naturalistic terms, whereas, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind is ungraspable. For naturalistic Buddhists, there is no transcendence and the mind is fathomable in entirely naturalistic terms; for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind is transcendent and unfathomable. Garfield takes me to be arguing from the purported falsity of narrow supervenience to the falsity of naturalistic Buddhism. That argument is indeed invalid, but it is not my argument. My argument is that, as a form of Buddhism, naturalistic Buddhism is superficial because it ignores the radical challenge posed by Mahāyāna Buddhist thinking about the mind. This is why the conclusion of my argument beginning with Vimalakīrti’s statement about nonduality is the following one: “If one takes the Buddhist viewpoint seriously, the deep question isn’t whether Buddhism can be made consistent with scientific naturalism. The deep question is whether it’s possible for science to be mindful of the mind’s ungraspability and what that would mean for scientific thinking and practice” (78).

This question arises when we are thinking specifically about the relationship between the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective on the mind and scientific naturalism. Of course, there are other Buddhist perspectives, such as the Abhidharma perspective. Finningan says I am “too hasty” in not allowing for a convergence between Abhidharma realism and scientific realism. But I explicitly allow for this convergence (see 72-73). When I describe the “circulation” between Buddhism and cognitive science that Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and I explored in *The Embodied Mind*, I make the point that one can enter this circulation from different Buddhist philosophical perspectives (73-74).27 Varela, Rosch, and I explored two entry points, one from the Abhidharma perspective and the other from a Mahāyāna (Yogācāra and Madhyamaka) perspective. The Abhidharma philosophers, though realist, are nonetheless radical compared to the standard naturalistic picture of the mind, because they go beyond even the wide supervenience of the mental on the physical by holding that subject and object, mind and world, are thoroughly relational. Naturalistic Buddhists, especially those who rely on evolutionary psychology (see my response to Coseru below), do not conceptualize the mind in this radically relational way, so there remains a significant discrepancy between their frameworks, despite agreement about realism.

Finningan wonders whether what I call a “genuine encounter” between Buddhism and science “must engage their radical points of difference or whether interdisciplinary dialogue could still be productive if interlocutors emphasize points of similarity (at least initially).” Of course, emphasizing points of similarity is fine for certain purposes. But it is not fine if it obscures deeper differences and makes it difficult or impossible to talk about them. At this stage of evolution in the Buddhism-science dialogue, emphasizing just points of similarity does not go far enough. We need to engage the differences for the reasons given above (see the sections on cosmopolitanism and no-self).

Coseru disputes my criticisms of evolutionary psychology and argues that evolutionary psychology is an appropriate framework for relating Buddhism to science. He makes four points in response to my critique. I am not persuaded by any of them.

First, he thinks my criticism that evolutionary psychology treats the organism as a passive recipient of selection pressures implies that I am mistakenly treating explanations that appeal to evolution and explanations that appeal to adaptive behavior and learning as competing ones, whereas these explanations are compatible and operate at different levels. But I do not make this mistake and Coseru misses the point of the criticism. The criticism is that it is incorrect to see evolution, as evolutionary psychologists do, as fundamentally a matter of solving adaptive problems, as if environmental problems pre-existed the organisms.
and could be specified independently of them. A more sophisticated view of organism-environment coevolution is required, as we see in niche construction theory, evolutionary developmental biology, and gene-culture coevolution theory. The irony here is that the organism-environment coevolution perspective fits much better with Buddhist philosophical psychology, as we argued in The Embodied Mind, than does evolutionary psychology.\(^{19}\)

Second, Coseru thinks that my placing greater emphasis on cultural transmission than evolutionary psychologists do “begs the question” of how our cultural abilities originated if not from evolution. This objection, however, confuses the need for evolutionary explanation with the version of evolutionary explanation that evolutionary psychologists give. My argument is against the latter, not the former, as I make clear. Niche construction theory, gene-culture coevolution theory, and cultural evolutionary psychology are much more impressive research programs for explaining our cultural abilities than evolutionary psychology.\(^{20}\)

Third, Coseru thinks that my critique of the “massively modular” view of the mind favored by evolutionary psychologists “glosses over a rich history of debate,” and that “the question of modularity of the mind is far from settled.” These points are fair. My concern in Why I Am Not a Buddhist is not to give a detailed assessment of these debates, and the question of modularity remains open. Still, I think the evidence from computational neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, neurobiology, and complex systems theory speaks strongly against the modular viewpoint, especially the form it takes in evolutionary psychology.

Fourth, Coseru thinks that the criticisms I cite of evolutionary psychology made by philosophers of biology and evolutionary biologists mistakenly paint evolutionary psychologists as genetic determinists (who think that human behavior is directly controlled by an individual’s genes). This is mistaken. The specific criticisms that I summarize on pages 69-70 do not assume that evolutionary psychologists are genetic determinists. Instead, the criticisms target a certain style of adaptationist reasoning prevalent in evolutionary psychology.

Since I wrote my book, another important critique of evolutionary psychology has appeared.\(^{21}\) This critique makes a strong case that evolutionary psychology does not have the resources to match hypothesized ancestral (Pleistocene) cognitive structures with present-day ones in the right way to formulate and test evolutionary psychology hypotheses. The conclusion is that evolutionary psychology is not a proper scientific theory. This critique reinforces my claim that evolutionary psychology is not the right framework for relating scientific theories of the mind to Buddhist ideas.

In the second part of his response, Coseru focuses on Madhyamaka. I argue for a two-way exchange between cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy, including Madhyamaka as a key player. Coseru interprets me as proposing that Madhyamaka should be the overarching philosophical perspective in the Buddhism-science exchange. That is not my view, however. I invoke Madhyamaka in Why I Am Not a Buddhist mainly for the purpose of illustrating the radical nature of certain key Buddhist ideas that naturalistic Buddhists overlook. I would not propose Madhyamaka as the decisive perspective for the Buddhism-science dialogue. Which Buddhist philosophical perspective is relevant depends on the issue being discussed and is for Buddhist thinkers themselves to decide. My proposal is that the whole evolving tradition of Buddhist philosophy—Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Buddhist epistemology (the pramāṇa theorists), in all their intertwinnings and elaborations down to today—should be part of the two-way exchange in the Buddhism-science dialogue. I take it that Coseru would agree with this proposal.\(^{22}\)

Kachru draws attention to my statement that asking “Is Buddhism true?” (as Robert Wright does) is not the right question to ask (85). I make this comment at the end of my chapter on Wright’s Why Buddhism Is True. “Truth,” in that context, means scientific truth—truth understood as a correspondence or isomorphism between scientific models and phenomena. As Kachru writes, there is “another valence to truth, particularly evident when speaking, for example, of the reason to pursue a religion, including thereby the overriding beauty or power it may involve, or the eloquence one’s smallest gestures may achieve when one is taken apart and put together again through training in a way of life taken to express some truth or reality.” I agree with Kachru that there is room for a modern Buddhist to speak of truth in this sense. “Truth” means more than just scientific truth. Kachru is right that I appeal to the idea of authenticity in this connection. Here I am influenced by two Buddhist modernist thinkers, Stephen Batchelor, in his first book on Buddhism and existentialism, and Nishitani Keiji.\(^{23}\) These writers do not try to justify Buddhism by appealing to scientific truth; instead, they articulate Buddhism, particularly Zen, as a response to the demands of authenticity, of facing up to the question of how we choose to lead our lives given our lack of any fixed nature or essence and in the face of our inevitable death. This is why I write in the book that if we’re going to recast the Buddhist idea of liberation in modern terms, then we should understand it as involving “a total reconfiguration of our existence as governed by the norm of authenticity, not simply [as] a change to our mental states and traits as psychology conceives of them” (82).

VII. CONCLUSION

If you have made it this far, you may be thinking that I really should have called my book Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist (despite that not being a very catchy title). So let me take this opportunity to state explicitly something that I only allude to in the book (see 80-82, 158).\(^{24}\) I submit that the driving philosophical engine of Buddhist thought is the following set of propositions: All conditioned and compounded things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self (the so-called three marks of existence); and nirvāṇa is unconditioned peace. Another formulation is the so-called four seals (which, according to Tibetan Buddhism, minimally identify a view as Buddhist): Everything conditioned and compounded is impermanent; everything contaminated (by the mental afflictions of
beginningless fundamental ignorance, attachment, and anger) is suffering; all phenomena are devoid of self; and nirvāṇā (unconditioned cessation of affliction) is peace.

The fundamental reason I am not a Buddhist is that I cannot find a way to accept these proposals, including their modernist renditions, and my philosophical project does not include trying to reformulate them in acceptable modernist terms. Nevertheless, I believe that unless one grapples with the radical philosophical and existential challenge that these propositions pose to our usual ways of thinking and being—especially to the modernist project of searching for well-being in the form of happiness and psychological well-adjustment—one has not really heard what the Buddhist tradition has to say. Moreover, as a philosopher, I believe it is important to confront these propositions and the arguments for them, and to think through them deeply for oneself.

NOTES


11. As a result of reading my book, Robert Wright invited me to be on his podcast, where we had a convivial two-hour conversation. See Robert Wright, interview with Evan Thompson, Meaning of Life TV, podcast video, April 28, 2020, https://meaningoflife.tv/videos/42741.

12. Indeed, this argument is especially important to make today, given the global environmental crisis. Ethical egoism, greed, and selfishness threaten not just all human beings—the human community altogether. They also especially threaten poor and vulnerable human communities and traditions, as well as other forms of life, and therefore they are fundamentally unjust. See Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Let me also take this occasion to note that one of the serious limitations of contemporary cosmopolitanism is its anthropocentrism: its explicitly stated concern is only for the human good, and not for the good of other forms of life, such as nonhuman animals and the planetary biosphere. The need to enlarge cosmopolitanism to include nonhuman animals within its purview is a theme in Martha Nussbaum, The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

13. Velez also wonders how “partial cosmopolitanism,” which affirms our need to be partial to particular people and groups, “can be reconciled with the Buddhist ethical ideals of universal compassion and loving-kindness, which in their most advanced manifestations are accompanied by equanimity or emotional impartiality towards particular people and groups.” Although Mahāyāna Buddhism especially emphasizes these ideals, Mahāyāna Buddhists generally also recognize that compassion and loving-kindness have to be cultivated, at least initially, in partial ways, especially for lay Buddhists. Indeed, lay Buddhists in Mahāyāna Buddhist cultures are hardly ever expected to practice the absolutely impartial compassion of the arhat or bodhisattva. It is also worth pointing out that the “competing cosmopolitanisms” of Chinese Buddhism versus Confucianism (to which I refer on 171) also faced this issue, with the Confucians arguing that the Buddhists did not respect the value of filial piety, because they encouraged people to leave their families and become monastics. For a contemporary philosophical defence of the Neo-Confucian view of the self and the value of partiality in benevolence against the Mahāyāna Buddhist view of universal compassion, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).


15. Some contemporary Buddhists, notably Thanissaro Bhikkhu, interpret the Pali Buddhist suttas (Nikayas) as affirming the reality of a similar pure, absolute, and unconditioned consciousness (see 93-94, 203, note 7). I find their reasons for this interpretation unconvincing. Nevertheless, the positing of such a consciousness would arguably show insight, at least, if not all, of the Abhidharma radical revisionism in place.


20. Nevertheless, and despite Kassor’s demand for “specificity in terms of the distinction between ātman [self] and pudgala [person]” when we engage Buddhist philosophy, simply transposing the Buddhist distinction between self and person onto cognitive science and contemporary philosophy will not work. Consider the concept of the “minimal self,” understood as a basic, non-metacognitive self-awareness and as the sense of being a subject and agent grounded on the body. This concept is central to phenomenological philosophy of mind, embodied cognitive science, and certain lines of investigation in cognitive neuroscience. The minimal self is not a person or sufficient for personhood, so it is not a pudgala. It suffices, however, for a basic functional and experiential self-versus-other distinction, so it warrants being called a kind of self. Does it fall within the scope of what the Buddhist no-self view negates? That is not easily determined and depends on which Buddhist philosopher one asks. It would fall within the scope of the so-called object of negation for Candarkiriti, so if embodied cognitive science is right, then Candarkiriti is wrong, and hence science does not
support his Buddhist view. Yogācāra Buddhist philosophers, however, can accommodate the phenomenology of the minimal self with their ideas of “reflective awareness” (svasaṃvedana) and “storehouse consciousness” (ālayavijñāna) (ideas Candrakīrti rejects), but these Buddhist philosophers would object to applying the term “self” to these kinds of consciousness. Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, the fact that other Buddhists and Brahmanical philosophers accuse them of returning to a self viewpoint in new terminological guise is telling. In suggesting that respecting the terminological distinction between ātman and pudgala will establish the scientific or philosophical credentials of the Buddhist no-self view, Garfield and Kassor are being lax and are simplifying a complex dialectical terrain, not just in the Indian context but also in how we relate that context to cognitive science.


22. I focus on scientific naturalism in its standard or orthodox sense. I am not considering radical or revisionary forms of naturalism, such as idealism, panpsychism, and Whiteheadian process metaphysics.


24. Amod Lele also takes this route, though in a different way from Wright. See notes 8 and 9.


26. When I write that naturalistic Buddhists proceed as if the mind could “be pinned down and identified as essentially the ‘biological reality’ of the brain” (77-78), it may sound like I am saying that they have a narrow supervenience view of the mind-brain relation. But that is not what I mean. Rather, I mean that naturalistic Buddhists seek to understand the mind fundamentally in terms of the workings of the brain, whether that be in a narrow (internalist) or wide (externalist) explanatory framework. Consider that, on a wide supervenience view, the brain remains the critical node in the extended cognitive system and the minimal supervenience base for consciousness. It is the naturalistic conception of the mind as entirely comprehensible in mundane, empirical terms, not narrow versus wide supervenience, that creates the tension with Mahāyāna Buddhist thought.


28. “For the Abhidharma, what we call the ‘mind’ is a collection of interactive processes, some physical and some mental, that arise together with what we call the ‘object’ of cognition. In cognitive science language, what we call the ‘mind’ is a collection of interactive processes that span and interconnect the brain, the rest of the body, and the environment, and what we call the ‘object’ of cognition is defined by these interactive processes” (73).


34. I draw here from “Clarifying Why I Am Not a Buddhist.”

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

GOAL OF THE NEWSLETTER ON ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS

The APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies is sponsored by the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies to report on the philosophical work of Asian and Asian American philosophy, to report on new work in Asian philosophy, and to provide a forum for the discussion of topics of importance to Asian and Asian American philosophers and those engaged with Asian and Asian American philosophy. We encourage a diversity of views and topics within this broad rubric. None of the varied philosophical views provided by authors of newsletter articles necessarily represents the views of any or all the members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, including the editor(s) of the newsletter. The committee and the newsletter are committed to advancing Asian and Asian American philosophical scholarships and bringing this work and this community to the attention of the larger philosophical community; we do not endorse any particular approach to Asian or Asian American philosophy.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

1) Purpose: The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of Asians and Asian Americans and their philosophy and to make the resources of Asians and Asian American philosophy available to a larger philosophical community. The newsletter presents discussions of recent developments in Asians and Asian American philosophy (including, for example, both modern and classical East-Asian philosophy, both modern and classical South Asian philosophy, and Asians and Asian Americans doing philosophy in its various forms), related work in other disciplines, literature overviews, reviews of the discipline as a whole, timely book reviews, and suggestions for both spreading and improving the teaching of Asian philosophy in the current curriculum. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies. One way the dissemination of knowledge of the relevant areas occurs is by holding highly visible, interactive sessions on Asian philosophy at the American Philosophical Association’s three annual divisional meetings. Potential authors should follow the submission guidelines below:

i) Please submit essays electronically to the editor(s). Articles submitted to the newsletter should be limited to ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA submission guidelines.

ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow The Chicago Manual Style.
iii) If the paper is accepted, each author is required to sign a copyright transfer form, available on the APA website, prior to publication.

2) **Book reviews and reviewers:** If you have published a book that you consider appropriate for review in the newsletter, please ask your publisher to send the editor(s) a copy of your book. Each call for papers may also include a list of books for possible review. To volunteer to review books (or some specific book), kindly send the editor(s) a CV and letter of interest mentioning your areas of research and teaching.

3) **Where to send papers/reviews:** Please send all articles, comments, reviews, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: A. Minh Nguyen (athuyyuyen@fgcu.edu).

4) **Submission deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

5) **Guest editorship:** It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of the newsletter depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality newsletter, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.
It is our humble pleasure to present this special issue of the APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy. This issue brings together a variety of diverse voices to reflect on the experiences, challenges, barriers, and joys of pursuing philosophy from the position of a first-generation student and/or person from a low socioeconomic background.

This issue grew out of a number of conversations we, Arianna Falbo and Heather Stewart, have had about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the discipline of philosophy. Over the course of these conversations, we observed that despite the increased attention to matters of diversity in the profession (and efforts to "diversify" the profession), meaningful conversations about first-generation status, socioeconomic class, poverty, and the significance of these experiences in the lives of those who do (or do not) choose to pursue philosophy were generally lacking. This is a problem, we believe, because class-related concerns oftentimes pose significant barriers to entering into, and successfully remaining within, the field. Thus, it’s imperative that more careful attention be given to these topics and that more serious conversations about issues of class status in the profession are had, especially among those with the power to increase support for members (or would-be members) of our discipline from these backgrounds.

In an effort to spark such conversations, we organized a session at the 2020 Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, held in Philadelphia, PA. The session (which shared its name with this issue) brought together four panelists to share and reflect on their experiences as first-generation students and/or students from working-class backgrounds or conditions of poverty. We are delighted that two of the panelists, Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka’Nobuhlaluse, have developed and expanded upon their presentation from the session in a contribution for this issue. (For an overview of the highlights from this session, you can find it on the Blog of the APA.) The panel was very well received, and many attendees of the session and other colleagues encouraged us to keep this conversation going. This issue is an effort to do so.

Before discussing the contents of the issue itself, it is worth situating ourselves in relation to its content. We come to this topic as a matter of having deep personal connections to it. That is, we both personally share in some of the experiences reflected by the issue’s authors, and have come to philosophy from positions typically underrepresented in the field.

Arianna is a first-generation college student. Neither of her parents attended college, and her father, an immigrant who moved to Canada from Italy, left high school in the tenth grade to take a job working in a steel fabrication factory in order to support his family. Arianna is among the first in her immediate and extended family to receive any graduate or professional schooling. Her parents have instilled in her the importance of ambition and a strong work ethic, and she holds tightly onto these values as she progresses through graduate school. Reflecting upon the hard work of her parents, as well as her grandparents and generations before them, she feels incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to go to university and to be currently pursuing a doctoral degree. This is an opportunity that simply wasn’t in the cards for her parents, and she recognizes that her schooling is the direct result of their sacrifice and determination to provide opportunities to their children which they never had. For Arianna, college was an awkward and uncomfortable time of intellectual and personal growth. Everyone else in her classes seemed to know what they were doing and how everything worked; they were confident and in control. But she always felt out of place, anxious, and confused. Growing up, she had few examples of what post-secondary education was like, and it took a long time for her to gain the confidence needed to feel at ease in philosophy classes. Arianna is indebted to a handful of inspiring mentors, who she looks up to and respects, not only as brilliant and careful philosophers, but also as supportive, genuinely good, and down-to-earth people, who have helped her to find her voice in the philosophy classroom, and to find her place in the profession more broadly. She owes much of her intellectual growth and success in the field to their continued support; she wouldn’t be doing philosophy today had she not had their guidance.

Heather is also the first in her family to attend college or university, and comes from a working-poor background.
After her father, a factory worker, passed away suddenly when Heather and her brother, Sean, were young children, Heather’s stay-at-home mother, Alice, became a single, stay-at-home mother. Their family of three managed to get by, thanks to a vast array of social safety-net programs, until Heather’s mom remarried when Heather was in high school. Heather’s step-father, Barry, is also a blue-collar factory worker. Growing up, Heather’s parents always supported her and her brother’s many interests, and particularly, Heather’s boundless curiosity and love of reading, writing, and thinking. Heather and her Ma made frequent visits to the local library to check out massive stacks of books, which Heather would inevitably devour far too quickly. Heather’s mother always prioritized using the small bits of disposable cash she had on materials to fuel the intellectual fire sparking in Heather: subscriptions to *National Geographic* and *Scholastic Kids* magazines, and even encyclopedias the family would receive by mail. Though she never received a post-secondary education of her own, Heather’s mom made every effort to foster a love of learning in Heather; even when finances were tight, she found creative ways to keep Heather engaged. Heather bounced through a number of public schools before graduating with a keen desire to go to university. With a combination of scholarships, grants, and a hefty amount of student loans, she was able to do so, becoming the first in her family to pursue and receive a university education. Heather’s brother, Sean, has worked a series of jobs after high school, and is currently pursuing his own passion—professional wrestling. Where Heather grew up, furthering one’s education is a luxury, not a given. And Heather feels unimaginably fortunate every single day for the invaluable mentorship she has had to help her along her educational journey, from a terrified undergraduate working multiple part-time jobs and agonizing over accruing student loans to her current self, months away from completing her PhD (and still having no idea how exactly that happened).

It is from these personal experiences that we conceived of this project, and from these perspectives that we present this issue to you. Before doing so, we offer an overview of the issue’s contents, themes, and goals.

To begin, let us explain our reasons for our choice of title, “Outsiders Within: Reflections on Being a First-Generation and/or Low-Income Philosopher.” In using the terminology of “outsiders within,” we are indebted to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins.¹ In coining the term, Collins highlights the unique experiences of Black women entering the academy. The concept of the “outsider within” is used by Collins to underscore how one’s belonging to a social group, and that group’s situatedness within a particular historical context—pertaining to race, gender, and socioeconomic disparities and inequalities—has the potential to contribute to and enrich their perspective on the social world. As it relates to this issue, we draw upon Collins’s concept of the “outsider within” as a powerful hermeneutic tool. In later work, Collins says:

1. I now use the term outsider-within to describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals claim identities as outsiders within; by their placement in these social locations. Thus, outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice—they are not a decontextualized identity category divorced from historical social inequalities that can be assumed by anyone at will. What I aim to do with this shift is refocus attention back on the unequal power relations of race, class, and gender that produce social locations characterized by injustice.²

The status of the outsider within is apt in the case of philosophers who come from poor or working-class backgrounds and/or who are first-generation (especially when compiled with additional intersectional experiences of oppression and/or disadvantage) because such philosophers often find themselves straddling two disparate social worlds with stark differences in power, norms, values, and social status. This perspective and experience of being an outsider within the academy is prevalent in the narratives and shared experiences in this volume. This concept helps to home in upon the unique perspectives of philosophers in the academy who are first-generation and/or who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the important intersectional differences between them, and the critical insights they bring to discussions of diversity and inclusion in the profession.

There are a number of themes which have emerged across the pieces included in this issue that are important to note. The first is the theme of double alienation: of feeling alienated or, as though one is an outsider, upon entering into academic philosophy as someone from a working-class and/or first-generation-background, while at the same time feeling alienated and less able to relate to one’s family and home communities as a result of one’s academic lifestyle. Fitting into an academic environment oftentimes requires that one navigate a social space structured by prestige and social hierarchy. One is forced to submerge themselves in a world of new culture, norms, and expectations. Oftentimes, trying to fit in with the norms and lifestyle of the academy results in a weakening of the connections to one’s previous home life: missing important milestones (e.g., weddings, births, funerals); being unable to help and support loved ones at home because of one’s academic obligations and geographical seclusion (often resulting in failures to “carry the mental weight” of their hardships, resulting in what Lucia Munguía’s contribution categorizes as a potential instance of epistemic shame); feeling unable to fully communicate and share your academic life with family and friends back home, many of whom might not understand the value or point of pursuing a life as a philosopher. All the while, many philosophers from socioeconomically disadvantaged and first-generation backgrounds feel importantly different from their more privileged peers in the academy, and often find it difficult to relate to their colleagues, or to find sources of community and support within academic spaces. Several contributions to this volume bring to the fore how first-generation and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged philosophers often find themselves doubly alienated—feeling as though they are an outsider in academic settings, and in the process of trying to fit in and to cultivate a sense of belonging in academic...
spaces, they find themselves becoming increasingly more distant from their previous home life or communities. In effect, such philosophers are often in the position of being outsiders within the academy and, in a sense, outsiders outside of the academy as well—traveling between two worlds, neither of which feels wholly comfortable.

Related to the idea of double alienation is the feeling of *imposter syndrome*. Imposter syndrome refers to the experience that underrepresented people have of feeling as if their “external markers of success are unwarranted,” and subsequently “fear being revealed as a fraud.” When those around you—your classmates, peers, and professors—all seem to represent a fairly homogenous group, it can be difficult for outsiders to see themselves as really belonging in those spaces, or to feel as if they have something meaningful to contribute. Many of the pieces in this issue offer first-person accounts of experiencing oneself as an “imposter,” and, importantly, at different stages throughout one’s philosophical journey (e.g., Kayla Aceves describes experiencing imposter syndrome as an undergraduate student, while Bailie Peterson makes clear that imposter syndrome often persists, even as one completes a PhD and lands an academic job). While our focus in this issue is on matters of socioeconomic and first-generation status (and thus, the imposter syndrome that results from feeling like an outsider among one’s peers and professors on those grounds), it is worth noting that for those who are members of other social groups that are underrepresented in the profession (e.g., women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ individuals, folks with disabilities, and as Brady Heiner (this issue) adds, formerly incarcerated folks), the sense of imposter syndrome can be multiplied. When members of our profession who experience this sort of imposter syndrome are not well supported, it can cause real damage: anxiety, self-doubt, and withdrawal.

Widespread experiences of alienation and imposter syndrome bring to light the importance of *mentorship and community with others who share one’s experiences*. This, too, is a theme that runs through many pieces in this issue. Many of the contributors, in describing their experiences in the profession, cite the exceptional value they have found in sharing their experiences with other philosophers who share similar life histories and backgrounds. In reflecting upon the obscure and unwieldy journey that one takes in pursuing a career in academic philosophy, Jennifer Morton’s piece highlights the importance of finding community, and finding others who can “laugh along with you at the absurdity.” Similarly, in her piece, Aceves, who has recently finished an undergraduate degree in philosophy at University of California, San Diego, discusses the value in finding community with other philosophy majors (most of whom were transfer students) who shared similar experiences of feeling lost and as though they didn’t belong in the philosophy classroom. Aceves says: “We could share and bond over the experiences of feeling like the odd-one-out in a classroom.” This need for community is also expressed in the piece from Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka‘Nobuhlaluse, who describe the importance of sisterhood and solidarity that they found in each other as Black women from working-class backgrounds collaborating and building networks of mutual support in competitive academic spaces. John Proios’s contribution emphasizes the importance for underprivileged philosophers (with a focus on graduate students) to cultivate an “oppositional consciousness,” understood as a critical standpoint which helps to preserve one’s sense of self and further facilitates bonds of community and solidarity among students who come to academic philosophy from low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. Other contributions also emphasized the key role of faculty mentorship and support for first-generation students and students who come from poverty. The pieces from Elvira Basevich and Bailie Peterson (among others) highlight concrete recommendations for how faculty and administrators in positions of power can help to make academic philosophy more accessible to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds.

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the many practical challenges and financial barriers first-generation and/or students from low-income backgrounds face when deciding to pursue philosophy. While many first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged people face barriers to obtaining a higher education at all (and often incur substantial debt to do so), there is often added pressure to pursue a lucrative degree or career—one that can potentially lift oneself and their family out of poverty or otherwise provide an opportunity for upward mobility. For such students, the decision to pursue philosophy (with its perpetually grim job prospects) can be particularly weighty (even when, as Elvira Basevich describes, they have fallen in love with it). For all students, regardless of class standing, the decision to study philosophy can reflect a significant financial risk, especially when one acquires debt in the process. However, this risk is heightened for people without familial wealth or financial safety nets to fall back on should they not find a stable job post graduation.

When students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves in graduate programs, they often experience financial hardship throughout—experiences many of their peers can alleviate by drawing on family support. Graduate stipends tend to be marginal, often barely covering living costs for a single person (let alone one’s dependents, should they have them, or should they need to send money to family or loved ones back home). Many graduate students find themselves taking on additional work (e.g., adjunct-teaching, or outside part-time jobs) to make ends meet. This can, of course, slow or hinder progression towards their degree, and place them at a disadvantage relative to peers who might be positioned to devote most of their time to their graduate work (this experience isn’t by any means unique to graduate students, and is also felt at the undergraduate level, as the piece from Kayla Aceves makes clear). Furthermore, for socioeconomically disadvantaged graduate students or precariously employed junior scholars, many dimensions of professional life and activity might be off limits entirely (e.g., they might not be able to pay out of pocket for conference costs while awaiting reimbursement; or, they might not have credit cards or sufficient credit to book hotel rooms or flights). This, in turn, can exclude such philosophers from critical professionalization and networking opportunities, often at points in their career trajectory when they are most
important. Finally, when socioeconomically disadvantaged people do successfully complete graduate degrees in philosophy, they might end up pushed out of the field as a result of job insecurity, compounded by a lack of financial fallbacks. People without financial support or stability cannot, for example, go on the job market year after year hoping to secure a permanent job. As such, some of the voices that the discipline needs the most might find themselves leaving it out of financial necessity.

We raise these concerns because, though they pose serious, tangible barriers to members of our profession who come from underprivileged-class backgrounds, they might go unnoticed by those with the power to enact more support for first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Often, such financial concerns are fairly far removed from more senior people in the field, or those in administrative positions. We hope to place these issues on the radar of those with professional and institutional power, who we hope will come to see them as critical dimensions of equity, inclusion, and justice in our profession moving forward.

With these themes and concerns in mind, we now offer a taste of what is to come in this issue.

First, Jennifer Morton’s piece, “Flourishing in the Academy: Complicity and Compromise,” brings together a wealth of insights on a range of topics facing first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, especially in the context of elite institutions of higher education. Morton discusses the cultural mismatch that such students confront upon entering college, trying to reconcile their previous life experience with their newfound experiences as a college student. In the context of academic philosophy, Morton describes how a range of social and cultural forces limit and constrain not only who enters into graduate programs and who ends up becoming faculty in the profession, but also which sorts of research agendas and topics are regarded as rigorous or worthy of serious engagement, and, more generally, what counts as genuine philosophy. Additionally, Morton’s contribution chronicles her experiences teaching philosophy across different institutions, including her experience teaching at City College of New York, which she describes as “full of ambitious working-class kids striving to realize the promise of higher education.” A key insight that Morton develops in her article concerns the difficult ethical compromises that many first-generation and working-class students face as they ascend the ranks of higher education (e.g., choosing between helping a sick loved one, studying for an exam, going to class, or going to work to pay rent). In reflecting upon her own experiences and life choices, Morton appeals to the notion of a *double bind* to offer a window into the ethical compromises she has confronted throughout her career. She considers how her educational background at elite institutions reinforces and contributes to hierarchies of prestige in the profession, as well as her choice to advance her career by taking a job at a more prestigious university. Moreover, she discusses the strain that her career ambitions have placed upon her family relationships, what she describes as one of the most painful ethical compromises she has had to confront. She says of her family that “We love each other, but I am now part of a world whose logic is mysterious to them.” This compromise, namely, how academic ambitions can make one feel like an outsider in the spaces where one previously felt most familiar and at home, seems to be a shared feeling among philosophers from first-generation and working-class backgrounds, and is a topic that is discussed across many of the pieces in this newsletter. Morton ends her contribution by emphasizing the value of friendship, community, and finding networks of support when traversing the challenges that a career in academic philosophy presents.

In his contribution, “Ethical Narratives and Oppositional Consciousness,” John Proios engages with and builds upon arguments in Jennifer Morton’s recent book, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* (2019), specifically through the lens of a graduate student from a working-class background guiding their way through the complexities of elite institutions. Proios persuasively argues for the importance of *oppositional consciousness*: “an adversarial self-conception in which one sees oneself as a member of a subordinated group in an unjust hierarchy that calls for resistance and displacement with new, non-hierarchical relations.” Oppositional consciousness, Proios argues, is an essential ingredient in allowing students from non-privileged backgrounds to find their voice in academia, while at the same time enabling them to acknowledge important structural forms of exclusion and elitism that permeate academic spaces. Oppositional consciousness, he argues, allows one, in a sense, to stay true to their roots, core identity, and upbringing, while ascending the ranks of academic philosophy—a balancing act that is fraught with moral risks, alienation, and impostor syndrome.

In “What It’s Like to Grow Up Poor, but Fall In Love with Philosophy: A Notice to the Profession in Case it Forgot,” Elvira Basevich offers a powerful narrative which traces her journey into the world of academic philosophy as someone coming from a life of poverty. Basevich shares personal experiences as a student of the New York City public school system and as a young woman facing homelessness throughout her twenties. Basevich highlights the key role that support and mentorship from faculty had throughout her undergraduate studies as a poor undergraduate student who found herself hooked on philosophy. Philosophy provided her with the tools she needed to frame and make sense of her own life experiences and hardships, and also served as an empowering vehicle by which she could carve out a path forward for herself. Drawing upon a range of Toni Morrison’s work (and in particular Morrison’s scholarship on memory and the notion of “rememories”), Basevich compellingly argues for the vital importance of cultivating genuine forms of inclusion and belonging in academic philosophy, and outlines a series of concrete recommendations for how to support first-generation and low-income students: through early career mentorship, monetary support, and more.

In “Knowing What to Order at the Conference Dinner,” Ian James Kidd draws on a story of a post-conference dinner to situate broader reflections about the confusing, exclusionary norms of professional behavior, and how such norms can be both terrifying and alienating for those for
whom they are unfamiliar. As Kidd’s discussion renders evident, a great deal of critically important networking and professionalization takes place at these informal events (e.g., the post-conference dinner, the wine and cheese reception). And yet, these events can be deeply uncomfortable for those who either lack the insider knowledge of how to behave at such events, or who lack the financial means to comfortably participate in them. While this might seem like a fairly minor concern to those who have never had the experience of feeling like an outsider at these events, Kidd makes clear why those with more seniority and privilege in the discipline (economically and otherwise) should slow down and think critically about these events and their significance: they are potential sites for reproducing and reinforcing injustice in the profession. This is because opting out of such events (e.g., because one cannot afford the expensive dinner or cocktail hour) could have negative implications for one’s professional prospects, while the opportunity to fully participate can have numerous professional benefits. Kidd offers some practical suggestions for how to make these informal events more widely accessible by alleviating some of the class-coded pressures they often involve.

In “Epistemic Shame as a First-Generation Scholar,” Lucia Munguía offers an illuminating account of epistemic shame. Munguía summarizes recent analyses of epistemic shame, which have assumed that this emotion necessarily involves the realization that one holds a false belief. Drawing upon her personal experiences of navigating between the worlds of academic philosophy as a first-generation graduate student, and her previous home life experiences of coming from a working-class family in Barrio Hollywood in Tucson, Arizona, Munguía calls this assumption about epistemic shame into question. She argues for a more capacious analysis of epistemic shame, which includes one’s failure to possess certain beliefs altogether. In doing so, Munguía offers a series of insightful reflections on the relationship between epistemic shame and one’s sense of self, and how epistemic shame has the potential to make salient important elements of one’s personal identity and one’s close personal relationships. Munguía’s account of epistemic shame also helps to make sense of the need to do one’s part in shouldering the “mental weight” of loved ones’ hardships (e.g., by lamenting with them through financial struggles or the demands of care work), even when one’s academic lifestyle has distanced one geographically from loved ones.

Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka’Nobuhlaluse bring to the fore a number of important insights in their journey of navigating academic philosophy as Black women from working-class backgrounds in “Marginal Disclosures: Sisterhood, Standpoint, Community and Thriving.” This contribution takes the form of a dialogue between Lamarre and ka’Nobuhlaluse, explaining the importance of the sisterhood that they have found in each other during their graduate studies and how their collaborative work functions to resists the racist, sexist, and classists norms which entail that students, especially those from marginalized background, and in particular Black women, should be in constant competition within the academy. Lamarre and ka’Nobuhlaluse also offer an illuminating critique of the common task of writing professional documents, such as statements of purpose and diversity statements, for applications to graduate school. Drawing upon Patricia Hill Collins’s (2009) analysis of “marketplace ideologies,” Lamarre and ka’Nobuhlaluse highlight a need for admissions committees to take pause and seriously consider the value of including diverse practitioners in the field and what it takes to sufficiently include these philosophers in academic spaces. Lamarre and ka’Nobuhlaluse also consider how family obligations often fall upon first-generation students and students from low-income families, with insightful connections to how the pandemic has exacerbated these obligations further, putting increased pressure upon such students as they juggle the demands of familial obligations and academic progress towards career goals. Lamarre and ka’Nobuhlaluse end their piece with an important cautionary note, namely, that we need to be careful to avoid objectifying a single-sided narrative which construes students from working-class and other disadvantaged backgrounds as always struggling in the academy. Their piece itself serves as an example which challenges these common narratives and reflects the importance of sisterhood and solidarity as acts of resistance to the constraints of academia.

Offering the important perspective of a recently graduated, first-generation philosophy undergraduate student, in “Confessions of a Working-Class Student,” Kayla Aceves describes the transition from her small, predominantly Latinx border-town of Calexico, California, to university life as an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego. Including important insights that administrators, professors, and fellow students alike should be aware of (e.g., the difficult task of balancing work and academics; comparing oneself to their peers; feeling too intimidated to speak up in class; experiencing imposter syndrome) and advice they should heed (e.g., being aware of the discrepancy in available time between students who do and do not have to work while in school; offering flexibility where possible), Aceves’s important perspective on the “privilege which surrounds academic philosophy” should not be overlooked. As Aceves notes, a career in reading and writing often looks unrealistic to anyone who does not come from a certain level of material wealth. “Sometimes,” she writes, “all of philosophy seems like an activity of leisure and/or performance, depending on how you’re doing it and who you’re doing it for.” But many people without these privileged backgrounds have something important to offer the discipline, if only they can find the time.

In “Abolition University: Mobilizing Black Feminist Philosophy to Transform Institutions of Higher Education into ‘Vehicles of Decarceration’ that Affirm the Lives of First-Generation Students,” Brady Heiner explores the role of institutions of higher education in the constructive project of abolition. He argues that institutions of higher education can become critical sites of decarceration which affirm the lives of first-generation, formerly incarcerated students and promote broader social justice. Using his firsthand experience as the founder and executive director of the California State University Project Rebound Consortium as his lens, Heiner presents a series of concrete ways in which institutions of higher education can better serve
formerly incarcerated students, the majority of whom are first-generation students. Programs like Project Rebound simultaneously resist the harms of incarceration while also engaging in a positive project of constructing infrastructures of care. Importantly, programs such as Project Rebound can help formerly incarcerated, first-generation students establish a sense of belonging within the academy and their broader communities. Through such “student-centered, grassroots-oriented empowerment work,” first-generation, formerly incarcerated students, faculty, and staff can “inspire and reconstruct universities so that they begin to crowd out the prison industrial complex, so that the prison industrial complex inhabits increasingly smaller areas not only of our social and psychic landscape, but of our state and municipal budgets.” In so doing, institutions of higher education become critically important vehicles of abolition and of social justice.

In the final piece, “Supporting First-Generation Philosophers at Every Level,” Bailie Peterson reflects upon her own experiences as a first-generation student and professor to offer concrete recommendations for how those in the profession can better serve their first-generation and financially disadvantaged students. She does so by making explicit a number of subtle ways in which well-intentioned professors can unintentionally contribute to the challenges and insecurities their first-generation and financially disadvantaged students face, and by offering concrete tools for beginning to improve upon them. Peterson draws attention to the often overlooked and insidious ways in which professors can contribute to the myths that underprivileged students are doomed to fail or that people “like them” don’t belong in academic spaces. She then offers ways to resist these myths by cultivating communities, both within and beyond the classroom, that demonstrate respect for others, help students establish a sense of belonging, and take students’ comments and contributions seriously. All of these, Peterson argues, are critical steps towards making philosophy genuinely inclusive for students and junior faculty who come from disadvantaged class backgrounds.

In addition to the contributions just mentioned, in this issue you will find the following book reviews: Nancy J. Hirschmann’s review of Margaret McLaren’s Women’s Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice, Joan Eleanor O’Bryan’s review of Éléonore Lépinard’s Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times, Vanessa Wills’s review of Kate Manne’s Entitled, and Fulden Ibrahimhakkoğlu’s review of Laura Roberts’s Irigaray and Politics: A Critical Introduction.

We hope that you enjoy reading and reflecting on the pieces contained in this issue. But, more importantly, we hope that you will continue to bear these things in mind, and work to make our discipline more welcoming to and inclusive of those who come to philosophy from non-traditional backgrounds. With that, we proudly bring you this special issue.

Before concluding, we would be remiss without saying the following. We are grateful to Lauren Freeman, editor of the newsletter, for trusting us with the opportunity to guest edit this issue. Her belief in the importance of this topic and this conversation means a lot to us, as does her support of us. As we both noted above, we would not be in the positions we are if not for the patience, guidance, and diligent care of our mentors. Though there have been many, we want to acknowledge a few people in the field who have impacted us as young philosophers, and have showed us what professional philosophy can be: Arianna is grateful to Gurpreet Rattan, her undergraduate mentor (who is in many ways responsible for having sparked her initial interest in philosophy and the desire to pursue it professionally), Endre Begby, her MA supervisor, as well as Elizabeth Miller and Joshua Schechter, her PhD committee members, and David Christensen, her PhD advisor, all of whom have been sources of endless generosity, guidance, and support. Heather is grateful to the entire philosophy department at the University of Louisville, but especially to Lauren Freeman, Avery Kolers, John Gibson, and her former mentor, Nancy Potter. She is also grateful to her MA advisor, Alison Jaggar, and her PhD supervisor, Carolyn McLeod. To all of you, thank you for believing in us, often far more than we believed in ourselves. In making this issue a reality, we are grateful to everyone who responded to our call for papers for sharing their stories and experiences with us. We are especially grateful for the contributors for allowing us the opportunity to publish their important words and to share them with a broader audience. Finally, we are grateful to those who have shared in this conversation with us along the way, including all of the participants and attendees at the 2020 APA Eastern Division session in Philadelphia, PA, on this topic, members of the APA Graduate Student Council, and our own partners and families.

NOTES

ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

The Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women (CSW). The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of newsletter articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.
Whereas many students from The collateral of this
lauren.freeman@louisville.edu
1
Submissions for spring issues
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3
and the only two racial minorities in our cohort. When
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anchored our bond. We were both first-generation students
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one inaudible to our classmates. But something far deeper
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yet, our senses of humor existed on the same wavelength,
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slightly disheveled, bespectacled, bookish empiricist. And,
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far from the truth. Richie and I were an unlikely pair—he,
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he, we were too cool for school. That might not have been
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the culture they bring to school and the one that they find
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their approval means that we have
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support, and acceptance of those who set the terms and
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suspecting that their approval means that we have
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turned into precisely the people we do not want to be.
15.
I. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL
16.
IN THE ACADEMY
17.
To understand the dynamics of philosophy as a set of
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institutional practices, we must understand the broader
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social dynamics at play in the educational institutions
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within which our departments exist. Inspired by the work
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of Bourdieu, who argued that social and cultural capital
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is critical to understanding hierarchies of class,¹ social
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scientists have been seeking to understand how these
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forces operate in American colleges and universities.
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What they find is that these social and cultural dynamics
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often benefit those who arrive on campus already at an
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advantage.
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Nicole Stephens’s work shows us that first-generation
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college students often experience a mismatch between
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the culture they bring to school and the one that they find
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reflected within its walls.² Whereas many students from
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working-class backgrounds grow up with an interdependent
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culture in which they understand their own flourishing in
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relationship to others, upper middle-class students grow
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up shaped by an independent culture that puts their
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individual autonomy at the forefront. She suggests that this
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mismatch is responsible for the achievement gap between
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first-generation college students and those whose
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parents attended college. Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura
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Hamilton’s devastating ethnography of a flagship public
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university shows us how such institutions are organized
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to satisfy the paying customers—out-of-state students
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seeking “the college experience.”³ The collateral of this
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model are women from working-class backgrounds who
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have trouble making friends, developing mentoring
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relationships with faculty, and feeling at home on campus.
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1. Purpose: The purpose of the newsletter is to publish
information about the status of women in philosophy
and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more
widely available. The newsletter contains discussions of
recent developments in feminist philosophy and related
work in other disciplines, literature overviews and book
reviews, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the
traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on
feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about
the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women.
Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten
double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines
for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays
electronically to the editor or send four copies of essays
via regular mail. All manuscripts should be prepared for
anonymous review. References should follow The Chicago
Manual of Style.

2. Book Reviews and Reviewers: If you have published
a book that is appropriate for review in the newsletter,
please have your publisher send us a copy of your book.
We are always seeking new book reviewers. To volunteer
to review books (or some particular book), please send the
editor, Lauren Freeman (lauren.freeman@louisville.edu), a
CV and letter of interest, including mention of your areas of
research and teaching.

3. Where to Send Things: Please send all articles, comments,
suggestions, books, and other communications to the
editor: Dr. Lauren Freeman, University of Louisville, lauren.
freeman@louisville.edu.

4. Submission Deadlines: Submissions for spring issues
are due by the preceding November 1; submissions for fall
issues are due by the preceding February 1.

ESSAYS

Flourishing in the Academy: Complicity
and Compromise

Jennifer M. Morton
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

From the first week of graduate school, my friend Richie Kim
and I were inseparable. People thought we were cliquish
or dating. Neither was true. We were accused of thinking
we were too cool for school. That might not have been
far from the truth. Richie and I were an unlikely pair—he,
a well-dressed, baseball-loving, club-hopping Kantian; I, a
slightly disheveled, bespectacled, bookish empiricist. And,
yet, our senses of humor existed on the same wavelength,
one inaudible to our classmates. But something far deeper
anchored our bond. We were both first-generation students
and the only two racial minorities in our cohort. When
Richie would tell me about his complicated family life, I
was not taken aback. I too had stories to tell. When I would
roll my eyes at a question during the colloquium, I knew
that when I looked up Richie would be smirking with me.
Our friendship was a safe space from an academic world
that we both wanted to succeed in but which neither of us
wanted to belong in. This is the paradox for so many first-
generation and working-class students.

Academic institutions are social institutions. Our success
depends not just on our good work, but on the approval,
support, and acceptance of those who command the
classrooms and seminar rooms. And, yet, for people like
Richie and me, that social world feels foreign, sometimes
hostile, and often kind of dull. We are caught between
wanting to gain the approval of those who set the terms
and suspecting that their approval means that we have
turned into precisely the people we do not want to be.

1. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL
IN THE ACADEMY

To understand the dynamics of philosophy as a set of
institutional practices, we must understand the broader
social dynamics at play in the educational institutions
within which our departments exist. Inspired by the work
of Bourdieu, who argued that social and cultural capital
is critical to understanding hierarchies of class,¹ social
scientists have been seeking to understand how these
forces operate in American colleges and universities.
What they find is that these social and cultural dynamics
often benefit those who arrive on campus already at an
advantage.

Nicole Stephens’s work shows us that first-generation
college students often experience a mismatch between
the culture they bring to school and the one that they find
reflected within its walls.² Whereas many students from
working-class backgrounds grow up with an interdependent
culture in which they understand their own flourishing in
relationship to others, upper middle-class students grow
up shaped by an independent culture that puts their
individual autonomy at the forefront. She suggests that this
mismatch is responsible for the achievement gap between
first-generation college students and those whose
parents attended college. Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura
Hamilton’s devastating ethnography of a flagship public
university shows us how such institutions are organized
to satisfy the paying customers—out-of-state students
seeking “the college experience.”³ The collateral of this
model are women from working-class backgrounds who
end up falling through the cracks of a set of institutional
pathways that are not designed for them. And, finally,
Anthony Jack’s incisive work uncovers the work that culture,
as distinct from economic class, plays. He finds that not all
low-income students of color face the same challenges at
selective universities.⁴ Some attend private, well-endowed
high schools that prepare them for the culture of the
upper middle-class milieu that dominates highly selective
universities in the United States. These privileged poor
students flourish, while their disadvantaged counterparts
have trouble making friends, developing mentoring
relationships with faculty, and feeling at home on campus.
This research shows us that the internal social and cultural forces at play in academic institutions determine how social and economic background influence students’ experiences. That feeling of discomfort many first-generation and low-income students feel reflects the social dynamics that dominate many academic institutions, in particular, the sort of elite places that are a fast-track into positions in the academy. Those who grow up with parents, neighbors, and peers who resemble the faculty, administrators, and students at those universities, unsurprisingly, find them comfortable and welcoming places in which to flourish academically and socially. For those of us who do not come from that world, the experience is that of being an outsider.

In theory, being an outsider should be an advantage. Universities are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and insofar as they draw the people carrying out that research from a narrow slice of the population, the resulting work will be epistemically impoverished. Because students from first-generation or low-income backgrounds arrive on campus with different cultural models and different educational trajectories, they have the potential to contribute to diversifying the epistemic viewpoints that are represented. That is, if educational institutions are an important site of epistemic injustice, then redressing our epistemic blinders requires that we actively recruit those whose capacity to contribute knowledge has historically been sidelined. Or so the theory goes, and many efforts to diversify faculty are driven by something like this argument.

Yet, there is a disconnect between this widely accepted argument and the social reality. The institutional practices of admission, hiring, promotion, and the rest are often driven by word of mouth, social networks, and institutional reputation: all factors that contribute to the entrenchment of those with the economic, social, and cultural capital in positions of power. In advertisement after advertisement, working-class, first-generation, and minority students are encouraged to apply for faculty positions, but their success in getting the job and succeeding at it is often a function not only of their work but of how well they play along with the expectations and interests of those who dominate the profession.

My impression from being a part of many a hiring committee at both less selective and highly selective places is that the ideal candidate for a philosophy job is a woman of color who has been trained at Princeton or MIT and works in metaphysics, epistemology, or, maybe, philosophy of language or science. Pedigree, in the words of sociologist Lauren Rivera, attests to one’s capacity for the kind of work that is seen as “core” to philosophy. As sociologists Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison argue in *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged*, the path into elite professions for those who come from working-class backgrounds is not just a matter of merit, but of having the social and cultural capital to present one’s merit in a way that is easily recognized by senior figures many of whom come from more privileged backgrounds. Faculty on hiring committees often want to diversify their faculty not by truly diversifying the educational experiences and perspectives of those they hire, but by hiring someone who broadly shares their perspective of the world despite coming from a different background than them.

II. THE HIERARCHY OF RESEARCH AGENDAS

The social and cultural forces that entrench advantage not only influence who is in the profession and who receives prized academic positions, but which research agendas are celebrated. The profession confers prestige on projects that have little to no connection with issues that matter to the public and often marginalizes projects that do—practical ethics and applied philosophy of all sorts. (Though I am happy to see that this is changing, albeit slowly.) To be clear, I am not simply talking here about the prestige of ethics over metaphysics or philosophy of language. Even within philosophy of science, for example, some projects have more practical relevance than others, but the prestige is not conferred on this basis. This happens both at the level of which research topics are deemed “important” but also at the level of how this research is conducted.

It’s true that in most years there are more faculty jobs in practical subjects, but this is because students want to take those courses and departments need somebody to teach them. Most of the people who teach these courses end-up having to prove their philosophical mettle by doing research in areas that are considered more “serious.” So even within ethics and political philosophy, the prestige falls on those whose work is opaque to your average intelligent person. The vast majority of philosophers write for other philosophers who uphold standards of good scholarship that have little to do with, and in some cases are diametrically opposed to, standards of relevance, accessibility, or even sheer interestingness. We claim to aim for clarity and rigor, but, in fact, what we aim for is work that is only intelligible to those who are already in the profession. For all the talk of clarity, few educated non-philosophers can pick-up an article in *Mind* or *Nous* and figure out what the central argument of a given research paper is or, crucially, why it matters. Work that is written for a non-specialist audience or the general public is tolerated as long as the person can show that they can play by the rules of the specialist audience.

It is no coincidence that the elite institutions who play a big role in conferring prestige have an interest in incentivizing the kind of work that has little connection to those outside of those institutions. This is part of how we stay complicit in an ideology that sustains exclusivity. Plato argued that philosophers who had gained knowledge by becoming familiar with the forms had a duty, as citizens, to come back and explain what they knew to others. In the ideology that dominates our profession, we are encouraged to fail to fulfill this duty. Our research keeps elevating and perpetuating the importance and centrality of projects within the profession that keep us in the cave.

As philosophers we are reluctant to think that our interests and preferences could be influenced by non-rational factors, but, of course, they are. The social and cultural forces at play in educational institutions play a role in what we find interesting, important, and a “contribution” to the literature.
When I first started taking philosophy classes as an undergraduate, I was also taking classes in anthropology, sociology, and women's studies. But I wanted in on philosophy, mostly, because I felt that philosophy classrooms were a place in which I was respected just in virtue of my intellect, not my class, race, gender, or anything else. This is the seductive promise of philosophy, in particular, for those of us whose identities, far too often, lead others to fail to see us as individuals. As I started taking more philosophy courses, I realized that the tacit culture of the department was that the "smart" students shied away from ethics or political philosophy and went in for the "heavy" stuff—philosophy of language, mind, metaphysics. As a curious undergraduate, I was interested in all of it. But I could tell that if I was going to show that I could do the hard work, I needed to cultivate my interest in some fields and not others. As a first-generation woman of color, I was particularly keen to gain respect and standing with this world by showing that I was capable of doing the most "difficult, rigorous, and abstract" work. I was genuinely interested in philosophy of perception, but I was also interested in doing well in the eyes of my professors.

This ambition culminated in my enrollment in Philosophy Analysis in the Twentieth Century. It was known, informally, as a kind of analytical philosophy bootcamp and students interested in graduate school were encouraged to take it. Forty or so unsuspecting undergraduates signed up for the year-long course and by the end of the spring term, fewer than ten of us remained, mostly white men, but for my good friend Vanessa Wills, now also a successful philosopher. Of course, I was proud to have made it through the grueling experience. I learned a lot about how to do the kind of philosophy that got rewarded in the profession at large. I also learned to act assertively and confidently in class. The professor who taught that class brought me close to tears enough times that I developed the kind of thick skin that would serve me well professionally. But this training also shaped my philosophical instincts in a way that made me complicit with a professional hierarchy that often marginalizes rather than welcomes diverse points of view.

I admired women who did the kind of philosophy that was seen as typically male—abstract, rigorous, and difficult. I found it insulting if someone suggested that gender, race, or class played a role in what I thought or why I thought it. In seminars, I acted confidently and aggressively even when I didn't feel either. I looked down on work that was practical in any way. I'm ashamed to admit all of this, but I don't think I was the only one because I saw many students who went through the kind of "elite" education I did develop many of the same attitudes and behavior. Nobody told us what the norms of the profession were explicitly, but we picked them up and internalized them, often to our own detriment. I felt torn when, in graduate school, I realized that I was more interested in moral psychology than the philosophy of perception. As my work took me further and further from the philosophical mainstream, I thought that maybe I should leave the profession. The nagging feeling that the work I was supposed to be doing didn't matter was only made worse by my sense that I wasn't doing a particularly good job at doing it, even as I succeeded enough to stay on the path.

This is only my experience, but the way in which the hierarchy gets reinforced is all around us if you pay attention. I was talking to a colleague recently who was telling me about how a woman in her department was upset that fewer people seem to attend colloquium talks when the speaker was a woman. Her colleagues agreed that it was unfortunate but that the topics that these particular women were talking about were just less "interesting" to them. Or, when I recently attended the first in a series of talks by one of my philosophical heroes and overheard other philosophers after the talk say that what she was doing "wasn't philosophy." I take that they meant this as a disparaging remark because they didn't show up to the next lectures in the series.

These little comments that the talk was just not "interesting" enough to attend or that the talk was "not philosophy" pervade our profession. And yet, as I grew tired of the sort of topics that were deemed worthy by philosophy's elite, I found those ignored topics more exciting and compelling. In fact, if I hadn't gotten interested in the philosophy of education, I might not have stayed in the profession.

III. LEARNING TO TEACH

My work in the philosophy of education grew out of my dissatisfaction with my teaching. As a newly minted PhD, my first job was as a visiting assistant professor at Swarthmore College. And like many a graduate of a well-regarded PhD program, I started teaching without any knowledge of how to teach effectively. I fumbled. I lectured too much. I let the most vocal students dominate discussion. In sum, I was not really teaching as much as mimicking what I had seen my own professors do. Worse, I was replicating the sort of classroom dynamics that privilege those students who come to college knowing how to take advantage of it. A few months in, one such student came into my office to calmly tell me that what I was doing in the classroom wasn't working for her. She was right. But it was the fact that this student had the courage to talk to me and the knowledge about how to make her point in a polite yet firm way that stunned me. I would have never, ever had the courage to do what she did as an undergraduate. I did not know that I could take ownership of my own education in that way. In an effort to understand why, I started reading more about education and the ways in which social and cultural capital operate in educational institutions. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that I was a first-generation college student and that this had affected my own educational experience.

When I took a position at the City College of New York, my lack of pedagogical training became ever more apparent, but so did the ways in which my experience of college had been an anomaly. CCNY was full of ambitious working-class kids striving to realize the promise of higher education. Teaching, which I had dreaded, became a joy. My students reminded me time and time again of how narrow and constrained my academic experiences had been thus far and how valuable being a good teacher was. I had received my education at the most elite institutions and yet I had never been so challenged in the classroom. My students pushed back on many of the core assumptions of the philosophical mainstream with humor. And to teach them...
well, I had to make explicit many of the implicit norms and expectations that I had been operating under.

Yet, by far the most important thing I learned in the ten years I spent teaching in the City University of New York system was that the way we talk about higher education is distorted. We focus too much on admissions into elite colleges and not nearly enough on what is happening to students attending the institutions that are the real engines of transformative education—our public colleges and universities. The challenges I saw my students face had little to do with affirmative action, free speech, or the other ‘hot topics’ in the public discourse around higher education and much more to do with how to succeed at college while playing critical roles in their families and communities. The financial and academic challenges working-class and first-generation students face is but a piece of a broader set of hurdles. What I saw was that they often had to make painful ethical compromises in order to succeed in college and transform their life prospects. The students I taught were caught between, for example, taking a grandparent to the doctor or working fulltime to support their families and studying for an exam or attending class. Whichever choice they made, they felt like they were letting someone they loved or themselves down. This insight became the basis of my book Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility, a book that I would have never been able to write had I only been at the sort of elite institution I attended as an undergraduate and graduate student.

IV. DOUBLE BINDS

Sukaina Hirji has recently written a thoughtful paper about how people from oppressed social groups are often caught in oppressive double binds—no matter what they do they become complicit in the oppressive mechanisms that function to oppress them. She argues that what is bad about such situations is not simply that they undermine our autonomy, but rather that they present us with choices that are self-undermining no matter what we do.

To truly diversify the academy would require that we welcome people that have backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that are truly different than the philosophical mainstream. And yet those who fit this description must convince those who are in positions of power to recognize their contributions in order to be given the positions and support required to advance their intellectual agenda. This pushes us to contort ourselves to fit into a social world in which we do not feel at home. To pursue research agendas that are more connected to the concerns of those outside of the academy, we need to embrace and pursue projects that relate to aspects of our experiences that make us different. And yet those are the sorts of projects that will not be seen as valuable or understood as properly philosophical within our profession. This pushes us to pursue other projects that will make it easier for us to succeed professionally. To resist the ways in which colleges and universities privilege those who already arrive on campus with the skills and knowledge critical to thriving in the academy, we need to invest time and energy in learning to truly teach all students. And yet the institutional incentives are set up so that doing so comes at the expense of our own position in the academy. As Hirji argues, whether we give in or resist, we are compromising our own success in the long run.

I write this as a professor with tenure at a well-regarded research institution. In what ways have I compromised? It is too early in my career to provide a definitive autopsy but let me provide a preliminary one.

First, I benefit from and my success reinforces a system whose continued existence makes it harder for people from marginalized backgrounds to succeed. I am a person of color and a first-generation college student, yet I have been credentialed at elite institutions and been mentored by people whose word is trusted by the gatekeepers. This has been critical to my success in the academy. This is not to diminish the work I’ve done, but to acknowledge that I am a part of a system that is exclusionary and elitist. I know that my mere presence within these institutions makes those around me feel better about the fairness of the flawed system that brought them there. I made instrumentally rational choices in the pursuit of my professional goals, but nonetheless my success in doing so buttresses the prestige economy that pervades much of higher education.

Second, I have chosen to take up opportunities for career advancement at the expense of being in a position where my teaching had a direct impact on first-generation, low-income, and minority students. When I was at the City College of New York, my teaching mattered. I became a more empathetic, open, and motivated teacher and I could see that in doing so I was making a concrete difference in the lives of my students. And yet, I no longer teach there. I chose to pursue opportunities that had more research support and prestige. In part my choice was a response to institutional constraints at CUNY that made it increasingly hard to be a good teacher—larger classes, crumbling infrastructure, and less support for students. It was also an intentional move to ensure my work was taken seriously. But though I think my choice was reasonable, it too was a compromise.

The third and final example is the most painful. I have continued to increase the distance between myself and those I love for the sake of my career ambitions. Not only did I decide to pursue higher education thousands of miles away from home, but I became more and more like the people I could not understand growing up—the ones that prioritize work over much of their lives. The pandemic has made this all the more apparent as I am now unable to go see my mom, grandmother, or sister even if I want to. My family doesn’t quite understand my drive and I don’t know how to explain it. We love each other, but I am now part of a world whose logic is mysterious to them. This makes it hard for us to be a part of each other’s lives in the intimate way that we used to be.

Despite having compromised in these ways, I have also refused to compromise in others. I have pursued a research agenda that is, by the professional standards of many philosophers, peculiar. I read more social science than I do philosophy. I value becoming a better teacher and invest my time in doing so. And I make no secret that I
think all academics should invest much more of their time in improving as teachers instead of writing papers that hardly anyone reads. I have gladly taken on many “service” jobs within the profession that focus on teaching even as this is seen as a professional dead-end by some. I care about the profession becoming more inclusive and do my best to mentor students who need it inside and outside of my university. I try to extend the excellent mentorship I received to others even as it takes time from so much else on my plate. Even as my career has played out largely within the confines of academic practices that too often exclude and marginalize, I have tried my best to push on some of those boundaries from within.\textsuperscript{13}

To be the first person in your family to pursue higher education is to embark on an exciting, but, in many ways, obscure path. You really do not know what you are going in for—the compromises you will have to make, the challenges you will confront, and the person you will become in the overcoming. The way to get through is to find your Richies—those people that can laugh along with you at the absurdity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Some of the content of this paper is drawn from my talk “Complicity and Compromise in Higher Education” presented at the Society for Applied Philosophy Meeting at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Meeting in 2016. Thanks to the audience of that session and to Audra Jensen for feedback.

NOTES
6. Though as I argued in “The Miseducation of the Elite,” Journal of Political Philosophy (2019), the way in which this is carried out is often diversity-undermining rather than diversity-amplifying.

Ethical Narratives and Oppositional Consciousness

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. . . there was no place in academy for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket. Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality. . . . Students from nonprivileged backgrounds who did not want to forget often had nervous breakdowns. They could not bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront. They were crushed. More often than not they dropped out with no trace of their inner anguish recorded, no institutional record of the myriad ways their take on the world was assaulted by an elite vision of class and privilege.

– bell hooks, Where We Stand: Class Matters, Routledge, 2000, 36-37

I. INTRODUCTION
In this paper, I explore some of the contradictions exposed in my experience pursuing a philosophy PhD, in light of scholarship highlighting challenges for low socio-economic status (SES) undergraduate students. I evaluate the proposal from the philosopher Jennifer M. Morton (2019) that low-SES students need “clear-eyed ethical narratives” to navigate higher education. I argue that, in order to develop these narratives, low-SES graduate students must self-conceive in a way that incorporates “oppositional consciousness.”

II. HIGHER EDUCATION AND SES
In the last few decades, higher education has sought to foster diversity through recruitment and financial support for low-SES undergraduates,\textsuperscript{1} but it has struggled to achieve genuine inclusion. Low-SES undergraduates often strain to navigate the “hidden curriculum,” such as the norms governing networking, classroom behaviors, the use of office hours, or student groups.\textsuperscript{2} They can also be confronted with their comparative disadvantage through common displays of expensive clothing, being unable to afford participation in student clubs, or being hired to clean up after wealthier students.\textsuperscript{3} They may be forced to choose between school and caring for an ill relative, or face hunger in light of the need to stay on campus over a break.\textsuperscript{4} Although many social forces (e.g., race, citizenship) structure these challenges, the problems represent a broad failure to take account of SES as a factor in a student’s ability to participate in higher education.

Morton focuses on how low-SES students are burdened with special “ethical costs” that arise from the combination of their backgrounds and the norms of higher education.\textsuperscript{5} On the one hand, where they are from—their neighborhoods,
families, friends—are parts of who they are and often present demands on them while they are in school. On the other hand, in order to escape the socio-economic conditions that are the pretext for seeking a degree, they are pressured to forgo these ties. For example, Morton describes a student who feels that “one of the more difficult aspects of his path upward had been not allowing himself to be ‘dragged’ back down by those who mattered most to him—family and friends. . . . Strivers trying to move upward can be held back and pulled on by those whom they love.” Social alienation from their homes is one dimension of the challenges low-SES students face, but others may be more straightforwardly economic, for example, being compromised by obligations to support a family member who cannot afford medical care or faces chronic food insecurity. In this way, low-SES students must make personal sacrifices to satisfy norms that reflect the middle- and upper-class culture of higher education. Yet, this dynamic undermines traditional narratives of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, in which students bear only the costs of tuition and hard work. Any attempt to correct this situation requires new, more informed narratives.

One reason I am interested in this issue, and Morton’s work, is that it captures aspects of my experience as an undergraduate. I grew up in a gentrifying small town in New York, where my father had grown up in working poverty. He earned the sole income for our family of four as a self-employed house painter; renting run-down old homes that he tried to make safer allowed us to hide in a white area above our SES. Around the time I left, my father became unable to paint due to work-related illness, my mother became the sole income earner as a housekeeper, and my only sibling dropped out of high school. I strongly considered going to work as a painter full-time, but I settled for taking my sibling in, and offering my parents, who relocated to a poorer area, limited support as a student. In order to succeed as a student, I often felt that I needed distance from my family’s habits and ways of thinking, which I saw as trapped in cycles of desperation. Yet, I was also alienated from my student peers, whom I perceived to be better educated, more adept in classrooms, more financially secure, and generally happier. I was conscious of the fact that I cooked them breakfast in the morning and burgers at night and listened to their conversations as I drove them to the movies so that I could secure basic necessities. I felt caught between my obligations to my family, my attempt to transcend the conditions of our lives, and the sense that this part of my identity created a barrier between me and my learning community.

Hence, I am interested in Morton’s alternative to the traditional “ethical narrative” about upward mobility in higher education: the “clear-eyed ethical narrative.” In contrast to the traditional narrative of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, Morton proposes that low-SES students develop narrative self-conceptions that foreground how, as a condition of mobility, they will have to make personal, compromising sacrifices—“ethical costs.” On the other hand, a clear-eyed ethical narrative connects these costs to hope for improvement of the social conditions that create them through the resources of mobility. This commitment is an important domain for a low-SES student to consider in order to avoid one of the ethical costs they will encounter: complicity. By reflecting on the needs brought to light in their personal experiences, and by using the resources they acquire once they have graduated to try to meet those needs, a low-SES student can work to undo the social conditions that created their own struggles, rather than perpetuate them.

While Morton focuses on undergraduate education, her account offers a useful frame of inquiry into similar issues in graduate education, which will be my focus for the rest of the paper. When a low-SES student moves from undergraduate to graduate education, their pre-college communities will likely suffer from similar problems. Moreover, barriers to undergraduate inclusion persist in graduate school, and may even be intensified—for instance, graduate education is likely to increase high-SES representation; universities frequently offer less resources for low-SES graduate students than they do for undergraduates (e.g., grant and loan programs, student unions, and support offices); graduate professionalization is often personally costly and, for example, a disabled low-SES graduate student may struggle to meet their own needs on a low-paying stipend and university health insurance. In the next section, I argue that the threats of complicity in graduate school offer resources to critique Morton’s model of an ethical narrative.

III. EXTENDING THE NARRATIVE

When I went to college, I sometimes confronted more hunger than I could afford to feed. At some of the lowest points, I survived on the cheapest grocery food and meals that I took through my job in the cafeteria. Even then, I lost weight.

Being a graduate student has meant facing conflicts with my relationship to food. The first time I attended a department-paid dinner at a fancy restaurant, I was overjoyed—but this feeling eventually turned into an uncomfortable acknowledgement about academic food culture. I once organized a workshop involving many well-regarded scholars. For the final night, I planned, delivered, and set up the catered dinner from one of the local faculty-favorites. I was somewhat uncomfortable from the behind-the-scenes look I had been given into the dinner, particularly how expensive and lavish it felt. Yet, what troubled me more was that this dinner went largely uneaten by the end of the night. Cleaning up afterward, I was overwhelmed by anger, sadness, and a feeling of guilt. I remembered the way my father would take leftover or expiring food and cook it into scrambled eggs; the bowls of pasta that got me through the worst times as a student; how SNAP benefits were feeding my infant nephew. This contrast made me feel that the use of departmental resources for feeding academics acknowledges no moral limiting conditions stemming from the material realities of poverty. Yet, I had attended the same workshop with the same catering in previous years and never cared to think about the food. Now I had helped provide it.

In my experience, this example reflects the fact that attitudes toward material scarcity and plenty in academia
are rooted in middle- and upper-class culture. Common professional norms governing food and drink reflect the dominant, high-SES perspective. As a result, low-SES graduate students risk being complicit in practices that perpetuate the inequalities that harmed us, may still harm family and friends, and for many graduate students without outside financial support, us, too.

To underscore how threatening this can be to one’s sense of integrity, I will relay another story. In my second year in graduate school, barely a year after earning a BA, I received several teaching related assignments that made me extremely uncomfortable. I was in a program that supported many of its students and faculty through a private think-tank attached to the University (the “Center”), which focused on libertarian political philosophy and economics. I was given a TA assignment for a class organized by the Center on ethics and economics. Throughout the semester, students were taught that markets are good, governments are inept and corrupt, and the best way to help poor people is to deregulate the economy. The little attention paid to alternative views made them into caricatures. A survey at the start and end of the term asked the students a series of questions about regulation and markets in order to measure how much the course shifted their beliefs—it was rumored that this was for attracting donors. At the same time, I was asked to participate in a program that involved teaching versions of these lessons to high school students.

I felt that I was being called on to participate in upholding class hierarchies through teaching a harmful ideology. Moreover, these were my official assignments in exchange for my stipend, health insurance, tuition waiver, and status as a PhD student. At that point in my life, my stipend was around what my family earned, and I had been uninsured before. I saw the relationship I was being asked to enter as reflecting, personally, the social inequality it would perpetuate in the classroom.

I suggest that Morton’s “clear-eyed ethical narrative” runs into two families of problems when applied to situations like these. First, her strategy for identifying ethical costs fails to account for the ways that low-SES graduate students are pressured to conceptualize their challenges in ways that erase the moral framing necessary to identify them as injustices. She suggests that constructing a clear-eyed ethical narrative is a personal, reflective process, but it should also be cultivated through a community, including spaces for sharing experiences. Yet, for example, while I spoke to other graduate students about my teaching assignments, the common reaction was to sympathize with my discomfort but offer some excuse: this is part of the price of graduate school, which is a privilege, and it is OK to take “dirty money” as an already marginal graduate student. I felt that similar barriers prevented me from sharing my discomfort about the food. Hence, being “clear-eyed” requires that one be able to navigate the ways that peers, mentors, and norms in higher education exert pressure on a low-SES graduate student’s own self-conception in ways that implicitly or explicitly obscure the class hierarchy such a student confronts. (And there may be intersectional issues that further winnow a student’s socio-economic community, such as an LGBTQ+ student who is isolated from their home community due to their sexuality.) This is a missing factor in Morton’s proposal. Yet, it is plausible that this pressure must be made explicit in a student’s self-conception in order for the student to be able to develop clear-eyed sight of their situation.

Second, Morton’s suggestion for avoiding complicity is inadequately long-term and focused on individual action. For example, using Morton’s model, I could address the costs I bear in both cases by hoping to use an eventual position as a faculty member to influence food norms in my (future) department, defend left-wing political philosophy, and avoid putting TAs in compromising positions. While I would value these goals as part of my long-term identity as an academic, I still find this a disempowering response. The food is expiring; the ask to teach is present. On Morton’s model, the ability to mitigate these costs lives in an uncertain future requiring my own ingenuity and access to elite goods. But this provides no concrete guidance in the immediate present. Moreover, it assumes successful acquisition of access to elite goods in the future, which is far from certain, especially for a low-SES graduate student whose mobility is itself in question (and could be disrupted, for instance, by an unstable economic situation). Finally, Morton’s model places the burden on individual students. Of course, individuals must think about what they can do, but as I hope to show below, there are alternatives that center the collective nature of both the problems and the solutions. Insofar as the purpose of Morton’s model is ameliorative, these issues suggest that the clear-eyed ethical narrative must be able to do more than center what an individual can do for long-term reform.

IV. OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In response to these challenges, I claim that an adequate clear-eyed ethical narrative for a low-SES graduate student incorporates “oppositional consciousness,” an adversarial self-conception in which one sees oneself as a member of a subordinated group in an unjust hierarchy that calls for resistance and displacement with new, non-hierarchical relations. Sociologists Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine offer the following definition:

An oppositional consciousness is an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination. Minimally, that mental state includes identifying with a subordinate group, concluding that the mechanisms that have produced at least some of the group inequalities are unjust, opposing the injustice, and seeing a common interest within the subordinate group in eliminating the injustice. . . . A more full-fledged oppositional consciousness includes seeing some actions of the dominant group as forming in some way a “system.”

Oppositional consciousness, as a form of subjectivity, is a way of making sense of reality. The core idea is for members of a group demarcated by shared injustice to develop an awareness of their situation as an oppression by undermining the dominant practices and concepts obscuring it, for example, through creatively formed
Oppositional consciousness allows members of the group to vindicate their shared experience by bringing it to light in its capacity as unjust, including the various grassroots forms of resistance that might otherwise seem mundane. As political scientist Jane Mansbridge puts it, oppositional consciousness provides an “injustice frame” for making sense of oppression, often first felt as a “gut refusal to be subordinated.”

In the context of SES in graduate education, oppositional consciousness means recognizing one’s subordinated place in the SES hierarchy in higher education, identifying the network of factors perpetuating that hierarchy, and aspiring to transform the power relations among members of the institution to end the hierarchy. In this way, a low-SES graduate student can turn their experiences of injustice, which are likely otherwise only damaging to them, into an important, proactive part of their identity. This can obviously take a number of different forms, and I do not suggest that every low-SES graduate student must see the SES hierarchies they confront in the same way. However, I will offer some ideas about how oppositional consciousness might manifest for a low-SES graduate student and what benefits it could provide.

For example, in my leftover food story, I felt anger, hurt, and guilt, through a connection to those in my socio-economic class, in opposition to the class around me. This provided the moral framework for evaluating possible courses of action. Out of a sense of duty to myself and to people in my life, I decided to take the leftovers home, package them, and give them away to graduate students and staff. Similarly, feeling connected to beneficiaries of tax-funded social programs, I refused to participate in the high school teaching program, and as a TA, I spent the semester trying to convince the students in my three discussion sections to resist the ideas presented in class; when I had the opportunity to teach the class the next summer, I focused it on socialist and egalitarian political philosophies. These were not necessarily the right responses, but, for me, the ability to find a response that met my immediate needs in any way was possible only by creating group-based distance between myself and the community in which I lived and worked. If my experience can be generalized, it suggests that oppositional consciousness, and the collective nature of its division between “us” and “them,” is needed for this clearing of space in which to articulate values and other moral commitments and identify actions that reflect them.

Moreover, oppositional consciousness can address the problems I articulated above. First, it calls for students to find a way to draw a firm boundary between themselves and the elite culture and practices of higher education, because this is necessary for acquiring the moral clarity to identify a socio-economic injustice as such. This partially addresses the lack of recognition of the conceptual pressures a low-SES graduate student faces in Morton’s original model. While there is no simple recipe, oppositional consciousness implies that the kinds of audiences that will be receptive must reject usual ways of thinking and acting as aspects of the existing system of domination. In my experience, departmental or professional advocacy groups, graduate worker unions, and other (often marginalized) graduate spaces can provide this audience. Once a graduate student has practiced oppositional consciousness, they will be more inoculated against the conceptual pressures I outlined above: a network of beliefs, concepts, and practices will help to name and make sense of SES hierarchies, often or ideally in a way that connects them to other interlocking forms of injustice.

Second, the goal of oppositional consciousness is to end the source of opposition, that is, the existing system of domination. This is a collective conflict between two social groups. From this perspective, upward mobility is a form of infiltration: one moves closer to the resources of the dominant group in order to disrupt the existing system. This is an important perspective to inhabit, as it speaks to one of the concerns that an upwardly mobile student might have, namely, that their mobility is ultimately only a further form of domination, by taking them away from their communities and assimilating them into the elite. While Morton highlights the importance of individuals seeking long-term reform to resist this form of complicity, oppositional consciousness allows an individual to see their efforts as part of a larger struggle requiring solidarity. Moreover, it locates that struggle in the immediate present, which can allow a low-SES graduate student to see how they presently occupy unjust relations (e.g., earning poverty wages). Relatedly, oppositional consciousness can provide the psychological fortitude to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in order to identify actions that have immediate effect. As I outlined above, to decide on certain courses of action and to maintain conviction, I thought about how I could express my loyalty to people from my class background who weren’t there with me precisely because of class, with less regard to how this would be received by my peers and supervisors.

Indeed, oppositional consciousness can cultivate a durable sense of hope for improvement grounded in a radical honesty. It arises out of the realization that the only path to well-being comes from confrontation and solidarity. In this way, oppositional consciousness is an aspect of being “clear-eyed” about the sources of the costs of mobility. Moreover, as I suggested above, Morton’s assumption that the sources of these costs are capable of being changed in a fundamental way, and that a low-SES student will find durable mobility, can be undermined by the same system they seek to inhabit and transform. The long-term vision of oppositional consciousness can help mitigate these forces by providing a larger picture in which to embed individual sources of ethical costs, and an expectation of resistance to change as part of its analysis of power struggle. Even if the pathway upward is thwarted, oppositional consciousness provides a framework for understanding why, and for maintaining resolve in a long-term struggle. Thus, the radical honesty of oppositional consciousness creates a foundation for renewing hope.

Yet, I recommend oppositional consciousness as one area of the space comprising a clear-eyed ethical narrative. This is important, for example, because oppositional consciousness is risky—e.g., being adversarial could risk
losing the favor of an advisor who can provide access to professional opportunities. Low-SES students are inherently more economically vulnerable and often more socially isolated; and many low-SES students face multiple oppressions and sources of vulnerability. These challenges require being able to evaluate oppositional consciousness itself, as one factor in a low-SES graduate student’s attempt to make sense of their mobility. Still, upwardly mobile individuals have a broad matrix of reasoning that is capable of taking into view competing personal considerations regarding their mobility like these. As the feminist writer bell hooks writes, in a similar context:

When I finished my doctorate I felt too much uncertainty about who I had become. Uncertain about whether I had managed to make it through without giving up the best of myself, the best of the values I had been raised to believe in—hard work, honesty, and respect for everyone no matter their class—I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact. Even so, I had planted my feet on the path leading in the direction of class privilege. There would always be contradictions to face. There would always be confrontations around the issue of class. I would always have to reexamine where I stand.¹⁹

My suggestion is that oppositional consciousness is an essential moral goal for giving shape to this reexamination; it can help graduate students from non-privileged backgrounds orient themselves as they undergo the continued transformation arising from their mobility.

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NOTES

2. Ibid., chapter 2.
3. Ibid., chapters 1, 3.
4. Ibid., chapter 3.
6. Ibid., 47.
7. Ibid., 58–60.
8. Ibid., 37–42.
9. Morton has arguably identified a “hermeneutical” epistemic injustice: the collectively available epistemic resources have a gap (evident in the traditional narrative’s inadequacies), due to the inability of low-SES students to participate in constructing these resources, thereby depriving them of the conceptual tools to name and make sense of their experiences. See Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (Oxford University Press, 2007), 153-54. Cf. Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” in Hypatia 26, no. 2 (2011): 236–57—other forms of epistemic injustice, such as “testimonial smothering,” also plausibly arise in contexts of upward mobility.

What It’s Like to Grow Up Poor, but Fall in Love with Philosophy: A Notice to the Profession in Case It Forgot

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“So if it’s all love, show me love then.” — Cardi B.

Perhaps no issue is more widely debated in feminist philosophy and critical race theory than the role that the experience of oppression should play in our theories. It inspires original, exciting research. Yet in spite of a nominal commitment, our profession struggles to confront the personal experiences of oppression of our students and colleagues. Among academic philosophers, just as in the world at large, group-based vulnerabilities vary widely: racist exclusion and disrespect, statelessness and a lack of formal legal status, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and childhood poverty. It is vital to respect our differences to build inclusive professional networks and welcome a rising generation of young philosophers whose backgrounds do not align with the privilege, wealth, and whiteness that define academic philosophy. Like fish swimming in poisoned waters, it is hard to notice the background conditions that both sustain academic life and undermine the wellbeing of its participants.

In this short essay, I reflect on my personal experience of what it’s like to grow up poor, but to fall in love with philosophy. My motivation is not just to share anecdotes. To be sure, the more we share our stories of hardship, the less the most vulnerable among us will feel like we live with a shameful secret or a chip on our shoulders or are pariahs. Rather, my objective is to defend the imperative of welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy. Our personal experiences are valuable for refining
I took one of the shrimp cocktail for an end-of-semester class party. Frank Kirkland gave me a key to an office. Once I walked into the train station. As we walked, I felt a wave of gratitude, my eyes welling. I somehow sensed that he had not touched me while I was blacked out. As the train climbed its elevated tracks, I watched the morning sun pour into the faces of the women beside me on the train. I wanted more than anything to be a little more like them. They had somewhere to go. They were busy and dignified in the life they were building for themselves; however modest, it was theirs. Above all, I wanted my body, I wanted my mind. I decided that morning that I would get to college, one way or another. And so, the weird gratitude to a stranger for not touching me in the context of a functional homelessness that would last into my early twenties was the impetus for my philosophical studies.

I was in and out of my mother’s home in my late teens, before I left for good after we lost our home to the housing market crash during which over nine million American families lost their homes from 2006 to 2014. I took one of two paths available to most women from my neighborhood — sex work or domestic work. Because I figured I had some kind of skillset in the latter department, I became a live-in nanny for a philosophy professor, of all people. A stark representation of the realities of who I was and of where I wanted to be and might yet still go. But even if I couldn’t believe it then, I was already on my way.

For me, poverty was an immense feeling of aloneness. A kind of drifting into a cosmic void, like being lowered into a sensory deprivation tank. The future, at best, is a promise that won’t be kept and that you don’t believe in anyway. At worst, it’s a threat. Most days you don’t feel anything. Not knowing what to do with one’s own body—that my physical body was a burden to bear, finding a place for it to sleep, eat, pass the hours of the day and night, safely. It wasn’t the condition of my existence, but a stubborn, ever-present obstacle. An obstacle that in Hunter College I assailed by staying in the library until it closed. I filled every research and editorial opportunity in the philosophy department until the chair (and longtime beloved mentor Frank Kirkland) gave me a key to an office. Once I walked out of a local supermarket with an entire “party-size” tray of shrimp cocktail for an end-of-semester class party. The instructor had asked us to bring “snacks.” I probably could’ve just brought nothing but didn’t want to be outed as poor. She was a harbinger of all those to come who would unintentionally exacerbate my insecurity before—and arrogant disdain for—those who were better off. It illustrated how much one person has to sacrifice for what someone else can take for granted.

My formative experiences reflected in my philosophical studies by forming a constructive outlet for my anger. With philosophy, I had my first chance to reflect on my life, a tightly wound knot of bad memories to which I had become numb. Even if anger predominated, an entire range of feelings returned to me as I uncoiled memories and used them to sustain my focus to study ethics and politics. I found the concepts to make sense of my experiences. I formed a strong voice and a sense of self. I became passionate. I had a way to understand and condemn the world. Even if I couldn’t change my immediate circumstances, at least I could explain why my anger was justified. And for that I will always be grateful to and love philosophy.

My anger has now mostly dimmed. The further in time and space that I move away from my past and my hometown, respectively, the less my memories hold my attention. I get scared sometimes that I will forget, get comfortable and complacent. Yet just as falling in love makes you want to be a better person, my love for philosophy has, with time, driven me to rise above myself. It is important for me to hold onto the parts of myself that had inspired my philosophical imagination. But it’s just as important to me to learn to see the world from the perspective of others who can complete and refine my philosophical imagination. For there are even greater sacrifices so many are forced to make for the privileges I can take for granted in the profession and in the world at large. Though my own experiences have primed me to empathize with others, the firsthand experience of hardship is absolutely not necessary to stand in compassionate solidarity with others and to appreciate their perspective and advocate—and even sacrifice—on their behalf.

And so, I don’t want to forget my own memories. I also don’t want to forget what Toni Morrison in Beloved describes as “rememories” that belong to somebody else and that never happened to me:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think...
Morrison suggests that some memories of hardship are so acute and so neglected that they become “rememories.” They become something like orphaned memories, outside of received histories and day-to-day conversations, and they linger after the persons who experienced them firsthand are gone. Morrison suggests that it should be the burden of the world to bear rememories and to change the institutional structures that had generated them in the first place. In other words, orphaned memories should eventually find a home in a discursive community. What is more, even if we continue to ignore rememories, they will remain palpable enough that we will “bump” into them. But for philosophers, of course, the goal is not to “bump” into that which holds ethical significance, like hands groping in the dark: it is to mediate, build, and invite community. We just need to figure out how to.

In a collection of essays published in 2019 shortly before her death, The Source of Self-Regard, Morrison discusses drawing on slave narratives in her research for her exquisite novel Beloved. Received narratives of American history had elided the black historical perspective on slavery. Morrison pieces together what was left unsaid in US history books written by whites to uphold white-power regimes for centuries. She looks to enslaved persons’ own accounts of what had happened to them. Her work is the site of a “pitched battle between remembering and forgetting.” She notes that the notion of remembrance confronts an unspoken past and the untold experiences of hardship that it conceals in a new way: it amounts to “the effort to remember and not to know.”

What I take Morrison to mean here is that “knowing” is an open-ended, incomplete, and imperfect process. She cannot “know” the personal experience of slavery in the sense that the mechanisms for constructing knowledge are profoundly unreliable. However, without amounting to “knowledge,” her fictionalized representations honor the ethical demands of memory. They partially fill in the “truth” to represent the millions of enslaved persons who never had a chance to speak for themselves and who perished nameless and forgotten in the Middle Passage and on plantations.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

Morrison’s notion of “rememory” is a useful normative signpost for thinking about the ethics of inclusion that can guide the redistribution of power and prestige in academic philosophy. In order to build inclusive discursive communities, we must accept that the missing pieces of our collective knowledge require an ever-expanding circle of interlocutors whom we have historically excluded as credible epistemic agents. In a real sense, our profession does not “know” and will never “know” the rememory of those it seeks to welcome. But it must nevertheless attempt to carry that epistemic weight anyway. That is a tall order for a profession that resists mitigating the illicit authority of those who hold de facto power and privilege. And yet it should be the responsibility of the profession to ease the burden—and even sacrifice—for those it nominally seeks to welcome.

In my view, following Morrison, the ethics of inclusion involves cultivating both deliberative reciprocity and an inclination to foreground the voices of the excluded. On the one hand, if we expect to be heard, we must reciprocate, in return, an open disposition to listen and to engage in good faith. That is, treat others like real philosophers. Read their work. Disagree in meaningful and helpful ways. And above all: read and assign in syllabi historically excluded voices and canonical figures. As a Du Bois scholar, I can’t say how many times I’ve been on a panel with commentators who preface their remarks, “Never read Du Bois, but skimmed Souls on the flight over—interesting stuff!” Or, “It seems to me that you’re making a mountain out of a molehill—there’s just not enough ‘there there’ in his writings.” I can’t imagine someone on a Kant panel making similar claims about Kant’s worst and most notorious writings, such as his lectures on anthropology and geography.

On the other hand, the project of building inclusive discursive practices is even more demanding than merely cultivating genuine deliberative reciprocity. It asks us to foreground the persons excluded by our profession as holding the promise of its future development. As such, we must accept that those who finished public or community colleges, or who were the first in their family to graduate high school and go to college, or enter the middle class are the potential future leaders of the profession. They too are philosophical powerhouses to whom we owe our respect and gratitude for bothering with a profession that for too long and for no good reason has made no room for them. I have been lucky enough to teach in public universities for many years now. I enter my classroom with all the seriousness that my students—who tend to be socioeconomically and racially diverse—hold the key to what our discipline could one day become. We must attend to the needs of a diverse student body not just for the sake of inclusion, but for the sake of the potential vibrancy of philosophy itself. Moreover, we owe our students as a matter of moral respect and justice the opportunity to pursue their chosen profession with dignity. Without accepting these claims about the ethics of inclusion, I believe that it will be difficult to garner the collective will to enact the recommendations I outline below.

**Early mentoring.** First, it is vital to start cultivating early informal support networks for students, with a special focus on teaching philosophy effectively to undergraduates. For good reasons, we tend to focus on our graduate students in whose intellectual development we are directly invested. Yet there are serious limitations to this approach. Being admitted into a competitive graduate school often signifies that a student has already scaled a formidable obstacle that many talented but poorer students cannot scale on their own. Unfortunately, admission into graduate philosophy programs often requires an undergraduate degree from some of the most expensive colleges in the world. For
example, as my alma mater The Graduate Center, CUNY moves up in rank, admissions committees draw more seldomly on the student body that CUNY is supposed to serve: students like me who attended New York City public schools and CUNY colleges. I have found the same trend in large public research universities across the country.

I suggest we start modelling informal support networks at the undergraduate level that we’d like to see grow in the profession. At least in my case, effective mentoring entailed long mentoring relationships that kept me on track, alerted me to opportunities, and advocated for me when I felt like I was losing ground in difficult circumstances. Just to have someone who is ready to talk philosophy—I mean to really get into it—was extremely dignifying when I was losing heart. In order to build these kinds of transformative mentoring relationships, potential mentors must earn students’ trust and this takes time. Instead, we often show a weird formal distance from our undergraduate students that leads the more vulnerable to turn away from philosophy because they intuit that few will be there for them when they will need it most. Moreover, it is of course vital to continue nurturing students’ development once they enter graduate school.

Monetary Support. Access to resources for economically disadvantaged students is perhaps most helpful of all. Usually, the less a student has, the more likely they will work while in college. Some students raise children or take care of family members, particularly in public colleges. The discrepancies in pay faced by women, people of color, and women of color in particular are well known. The attack on FAFSA, Pell, and TAP student aid programs further burdens an already cash-strapped student body reeling from the effects of a string of economic crises. Federal and state subsidies for financing needy students’ college degrees are being depleted by rightwing profiteers. The cost of a college degree is prohibitive, even in a public university system such as CUNY, which was free until 1976. The escalating costs of higher education tightly knits whiteness, power, and prestige, which then seeps into the culture and material reality of academic philosophy. Albeit a small step in the right direction, in my experience, the commitment of a philosophy department to hire research or editorial assistants can provide students with much needed cash and help foster the mentoring relationships that are vital for their long-term success. Even the rare monetary essay prizes for majors can go a long way. For the solidly middle class, it is easy to overlook the difference an extra $300 or $500 can make for a student living paycheck-to-paycheck. My mentors also nominated me, again and again, for grants and national awards when I lacked the cultural capital to discover them on my own. Finally, full-time and tenured faculty should consider subsidizing departmental conference travel funds for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as co-writing talks with students, who can then begin accessing our professional networks.

The politics of public schooling. What is more, inequalities in academic philosophy reflect the staggering inequalities not only in higher education but at schooling at the pre-K and K-12 levels across the US. The under-resourcing of public schools disproportionately impacts communities of color and black and brown students. Recently, public school students in the worst performing high schools in Detroit won a class-action lawsuit against the state of Michigan because they graduated high school unable to read. The New York Times reports:

The ruling came in response to a class-action lawsuit filed by a group of Detroit public school students that cited a litany of severe deficiencies: Rodent-infested schools. Unqualified and absentee teachers. Physics classes given only biology textbooks. “Advanced” high school reading groups working at the fourth-grade level.

[. . .] The overwhelming majority of students in the Detroit public schools are black or Hispanic and come from low-income families. Judge Clay noted that through the nation’s history, white people have repeatedly withheld education to deny political power to African-Americans and others, most notably under slavery and segregation.

A federal court ruled that Americans have the constitutional right to literacy, without which they are unable to participate in democratic public life. The ruling in the Detroit case occurred in April 2020. It follows class-action lawsuits filed by former public school students in New Hampshire and California. Note: This trend is the national context of debates about the ethics of inclusion in academic philosophy.

Obviously poor educational outcomes in high school leave students unprepared for college. It also prohibits economically disadvantaged students from pursuing any profession at all and locks them into grinding, soul-crushing poverty. If we are serious about welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy, we must contextualize the inequalities in our profession in the light of the grossly unequal access to a quality higher education and public schooling at all levels. In other words, our commitment to inclusion cannot be myopic. It ultimately entails getting involved in messy political debates that seem prima facie unrelated. As a profession, we must defend public schools, as well as affordable—heck, free!—college education as an essential public good.

Moreover, given extreme structural inequalities, our most vulnerable students and their families also require quality, publicly funded childcare, fair compensation for their labor, health care, adequate shelter and nutritious food, resources without which focusing on one’s studies takes a herculean effort—the kind of effort that drives the heroines of epic poems to battle sea monsters and pagan gods. To be blunt, the profession needs a clear progressive politics. Even if there is reasonable disagreement about which variety of a socialist or liberal democracy best exemplifies justice, there must be a consensus about the crucial importance of public schools and the universal satisfaction of basic needs for all children, including our historically excluded, brilliant, and hardworking philosophy students.

Reflecting on post-WWII Germany, Hannah Arendt observes that “There are more than a few people, especially among the cultural élite, who still publicly regret the fact that
Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing that it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius.” In our effort to build an inclusive community in academic philosophy, we must commit to the right of all children to live dignified and flourishing lives, with access to quality public schools at all levels and basic resources, regardless of the beneficial effect it will have downstream on enriching academic philosophy, which it inevitably will. At the very least, it cannot remain a matter of a random draw that a child is fated to attend a local public school district that will teach her how to read. Whatever obstacles I faced, I am somehow left feeling lucky. In fact, I am in awe of my good fortune later welcome philosophy into my life.

**NOTES**


4. Ibid. Emphasis added.


7. Ibid.


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**Knowing What to Order at the Conference Dinner**

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Here’s a story about a familiar scene. A group of philosophers in a restaurant at the end-of-the-first-day conference dinner. One of them, I notice, is clearly uncomfortable. During earlier sessions, they’d been confident and cheerful. Now, they’re anxious and quiet. Sitting by them, I asked if they were okay. Hesitantly, they explained they’d never eaten in a restaurant at the end-of-the-first-day conference dinner. Unfortunately, the rest of the table went for three-courses—which, I explained, meant starter, mains, and a dessert. Automatically totting up prices, the philosopher was then aghast when I warned that there was the risk of someone suggesting splitting the bill “equally.” Their carefully constructed $27.85 bill could inflate into a cross-subsidising $100 bill. (Luckily, the conference organisers later passed around to advise against splitting—a crucial intervention, since power dynamics make it hard to resist by saying, “Actually, could we not. . .”)

I offered to help, and, after a pause, they held out their menu to me.

“What do I order?”

That question totally threw me. I was so familiar with restaurants; it hadn’t occurred to me someone might not know that you can choose what you like. My parents took my sister and I to restaurants when we were little. Since we couldn’t always afford holidays, it was one way to give us nice experiences my parents had never had. None of them were Michelin-star places—my post-industrial hometown had none of those. But I knew enough to know how to act in restaurants. I’d read a menu, asked my parents to explain the words, and seen people picking out their glass from the array of options. I knew that specials are usually pricier, knew how to act when someone was serving me, knew not to stack and carry the plates at the end of the meal. By contrast, said the philosopher, they’d never even entered a restaurant.

When they asked what they should order, I realised they’d assumed that there was an item they were supposed to select—as if all conferences attendees had been assigned a meal. They thought they’d missed that bit of information (was it in the conference pack?) and were feeling that hot fear of not knowing what to say, like an actor forgetting their lines. It wasn’t clear to them that they could choose anything they liked. Obviously, once I explained, things became tougher in a different way. Your choices depend on your wallet. Moreover, you need to find some dish you know that you can choose as if all conferences attendees had been assigned.

Alongside this uncertainty about the rules and format of the evening, the philosopher was deeply struck by how obviously comfortable everyone else seemed. Folks were relaxed—jackets off, pouring wine, laughing away at favourite stories and old jokes. Everyone else, they said, was so obviously at home in this environment. They were utterly competent in all these little actions—clearly rehearsed in hailing a waiter, perusing a menu, knowing which glass was theirs. Speaking phenomenologically, what struck the philosopher was that everyone else was embedded in a space of possibilities they were able to navigate with unruffled spontaneity. It was an environment in which they felt at home. By contrast, the philosopher lamented, they lacked the most elementary knowledge and understanding. How do you call a waiter? What can I ask them for? Is there a charge if I ask for more water?

I tell this story because, a few days later, on returning home, I happened to tell it to a colleague.
They burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha! How can you not know how to order at a restaurant!"

Years later, I'm still struck by the stupidity of this statement. Stupid in the sense of a culpable failure to exercise one's intelligence. For a start, it's perfectly obvious why a person might not know the myriad norms, rules, and micropractices relevant to restaurants. You may be from a family too poor to enjoy the luxury of paying professionals to prepare and serve you food. You may have always lived in socioeconomically impoverished areas that don't have restaurants. You may not have the luxury of regarding food as an opportunity to outsource your culinary labour and enjoying an evening of recreational consumption. If you're poor, you wait tables, you don't sit at them.

Since none of these possibilities is difficult to generate intellectually, my colleague's failure lay somewhere else. If stupidity is a culpable failure to exercise one's intelligence, then we ought to ask what motivates those failures. Some obvious candidates are the epistemic limitations built into the structured pathways of experience and activity characteristic of socially and materially privileged people. From my colleague's perspective, those possibilities really were just possibilities—abstract options, generated by imagination, not drawn from painful memory.

If my colleague's earlier life afforded the consistent possibility of fun meals out, that's a good thing. From experience, I know that being poor and hungry sucks, not an experience that I'd wish on anyone. But that sets up the challenge—to maintain an empathic understanding of realities of life that lie outside the particular course of one's own experience, to resist the stupidization that poverty of experience breeds, to constantly act to resist the ossifying patterns of obliviousness to the heterogeneity of human life sustained by one's privileges. It is the challenge—moral as much as epistemic—to inhabit a particular style of life without it gradually narrowing our receptivity to other kinds of life, to the wider realities of how our fellow humans live, or try to. It's easy for our imaginations to become dampened, leading to contemptuous snorts of laughter at the fumbling uncertainties of others. (The Britpop band, Pulp, put it well in their song "Common People," which describes a wealthy girl who "wants to live like common people." Upon being taken to a supermarket, "I said 'Pretend you've got no money' / She just laughed and said, 'You're so funny'"). It may seem hard to imagine someone getting to their twenties without having eaten in a restaurant—but it's not, really.

Back to the philosopher in the restaurant. I didn't laugh at their uncertainty and their ignorance because, thanks to the forethought and determination of my parents, I'd had some experience of restaurants. They were poor for a lot of my early life, but hid it very well. Even now, the economic precarity that structured my earlier life remains well-concealed, as I half-remember bags of 'hand-me-downs' and assurances on Christmas Day that my parents spent the same amount on my sister and I. Such experiences help me do the work to avoid the fault of that colleague who guffawed at the sad ignorance of someone who didn't know how menus work.

Obviously, we can make it easier for philosophers to exercise their intelligence and imagination, not least diversifying our disciplinary demographics. If departments are staffed by those from wealthier backgrounds, that sustains expectations about what sorts of social experiences and activities can be taken as the norm. A wine reception—never one with beers. A conference dinner at a smart restaurant—never something informal in someone's home. Upon describing a typical conference dinner to a friend, they said it'd be more fun to have a few beers in someone's garden with homecooked food. He regarded visits to restaurants as complexly demanding trials, course after course of class-coded challenges with constant risk of subtle normative censure.

I'm not urging abandonment of the swanky conference dinner, nor suggesting first-generation philosophers from socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds are incapable of enjoying them and mastering their nuances. That would be invidious snobbery, of a sort liable to mutate into horrible contemptuousness. What can help, though, are changes to our social practices in specific contexts like restaurants. Some of the changes are obvious. Don't choose pricier restaurants, unless you have budget to pay for all the attendees (and beware well-meant systems that require people to reveal that they need financial assistance). Sometimes, there are collegial delegates who offer to subsidise the unfunded and underfunded. That's a nice practice, albeit too dependent on the generosity of attendees to be any real solution. Proscribe the practice of 'splitting the bill', which really forces the involuntarily abstemious to subsidise those who enjoyed three courses and expensive wine. Choose restaurants that offer special deals—"$30 dollars for two courses if you order between 5 and 7!" If they don't, try to negotiate a deal, or else take your fifty-person party elsewhere.

Crucially, communicate all these costs to attendees in advance. Some will have to save up in advance for conferences. Being told three months in advance that the conference dinner will cost thirty dollars total including your first drink helps them to budget. Moreover, if you're the organiser, provide information on hidden costs, like the tip at the restaurant and the cost of a taxi: when I was a postgrad, my heart sank when someone suggested sharing a taxi, since I could never afford one, unless I gave up on having an alcoholic drink over dinner. If you can, cover costs of taxis to and from the restaurant. Provide information on public transport—too many conference organisers forget about buses. Conference packs, in my experience, rarely include bus schedules. If you're a financially privileged delegate, consider inviting those who need a ride to join your taxi. Be clear you're not expecting them to chip in for the fare.

A conference dinner at a restaurant represents a whole structure of socially, culturally, and materially complicated relationships. Some people are comfortable in those structures, since they'll be as effortlessly able to pay the bill as navigate the menu. They'll have a lovely evening. But for
others, those structures impose anxiety, uncertainty, and a bill that can’t be allayed with a wave of a credit card or the keeping of receipts for reimbursement—a privilege that can also be co-opted, of course, by delegates inclined to support their fellow dinners who use their financial privileges to help others. And remember that some can’t afford the upfront costs in the way assumed by the reimbursement model.

Some of this is the work of the organiser, some is the work of the attendees. Some of the work is rewarding. Many enjoy their generosity and public acts of magnanimity. Some of the work is dull or demanding. Some delegates get grumpy if told they can’t water down their own bill. Arranging taxis is more work than just expecting people to call an Uber. Telephoning the restaurant to negotiate a deal is more work than not. But taking such measures are ways of trying to make the social and financial experience of a conference easier for low-income and first-generation philosophers—indeed, for anyone whose experiences and resources don’t automatically make a conference dinner the chilled, enjoyable experience it is for so many. That young philosopher had a rough time at that restaurant. A lot of their discomfort could have been allayed—but not by someone, like my colleague, inclined to laugh at the very idea of not knowing how a restaurant works.

A conference dinner at a restaurant is a good place for considering the interactions of class, race, economic privilege, professional comportment, and the culturally coded forms of sophistication that have been built into the discipline. Much needs to be changed and a really good place to start is by appreciating these realities—to grasp that when you’re happily sitting choosing a starter from the menu, the person sitting opposite may be wondering if the chilled, enjoyable experience it is for so many. That young philosopher had a rough time at that restaurant. A lot of their discomfort could have been allayed—but not by someone, like my colleague, inclined to laugh at the very idea of not knowing how a restaurant works.

Epistemic Shame as a First-Generation Scholar

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Once, during my time as a graduate student at Cornell University, I was reading in its iconic “Big Red Barn” when a few undergraduate students sat down at the table beside me. They were discussing the various ways their parents had protected them from bits of information that were deemed too burdensome for them to bear as busy college students. The examples ranged. One family hid a large-scale home renovation so their child would not worry about their life without a fully functional kitchen. Another set of parents kept the fact that their child’s ex-partner had moved on to another while the child was away in Ithaca. The students shared their feelings about these omissions with humor and lightheartedness. The overall mood seemed to be one of mild annoyance, colored with understanding. I gathered my book and set off for my shared TA office down the hill. My mind veered towards the question, “What is my family keeping from me?”

Three years prior, when I left Barrio Hollywood in Tucson, AZ for New York state, I knew there would be information kept from me. I was leaving at the onset of big things in my family: my parents took on a restructuring of debt earlier that year and each of my three younger siblings welcomed their first child, which I knew would raise financial and emotional stress given that my siblings ranged in age from 19 to 23 and only two of them had a high school degree. Although it was safe to assume that difficulties similar to the ones we faced while I was growing up would arise, weekend calls regularly failed to mention those things. My family did not divulge their worries about the cost of childcare. They did not discuss their difficulty getting the correct amount of peanut butter through WIC (i.e., Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), the status of my parents’ bankruptcy, whether there were any broken-down vehicles, whether any of my siblings were stuck waiting for public transit in the scorching Southwest sun while carrying a cranky toddler, or anything like that. When I asked how things were on those fronts, the topic quickly changed. On that short walk, I began to identify what I was feeling by the omissions I knew were present in my life: shame. I now take this experience to be one of epistemic shame.

Here, I sketch a short rationale for this claim. I briefly summarize recent accounts of “epistemic shame,” highlighting two features of them: (1) epistemic shame is an affective state that necessarily has a false belief as its object and (2) the intensity of an experience of epistemic shame is a function of the judgments other people make about one for holding a false belief. I suggest that the experience of epistemic shame described above is some motivation to reject both (1) and (2). As I hope to show, epistemic shame does not require a false belief as its object. Nor does it require one to hold any specific belief at all. Epistemic shame may occur when any feature of one’s epistemic life is shameworthy. This is because holding true beliefs is not the only quality one might strive for in an epistemic life. Here, I highlight how sometimes one may strive to share epistemic burdens with those they love because doing so is the basis upon which meaningful bonds with them are sown and strengthened. When one fails to do this, an experience of epistemic shame may follow. Further, I show that the intensity of one’s feeling of epistemic shame can also be a function of the importance one places on certain features of their epistemic life. It is not always the case that external observers influence how this epistemic emotion is felt.

Current work in philosophy and psychology takes epistemic shame to be the shame that one feels as a result of holding a belief that leads to contradiction or holding a false belief. Of course, the specifics are put forth using different theoretical tools and concepts special to the relevant disciplines. For instance, Ancient Greek theorist Laura Candiotto offers an account of epistemic shame based on the role it played in the process of belief purification in Plato’s Socratic dialogues. Candiotto shows that shame, captured by the Greek terms αίδος and sometimes ἀίζχυνη, was an affective state that some of Socrates’s interlocutors would enter upon finding themselves in the unpleasant state of ἀπορία (i.e., finding themselves lost...
This feeling of inferiority is a prerequisite for purification. Shame was a virtue, the one that allows an agent to recognize their inadequacy, and through it to purify them from wrong behaviors—from those wrong behaviors that are false beliefs according to the Socratic tradition—and, thus, to activate a process of purification.

Specifically, Candiotto notes that the level to which one feels ashamed for their false beliefs differs across group-facilitated processes of belief improvement (e.g., discussion-based inquiry) and individual processes (e.g., private meditation). They write, “[…] group aporetic states, described as the social procedure of belief-purification, may be more painful than the recognition of our faults while ruminating alone […] they unmask the agent’s inadequacy to the other members of the group that are evaluating the agent’s beliefs […]”

In psychology, Elisabeth Vogl et al. (2019) treat epistemic shame this way as well. They liken it to an achievement emotion. Achievement emotions are those arising as a result of some agent’s partaking in an action at which they can fail or succeed. Two prototypical achievement emotions are pride and shame. Put simply, many psychologists think that we tend to feel prideful when we win and shameful when we lose. The epistemic variants would be emotional states, arising when one learns whether or not one has achieved true belief or succeeded at some cognitive task, like correctly answering a math question.

In the above accounts, we get a sense that epistemic shame is an emotion arising in someone as a result of holding a belief that is false. Simply put, an experience of epistemic shame has a belief as its object. However, there are many features of our epistemic lives that may give rise to an experience of epistemic shame. Some examples include the following.

In addition to one caring about holding true beliefs, one may care about the way one arrives at their beliefs. For example, one may strive to have beliefs that do not depend on epistemic practices which are prejudicial or biased in a harmful way. One may also care about having beliefs that are not arrived at on a whim, for example, by a lucky guess. Further, in addition to holding true beliefs, one may care whether they have certain skills that are important to their cultural identity. For example, in the English-Only Latinx community (i.e., the community of Latinx individuals who speak English only) some report shame for not knowing how to speak Spanish. Rightfully or wrongfully, the way beliefs might make us feel, the questions or doubts that beliefs might raise in us about our belief gathering practices, and the connections they help us form with the people around us, are all things we care about as epistemic agents. In addition to whether the content of a belief is true, any of these features of our epistemic life can inspire epistemic pride and epistemic shame in us.

Specifically, my experience of epistemic shame (possibly one shared by many first-generation scholars whose families tried to support their focus on education in similar ways) illustrates how this form of shame can result not from having a false belief, but from lacking certain beliefs altogether. In this case, a state of lacking beliefs refers to those instances in which an epistemic agent has some reason to believe there is information out there that to which agent could have access (information about which they could form beliefs), but does not. As epistemic agents we are constantly in a state of lacking beliefs in this way. A relatable example of this is the state we are in while reading a novel. Prior to completing a novel, we understand it has an ending that is available to us, but we do not yet know what it is, nor do we have beliefs about it. One might wonder what makes this a shame-inducing state. After all, how is this state interestingly distinct from the state we default to after the simple acknowledgment that there are an infinite number of possible beliefs we lack at any moment?

I have come to believe that there are some beliefs I think I ought to have because carrying the burden of these beliefs is an ingrained component of my identity. Moreover, in some cases, sharing the burden of certain beliefs with other people is the way in which bonds with those people are sown and sustained. In part, this is because without carrying those burdens, I am powerless to alleviate the circumstances which give rise to these beliefs. Further, I am powerless to help my loved ones cope with the emotional realities these beliefs bring them, like worry, stress, or their own shame for their circumstances. By not sharing the load of those beliefs from which my family was protecting me, I was letting myself down on some level. That is what was shameful. I believe I ought to carry some of the mental weight that they do. I believe I ought to share in it because if I don’t, my identity and my purpose have ventured too far away from them.

My family and my roots in Tucson have been and continue to be a huge motivator in continuing my scholarship; but the connections between these two aspects of my life felt impossible in my first three years of grad school. The only connection I could feel at first was one of using my past as a source of inspiration. Every time the vulnerable process of submitting work was too immense, I would quickly think back to the days when my dad would bring all four of us kids to his weekend construction jobs and have us help smooth grout in cracks between terra-cotta bricks and hold rebar steady while he checked foundations for levelness. The work of my people is a different form of hard work. They dug holes in 90-degree weather to subsidize my education in any way they could. They cleaned houses and designed landscaping so I could have a bike to get to my classes.
and textbooks about topics like unrestricted quantification. When I thought back to that, I could find inspiration to dig deeper and try to be confident in my work (although, this is still a huge challenge). It was not until the second year of my PhD program when I realized that the burdensome beliefs I felt shame for not having might actually matter in a philosophical sense.

Cornell lucked out when, during my second year of grad school, a young professor joined our department and taught (what I believe to be) one of the first courses in non-ideal theory (besides our feminist philosophy course). Simultaneously, a close friend and I started a chapter of Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) at Cornell. All of a sudden, the world of philosophy looked really different to me. Philosophy’s distance to those real-life worries experienced by people like my family members felt a bit shorter.

The epistemic shame I had for escaping burdensome beliefs began to look more like the kind of shame anyone who cares about understanding good action, good character, and justice ought to feel on some level. I was finally learning that in writing for all, many of the ideal theorists I had read through the years were failing by their own estimation in the same ways I was. They were trying to answer these important questions about the role of a human being in supporting goodness and justice, but for some reason they were not considering the burden of the practical injustices and misfortunes that these answers depend on. They were simply avoiding these possible beliefs that were burdensome in the name of ideal theory. They were setting them aside for the sake of philosophical ease. I would not do that anymore. I decided to share the epistemic burdens with my family, to relate to them in this important way. I would push (with a “gently obnoxious” approach, as my sister describes it) for the full picture and try to help. I would no longer allow burdensome beliefs to be omitted from me.

This reflection illustrates reasons to reject both features of the current accounts of epistemic shame. First, one can feel epistemic shame because of beliefs they lack and the avoidance of the burdens those beliefs might give rise to (i.e., not merely because they hold a false belief). In my case, these were burdens I found important to bear because doing so felt like part of my identity and because bearing these burdens had instrumental value. To some extent, they opened a path to help when I could and they added an element to my philosophical thinking that I found to be valuable. Further, these burdens were part of the glue securing my familiar bonds. It is now the case that I can hold their hands through the ebbs and flows of life, even if I live far away. That is, epistemic shame led me to be a better epistemic agent on some level. This happens to reflect the upshot of epistemic shame described by both Candiotto and Vogl et al. Both think that epistemic shame might lead to belief revision. Candiotto puts it in the following way: “Through the challenges of others, an epistemic agent may feel ashamed for their epistemic errors and, thus, have the desire to overcome this unpleasant situation through epistemic purification.” Vogl et al. agree to some extent, while also noting several studies that show shame to have a variable effect on how motivated someone is to improve at the cognitive tasks that triggered with their shame. Regardless, we can be certain that it is possible for experiences of epistemic shame unrelated to the holding of a false belief (and the judgment of others) to also lead to better belief gathering processes. For example, my own experience shows that I pushed to stop the omissions. I take that to be an improvement in my belief system even if it is not the most comfortable one. Sometimes we avoid information that would be too painful for us to bear for the sake of comfort and ease. If, as epistemic agents we think our goal ought to be to hold true beliefs about the world, prioritizing such comfort may sometimes undermine it. It is in this trivial sense that I take epistemic shame to have led me to improvement, the obtaining of a truer, more authentic understanding of my loved ones’ lives.

Second, the above reflection shows how epistemic shame seems possible when the only judgment at play (or the most pressing) is one’s own. This is not in contradiction with the idea that the degree to which one feels epistemic shame depends on what their society values. It is just to say that the degree to which one experiences it may be a function of one’s own priorities in their epistemic life. I could not imagine living a truthful and fulfilling life as a scholar and not sharing the epistemic burdens of my family. I cannot imagine being fulfilled by housing all of these creative and critical thinking skills only to bust them out for things like derivations (no matter how fun). On the contrary, when I do have the opportunity to work with them to develop solutions, help them write resumes, ask for raises, etc., it gives me a sense of worth that I just would not have otherwise. In lacking beliefs and their associated burdens, I was failing on my own standards for my epistemic life, not anyone else’s. I take it as an important component of my epistemic life that some of my time is spent solving problems with those I care about. Admittedly, this is a luxury that not every first-generation or low-income philosopher has. It is certainly one I did not enjoy as a graduate student.

The burden of these beliefs brought its own set of challenges then as it does now. As a graduate student on a fixed income and far away from Arizona, helping was not nearly as achievable as I wished it to be. I was not around to babysit my nephews and niece, so that my siblings could go on job interviews for better-paying job opportunities. I was unable to send money to fix vehicles or pay unexpected medical bills. I often wished I was in their town so I could give rides to people when they needed it, or host dinners and just hug them to raise their spirits when times were tough. Uncovering this cavern of beliefs about my family’s lives and challenges raised huge demands on my emotional well-being. It colored every event that has happened to me during my journey in academia. Each failed attempt to get a job or an opportunity closer to them felt like a personal blow, a failed attempt to be able to share the load. As a professor, this is still the case. I am in a better position to help, but I still live far away. I lived and still live in a mild state of guilt, despite my family’s efforts to convince me that this guilt is baseless. Yet, I do feel a sense of connectedness with them that I just would not have staying in dark. My epistemic shame was replaced with these burdens, but the bonds we are sustaining by sharing them fills me with so much more purpose and
meaning. I am still a part of them and they are a part of me and a part of my philosophical life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES


2. Ibid., 77.

3. Ibid., 79. Here Candiotto also argues that group judgment and esteem for one as a thinker can shape how likely it is that the experience of epistemic shame triggers belief revision. Partially because in groups where true belief is valued there will be considerable pressure to revise. Limited space prevents me from discussing the full account and upshots of epistemic shame in this paragraph.


5. P. Jureç & Chavarria, C. & Medina, D., 2017; Older, D.

6. In another work, I show how examples of shame for not knowing how to speak Spanish also motivate rejecting an account of epistemic shame that necessarily requires a false belief as its object. There, my claim is that one gains and fosters connections with their loved ones and culture through shared language and this is one way in which lacking skills or knowledge-how can produce shame in the same way that a false belief can (Munguia, forthcoming).


9. Of course, there are different theoretical takes on how one ought to be as a belief gatherer. So, this may also be understood in a different epistemological framework (one that is not necessarily consequentialist and hyper-focused on landing on true beliefs, but also maybe a virtue epistemology that prioritizes openness to information, considering objections to one’s beliefs, an active pursuit of evidence for one’s beliefs etc.). However, one spins this, no theory necessarily places our own emotional comforts on a pedestal above these types of features of their epistemology. So, I believe this claim does not necessarily take a stand on whether one ought to adhere to a teleological or consequentialist take on adjudicating the relationship between epistemic agents and truth or true belief.

WORKS CITED


Marginal Disclosures: Sisterhood, Standpoint, Community, and Thriving

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In “A Troubled Peace: Black Women in the Halls of the White Academy,” Nellie McKay writes: “To be black and female in the academy has its own particular frustrations because it [the academy] was never intended for us to be here. We are in spaces that have been appropriated for us.” Although McKay writes these words in the 60s, specifically about the experiences of African American women, her words apply to many Black women who enter the academy. That is, even though the numbers of Black women professors and scholars are increasing, this change is happening at a rather slow pace. Call for papers (CFPs) such as this one are tending. The continuous calls for Black women to relay their experiences of marginalization are reminders that even though there is color in the ivory tower, we remain “outsiders-within.”

The style of this paper follows from Black feminist and womanist thought and takes a conversational format between me (Zinhle ka’Nobuhlaluse) and Ashley Lamarre. These are our reflections from the many intersecting identities that we hold. These identities are not essential to our being, but they have informed how these institutions treat us and those that look like us, hence the importance of sisterly scholarship. Through reflecting about our individual narratives, we hope to highlight the classist, racist, and sexist practices that still suffuse in the academy, in particular, in the United States of America and in South Africa. Additionally, we claim the importance of Black feminist and womanist theoretical and methodological frameworks in critiques of academia’s continued marginalization of Black women scholars. Our desire is not to seek empathy or blame, rather we use this reflection in a productive way. A kind of productivity that is articulated by Audre Lorde in “The uses of anger.” Lorde explains that “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.”

Black feminism(s) and womanism(s) have informed this desire to unashamedly write from the standpoints that have shaped our being, but they have informed how these institutions treat us and those that look like us, hence the importance of sisterly scholarship. Through reflecting about our individual narratives, we hope to highlight the classist, racist, and sexist practices that still suffuse in the academy, in particular, in the United States of America and in South Africa. Additionally, we claim the importance of Black feminist and womanist theoretical and methodological frameworks in critiques of academia’s continued marginalization of Black women scholars. Our desire is not to seek empathy or blame, rather we use this reflection in a productive way. A kind of productivity that is articulated by Audre Lorde in “The uses of anger.” Lorde explains that “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.”

I. SISTERHOOD

A good starting point would be to reflect on our decision to write this paper together. When the CFP came out for an APA session on the topic of first-generation and/or low-income philosophers in the academy, I (ka’Nobuhlaluse) asked Lamarre, a peer in my graduate cohort, if she would be interested in collaborating on the presentation on which we base this paper. As the only Black women
in our cohort with some overlapping research interests, I could have readily adopted the mentality that Lamarre and I are naturally in competition for opportunities, given the racial and historical demographics of philosophy and its job market. Instead, I decided this need not be the case. Though we have overlapping intersections and research interests, we are not in competition with each other. We choose to resist this racist heterosexist capitalist neoliberal narrative.

To echo Lorde, the final decision to collaborate with Lamarre came from the assumption that “[w]e are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for whom racism and sexism [including classism] are primary, established, and necessary props of profit.” It is for this reason that we need to rally together and go beyond bonding over our oppression in order to navigate academia.

Therefore, my request to be in sisterly scholarship with Lamarre was a conscious decision because I treat Black feminist thought as a life philosophy. I intentionally use the word sisterhood instead of collegiality or friendship. ‘Sisterhood’ neatly captures a branch of my feminist standpoint, that is anchored in Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a normative and moral philosophy that underscores relationality in most Southern African cultures. The ethic is best captured by the Zulu proverb “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.” As a moral theory, Ubuntu underscores the ways in which we are relational beings—a relationality that is rooted in mutual recognition: kobuntu bethu kanye nomlando owabiwe.

Little did ka’Nobuhlaluse know, her reaching out to me (Lamarre), long before this call, disrupted my solitary and painstaking process of reflecting on my place in graduate school. At the start, these meditations were individualistic and largely obscured by my imposter syndrome—a legitimate form of intellectual self-doubt that can be exacerbated by overlapping marginalized identities. Over time, I recognized that attempting to bury these troubling feelings by isolating myself and developing a practice of overworking did little to alleviate my depleted spirits. Only through the care-filled reallocation of my time to robust dialogues with peers like ka’Nobuhlaluse and my readings of Black feminist scholarship did I begin to heal. This healing meant I felt more prepared, excited, and ready to accomplish my graduate work, while also having an increased investment in the needs and struggles of my peers. Therefore, tankou yon ayisyèn ki tande bri lanbi a k’ap sonnen, ka’Nobuhlaluse’s call to co-write with me was music to my ears.

II. STANDPOINT

Regarding this special issue’s desire to highlight the experience of philosophers who are “outsiders within,” I (Lamarre) want to expound on what inspired this paper’s title. Marginal disclosure, in the case of graduate applications, is the moment in which an applicant attempts to reveal their difference within their “Statement of Purpose.” This voluntary admission of difference precedes the phenotypical encounter through its presence in this application requirement. In the very first lines, in some cases, we reveal the various intersections of our identities.

I want to consider the rippling effects that can arise from this moment of disclosure in graduate applications, but not before exploring why this disclosure occurs in the first place.

For many of us, the practice of marginal disclosure is not merely an early attempt to illustrate our difference, but an intentional gesture to explain how these differences impact our existence. This decision is no coincidence in the “Statement of Purpose.” Instead, this choice to disclose deviation represents two truths moving towards the same goal, successfully making it into the academy as one truly is, for what academia truly is. As one truly is, denotes a disclosure interested in utter transparency. It does not intend to declare inherent “superiority” in our intersections. Instead, this admission shows that we have experienced our position at those intersections as not only a site of struggle but also as “a source of strength, community, and intellectual development.” This disclosure states that one’s commitments to community include the philosophical community but also spans beyond it. It states that our intellectual development as philosophers has already been informed by and will continue to be informed by the distinct epistemic and ontological ways we inhabit the world. Despite long running contentions with “identity-based politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw clarifies that “[t]he problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.” Through marginal disclosure, many of us seek to reveal our sprawling connectedness and we aim to recognize how our connectedness can impact our presence and intellectual development. We strive to highlight a difference in scholarship and a difference in how we might choose to inhabit the traditionally white, male, heterosexist space of academia, and more particularly, philosophy. In other words, our disclosure is a warning that you should not perceive us as any other student but rather as “troublemakers” who can truly push and challenge departments for the better as our purpose is to disrupt the “philosophical status quo.”

For what academia truly is means that one recognizes the neoliberal tendencies within the academy, noting how the institution falls prey to marketplace ideologies. Though one might not be sure whether they will be a docile subject or troublemaker in the academy, one must make it into the academy to even face that dilemma. That is why select marginalized students deploy identity-based politics as a strategy. A strategy that acknowledges how “marketplace ideologies,” as described by Patricia Hill Collins, have impacted academia’s desire to meet various “marketplace needs.” In this case, the “marketplace needs” of a historically exclusionary institution like academia, and a discipline like philosophy, is to entice and retain outsiders—within who are socially distant from academia. When these neoliberal institutions seek out these students, they serve their larger systems and agendas by pursuing our unique presence and particular research interest. These institutions can make themselves eligible for select grants and endowments where they would otherwise be ineligible. Departments improve their marketability as diverse, which can attract additional diverse students—while also improving departmental optics at a time where
anti-Black and anti-Trans violence is more visible to the non-marginalized and the marginalized alike.

Even if our own inclination does not bring about this kind of strategic disclosure, this strategy is also regularly encouraged by select undergraduate institutions, the varying minorities in philosophy programs, the plethora of minorities in the humanities programs, or the advice of current marginalized graduate students. This marketplace place ideology is the kind of "we only need so many" institutional thinking that could make people like ka'Nobuhlaluse and I believe we are competitors. The drive for scholars of color to perceive our peers as competitors are fueled by market logics, claiming a finite and quantifiable interest in scholars like us. Again, this is no coincidence but instead reveals that these programs and institutions are also aware that this disclosure of difference can be advantageous somehow. Some graduate programs support this idea of disclosure by saving you the trouble of having to embed this information in your personal statement skillfully by providing you with the option to write an entirely separate "Diversity Statement." This observation does not intend to insinuate that all programs which offer the option to write a "Diversity Statement" are insincere in openly requesting marginal disclosure. Still, the growing popularity of "Diversity statements" represents an additional level of labor in which you must articulate your difference, which will not be expected of our non-marginalized colleagues. Despite the perceived benefits, this kind of disclosure has selective ramifications.

Take a portion of my disclosure, for example, wherein I say that I am a Haitian American Black woman from Brooklyn, New York. When I wrote this, I expected this to be valuable for some of the reasons I already mentioned, but I could not anticipate them all. Though I did not expect to study Caribbean philosophy, it is no shock that I was open, willing, and excited when introduced to this very subject matter. Due to the incomplete nature of marginal disclosures, I did not explicitly state that I come from a working-class family. Perhaps I thought it was implied. However, even if I were to include this in my description, I do not believe it would have the same ramifications as my Haitian identity. For instance, I could have added that I am a low-income student whose parents came to this country and became factory workers while all five of us lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Furthermore, we were able to move to a bigger apartment and attend relatively better schools only because my mom worked twelve-hour days, weekdays, and weekends, as a home attendant. At the same time, my dad worked similar hours as a paratransit bus driver. However, I sincerely doubt this disclosure would have entailed me being encouraged into theorizing socioeconomic status because of my lived experience. In a similar vein, marginal disclosure, by statement or phenotype, is not always read as valuable for "marketplace needs." Instead, the perception can be that you will not be "marketable" because you will not be interested in staying within the true philosophical cannon. This assumption fails to realize that the aspects of my marginal disclosure that I came to study were new to me as it would have been for me to, for example, become a Hegelian. When you are already experiencing extreme intellectual self-doubt in a discipline that has theorized against your belonging there, and are primarily met with engagement and enthusiasm when you enter courses that overlap with your identity, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I became invested in my Haitian-ness or Caribbean-ness and my Black woman-ness, not because it was wholly what I planned to do but what I was, and am supported in, doing.

III. COMMUNITY

Though I (Lamarre) recognize the contrived ways in which I discovered my research interests, I have absolutely no regrets in the sense that I thoroughly enjoy exploring these new ideas. My concern is around the failure to recognize that these intersecting identities and research interests come with a set of duties and responsibilities to these communities beyond the functions of solitary scholarship. In other words, I should not be encouraged to cultivate research interests that mirror portions of my marginalized identity simply because they are trendy, niche, or register as authentic in an academic setting. Instead, the expectation should be that there is immense value in theorizing from and serving those communities acutely. This realization only began to percolate in my mind after reading Joy James and Ruth Farmer’s edited volume Spirit, Space, and Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe. Concerning the individualism academia fosters, James described alienation as the "signature of academia" and makes note that "'[i]n belonging to a people seeking freedom from colonization, African American academics face issues of responsibility and accountability, unrecognized by White colleagues.' The inability of privileged colleagues to recognize this responsibility and accountability causes tension when diasporic people take philosophy to be a pragmatic discipline that requires service. At the same time, "traditional" academe devalues or disregards this kind of activity-based theorizing.

Now, this insight provided me with increased clarity on a sentiment that is often expressed by undergraduate and graduate first-generation students. This sentiment is "my family does not understand what I do or the responsibilities I have as a student." This perception often leads to tensions and disputes surrounding the regular requests family members make of us as first-generation students. In this case, I am not referring to the financial contributions marginalized graduate students make to their families, which creates an additional strain on graduate stipends. Lamarre, I (ka'Nobuhlaluse) actually want to stress the material realities of being a low-income student in that very exception you just named. As an international student, I do not have the luxury to go home as frequently as I would like to. I do not have any financial support from my family (even if I needed help, the value of the South African Rand to the US dollar makes it hard), instead, I am the one who has to send money home. This was my reality when my mother lost her job last year. The responsibility that I have towards my family is not occasional but on going. This responsibly is best known as "black tax" in South Africa. As the first one to even get a university qualification, supporting my family is not a conversation about choice, this is an obligation. Interestingly, when I am in the US, I am a low-income student, but to my family, I am not. These are the complexities that our marginal disclosures do not highlight.
I (Lamarre) appreciate your ability to nuance this discussion with not only the material obligation to family, but also what it means to have this responsibility transnationally, ka’Nobuhlaluse. Despite my family’s recent experience with job loss due to COVID-19 as well, the requests my family continue to make of me, like many of our first-generation and low-income peers, are requests for my presence, service, and time. These duties range from assistance in childcare, eldercare, job searches, family mediation, and educational support for younger family members. What first-generation students oftentimes perceive to be potentially unreasonable or additionally taxing about these requests is that it diminishes our ability to solely dedicate our time to our academic pursuits and our “new lives” as scholars. A social position that seemed nearly impossible to reach and seems more challenging to maintain every day. So, in just a year, academic institutions can cause first-generation and low-income students to render their own immediate families a hindrance to their educational training. This import is far more sinister than a “lack of understanding,” as it allows one to rationalize that providing decreased aid and resources to marginalized families and communities is a worthy sacrifice for the greater academic good. Sure, this orientation may reap prestige for oneself and financial benefits for one’s family after years of isolation. Still, the chances of securing a viable placement in an extremely competitive job market, only to be further stressed by the impacts of COVID-19, are incredibly precarious.

If academia alienates low-income and first-generation students such that family becomes a barrier to success, how are we expected to serve any community? We are not. We are labor and resources estranged from kin and installed into an academic community that devalues any external investments that detract from rigorous scholarship. In order to do service for the communities we expose in our marginal disclosure, we cannot separate community needs from academic responsibilities, regardless of their so-called incompatibility. With the hope that our sisters keep us accountable, we, too, intend to move forward in academia, recognizing that “I am because we are.”

IV. THRIVING
Will you survive?
No, darling, I will thrive
– Ijeoma Umebinyuo, Questions for Ada

Now Lamarre, here lies another conflict that I (ka’Nobuhlaluse) am feeling about these essentializing conversations (i.e., being low-income or first-generation), these are tensions that have been highlighted by Zine Magubane in Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy (2004); Mabogo Percy More in Looking Through Philosophy in Black (2019), and Pumla Dineo Gqola in Reflecting Rogue Inside the Mind of a Feminist (2017). On the one hand, I think that it is important for us to share the challenges that we face as Black, first-generation, low-income, etc. students. However, these narratives can be objectifying. They do not capture how I view myself, how you (Lamarre) view yourself, and how other Black feminist scholars within the academy view themselves. To view oneself primarily through the lens of marginality is to succumb to objectification. bell hooks reminds us that as “objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject.” It is for these reasons that we need to reshape our narratives. I am interested in the narratives that show us thriving in the academy. Whiteness thrives in seeing us suffer, this is why there is so much interest in Black suffering and pain. So, while it is important for marginalized scholars to share their narratives, we need to be careful in how we share these narratives. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) warns us, there is danger in telling a single sided story and we have the social responsibility as Black people not to participate in the creation of one-sided narratives. Most of the time the narratives around being first-generation only focus on the challenges that we must overcome. While all the aforementioned narratives are part of our narratives, we are not single narratives of struggle.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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NOTES
3. Lorde, “The Uses of Anger.”
4. Ibid., 280.
5. Ibid., 215.
6. Weir, “Feeling Like a Fraud?”
8. Ibid.
9. Yancy, Philosophy in Multiple Voices, 6.
10. Di Leo, Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving Beyond the Neoliberal Academy, 57–69.
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REFERENCES
Confessions of a Working-Class Student

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This is not a philosophical argument. This is not a theory or analysis. It is an attempt at recollection. My intention is to illustrate my personal experience as a first-generation and low-income philosophy student, but I would not be surprised if these experiences resonate with many other students from similar backgrounds. It is not a unique experience to need to support oneself, even if the financial need is causing significant harm to one’s well-being. It is not unique to have to teach yourself how to do and handle everything on your own, because you have started doing things your caretakers didn’t. I would like to say that I appreciate being able to share my experiences and thoughts here. The opportunity to be able to write about this should not be treated lightly, only because it is such a special occasion when others want to listen. I hope that this piece can offer something to those who have faced similar struggles and those who have not. More than anything, I hope it can initiate conversation and make a difference.

I am from Calexico, a small border-town where Mexicans make up 97 percent of the population. It is a small cultural bubble almost stuck in time—one that is currently notorious for its position on the border and drug-related crime, its corrupt city government and police, and its intense heat. It is a strong community, and what I mean by that is it possesses a potent culture which bleeds proudly into the identity of all its members. If you leave, you find that there always seems to be something important missing in every place you live thereafter. I used to believe this was just my family and the food, but now I understand that the thing I silently searched for in college, but could not find, was a place of belonging and a sense of community. Maybe I shouldn’t even try to compare the level of social and civic engagement I had in my hometown with my experiences as a student in a research institution’s philosophy department. After all, community is not simply the collaboration between individuals, but it also requires a sense of mutual recognition between them. I could not expect to just find something like that at school, or in any place which isn’t home. Sometimes, I find myself romanticizing my high school academic experiences, where I had a strong sense of confidence in the classroom, when I felt genuinely connected both to my teachers and my classmates. I miss feeling like I am coming from the same place as those around me and have something of value to share with them and vice versa. The harsh reality at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), more often than not, was that I found myself so intimidated by my professors and peers that I would not engage in class discussion at all.

My family knew nothing about the major I had chosen and did not know what to think, other than that it would help me get into law school, which is what they ultimately wanted. My grandma (or as I call her, my Palle) never told her compadres that I studied philosophy. She told them that I was studying “para ser abogada” (to be a lawyer). Nobody in my family had gone to university before me, so it was a moment of success for all of us when I received my acceptance letters. I think this must be a common experience for first-generation students: having complicated feelings about our individual goals and success, perhaps to the point where we begin to misunderstand ourselves. Maybe we find that we have been misunderstanding ourselves all along. I have often felt as if my journey was not solely my own, but that it also belongs to my entire family, all the way back to my Nana Maria (my powerful ninety-eight-year-old great-grandmother). My mother had me when she was sixteen years old and that has always made me feel obligated to make her proud. If my mom or family would not get their degree or the opportunity for a successful career, then I would do it for all of us. I used to dream of getting rich in order to take care of my family and give them everything they wanted. These feelings cause a lot of difficulty when making choices solely for myself. It’s true, I would not have been able to make it to university without the sacrifices of my family, especially my parents and my grandmother. They deserve my success as much as I do, and of course I want to make them happy. I also feel the need to set an example for my younger siblings and cousins. I must show them what it takes to be able to leave our small border town in order to get a “good” education and a job. I cannot just abandon this dream of a career and money because it feels heavy with history, with my family’s struggle up until this point as well as our whole future. The dream is not just mine to leave behind.

When I arrived at UCSD I was going through the worst time of my life emotionally. My mental health was not in good enough shape for starting my adult student life. Long story short: I was kicked out of my house after an explosive fight with my parents—I would not speak to them again for months. This was a time of many changes, moving, and financial anxiety for which I did not have their support. I cannot explain how devastating that was for me, and it set the tone for my independent life moving forward. I moved for school even though at that time I was living every day knee-deep in anxiety and depression, looking forward to absolutely nothing. In a sick sense though, the traumatic fight between my parents and I helped in the long run because it gave me cause to submit a petition to be considered an independent student for the purposes of financial aid. This meant that my parents would no longer be financially responsible for me, therefore, I would qualify for more aid since their income would no longer be considered a part of mine. Once I found out my petition was approved, the financial aid representative who was working on my case told me that I needed to start using the free therapy on campus, given the rough situation with my parents. I was a little shocked. Therapy was never a consideration for me.

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thing I saw myself doing (or needing). Nobody checked on whether I went or not, and because I was settling in at a new job and a new home, I did not go consistently, even though I should have. Looking back though, I don’t think I would’ve had the time.

There was an intense level of anxiety or dread anytime I was in a classroom, especially in the beginning. I was not prepared to feel so intimidated, even though other Calexico kids who made it out talked about experiencing this when they were studying at a big university. I did not feel like I deserved to be there, and with everything else in my life going on at the time, I could hardly deal with not being able to afford it. The possibility of dropping out due to lack of financial stability always hung over my head, and unfortunately this did not empower or motivate me. Student loan debt was also a source of anxiety. I already couldn’t even think of an existence which was not paycheck to paycheck; how could I take on over twenty thousand dollars in loans? I would have to work forever or hope to marry someone wealthier. Even the possibility of wealth after law school did not put the economic anxiety and guilt to rest. I felt that I did not deserve to be in university because I could not afford it and I was not as knowledgeable as my peers. I still feel ashamed that I was never as knowledgeable or well-read as they were because I didn’t have time in the same way they did—unlike many of them, I had to work. I soon realized that having the time needed to study was a clear mark of privilege, afforded to those who didn’t have to work to make a living during college. Ideas and questions for possible papers quickly morphed into nagging reminders of self-doubt and ever-evolving impostor syndrome.

It’s important to mention that having enough money to travel home during breaks to see family is a privilege, especially if they live in another country. Not having to worry about having enough for your next meal or for a doctor’s appointment and medication is a privilege. Being able to afford all your required and recommended textbooks and your own printer and ink is a privilege. Having a car is a privilege. So is being able to socialize and go to the gym without interfering with the time you’re supposed to be using to make money to pay for your rent. I am constantly reminded of the atmosphere of privilege which surrounds academic philosophy. It can at times be sickening, and it needs to change. I can see how it drives people from working class backgrounds away—a career in reading and writing often looks unrealistic to anyone who does not come from a certain level of material wealth. Sometimes all of philosophy seems like an activity of leisure and/or performance, depending on how you’re doing it and who you’re doing it for.

With the fall in my academic self-confidence came the slow death of my internal motivation and work ethic. I didn’t fit in, in terms of my cultural background or my kind of knowledge. My classmates were not like me, in what they did outside of class and what they cared about. It took a few years before I would make any close friends from the same major, and most of them were transfer students who were just as “lost” in philosophy as I. We could share and bond over the experiences of feeling like the odd-one-out in a classroom. Whether it was because of our cultural background, sexuality, or socioeconomic circumstances, our major simply didn’t offer a place for us. This feeling of alienation did not help my self-esteem and it did not motivate me to try and carve a space for myself, but it was nice to have other people to sink with. A few months ago, I discussed these feelings with another UCSD philosophy alumnus. I was not shocked to hear that they too struggled in having to navigate a program that obviously catered to “smart” kids from higher income backgrounds. The way we talked about ourselves relative to the other philosophy majors was concerning—there were the real philosophy majors, the ones who took it very seriously and did well, and then there was the rest of us: the other philosophy majors who did not speak much in class, the ones who were perhaps more reserved and less articulate when they did speak. What does this distinction reveal? I will never forget this conversation, mostly because it made me deeply sad, but also because I wonder who else has felt this way.

I was not going to let myself live those four years without a drive or purpose, but it was clear to me early on that it would no longer be school. Up until then, my self-confidence had been built on my academic ability and success. After six months at UCSD, I honestly stopped caring about my grades because they stopped reflecting who I thought I was and who I wanted to be. It was rough, struggling to keep up with work and school, knowing I couldn’t do my best and wasn’t putting my all into it. Instead, feelings of validation started coming from my part-time retail job, which was obviously better because it paid. My academic responsibilities were doomed to pay the price for my financial hardship: I was always going to need to work in order to survive. Financial need was truly the only obstacle between me and the ability to devote myself fully to my studies.

Once, I emailed a philosophy professor to let them know that I would be leaving class a few minutes early in order to get to work on time. (I would still have to walk twenty minutes across campus, wait for the bus, and then walk to work.) They were fine with it, but wanted to know how many hours a week I spent working. I was sort of thrown off by this question, but I responded that on average I worked about twenty-eight hours. Before I responded, I found myself thinking about how many hours I was going to tell them relative to how many hours I spent in class and studying. The next time our class met, my professor expressed how they were displeased with how our education competes for time with work. They also said that they knew some of us were “working up to twenty-eight hours a week” and that it would simply be better for us if we just “didn’t have to.” Although nobody else knew about our email exchange, I felt deeply embarrassed about my economic circumstances as I listened to these comments hunched over my desk in the back row of the small classroom. I felt shame and resentment. It never bothered me when I saw everyone around me with MacBooks and other typical college student brand-name items, while I had my ancient and heavy HP laptop that I carried around in the same backpack I’ve had since high school (I love that backpack!). However, it bothers me deeply that I did not come from enough wealth in order to walk away from the tightrope-balancing-act that is being a full-time student with a job.
Not only did I have to sit through my own internal struggle (where I felt a lot of guilt) when dealing with this, but I had to put up with the expectations of others as well.

To be clear, I do not think my professor meant to make me, or any other working student, feel bad. Nevertheless, those comments were unnecessary. How could my professor have been more understanding and accommodating? The thing is, I’m not sure. I can only say that professors should try to be more sensitive to perhaps what could be radically different economic conditions of their students, and if they are to speak about it openly, be prepared to offer the necessary resources and support for those who are struggling. Most of my professors offered me support by giving extensions of a day or two, maybe with a few words of encouragement and acknowledging my circumstances. This was enough for me—I wanted to be able to handle it all, get everything turned in on time, even if I came back home from work at 3 AM the night before and got no sleep. However, not every working student will feel, think, or work this way. Students who are first-generation and working-class should feel able to ask for more flexibility and help from professors when we need it, even if we feel bad about asking. How do we get there?

Trying (and constantly failing) to balance work and school was ultimately the most challenging part about college. I quickly realized how I was naturally much more motivated to work than to go to school. Work was a place where I felt like my labor mattered, it paid me, I felt recognized and productive. I did not feel these ways when doing philosophy. I worked all four years of college even when my therapist repeatedly asked me to consider taking on more loans instead of working. He said I was always on "survival mode" which is common for first-generation and working-class students (who would’ve thought?!). The idea of living without having to work is absurd to me, but I also acknowledge this is most likely a psychological consequence of struggling under capitalism. But really, I preferred the job because I felt like I made a difference there, I belonged there, I succeeded there, and it provided me with more money than I ever had in my life. To be honest, there were times I felt like I thrived, the total opposite of how I felt at school. Even when the hours were terrible and resulted in my being late or absent to class, I never felt like I had the option to quit work. Nobody else was going to financially support me and somehow having a job kept me going. It wasn’t until I had to depend on the sympathy and mercy of my professors that I felt bad for working. I am too ashamed to admit how many times I turned assignments in late. I was given a lot of extensions. I couldn’t keep up with all the weird shades of shame, (in)validation, and anxiety that contaminated my own thoughts about myself and my academic performance. I have my degree now, yet I do not feel like I truly deserve it. I do not feel like I put in the time or mental effort that is necessary for obtaining a whole BA. I know how much I hustled to get all my papers and readings done, so why do I feel like all of the work that I did put in still didn’t amount to much, like I didn’t accomplish anything?

Four years have passed since I started this journey and I am currently counting my losses. I fear how badly people would think of me if they knew that I felt as if this experience had resulted in more losses than gains for me. Yes, I gained an education at a top institution, I learned more in four years than I may have learned in my whole life before. I have gone to places my family only wishes they could go, as my mother would say. I am privileged, there is no doubt about that, and I feel guilty writing this because I know that many other people deserve to be in the same place as me but cannot be. There was just a lot of loss I did not anticipate by choosing to go to college. I did not give myself the chance to begin my degree in a healthy, functioning place. I missed out on so much time with my family. My younger brother, who I practically raised, grew up into a teenager and I was not there for that. We are not as close as we used to be. To my dismay, time went on without me. I missed out on too many award ceremonies, sports games, family dinners, and laughter. In some ways I felt like I could not recognize my family’s ways of life anymore. My great-uncle, my Tio Chuy, moved back to Calexico soon after I left for college. He is a grandfather figure to me, someone I look up to because he was somehow always in a good mood, always trying to lift everybody’s spirits. He was an incredibly supportive father to my cousins and always did his best to take care of both my grandma and Nana. My uncle had lived through so much. He grew up working in the fields and had children to support at a young age. But no matter how hard life got, you could count on his humor, smile, and love. Memories of his jokes and laughter bring me deep comfort and I feel intense guilt and regret for not expressing more of my appreciation to him. I looked forward to being able to spend time with him since he was living at home, and I would go back once I graduated. We didn’t have that time together. After he moved, it was discovered that there was a tumor in his brain. I didn’t get to say goodbye to him or spend time with him while he was recovering between surgeries; and then he was gone. This is a great regret. My Nana Maria would pass away shortly after her son, a few weeks after I first sat down to write this. That’s four years I could have had with the two elders of my family before they were gone. I genuinely feel like college was a time where I had to leave my family behind, and I was unaware that I was making that choice by moving away for school. Work commitments kept me from visiting home much, and now that miserable excuse matters as much as that prestigious piece of paper.

The more time goes on, the less I find in common between myself and the people I grew up with. The only people I have truly felt close to and identified with. I do not just feel disconnected from my family because of the physical distance. Now there are way fewer things to talk about, and I find that when my family speaks to me it’s more about how things used to be. We become sentimental, but our interactions can feel so passive. I don’t even feel like the daughter, granddaughter, sister, niece, and cousin I was before I left. Whenever politics come up my palms start to get sweaty because my family and I do not see eye-to-eye on certain things. Some of my family members glorify my struggles of living on my own and supporting myself. This makes me sad sometimes because I feel like as my family, they should want me to live comfortably, instead of romanticizing me working long hours during finals week and facing housing insecurity. When we disagree, my
I would have regretted not pursuing philosophy. Despite how hard it’s been, I can’t imagine doing anything else. I would say that it wasn’t until my second year that I truly began doing better in my coursework because I was motivated by developing my own interests. I can remember that fortunate series of events as follows: 1) I took Mexican philosophy and felt like something was familiar in the content, approach, and atmosphere of the class, which I had never felt before. It was the only time during college where I felt like I was in class back in high school, which may not sound like a good thing—but it is. I don’t mean that the class was less difficult, or less philosophical, and therefore easier. No, I faced the same struggles while writing and reading for this class, but, because I felt connected to the content, I was more motivated to do my best. I wanted to understand more, I felt the urge to put in the work and engage with the texts at home and with my classmates during lecture. After taking this course, I became a member of the FiloMex (Mexican philosophy) Lab, which was a culturally and philosophically affirming experience. 2) I took Existentialism and developed a strong interest in Kierkegaard, a philosopher whose work has provided me with a framework that helps me understand the way I live, what I do, and how I love. I would end up having a beautiful experience doing a summer research program where we worked together as a small class daily to “summon his wisdom.” Having that moment and feeling connected to a particular thinker, their philosophy, and the community which exists only to celebrate and understand their work was very important for me. Before then, I honestly did not know what it was like to do “research.” I had not been to a conference or experienced a Q&A session. I didn’t know what a community in philosophy could look and feel like until I did that project. 3) I read Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the end of my junior year and felt like my mind was burst open. 4) During my senior year, I participated in the regional Ethics Bowl. I officially became a part of the small undergrad philosophy community on campus because I served as Phil Club Vice President. I also completed my first independent studies: one on Kierkegaard and Hegel, and another about racism and responsibility.

Since I’ve fully integrated into the working class after finishing my BA, I’ve missed studying philosophy more than I anticipated. I became comfortable with the idea that I’m not cut out for it, the way I am for working in a non-academic setting. I think I led myself to believe that because I know I’m good at working. But I think I can be good at philosophy too. More recently, I have been able to put more time into figuring out the answers to my own questions about existence, doing reading groups solely out of my interests. This makes me feel confident that I have what it takes and all I needed was the time. The part I am most grateful for is the support and help from my advisors, and other philosophers too. I am serious about my plans for graduate school, so who knows what happens next?

**NOTES**

1. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who read my piece and pressed me to say more on this—there is much to think about.

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**Abolition University: Mobilizing Black Feminist Philosophy to Transform Institutions of Higher Education into “Vehicles of Decarceration” that Affirm the Lives of First-Generation Students**

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In this moment of national reckoning with structural racism and racialized state violence, particularly as they pervade the US criminal legal system—a moment crystallized by the recent siege of the US Capitol by armed white supremacists, carrying Confederate flags, intent on overturning a democratic election—it is imperative that we recognize and reckon with the work of Angela Y. Davis. An engaged Black feminist philosopher, Davis has for more than fifty years been the most prescient and incisive voice on abolition in the country. Contemporary calls to overhaul the dominant American approach to public safety, to decrease disfavored public investment in institutions of racialized state violence and to reinvest public resources in...
Marginalized communities, have their theoretical origins in Davis’s consistent call for a New Abolitionist Movement—calls which date back to the mid-1990s.¹

In this article, I argue that Davis’s philosophy of abolition articulates a vision and analytic framework for refashioning institutions of higher education into “vehicles of decarceration” that affirm the lives of historically marginalized, first-generation students.² Moreover, I maintain that reconstructing institutions of higher education along these lines is an essential moment in the actualization of the unfinished project of American abolition. I advance this claim in three steps. First, I summarize Davis’s philosophy of abolition, focusing on the way that it revamps W. E. B. Du Bois’s historically grounded conception of abolition democracy into a regulative ideal for anti-racist democracy consisting of two essential moments—one negative, one constructive.³ Then I argue that refashioning institutions of higher education to affirm the lives of historically marginalized, first-generation, formerly incarcerated students is an indispensable ingredient of the constructive moment of abolition.

The second half of the article will apply these insights to the California State University Project Rebound Consortium, a network of programs across fourteen public universities designed to support the higher education and successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated. This program is an exemplar of the mobilization and materialization of abolitionist philosophy at the postsecondary level. The majority (63 percent) of Project Rebound students are first-generation; 61 percent are Black, Latinx, or Native; and 69 percent are Pell Grant recipients. Many of them had their educational journeys as youths violently disrupted by the school-to-prison pipeline. I analyze how Project Rebound, by centering the leadership of formerly incarcerated people, works to deliver formerly incarcerated first-generation students from the prevalent experience of compounded imposter syndrome. Project Rebound helps formerly incarcerated first-generation students emancipate themselves from an imposterism compounded by the prison label—a “badge of inferiority,” which not only makes them feel that they don’t belong in higher education but is legally designed to deny them both the sense and the substance of belonging in mainstream social institutions altogether.

I. BLACK FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND ABOLITION

Davis’s philosophy of abolition is driven by the ideal of abolition democracy. Drawing from W. E. B. Du Bois’s analysis of the post-Emancipation period in his work Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880 (1935), Davis argues that mass and racially disparate incarceration in the US is a sedimentation of slavery:¹ Indeed, it is a result of America’s failure to comprehensively abolish slavery. “Du Bois argued that the abolition of slavery was accomplished only in the negative sense,” Davis writes. In other words, slavery was rendered illegal and formally disestablished as an economic institution. However, the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) to the US Constitution did not comprehensively abolish slavery; it explicitly recodified slavery “as a punishment for crime.”⁴ And as a growing body of scholars, activists, and cultural producers (following Davis) have shown, the US criminal legal system has served as a receptacle for the persistence-through-permutation of racialized violence and social death ever since.

“In order to achieve the comprehensive abolition of slavery,” Davis argues:

after the institution was rendered illegal and black people were released from their chains, new institutions should have been created to incorporate black people into the social order. . . . Because this did not occur, black people encountered new forms of slavery—from debt peonage and the convict lease system to segregated and second-class education. The prison system continues to carry out this terrible legacy. It has become a receptacle for all of those human beings who bear the inheritance of the failure to create abolition democracy in the aftermath of slavery. And this inheritance is not only born by black prisoners, but by poor Latino, Native American, Asian, and white prisoners [as well].⁵

Creatively adapting Du Bois’s historically grounded concept of abolition democracy into a regulative ideal of social justice, Davis articulates a theory of abolition that is composed of two concurrent and inextricably interrelated moments.⁶ By “moment” I mean, in the Hegelian sense (das Moment), an essential but partial aspect, stage, or part of a whole. One of the moments of abolition is negative, while the other is constructive. Comprehensive abolition requires the correlational development of both moments.

The negative moment involves “a negative process of tearing down,” i.e., dismantling the prison industrial complex and the vestiges of slavery embedded within it. This is the moment of decarceration and divestiture. When ideologically detached from the second, constructive moment of abolition, the moment of divestiture is distortedly deployed by detractors to foment fear and to caricature abolition as, at best, naively utopian or, at worst, an irresponsibly monstrous agenda of inciting complete, unaccountable disorder. “When abolitionists raise the possibility of living without prisons, a common reaction is fear—fear provoked by the prospect of criminals pouring out of prisons and returning to communities where they may violently assault people and their property.”⁷ We bear witness to this caricatured, often explicitly racialized fear, for instance, in reactionary calls to defend the police against the mass mobilized demands to defund the police, and at rejoinders to the claim that “Black Lives Matter” with counter-assertions that “All Lives Matter” or “Blue Lives Matter” (as if it weren’t obviously the case that the mattering of Black lives, and the inscription of that mattering into dominant institutions, were a necessary condition for all lives to concretely matter).

Such fear and reaction are partly the product of our tendency to “transfer to crime other fears for which we have no mode of expression.”⁸ They also stem from the epistemological resilience¹⁰ of carceral logic, which not only works to confine millions of mostly Black, brown, Native, and socioeconomically disadvantaged bodies, but
also confines our collective capacities for thinking, feeling, imagining, and acting beyond prisons and police.\(^{12}\) To say that the logic of carcerality is "epistemologically resilient," following Black feminist epistemologist Kristie Dotson, is to say that as an instituted social imaginary, it can absorb extraordinarily large challenges and disturbances without redefining or dislodging its dominant underlying structure.\(^{13}\) Like people in the nineteenth century who had become so inured to the institutions of slavery that they could not conceive of society without it, so it is with the institution of the prison and the logic of carcerality today.\(^{14}\) Instead of envisioning a world without human cages as an incitement to the presence of life-affirming, liberatory possibility, people confronted with the radical epistemological ingenuity of prison abolition as a philosophical and concrete anti-violence project instead imagine a mere absence of the carceral status quo—a vacuum of law enforcement teeming with unfettered violence.\(^{15}\) But such ideologically laden fears disregards or assemble the fact that decarceration and divestiture comprise just one partial aspect of the philosophy of abolition democracy. The constructive moment of abolition entails radically reimagining public safety,\(^{16}\) which involves rethinking an array of major public institutions, including, and especially, institutions of higher education.

"It is true," Davis argues, "that abolitionists want to dismantle structures of imprisonment, but not without a process that calls for building alternative institutions."\(^{17}\) Abolition democracy "is not only, or not even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions."\(^{18}\)

Thus, the second and equally essential moment of abolition is reconstruction.

Reconstruction is the affirmative, constructive aspect of abolition—a creative process of fashioning and investing in an array of social institutions, such as public employment, health, housing, and education, that are animated not by exploitation, domination, and social death, but instead by life-affirming relationships governed by equitable access to opportunity and infrastructures of care. Dismantling the carceral logics and systems that "disappear people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems [those people] represent,"\(^{19}\) these alternative institutions would establish vital systems of support that many communities lack, affirmatively disrupting the intergenerational cycles that set people on track to prison (e.g., poverty, housing and food insecurity, unemployment, abuse, addiction, and undereducation). The institutions of abolition democracy would substantively resolve the plethora of social, economic, and political problems that mass, racialized policing and incarceration in actuality exacerbate and extend by "devour[ing] the social wealth needed to address the very problems that have led to spiraling numbers of prisoners."\(^{20}\)

II. THE PHILOSOPHY OF ABOLITION AND THE FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY

Davis’s work conceptually severs state punishment’s "seemingly indissoluble link with crime."\(^{21}\) Instead, she articulates the criminal legal system’s implication in the structural (re)production of gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequality. One of the critical, and decisively feminist, innovations of Davis’s philosophy of abolition is that, through the concept of the prison industrial complex, she shifts our attention from the prison, conceived as an isolated institution, to the wider set of symbiotic relationships sustained among correctional communities, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, prison guard and police unions, legislative agendas, and judicial procedural systems.\(^{22}\) By widening and homing our critical attention in on the broad set of relationships that undergird the prison industrial complex—and through which carcerality and its profiteering insinuate themselves into our everyday lives and institutions—Davis articulates the expansive scope of decarceration as an overarching political vision. She also guides the intention of abolitionist world-making toward the formation of life-affirming relationships across an array of social institutions:

[The] most effective abolitionist strategies will contest [the relationships that uphold the prison industrial complex] and propose alternatives that pull them apart . . . [and] imagine a constellation of alternative institutions. . . . The creation of new institutions that lay claim to the space now occupied by the prison can eventually start to crowd out the prison so that it would inhabit increasingly smaller areas of our social and psychic landscape.\(^{23}\)

In making this point in different contexts, Davis repeatedly references the abolitionist significance of educational institutions. "Prison abolitionist strategies," Davis argues, "reflect an understanding of the connections between institutions that we usually think about as disparate and disconnected. They reflect an understanding of the extent to which the overuse of imprisonment is a consequence of eroding educational opportunities, which are further diminished by using imprisonment as a false solution for poor public education."\(^{24}\) Structural racism plays a significant role in determining who goes to prison and who gets to go to colleges and universities, as racism "is inscribed in the very processes that create trajectories that lead inevitably toward incarceration or higher education."\(^{25}\)

Mass and racially disparate policing and incarceration are reciprocally and recursively related to the erosion of public educational opportunities at all levels. The school-to-prison pipeline diverts the pathways of many would-be first-generation college students, especially youths of color. Not surprisingly, most formerly incarcerated college students are also first-generation. Thus, institutions of higher education—and specifically, the way that they function with respect to formerly incarcerated and first-generation students—are essential to the formation of abolition democracy. "Just as anti-slavery abolitionism called for new schools, so anti-prison abolitionism also emphasizes educational institutions."\(^{26}\) Colleges and universities are not only vital to actualizing the promise of equitable access to higher education and its associated opportunities. They are also critical to the construction of lines of communication and coalitional formations that link academic communities and imprisoned communities in ways that recapitulate the historical relationship
between enslaved people and abolitionists.\textsuperscript{37} Institutions of higher education are also crucial to the development of infrastructures and communities of care that ultimately (and inclusively) increase public safety, security, and prosperity. Indeed, Davis claims that educational institutions are “the most powerful alternative to jails and prisons.”\textsuperscript{38} However, to “transform schools into vehicles of decarceration”\textsuperscript{39} requires not only that schools be demilitarized,\textsuperscript{40} but that the spaces now occupied by schools be shifted, and their agendas expanded, through empowering relationships with historically marginalized communities that construct life-affirming alternatives to the school-to-prison pipeline and the revolving door of mass incarceration.

Davis focuses primarily on K-12 schools as “upstream,” preventative points of intervention for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and undereducation and building abolitionist alternatives to the school-to-prison pipeline. I will focus on the California State University Project Rebound Consortium as an exemplar of the mobilization and institutionalization of abolitionist philosophy at the postsecondary level. Project Rebound works both “downstream” by constructing a prison-to-college pipeline and “upstream” by creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated staff and students, as ambassadors of higher education, to mentor marginalized youth of color in their local communities as well as in carceral settings, disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and building a pathway to higher education for first-generation students in its place.

III. PROJECT REBOUND: TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES INTO VEHICLES OF DECARCERATION AND CONSTRUCTING INFRASTRUCTURES OF CARE

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world,\textsuperscript{41} and California has the second largest prison and jail systems in the country.\textsuperscript{42} Mass incarceration drains state budgets, depleting public resources that might otherwise be allocated to strengthen social safety nets and improve educational access and quality; it is also a significant generator of social inequality, contributing to the creation of a class of people permanently locked out of the opportunities of mainstream society, even well after they are released from the system. Formerly incarcerated people face momentous obstacles to successful reentry. The American Bar Association (2015) has cataloged over 45,000 federal and state statutes and regulations that impose collateral consequences on persons convicted of crimes, including barriers related to accessing affordable housing, transportation, and gainful employment. Currently and formerly incarcerated people also face tremendous roadblocks in accessing the transformative power of higher education, which for many is the most effective and successful pathway to a more purposeful and prosperous life. Prisons overwhelmingly prioritize labor over education. Education in prison tends to be restricted to adult basic education, high school equivalency, vocational, or career and technical education, but not college. And only in December 2020 did the government finally end the twenty-six-year ban on Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students. While possessing knowledge, experience, and skills that stand to enrich the university community, formerly incarcerated students (and aspiring students) have uniquely urgent needs in navigating academic institutions, accessing the available academic and student supports (or even knowing what supports there are), and acquiring the soft skills and social capital necessary for academic and postgraduate success.

The California State University (CSU) Project Rebound Consortium is a network of programs across fourteen universities within the largest public four-year university system in the country that are designed to support the higher education and successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated through the mentorship and living examples of other formerly incarcerated students, graduates, faculty, and staff. Project Rebound offers a community of support to students who have experienced the traumas of incarceration and who now face a multitude of social barriers related to housing, employment, transportation, and food insecurity—barriers that threaten to derail their lives and lead to re-arrest. Operating throughout the state of California, Project Rebound builds the capacity of CSU campuses to support reentering students by eliminating barriers and mitigating insecurities that compromise their ability to thrive academically. Project Rebound constructs a life-affirming alternative to the revolving door policies of mass incarceration by making higher education more accessible to and supportive of formerly incarcerated students and aspiring students so that they can acquire the knowledge and skills of a university education, enhance their capacity for civic engagement and community leadership, secure meaningful and gratifying employment, empower themselves and their families, and ultimately make stronger, safer communities.

Sixty-three percent of the more than four hundred self-identified formerly incarcerated CSU students that are part of the Project Rebound community are first-generation college students; 61 percent are Black, Latinx, or Native. Like (other) first-generation students, formerly incarcerated students often experience “imposter syndrome,” a psychological pattern characterized by pervasive self-doubt, in which an individual harbors a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud.\textsuperscript{43} Imposter syndrome is more broadly experienced by many first-generation students, who are often made to feel that they don’t belong in college; that they lack the background and social capital deemed necessary to succeed in higher education.\textsuperscript{44} Students suffering from imposter syndrome are more prone to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, social isolation, and burnout.\textsuperscript{45} Due to associated feelings of separation or dissociation from self, such students also frequently select majors and careers that do not align well with their own passion and purpose, which can lead to loss of intrinsic motivation, exacerbated emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal.\textsuperscript{46}

Students who have experienced incarceration (again, the majority of whom are also first-generation) experience compounded forms of imposter syndrome. They are not only made to feel that they don’t belong in higher education; they are frequently made to feel that they don’t belong in mainstream social institutions at all. This feeling is the product of extensive and purposeful social engineering.
Formerly incarcerated students arrive at the university with what the late sociologist Devah Pager called a “negative credential.” Like educational or professional credentials, the “negative credential” of a criminal record “constitutes a formal and enduring classification of social status, which can be used to regulate access and opportunity across numerous social, economic, and political domains.” Unlike an earned educational or professional credential, however, which grants an individual access to opportunities, the criminal credential is “a unique mechanism of stratification,” an unearned imposition of the state, manufactured out of 45,000 collateral consequences of criminal conviction, that “certifies [formerly incarcerated people] in ways that qualify them for discrimination or social exclusion.” The state-sanctioned social stigma of criminal conviction is so extensive and intractable that scholars and activists refer to it as a “mark,” “brand,” “label,” or “badge of inferiority” (thereby conceptually linking collateral consequences with Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), one of the most notorious decisions involving race in the history of the US Supreme Court, which established the “separate but equal” principle that was used until 1954 to legally uphold Jim Crow segregation).

Formerly incarcerated students have an abiding fear of being exposed and marked by “the prison label.” Indeed, as legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues in The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, “the system of mass incarceration is based on the prison label, not prison time . . . . Once a person is labeled a felon, he or she is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal, and privileges of citizenship such as voting and jury service are off-limits.” As a “badge of inferiority,” the prison label “relegates people for their entire lives to second-class status . . . locked out of the mainstream society and economy—permanently.” The prison label compounds the imposter syndrome felt by formerly incarcerated, first-generation students. Produced by punitive institutions and sensationalizing media conglomerates, the outsider or marginalized self-concept that formerly incarcerated students internalize is an integral currency of the “closed circuit of perpetual marginality” that mass incarceration manufactures.

A significant part of the work of Project Rebound is geared toward the elimination of the prison label and the social stigma of incarceration. One of the primary ways Project Rebound erodes the social stigma of incarceration is by centering the leadership, agency, civic engagement, and living example of formerly incarcerated college students, graduates, faculty, and staff. The principle of “each one teach one” is at the core of Project Rebound’s philosophy. Project Rebound staff have an incarceration experience of their own. Many are alumni of the program who have successfully transitioned back to society by pursuing higher education as a transformative practice, earning undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, pursuing research, and assuming leadership roles within their communities.

Believing that those closest to the problem hold the seeds of the solution, Project Rebound program staff and student peer navigators support other formerly incarcerated people with admissions and financial aid applications, course registration and major selection, soft skills and technical literacy, student life and leadership, securing internships, and career development. Through trauma-informed, asset-based community development and public education, staff exemplify, highlight, and build upon the many character strengths that formerly incarcerated people bring to institutions of higher education—virtues like resilience, persistence, resourcefulness, enthusiasm, gratitude, self-determination, and commitments to fairness and social justice. Project Rebound staff and students also amplify the unique critical insights of currently and formerly incarcerated people. Borne of the lived experience of struggle with the intricate injustices and indignities of the prison industrial complex, the insights of Project Rebound scholars productively complicate and contribute to scholarship, teaching, and policymaking on criminal justice, social inequality, and public safety.

By recasting the experience and survival of incarceration as a source of personal and collective empowerment, Project Rebound provides formerly incarcerated students with an opportunity not only to socially reintegrate in a college setting, but also to psychologically integrate their lived histories into their present identities, projects, and pursuits in an empowering way that dislodges the definitions imposed upon them by the prison label. As one Project Rebound alumnus, Robert, puts it:

Project Rebound is an existential spot for me. It’s where I get together with others who are similarly situated; they have an incarceration, as I do. That’s a huge part of who I am . . . . Project Rebound has been a scaffolding. It’s allowed me to integrate this important part of me into this educational experience and not have to feel like I’m hiding this part of myself.

Project Rebound scholars routinely speak of the freedom felt from “coming out of the shadows,” exercising agency in their own self-definition, and utilizing their knowledge and experiences to teach and empower others. By shattering the stigma and shame associated with the experience of incarceration, Project Rebound creates a culture that acknowledges, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, “that where life is precious, life is precious,” that there is no essential difference between people in prison and people in the free world. Currently and formerly incarcerated people are not failed human beings deserving of second-class citizenship; they are intrinsically valuable people—the overwhelming majority of whom are precious Black, Latinx, and Indigenous lives—whom we recognize as our friends, as members of our families, communities, and in some cases, our selves.

III.1 CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF CARE AND BELONGING

One of the primary goals of Project Rebound is to cultivate a culture of care and belonging for formerly incarcerated students on California State University campuses across the Consortium through community building, holistic peer-led and professionally supported healing practices, and wraparound support that help Rebound Scholars actualize their full potential. This entails that our students not be
seen and not see themselves as clients and recipients of services—not as multiply disadvantaged objects to be managed—but rather as valuable members of a community of care and aspiration.

For example, in response to the fact that formerly incarcerated people are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public, Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton established the first transformative housing community for formerly incarcerated university students in the nation in 2018. The John Irwin House is named after Dr. John Irwin, a criminology professor at San Francisco State University who founded Project Rebound in 1967 and, prior to becoming a scholar, had spent five years in prison himself. The John Irwin House not only provides housing for six students, but also serves as the hub of Project Rebound’s community-building work. It provides a space for the entire Project Rebound community to participate in regular social gatherings, orientations, workshops, mentorship meetings, celebrations, peer-to-peer support meetings, and more. The Irwin House is a scholar-centered space, thoughtfully designed to support learning and cultivate life skills so that our students can successfully transition to independent living after graduating from the program.

As a community center, the Irwin House also enhances Project Rebound as a community of social and psychological reintegration. Like other first-generation students, the identity tensions and estrangements that first-generation, formerly incarcerated students experience in their educational journeys are often multilateral and multidirectional. Students experience compounded imposter syndrome when they begin to integrate onto campus and interact with faculty, staff, and their more “traditional” student peers. They also often experience tension and estrangement from their families and communities of origin, who for a variety of reasons often experience cultures of higher education as foreign—sometimes even as unwelcoming, threatening, or hostile. It’s noteworthy that this sentiment from one’s family is common not only among formerly incarcerated students in Project Rebound, but first-generation students more broadly. Project Rebound works to mitigate this estrangement and resist the institutional history of US higher education, which has predominantly served exclusionary ends, reproducing rather than redressing social inequality. Utilizing the student-centered, yet domestic space of the Irwin House, Project Rebound welcomes students and their multigenerational families to commune with staff, faculty, and community partners at monthly cookouts, food pantries, holiday gatherings (e.g., “Friendsgiving”), and graduation celebrations. Students’ families, including the youths of the next generation, are not patronized or ostracized, but affirmed and recognized as integral participants in and beneficiaries of Rebound Scholars’ educational and emancipatory journeys. In this way, families of Rebound Scholars feel less estranged from the educational pursuits of their loved one, but instead, come to see themselves as part of the intellectual and social community of which their loved one is a part, and students’ children, nieces, and nephews frequently come to see themselves as future college students, thus interrupting intergenerational cycles of undereducation, addiction, and incarceration.

Attending to students’ basic needs is an integral part of constructing abolitionist infrastructures of care. Over 40 percent of CSU students experience food insecurity and 10 percent experience homelessness. Project Rebound knows from experience that these rates are higher among first-generation, formerly incarcerated students. In addition to providing housing and housing support scholarships, Project Rebound also provides meal vouchers and other forms of support to increase the food security of students. For example, Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton launched a Food Justice Initiative to address the escalating food insecurities of Rebound students and their families during the COVID-19 crisis. Pivoting in response to the rapid closure of campus infrastructure, which suddenly deprived the members of the program of the campus food vendors upon whom they rely upon for regular meals, Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton created a food pantry at the Irwin House and then broadened that work to encompass an organic community garden, horticultural training, and culinary skills curriculum aimed at providing Rebound Scholars with more equitable access to healthy food and empowering them with knowledge and skills to ensure greater long-term food security for them and their families. The garden also contributes to the holistic healing and basic wellness needs of Rebound Scholars by providing a therapeutic outdoor space, conducive to physical distancing, where students can socialize and serve the community while earning a wage and receiving hands-on experience with the harvest cycle—from seed to table. In these ways, Project Rebound helps develop networks of care, including housing and food security, for first-generation and formerly incarcerated students who might otherwise lack these critical sources of security.

Such infrastructures of care produce measurable and discernible results. Project Rebound is resoundingly successful. Compared with the State of California, which has a 46 percent recidivism rate, zero percent of Project Rebound students have returned to prison. Furthermore, 65 percent of Project Rebound students earn over a 3.0 grade point average, and 87 percent of Project Rebound graduates have been admitted to postgraduate programs or secured full-time employment. These results demonstrate that investing in abolitionist infrastructures of care increases public safety while dismantling systems of oppression and exclusion.

### III.2 SHIFTING THE FOOTPRINT OF THE UNIVERSITY TOWARD JUSTICE

The communities of care that Project Rebound cultivates extend beyond the university. Project Rebound builds bridges between the university and a broad array of community and grassroots political formations and philanthropic entities—founding mentorship programs with elders in the community, designing capacity-building workshop series on civic engagement, trauma-informed social work, and alternatives to violence that are facilitated by community-based organizations, and engaging in outreach and mentorship with currently incarcerated people and youth directly impacted by the criminal legal system. Forging these new relationships is not only a matter of increasing equitable access to higher education—the
language of “access” implies that the university makes itself more accessible while otherwise remaining unchanged. By embracing and empowering first-generation, formerly incarcerated students on university campuses, and by constructing networks of care and advocacy among them and diverse community partners, Project Rebound shifts the footprint of the university toward social justice.

Project Rebound exemplifies the leading role that institutions of higher education must play in the theory and practice of constructive abolition. Through student-centered, grassroots-oriented empowerment work, first-generation, formerly incarcerated students, faculty, and staff can inspire and reconstruct universities so that they begin to crowd out the prison industrial complex, so that the prison industrial complex inhabits increasingly smaller areas not only of our social and psychic landscape, but of our state and municipal budgets. To be sure, negative abolition is essential. We must divest from prisons and police, which for decades have consumed increasingly breathtaking proportions of state and municipal budgets, cutting public investment in education, health, employment, and housing, while producing greater social inequality and harm. But, as abolitionists have argued for over two decades, divesting from the prison industrial complex must go hand-in-hand with constructive reinvestment in infrastructures of care. Mass and racially disparate incarceration arose due to America’s failure to comprehensively abolish slavery by establishing such infrastructures of care. Just as anti-slavery abolitionism called for new schools, so anti-prison abolitionism must also emphasize colleges and universities as indispensable institutions for forging the future of abolition democracy.

NOTES
10. Ibid., 40.


Supporting First-Generation Philosophers at Every Level

Bailie Peterson
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The APA has recently taken steps to address concerns related to teaching and supporting philosophers and students from less privileged backgrounds. I want to add to this project by fleshing out some concrete ways that philosophy professors contribute to the challenges faced by first-generation and financially disadvantaged philosophers and students. I hope that in making these behaviors explicit it may be easier for faculty to acknowledge and overcome them.

I will share several undergraduate experiences as a first-generation woman from a low-income background, which demonstrate ways that these identities come into conflict with class differences. I will also include observations and comments from my students. I teach in a university with a significant population of underrepresented students. While I have some things in common with my students in terms of background, they face challenges that I do not, related to race, health, and disability status, for example. I hope that their experiences can add to the conversation in ways that mine cannot.

I will also address something that I only recently recognized. These issues do not go away with the attainment of a degree or a particular job or title, and they can continue to have deleterious effects on one’s professional life. The uncomfortable environment that professors create or support is not only damaging to undergraduates, but to graduate students and incoming faculty from less traditional backgrounds, who may feel a renewed sense of imposter syndrome and alienation.

I. IS PHILOSOPHY WORTH SHARING?

Before I begin, I’d like to quickly set aside the question of whether or not there is value in studying philosophy, in general, as well as specifically for less privileged students.
While this is an essential preliminary question, I assume that most of us working in this field find it to be worth sharing with those who are left out. Nevertheless, many existing arguments establish the worth of philosophy, based on benefits like improved reading comprehension and critical thinking.\(^2\)

We have no reason to assume that the benefits of philosophy fail to apply to less privileged students. There are even preliminary suggestions that the benefits of philosophy are especially significant for underrepresented students.\(^3\)

Philosophy courses can also provide opportunities for students to reflect on meaning, value, and identity. In *Moving Up without Losing your Way* (2019), Jennifer Morton suggests that reflective practices like these can help alleviate concerns relevant to first-generation and low-income students as they navigate spheres of conflicting identity.\(^4\)

Considering these benefits, we ought to correct the current imbalance. I caution those tempted with thinking that philosophy isn’t relevant to all students to question their assumptions. We must avoid jumping to harmful conclusions that reify dangerous stereotypes about the link between class and talent, interest, or ability.

Beyond these suggestions, the most substantial reasons I find for increasing access and exposure to philosophy come from teaching. I am not alone in this—philosophers share positive experiences teaching a range of students outside of college, including K-12 students, homeless youth, and people in prisons.\(^5\) Frequently, these students lack prior understanding of and exposure to philosophical works. However, philosophy does not need to have pre-requisites or other kinds of previous exposure, and students from a range of backgrounds are often eager to learn more.

In my case, I first took a philosophy course at community college. I added the class because I liked the professor, but I had a very vague understanding of the content. Despite this lack of previous exposure, I enjoyed the course so much that I asked what I needed to do to become a professor during the first weeks of the term. At that point, I was not on a path to a PhD by any means. I had dropped out of high school during tenth grade, ran away from home, lived among homeless youth and adults, and, eventually, completed a high school diploma program primarily as a way to increase job opportunities beyond minimum wage options. I had not intended to begin the work towards my associate’s degree and did so only after the state diploma program provided a scholarship. Philosophy provided a new approach to the specific questions that mattered to me. The ability to call everything into question and disagree with authority and past teachings was empowering. I did not stop until I met the goals I set out in my first course, earning my doctorate, and beginning my career as a professor.

While my initial experience with philosophy may not represent most low-income, first-generation high school dropouts, the immediate and profound interest I developed carried me through despite many challenges. Some of these challenges reflect deeper issues that may explain why philosophy has continually lacked diversity. These issues come, in part, from the content, e.g., the lack of representation of women and other marginalized philosophers.\(^6\) But efforts to make philosophy more inclusive must also focus on other factors, like an uncomfortable classroom setting or hostile learning environment.

Therefore, we must not only take into consideration the necessity of efforts like diversifying syllabi (which have essential and demonstrable benefits),\(^7\) but must recognize the importance of delivering content without alienating students. In my first philosophy course, my professor was incredibly adept at fostering a sense of community and belonging, which are essential ingredients in the quest to make philosophy more inclusive.

On the other hand, philosophers contribute to the lack of diversity by creating uncomfortable environments, in both overt and subtle ways. This last concern is my main focus, as it hasn’t been addressed, and I think that changes in this area would be significant and necessary at every level.

**II. A MISMATCH IN BACKGROUND**

I do not think philosophers intend to make philosophy feel exclusionary, but they often act in ways that create this impression, sometimes out of a lack of awareness or understanding. Frequently, the challenges faced by students are invisible—you cannot tell by looking at a student what they are facing outside of the classroom. Given the frequent mismatch between the background of professors and students (especially in institutions with large numbers of first-generation and low-income students), there is the potential for professors to make assumptions that do not accurately reflect others’ experiences.

In her recent work, Jennifer Morton works to counteract this lack of understanding by providing vivid first-hand accounts of her students’ lives and the emotional, psychological, and ethical costs that they must pay to achieve their goals.\(^8\) This narrative approach can help philosophers develop awareness and sensitivity toward issues that they haven’t experienced themselves. For example, if you were a more traditional student, you might make assumptions about what it means to miss a class or fail an assignment. If you lived on campus, your parents provided financial and emotional support, and you did not work outside of school, your assumptions may not reflect students’ realities. Many students work full time, sometimes in physically and mentally demanding jobs.\(^9\) Others provide substantial care for children, parents, or siblings. A large number of students are active service members or veterans, which can also create obstacles. They sometimes suffer adverse mental and physical health concerns, which can be exacerbated by financial problems and lack of adequate insurance. Students from underrepresented groups may be confronting micro- and macro-aggressions or actively combating racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or other forms of oppression and exclusion. Many experience overlapping issues that make college work more challenging to navigate. The lack of awareness of who our underprivileged students are can lead to assumptions, stereotypes, and harmful behaviors. Further, when colleagues do not fit the...
assumed mold of the “typical professor,” they are likely to fall victim to similar challenges based on assumptions about their backgrounds and experiences, as well. I will now give examples that illustrate these concerns and identify harmful preconceptions.

II.1 THE MYTH THAT UNDERPRIVILEGED STUDENTS ARE DOOMED TO FAIL

It is unfair to assume that your students are set to fail, for example, even if they did not have the same educational opportunities you expect. In my case, I quickly learned that some college professors viewed my academic background as a mark against me. I began community college with a deep sense that I did not belong. It was a community college, after all, and college had seemed like an unattainable dream for most of my life. By the time I graduated from community college, however, I had made significant strides towards feeling like I belonged.

But my confidence significantly diminished on day one as a philosophy major when I shared with my Ancient Philosophy professor that I was a transfer student. He immediately discounted my prior experience with philosophy and suggested that I find a tutor. Even though I earned an A in his course without outside help, I quickly decided that I was still an impostor and that my past work could not counteract my lack of initial pedigree. Comments like these can have a lasting impact. Often, it seems that these troubling interactions stem from inexperience with what life is like beyond the academic bubble.

II.2 THE IN-CROWD

Sometimes exclusionary behaviors are puzzlingly overt. In my junior year of college, a young beginning professor with a new Ivy League PhD and flashy sports car learned from another student that I lived in a mobile home park. He asked me what it was like—what kind of people lived there, and if he could observe sometime. His attitude made me feel more like an anthropological specimen than a college student.

Other times, minor slights can compound and contribute to an overall chilly environment. I teach at a university located in a community where many families work in agriculture, and many students come from rural backgrounds. As a professor, if you literally turn your nose up at the smell of cattle and have to leave for the day, you are showing students, staff, and faculty that their home—and perhaps the livelihood that supports their family—disgusts you. This attitude comes through when professors make offhand remarks that “their children would not attend this university” or that they could not imagine living in the city or area where most of their students grew up. If students already feel that they do not belong, these subtle behaviors can push them out of the door or express that professors view them as less than. Even when these comments are not directly shared, these attitudes are likely to come across in interactions with students. These biases are part of why, as I suggest below, it is essential to take students’ comments seriously. If students feel belittled, they may be detecting biases that professors themselves are not fully aware of, and their words may reflect more profound issues.

Here again, these problems move into the profession. When colleagues make assumptions about your upbringing or criticize your educational background, this creates a hierarchy within departments, reflecting the challenges faced by undergraduates. For example, quizzing job candidates about their knowledge of wine or international travel demonstrates that you have a particular type of person in mind for the job. Comments like these can further the feeling of alienation for faculty who come from less privileged backgrounds.

III. CREATING COMMUNITY

III.1 DEMONSTRATING RESPECT FOR OTHERS AND ENCOURAGING A GROWTH MINDSET

While the above examples illustrate various problems, there are positive means to counteract these issues. Becoming aware of our differences and identifying the assumptions guiding our teaching practices can allow us to change. For example, when teaching, we might initially model the confrontational classroom dynamics that we experienced as students. But, we can also adopt methods that work better to promote a sense of belonging.

We have many opportunities to demonstrate respect and cultivate a sense of community. For example, teaching introductory courses includes many opportunities for professors to reveal inconsistencies or contradictions within students’ views. However, we must be careful not to discourage or disregard students as uninitiated beginners. Professors can show respect for students’ burgeoning understanding, even as we aim to help them improve and overcome error. Misunderstandings provide excellent opportunities to illustrate the philosophical virtue of humility, to work through the benefits of scrutiny and critical analysis, and to demonstrate a growth mindset. Encouraging a “growth mindset” (or the belief that intelligence is a quality that can be changed and developed) versus a “fixed mindset” (or the belief that intelligence is innate or fixed at birth) has many benefits. For example, it has been shown to promote a love of learning, encourage students to embrace challenges, and to increase happiness and confidence.

Furthermore, the practice of demonstrating our own shortcomings and potential for progress is an important teaching practice, both as a way to connect and to increase a sense of belonging in the classroom. To this end, I frequently share my past mistakes and progress with students, and encourage them to practice “failing.” Philosophy can just be objectively confusing, even when one has substantial experience in the field. Normalizing these struggles at every level (perhaps, especially in the high-pressure environment of grad school) is one important way to create an inclusive environment. However, when professors show hostility towards their students’ views, this reflects a pernicious elitism that shuts down learning and decreases trust in the professor.

III.2 CULTIVATING A SENSE OF BELONGING

In some cases, students can experience alienation to the degree that it impedes their ability to complete essential
tasks. I recently taught in a summer program focused on bridging the gap between high school and college. The students had received athletic scholarships to play football, and many were members of marginalized groups. Unfortunately, some of these students had a deep sense that they didn’t belong. One timid but talented student found college so uncomfortable that a ten-minute meeting with a professor was one of the biggest obstacles of the semester. For context, I am a woman, fairly early in my career, and my students typically fail to find me intimidating, for several reasons, many related to gender and personality. I prioritize ways to encourage students to feel a sense of belonging in college. I’ve attended and taught workshops on this matter and work with various campus groups towards these goals.

Nonetheless, it took gentle but concerted efforts to increase this student’s confidence and sense of belonging. I reached out by email. I pointed out the benefits of his specific contributions. I made it a point to highlight areas where he had made progress and where his unique life experiences proved relevant and meaningful to the class. I focused on increasing both a growth mindset and understanding and community with other philosophers. I’ve benefited from reflective practices like those suggested by Morton, as well as by finding ways to encourage students to feel a sense of belonging in college. I’ve attended and taught workshops on this matter and work with various campus groups towards these goals.

I am discouraged when I imagine what would have occurred in many other professors’ courses. His lack of eye contact, for example, may have been misconstrued. His sudden absence from the virtual classroom, when put on the spot, could be seen as disrespectful, rather than as a sign of a student trying very hard to overcome his nerves while saving face before his peers. For students in this position, professors must work to create a welcoming environment. The smallest nudge towards the door is often all it takes to convince students to return to their lives before college. Note that in the case of underrepresented faculty, mentoring is essential for overcoming similar gaps. It was not until I got to know professors outside of my department that I felt comfortable sharing the ways that I didn’t fit. Their guidance helped me to find my voice and convinced me to continue despite challenges.

### III.3 TAKING STUDENT COMMENTS SERIOUSLY

The behaviors identified above are dangerous for both faculty and students. They can confirm students’ beliefs that they just aren’t cut out for college. We must correct those who—even inadvertently—contribute to these issues. When we receive complaints or comments, it is prudent to imagine that many more students share these concerns. Of course, student complaints are not always accurate—but, given the sense that philosophy is exclusionary, we ought to work hard to determine the causes of this view. We cannot disregard the opinions of the most vulnerable, even if it requires checking our egos or seriously editing our pedagogical practices to serve the needs of a changing student population.

We must be aware of the potential for implicit bias and acknowledge that the invisibility of various struggles and identities may enable negative behaviors to slip beneath the radar. It is essential to create awareness of elitism and other class-related attitudes and to assess the climate within existing departments. The attitude that only some people belong is pervasive and often comes to college with underrepresented students. We owe it to them to prevent the proliferation of these harmful attitudes.

### IV. ADDRESSING THESE CONCERNS FOR JUNIOR FACULTY

Given the nearly immeasurable difference between my life pre- and post-college, I have always found it essential to support students from similar backgrounds and to address the challenges that stand in their way. However, it has recently become clear that part of my exclusive focus on students obscured the fact that the exclusionary behavior I have described extends beyond professor-student interactions.

We can tie this to some of the myths embedded in the traditional narrative of upward mobility. Jennifer Morton rejects this narrative due to the overlooked costs and inequities that first-generation and low-income individuals face as they work to achieve their goals. A further problem with the typical portrayal of upward mobility is the idea that once one has “made it” past the hurdles of college, for example, they become accepted as part of the new group, and their struggles disappear.

Contra this idea, we have evidence that first-generation students fare worse than their peers beyond college in salary, interviews, and job prospects. These challenges can stem from a lack of awareness of how the professional world operates and ignorance of one’s lack of understanding, or “meta-ignorance.” We also know that issues like imposter syndrome present themselves well into professional life.

In my first years as a professor, I failed to acknowledge the continuing influence of these factors. It is now clear that I was trying to navigate within a new sphere without adequate support. I was eager to please and skeptical of my worth, which made it easy to fall victim to behavior that undermined my efforts, added to my workload unfairly, or displayed a lack of respect towards my contributions.

I encourage other professors from less privileged backgrounds to self-advocate and work to understand the possibility of meta-ignorance about policies like parental leave, salary negotiation, and service requirements, all of which caused conflict in my first years.

Although I initially struggled to self-advocate, this was not the endpoint. I’ve benefited from reflective practices like those suggested by Morton, as well as by finding understanding and community with other philosophers. I’ve
found ways to support my students while also supporting departmental changes that have made it better for all of us. Most importantly, I found mentors who I could trust to encourage and support my progress. The situation is not hopeless, but, like the alienation of students, it requires awareness as the first step towards change.

It is important to realize that my suggestions will require active work. This includes building departments that engender discussion and constructive feedback, time and patience in identifying and addressing issues, and a willingness to consider alternatives to current practices. This work must be prioritized by departments, especially when junior faculty are working to improve existing environments. In some cases, this will require cross-campus collaboration (e.g., linking in with student support specialists, administrators, and advocacy groups) to ensure that changes will have lasting effects. Acknowledging the need for change is an essential first step, but it will take substantial effort to make a shift in existing departments with long-standing traditions and practices. Given the APA’s mission, I suggest creating networks and mentoring opportunities within the organization to help meet these goals.

Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that this work is not the sole responsibility of faculty from less privileged groups, especially as they may be facing other challenges, such as meta-ignorance, or impostor syndrome, as discussed above. We must work together to assess and eliminate bullying, elitism, and hostility in our departments. Importantly, this must begin in Philosophy 101 and continue past dissertation writing, into the job search, and through the tenure process.

I hope that my comments can add to the APA’s efforts to improve the field for less-likely-would-be philosophers, and I strongly encourage them to continue to prioritize these goals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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NOTES
1. For example, roughly 46 percent of incoming students are first-generation in 2020, and about a third are Pell-grant eligible.
2. For a survey or reasons to major in philosophy, see the final chapter in Stich and Donaldson, Philosophy: Asking Questions, Seeking Answers. There is extensive support for philosophy within the K-12 philosophy movement, and much empirical research to demonstrate benefits (for example, Trickey and Topping, “Collaborative Philosophical Enquiry for School Children”; Millet and Tapper, “Benefits of Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry in Schools”; Mohr Lone and Burroughs, Philosophy in Education: Questioning & Dialogue in Schools). There is also data on GRE, GMAT and LSAT scores. However, we must consider whether there is a causal connection between the likelihood to pursue philosophy and better scores, or whether philosophy leads to higher scores (see the data available at ets.org, lsac.org, and mba.org. Relevant data is also compiled here: http://dailynous.com/value-of-philosophy/charts-and-graphics/).
3. Preliminary results from in-depth studies in the UK suggest that students who are most disadvantaged gain more in reading comprehension and math after philosophy courses, as compared to their peers. See the studies linked here: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/philosophy-for-children/. I have argued elsewhere that Summer Philosophy programs could improve the achievement gap, primarily due to empirical findings highlighting the benefits of studying philosophy (Peterson, “Can Summer Philosophy Programs Help Close the Achievement Gap?”). The benefits discussed here may be even more relevant and applicable to these students, as they navigate challenges in their own lives and within their communities. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.
5. For example, consider the success of programs like the Princeton Prison Teaching Initiative (https://prisonteaching.org), for examples of teaching youth in different contexts at the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (plato-teaching.org). I describe my experience teaching a free course for disadvantaged students in my school district in (Peterson, “Can Summer Philosophy Programs Help Close the Achievement Gap?”). Debalina Chatterjee and Joseph Willo’s 2019 PLATO Conference presentation on teaching critical thinking and philosophy to homeless youth at The Caring Place is another relevant example.
6. The APA has many useful resources related to these issues. See, for example: https://www.apaonline.org/page/diversity_resources. This page contains many resources and suggestions to increase diversity in philosophy, including efforts to increase philosophy classes offered at every level.
7. See, for example, Saul, “Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat and Women in Philosophy,” on the importance of adding women to course syllabi. My point here is that while necessary, these efforts may not be sufficient to make the field welcoming to all, especially if departments and classrooms are uncomfortable. We must address both sets of issues.
8. Morton, Moving Up Without Losing Your Way. For example, students may have to sacrifice the relationships most important to them, confront cultural differences, and contend with the challenges of code-switching.
9. Many students work to pay for college themselves and avoid loans at all costs. Sometimes, this is linked to concerns about their (or their parents’) citizenship status, and concerns about the role of federal aid. There is a vast need for mentoring and assistance about financial matters, particularly for students who do not receive this information from their families or peers.
10. Morton’s suggestions apply here, as well. Engaging in self-reflective work with students can increase awareness, understanding and empathy of these differences. These benefits extend to student-to-student interactions. One term, after a formerly homeless student in my ethics class shared her experience, I received many informed and conscientious essays on a topic that is sometimes treated poorly by students who hold stereotypes about homelessness. See further comments in section III.2.
12. Ibid. See also Leslie et al., “Expectations of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions across Academic Disciplines,” for example. These benefits may be especially important when students find philosophy initially inaccessible.
13. This is linked to yet another of the “Ethical Costs” Morton discusses. Students' beliefs, values and experiences should not be dismissed, even if they are beyond the range of what the professor may be able to imagine.
14. Several students in this course shared personal experiences with issues facing their families, including struggles related to poverty, the rights of felons, and the effects of racism and white
privilege. I sometimes share an experience of bystanders failing to notice the body of a homeless man in downtown L.A., during the busy morning commute. While students can sometimes be dismissive of issues that they haven't experienced, hearing firsthand from peers, e.g., from an African American student who witnessed police brutality in his community, is hard to turn away from. Of course, a comfortable environment is essential before this can take place, which is why some of the other issues are so important. Normalizing the experiences of those outside of the typical range of philosopher, student or professor is a powerful way to demonstrate belonging, while improving access to the material. Thank you to the reviewers for suggesting further discussion of these points.

15. I do not mean to suggest that we should coddle students, or omit necessary tasks, like conferencing with professors. Instead, I wish to highlight that we can follow methods for encouraging and supporting all of our students, including growth mindset and student-centered learning, without sacrificing rigor. See for example, Friedlaender, et al., "Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap"; Kuh et al., "Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations." ASHE Higher Education Report 32, no. 5 (2007): 1–182.

16. See for example, Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbaccalaureate’s Outcomes"; Colkey et al., "Impostor Feelings as a Moderator and Mediator of the Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Mental Health among Racial/Ethnic Minority College Students"; Hutchison, "Influence of First Generation Status on Students’ Perceptions of Faculty"; Morton, Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility.

17. See, for example, Eismann, "First Generation Students and Job Success"; Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students." 18. See Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students"; Hutchison, "Influence of First Generation Status on Students’ Perceptions of Faculty"; Swanson et al., "An Evaluation of the Educational Impact of College Campus Visits: A Randomized Experiment.

19. This is especially true for women and people of color, who, research shows, may be unfairly rated due to implicit bias, racism and sexism. (See, for example, Huston, "Race and Gender Bias in Higher Education: Could Faculty Course Evaluations Impede Further Progress Toward Parity?")

20. See, for example, Eismann, "First Generation Students and Job Success.”

21. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

22. Power dynamics can exacerbate these issues, especially for junior faculty, and in smaller departments. When one’s chair, for example, creates a hostile environment, junior faculty may put themselves at significant risk by complaining. Gender also plays a role, and women are frequently asked to complete gendered tasks. Therefore, tenured faculty need to become advocates whenever possible.

WORKS CITED


BOOK REVIEWS

Women’s Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice


Reviewed by Nancy J. Hirschmann

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The heart of Margaret McLaren’s excellent new book, Women’s Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice, entails looking at systemic and structural injustice as it is lived and experienced by women. A central theme of the book is that “addressing poverty, oppressive social norms, and violence in interpersonal relationships requires a broad-based approach to social change” (4), and McLaren’s book brings together many often-disconnected threads of philosophy: abstract and pragmatic, analytic and political,
systemic and small scale, global and local. This produces three central contributions of the book: a new approach to global issues she calls a feminist social justice approach; within that, a philosophy of relational cosmopolitanism; and an argument about the importance of women’s activist organizations to the achievement of feminist social justice, focusing on two local feminist organizations in order to illustrate her arguments.

After setting out the framework of her argument, McLaren recounts her work with two feminist activist organizations in India, MarketPlace India and the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India (SEWA). She considers their practical work as a ground for feminist philosophy, perhaps even a kind of feminist philosophy in itself, but certainly as a touchstone for the political and practical importance of the philosophical points and arguments that she herself makes.

In Chapters 2 through 4, McLaren then considers why alternative approaches, particularly the human rights model, the economic empowerment model, and mainstream cosmopolitan models, are inadequate for the achievement of social justice, particularly for women. Though human rights approaches have produced many positive effects, she argues, they also are problematic in their fundamental assumptions (70), particularly their individualistic focus rather than on “structures and systems” (67), leading to reformism rather than wholesale systemic change. The “one size fits all’ rubric” (58) and a focus on “legal and political” rights undermine attention to “economic and social rights,” which McLaren believes are particularly important to women as “the largest majority of impoverished people,” as well as social rights, particularly education, health, and childcare, all of which are generally left aside (58). Although some of these weaknesses can be addressed by expanding the scope of rights, a deeper critique “that the rights framework is imperialist [is] not so easily accommodated within the liberal rights framework” (59). A focus on rights also seems to be accompanied by implicit, and sometimes explicit, arguments that human rights violations against women, such as domestic violence, are the result of cultural practices, reinscribing the colonialist move (62).

While “empowerment” strategies focus on the economic issues that a human rights focus generally ignores, it too ignores other factors of structural equality that are particularly important to women themselves, such as their children’s education (119). Such models are also even more individualistic, operating within a neoliberal framework of individual responsibility and achievement while hypocritically deploying cultural norms against women, such as the “economy of shame” that microfinance institutions often rely on, whether by making communities financially responsible if an individual fails to repay a loan, or, as in Bangladesh, incarcerating women for loan default, which “results in a loss of virtue, according to cultural norms” (126). Such measures actually disempower women in ways that do not get measured.

Cosmopolitanism as it is generally envisioned similarly fails women. Often asserted as a counter to nationalism, its view that we are citizens of the world and that we have a moral obligation to care for strangers, viz. people of other nations, depends on a western view of abstract humanism and universal capabilities and similarities. It does this by asserting universal principles of justice and equity that are to be applied to everyone around the globe regardless of the specific situation of the country in which they live and the values of their national heritage. So, difference is tangential, and what is more important is that everyone is fundamentally the same, with the same rights and entitlements. For McLaren, such accounts of cosmopolitanism fail because their “commitment to hyperindividualism, abstraction, idealization, and acontextuality overemphasizes certain features of humans and limits itself to addressing moral obligations outside of actual circumstances of inequality and power differences” (150). They also smuggle in imperialist ideas in imposing western liberalism and ideals onto other contexts.

McLaren presents as an alternative to these approaches a powerful argument for gender inequality that she calls a “feminist social justice approach” (5). This approach not only follows the common feminist norm of recognizing the link between theory and practice, grounding her normative arguments in not only ethical ideals but in the lived experiences of women. It also seeks to link a structural understanding of injustice to local instances of its practice. Her argument thereby seeks to link the normative to the economic to the political to the social; and it is not only transnational but also intersectional because gender always intersects with all other aspects of identity, such as race and ethnicity, nationality, economics, religion, cultural practices, motherhood, and other familial relations. But the intersectionality that McLaren takes up is not just in terms of the identities of women; rather, she considers the ways that structures of privilege and oppression work in intersectional ways. That is, although McLaren draws on the experiences of particular individuals who sit at different particular vectors of identity, she is interested in what Maria Lugones called “structural axes of oppression” in which these women live and act rather than their intersectional identities per se. In McLaren’s argument, intersectionality happens at the level of structure: systems are intersectional.

A key dimension of the feminist social justice approach is relational cosmopolitanism, which starts from an assumption of common vulnerability and particularly a capacity to suffer. At the same time, it seeks to recognize and embrace difference, indeed treating it, as McLaren puts it, “as resources for mutual learning” (141). Her conception borrows from the thinking of Rabindranath Tagore, reading him through the lens of, and combining his ideas with, contemporary work in feminist philosophy and social theory. Taking as its starting point a long-established feminist norm of interdependence and relationality, popular in feminist thinking since at least Carol Gilligan’s groundbreaking work in the early 1980s which McLaren draws on (143), McLaren argues for a normative understanding of relationship building that is founded on principles of Feminist solidarity: for McLaren, interdependence doesn’t just describe what we are, it should be our basic normative value. McLaren holds that working together across differences is central to the development of our compassion for suffering and can help “expand moral imagination” (144). Relational cosmopolitanism affords an important advance on the
nationalism-cosmopolitanism debate, because it can help resist the close-mindedness and hostility to others, who are seen as competitors for resources, if not antagonists, that can characterize nationalist approaches; while at the same time providing greater nuance and complexity to the sometimes ham-fisted ideals of cosmopolitanism which often ends up simply imposing an obtuse form of western liberalism (thereby smuggling in a kind of nationalism).

McLaren then turns to what a relational cosmopolitan approach can do to foster a feminist approach to social justice, and this turns on two key elements, one philosophical, one practical, but both ethical: responsibility and fair trade. She draws on a notion of responsibility as being responsive to others’ needs, rather than the “rights” model of responsibility as taking credit or blame for something—a view that she borrows from Iris Young but in fact goes directly to Gilligan’s own view originally introduced in In a Different Voice. But we understand her attribution of this model to Young when she seeks to identify a weakness of Young’s distinction between social responsibility and political responsibility, a distinction that Gilligan herself does not make. McLaren notes that these two “kinds” of responsibility are intimately related, applying the keen feminist insight that the social is political, the personal is political, the familial is political, the community is political. She attributes to Young the insights that political responsibility starts from the idea that we are connected through our social and economic arrangements; and that political responsibility is a matter of gradation—some are more clearly and directly responsible than others. She deploys these ideas to engage with questions of how to alter structural injustice.

This leads to McLaren’s argument in favor of fair trade, which entails the decision of consumers to purchase products that operate within a recognized Fair Trade framework. At first, this might seem like an anemic ending to McLaren’s ambitious call for structural change, for many tend to think of it as an individualist consumerist action well within the frame of global capital. Many even dismiss Fair Trade as a neoliberal dodge that cannot produce any fundamental or systemic changes. But McLaren disagrees, arguing that even as we advocate for structural change, individuals must make moral choices in their day to day lives. She points out that individual acts support (or fail to support) larger structures. To reject Fair Trade “obscures the connection between collective political actions aimed at changing unjust structures and intentional, politically informed ethical choices” (226). And it is positive action, not negative. For instance, boycotts of products made through exploitive labor are often seen as effective, as corporations are more likely to respond to consumers “voting with their feet.” McLaren points out, however, the problematic aspect of boycotts, in that exploited workers are in many cases worse off if they have no income than if they work under exploitive conditions. She draws on protests against Nike’s use of sweatshop as a better model of organized action against the structure, because through massive popular protests the threat of a boycott motivated Nike to change labor practices so that the exploitive conditions ended and workers kept their jobs under better conditions. But even well-organized boycotts are not enough; we also need to advocate for an alternative structure of work, labor and production. We must act materially, not just through protest.

Fair Trade provides such alternative structures, and purchasing such products not only helps individual workers but the alternative economic structure in which they work as well. Thus, McLaren also advocates support of cooperatives, in which members share collectively in the profits, and receive social dividends in that a portion of profits go to collective goods like improving roads. We need to support alternative structures to top down capitalist corporations, and Fair Trade can be a way that westerners, who still need to feed and clothe themselves, can help promote these alternative structures. If protests and boycott threats lead Nike to stop sweat shop practices, that’s good; but just continuing to buy from Nike instead of switching to Fair Trade organizations where possible doesn’t help change the structure. We have to pursue both the individual and structural, because individuals have to work toward something, not just against. McLaren notes that “feminists who support these organizations through buying their products, political advocacy, and their own efforts to change unjust laws, policies, and social norms . . . engage in a type of multilevel, multifaceted political solidarity that recognizes that women’s struggles differ in different social and national contexts, while they are also linked through transnational structural injustice” (194-95). So, it’s not enough to buy fair trade coffee, we also have to urge our stores to supply more Fair Trade products, and we have to lobby our government for policies and laws that support fair economic trade. “As consumers, we are implicated in systems of unjust production, and both our individual choices and collective political actions matter” (203).

It is difficult not to be somewhat cynical about this last argument; most of the people who buy $3 T-shirts at Walmart do so not just because they happen to like cheap merchandise but because it is the only way to make their budgets work. Fair Trade consumerism is decidedly an upper-middle class undertaking. But that is not a reason for such people not to practice it. For those with more resources have greater responsibility for social action. We need not only to recognize how structures must be changed to produce more socially just outcomes; we also need to recognize who is most capable of changing injustice and put the pressure on those entities (such as multinational corporations) to effect these changes (194). Thus, those with economic privilege, including feminist philosophers, have more responsibility to engage in fair trade practices and promote structural change in other ways. Transnational feminist solidarity is an ethical commitment; feminists of the global North have an ethical obligation to support Fair Trade practices and workers’ cooperatives.

This broad overview does not do the argument justice, and I have run out of room in this review to discuss McLaren’s support of cooperatives over micro-financing, the examples that she provides through her work with MarketPlace India and SEWA, both of which are cooperative organizations, and many finer, more specific aspects of McLaren’s nuanced, passionate, and persuasive argument. I found this book
Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times


Reviewed by Joan Eleanor O’Bryan
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Who is feminism for? The question reverberates frightfully in feminist discourse. Despite decades of theorizing that the unified feminist subject is an impossibility (given differences in race, class, sexuality, etc.), the question remains all too relevant in praxis—much to the detriment of the movement as a whole. Or at least, so argues Éléonore Lépinard in her new book, Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times.

The tendency of feminists to rely on such a question, according to Lépinard, is a dangerous one: it results in an ethnocentric stance in which we are liable to judge people as being “good or bad feminist subjects” (11). It is those judgments—particularly on the part of white feminists—which have supported the rise of “femonationalism”—a phenomenon referring to the way that governments have justified anti-immigration and Islamophobic policies in the name of women’s equality.

Instead of asking the “subject” question (who is feminism for?), Lépinard posits that we ought to be asking a “relational” question (with whom am I in community?). Drawing on Joan Tronto’s ethic of care, Lépinard defines feminism as “a project to care for those who could be part of this political community, who are put in relation with it through their claims or the claims that are made about them in the name of feminism” (231).

Lépinard’s theory emerges from her empirical research, an attempt to ensure that her book is “grounded in the social and power relations that shape feminist communities” (14). This takes the form of a comparative study of feminist organizations in France and Quebec. There are two parts to this endeavor: first, an archival research project, tracing the histories of feminist organizations in the two nations; and second, a series of ethnographic interviews with white and racialized feminists on racism, organizing, and the relationship between religion and contemporary feminism.

It is in Lépinard’s delineation of her empirical findings that her book’s greatest strengths and also weaknesses manifest themselves. Most interesting is her discussion of the impact of different national backgrounds on feminist praxis in each respective nation. Both Quebec and France exhibited similar national discourses regarding the relationship between the state and local religious minorities, largely of immigrant-background. A large proportion of the discussion centered on the roles and rights of religious women in public life, with a significant proportion of (usually white) feminists—or feminist-coopters—seeing Islam in particular as incompatible with women’s emancipation. These “sexularism” debates raged not only nationally but also within women’s organizations, creating room for coalition or schism within feminist groups.

Feminist organizations in Quebec and France, though sharing much in the way of background ideology and culture, manifested starkly different responses to the sexularism discourse. In Quebec, racialized feminists were able to make their voices heard, and acting in coalition with white feminists, were able to speak out on behalf of religious accommodation and against the racism and Islamophobia they saw as intrinsic to such legislation as the prohibition of facial veils. Though their efforts were not perfect, Lépinard argues that the leading Quebec feminist organization was able to “keep a critical distance from femonationalist discourses” (61). In France, however, no such distance was achieved. The leading feminist organization’s response to various instances of racism and femo-nationalism, in particular those in national policy, was so disappointing to French racialized feminists that it resulted in uproar and schism.

Lépinard credits the difference between the two nations to three key factors: 1) the strength of racialized women’s self-organizing; 2) the relationship between feminist groups and the broader left; and 3) the history of institutional relationships within umbrella organizations with groups representing racial minorities. The first and third factors seem relatively self-explanatory; it makes sense that stronger organization on the part of racialized feminists and patterns of positive interaction between white and racialized feminists would ensure that voices of color be elevated during these debates. But the second factor was surprising, and deserves further attention.

The two dominant women’s organizations Lépinard discusses, the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) in Quebec and the Collectif national pour les droits des femmes (CNDF) in France, faced different political landscapes, which resulted in their respective abilities to engage with racial and religious differences. As Lépinard describes, in Quebec during and immediately after the FFQ’s founding, the left—and in particular the radical left—was decidedly weak. As a result, the FFQ’s early institutionalization and activism made it a powerful force within leftist politics. The organization thus emerged both relatively autonomous vis-à-vis other movements as well as influential, with left-wing parties in Quebecois politics headed by former FFQ members.

The CNDF in France, on the other hand, never had the opportunity to grow in strength and autonomy in the manner of the FFQ. Lépinard analyses how CNDF’s roots...
grew in the radical/class struggle of the French second-wave feminist movement, meaning that its leadership and members attempt to address class and sex oppression jointly, “a strategy that put them in constant relation to leftist politics, trying to convince leftist organizations and unions to include a gender perspective while attempting to also exist on their own and to forge coalitions with the radical feminists” (76). Unlike the FFQ, the CNDF comprises representatives of political parties and unions, meaning that the influence tends to be from outside-in, rather than the reverse. So, whereas the FFQ found the left a source of sustenance, rather than competition, the CNDF found itself struggling for power. This point matters because “the competition of the women’s liberation movement [the CNDF] with radical-left politics during the second wave encouraged white feminists to frame their claims as universal in order to resist the tendency in radical-left politics to sideline gender issues” (64). Because the FFQ did not face the same pressure, it could invest political energy into differentiation among women.

Lépinard’s archival analysis is fascinating and enlightening. Less convincing, however, are the conclusions she draws from her ethnographic work. Generally speaking, ethnography is hard to do well. The methodology is most useful when it points us to what Ian Shapiro calls “problematic redescriptions”—accounts of political phenomena that destabilize the lens through which we traditionally study them, engendering novel questions and exposing new avenues of moral concern.” Ethnography is thus most productive when it uncovers for us new ways of thinking, valuing, or perceiving old phenomena. The problem with using ethnography as evidence for established fact—such as the fact that white feminists often discriminate morally and politically against feminists of color—is that a theorist is likely to fall into the well-recognized traps of the empirical researcher: first, the propensity to over-extrapolate and generalize from small samples, and second, the desire to find what it is she’s looking for.

Although Lépinard is keen to demonstrate that she does not fall prey to such temptations, she cannot help but extrapolate beyond what her data can offer. For instance, although she provides the requisite caveat that her interviews do not “exhaust the variation of feminist whiteness,” nor are they “representative of the diversity of white feminists,” she writes as though she has uncovered the true “essence” of the phenomenon (85). Occasionally she makes it explicit: in a footnote, she states that her interviews are “representative of how feminism is made white” (emphasis added, 284). Furthermore, her analysis “charts a general evolution in feminist whiteness” (19). This seems a stretch. From a small selection of views, she constructs a supposed ideal type—the means by which feminism is made white—and seeks to define it comprehensively. This goes beyond what ethnography can rightly claim to do.

The second, and more troubling, trap which ethnographers must fear is the tendency of the researcher to impose her own normative framework upon her subjects. When Lépinard engages in such behavior I become suspicious not only of her methodology, but of her normative project as a whole: that moving from a subject-based approach to a relational one will help prevent white feminists from judging, othering, or excluding feminists of color.

Take for instance, her interview with three racialized feminists in France regarding legislation prohibiting the veil. Mariam is an immigrant from Mali in her fifties, Samira is another woman of presumably middle age (she was an adult during the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s, though she had immigrated to France by that point), and Maleiha leads an organization of lesbians of color in Paris. All three have lived experience dealing with oppression, racism, and the struggles of immigration. All three, also, are against veiling. Although united in opposition to the legislation, the three women see veiling as detrimental to women, and in particular to Muslim women born in France, as they highlight that veiling is a cultural, not religious, tradition. Given especially their experiences in environments in which veiling has not necessarily been an autonomous decision on the part of participants (149), they understandably see the issue as one of complexity. Lépinard, however, reads them as essentially brainwashed by white ideology:

Despite the fact that the three interviewees disapprove of the 2004 and 2010 bans, the needs and rights of veiled women are not put at the center of their critical analysis of the law. These discourses testify to the strength of hegemonic discourses in the French public sphere about secularism as necessary to emancipate women, and about the veil as a sign of oppression (148).

Implicit in this discussion is exactly the kind of judgement Lépinard thinks she can avoid: these are “bad” feminists.

Who then does Lépinard approve of? Sandra, a young activist who came of age as a feminist in the early 2010s, has the “right” political opinion. When asked about veiling, she responds: “What is emancipation? It goes back to a simple question: well, is a woman free to choose how she dresses, what she wears?” (150). For Sandra, there is no complexity. It’s “simple.” Ignoring background conditions, national discourses, and the lived experience of immigrant and other women, she expounds in the abstract: feminism is all about free choice. That this tenet of liberal feminism has been criticized since Simone de Beauvoir and before is of no import. On this banal statement, Lépinard waxes poetic, admiring how Sandra’s statement “expresses not only a political will for inclusion, but also a desire for relationality with those supposedly abject feminist subjects, a will and a wish to expand the boundaries of feminism’s moral universe and its promise of treating equally its members” (150).

Lépinard, despite her theoretical wish to remove the judging of “good” and “bad” feminists from the political project, so easily slips into their implications. One cannot help but read this chapter as follows. The middle-aged women, with all their experience and knowledge, are presumed to neglect those with whom they claim to be in community. They are “bad” feminist subjects. The young woman, on the other hand, who states the beliefs that Lépinard happens
to hold, is a “good” subject. Is this treating all who make feminist claims as political equals?

Indeed, it isn’t only the author’s inability to maintain her own approach which results in my skepticism; the entire thesis has troubling implications. The idea that anyone who makes a claim under a feminist banner is therefore to be treated as my political equal and joint compatriot in the political project strikes me as naive, to say the least. Do Phyllis Schafly and Sarah Palin’s causes become feminist by their claims or by the claims that are made about them “in the name of feminism”? What about men’s rights activists? There are good reasons to be discriminating in determining what indeed advances the cause of feminism, and what—and who—does not.

In order to do so, it will require messy, conflictual, and difficult organizing, engaging with those within and outside the feminist project. It will require exactly the kind of work and analysis Lépinard so deftly engages in during her archival exploration. It will be painful, and it will be complicated, and it will require choosing between good and bad feminists, the same way we choose between good and bad socialists, good and bad democrats—exercising those “false friends,” as Lorna Finlayson so aptly puts it: the Sarah Palins, Phyllis Schaflys, and others who advocate policies which harm more than they help.

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NOTES

1. “Racialized” is the preferred term in Francophonic feminist circles, used in this text as interchangeable with more common Anglophonic phrases such as “women of color.”


Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women


Reviewed by Vanessa Wills

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Kate Manne’s Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women takes up some of the central themes that animated her 2017, Down Girl. Where her first book is a conceptual analysis of misogyny, Manne’s more recent book is presented as a series of case studies of particular manifestations of misogyny. These treatments of various misogynistic encounters illuminate what Manne refers to as “male privilege”—a phenomenon that encourages men to feel “entitled” to various goods and services from women, with these goods being often sexual or emotional in nature. Entitled inherits many of the strengths of Down Girl and expands the picture; it also leaves open some questions that were raised by the earlier text.

Misogyny, we should remember from Down Girl, is, on Manne’s view, not most fruitfully thought of as a kind of inner hateful feeling inside men’s hearts. Rather, on Manne’s account, misogyny is “best conceptualized as the ‘law enforcement’ branch of patriarchy—a system that functions to police and enforce gendered norms and expectations, and involves girls and women facing disproportionately or distinctively hostile treatment because of their gender, among other factors” (7). For Manne, misogyny is a means of policing women for their perceived failures to render unto men what is theirs. One of Entitled’s contributions is to offer a catalog of the occasions upon which misogyny’s policing function may be deployed.

Understanding misogyny in this way allows us to avoid trivial back-and-forth about whether any particular man actually hates women in his heart of hearts—a debate that in most cases can never be adequately settled, that offers too much obscurantist plausible deniability to apparently misogynistic men, and that adds little to our ability to theorize the central question of oppression as experienced from the point of view of the oppressed person. That men’s experiences are more often centered in our collective social imagination is itself a manifestation of misogyny—“himpathy,” a term Manne coined in Down Girl. Manne’s account of misogyny helps us to reorient our attention from men’s motivations to women’s experiences of gendered mistreatment and to find out what can be learned from this shift of perspective.

Entitled opens with the reader called upon to gaze, with their mind’s eye, upon an image: the sullen, bright red face of then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. It is a face twisted in rageful resentment that in being vetted to determine his fitness for a seat on the highest court in the land, he might be called to account for his alleged commission of sexual assault against Christine Blasey Ford when both were teenagers moving in the same social circles of an affluent DC suburb.

Rhetorically, this beginning reminds one of the cinematic device in which the camera looks first through a keyhole, one’s gaze tightly narrowed to a specific object that serves as the point of reference for all that follows as the frame widens and the field of vision expands.

Manne describes Kavanaugh as “a picture of entitlement.” What do we see in that picture? Kavanaugh is angry, white, cisgender, affluent, powerful, and protected. Ford, also white, affluent, and established in her professional career, is not without her own enjoyment of social privilege—indeed it is this positionality that likely accounts for some of the courage she exhibited on the stand and for her having gained any standing for her claims at all. However, Ford has one obvious social disadvantage with respect to Kavanaugh: he is a man and she is a woman. As a woman, far from having access to the sort of shielding and protection that Kavanaugh experienced, Ford was driven from her home by relentless violent threats against her and her family—punishment for speaking out as a victim—and as of the time of this writing, she has not yet been able to return.
Manne’s invocation of the confrontation between Kavanaugh and Ford as a touchstone and framing device allows us to focus on one centrally salient fact about the field of the conflict—the disparity between how men and women are treated and, accordingly, how little men’s treatment of women seems to matter. At the same time, it is also indicative of an inherent “whiteness”—and cisness, straightness, etc.—of male entitlement as it is theorized in *Entitled*.

In her contribution to a print symposium on *Down Girl* that appeared in the journal *Signs*, Peggy McIntosh noted, “most men of color cannot show they feel entitled in public without being seen as a threat.” In response, Manne clarified that it is already part of her view that Black men, for example, typically do not experience male privilege and entitlement in the way that white men do. Manne writes, “male privilege is only enjoyed in full by white, heterosexual, cis, wealthy, and nondisabled men.” The suggestion then, is that to the extent that a man is removed from this hierarchical social ideal, he enjoys male privilege to an accordingly lesser extent than do men who are white, straight, cis, affluent, nondisabled, etc.

One question we might ask is whether it is the case that the experiences of marginalized men are different from privileged white men’s principally in degree when it comes to their enjoyment of male privilege or their lack thereof. We might alternatively wonder whether the experiences of marginalized men are sufficiently different in kind that we might ask, why refer to the object of analysis here as “male privilege,” at all? Might there be greater utility found in a term that more clearly encapsulates or signals the role of the full complement of privileges which combine to produce the particularly noxious brand of hubristic entitlement one finds in a figure such as Brett Kavanaugh?

As it happens, I think, with Manne, that there are indeed excellent reasons to speak of various forms of identity-based privilege that track a range of mutually determining and often simultaneously operative social hierarchies, “male privilege” being one of them. As modern “western” conceptions of gender are themselves essentially shaped by colonialism and white supremacy, it is not surprising that speaking of “maleness” would always already implicate one in a range of other related identity discourses. And the notion that full enjoyment of male privilege involves the enjoyment of a whole host of other privileges does not itself make the concept any worse off than, for example, “white privilege,” which we might also say is conditioned by a number of other complicating identity factors.

Yet, it seems to me to matter that white privilege discourse is typically rooted in the experience of poor and working-class people—especially, of encounters between poor and working-class Blacks and members of the so-called “white working class.” That is to say, in thinking about white privilege, the image with which we begin is generally not of a white person who is extraordinarily affluent and in possession of all that the full suite of hierarchies of social privilege has to offer. Rather, white privilege is specifically conceived as a way of making sense of how working-class whites come to see themselves as having a stake in a system of racial capitalism that otherwise offers them rather little. White privilege can’t be—and for the most part, hasn’t been— theorized in a way that takes its paradigmatic expression to be of privilege along one vector of identity that is enhanced by privilege associated with every other identity marker, as well.

One way in which this might matter is in its implications for our ethical responses to the sense of “entitlement” that can accommodate various varieties of privilege. Rageful entitlement and prideful sense of injury is obviously objectionable in the case of an elite, overly privileged blowhard such as Kavanaugh. His sense of entitlement is problematic and off-putting because it seems grotesque and insatiable, extending well beyond the bounds of what is seemly for any one person to seek for themselves, and apparently failing to respect the rights and boundaries of others around him (which is to say, even if we were to claim agnosticism about whether he committed the acts of which Ford accused him, we are still left with the fact that he made it plain to see that he had no respect for her right and standing even to be heard).

There are, generally speaking, at least two ways in which a sense of entitlement might be inappropriate. It might be a sense of over-entitlement, a conviction that one is owed much more than one is in fact actually owed. It might also get things wrong about against whom that claim of entitlement is appropriately made. It has been noted before that when we think of white privilege, what we have in mind is typically a combination of genuinely racist domination and some rather reasonable claims to which one might truly be entitled: the right not to experience prejudice on the basis of one’s skin color, the right to be treated fairly in a court of law, etc.

Although some of the rhetorical force of Manne’s use of the term, “entitled” derives from the pejorative connotations that the word has taken on in contemporary parlance, it is clear that as an ethical concept, she takes entitlement itself to be neutral. She speaks, for example, in the closing chapter, of her daughter’s “warranted entitlement” to bodily autonomy, to fallibility, to epistemic justice, and so on. Manne writes, “Entitlement, as I’ve written about it in this chapter, of her daughter’s “warranted entitlement” to bodily autonomy, to fallibility, to epistemic justice, and so on. Manne writes, “Entitlement, as I’ve written about it in these pages, has most often referred to some people’s undue sense of what they deserve or are owed by others. But, for all that, entitlement is not a dirty word: entitlements can be genuine, valid, justified” (186).

The entitlements Manne lists for her daughter (for any girl or woman), further include the entitlement “to be cared for, soothed, nurtured” (188). This is of course, a normal and reasonable human want. It is also, needless to say, an inherently social one that requires for its satisfaction another person who is willing to care, nurture, and soothe.

As in my experience of engaging with *Down Girl*, I found myself wondering how bringing the concept of “alienation” into conversation with Manne’s approach might help us make sense of some of the problems and scenarios that she brings to our attention. I am especially put in mind of Marx’s 1844 manuscript, “The Power of Money,” which concludes thus:
Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. [. . .] If you love without evoking love in return—that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a beloved one, then your love is impotent—a misfortune.3

Incel's, such as the misogynist serial killer Elliot Rodger, whom Manne discusses as a case of “entitlement to admiration,” claim to want love, care, and yes, sex, but see themselves as locked out of an economy of wealth and physical attractiveness that unlocks access to human connection. They rebel against this with the insistence that they deserve intimacy from the women of their choice just on the basis of existing. It is tempting to say that they see women as objects, but it is probably more accurate to say they mostly understand that women are not objects, and resent it.

We live in a world that largely denies people meaning, belonging, and authentic human connection. Manne concludes Entitled with reflections on how she will raise her daughter to survive in a world that expects women to pick up the slack for this in their individual interactions with men. These reflections mark, Manne writes, a personal transition between the more pessimistic Down Girl (which ends with a meditation on Shel Silverstein’s The Giving Tree), and the moderately more hopeful Entitled. Still, Manne shares, she has “tremendous difficulty picturing a world in which girls and women can reliably lay claim to what they are entitled to, let alone one in which they get it” (192).

Of course—especially from our historical vantagepoint as women have experienced tremendous reversals and setbacks due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic and governments’ insistence on placing as much of the social burden onto the domestic caregiving space as possible—this is certainly fair enough. I’ll suggest, though, that Entitled, which begins with a scowling, extremely privileged white man and closes in contemplation of the life of a baby girl, also white and born into numerous forms of privilege, valuably demonstrates the contours, possibilities, and political limitations of “white” liberal feminist approaches in the contemporary moment.

Manne herself is aware of such limitations, always clear that a full accounting of sexism and women’s oppression necessarily requires a broad and diverse array of voices, of which hers is but one. And yet in engaging with Entitled, I at times found myself almost preferring the pessimism of Down Girl’s dark ending, which offered not even a glimpse of a way out. That is not because I think it is unreasonable to have fighting spirit—I certainly don’t. Much less still do I wish for Manne to be without it! But there is a tension here worth naming: to create a world without misogyny will require tearing down many features of our society that, to women most likely to share social space with especially privileged men, might seem worth keeping. The solution to women’s oppression in elite spaces doesn’t exist as such because in a world without women’s oppression, that particular problem and those elite spaces don’t exist, either.

A world without the unbridled male entitlement Kavanaugh enjoys would be a world in which his social stratum simply isn’t there; we can scarcely imagine such a world from the point of view of the women Kavanaugh encounters in his social sphere because they—qua highly privileged women except, largely speaking, for their experience of gender oppression—wouldn’t exist there, either. And so a perspective on misogyny from the social position of those with hardly any social privileges at all is not just a complement to more elite women’s perspectives but itself often a corrective; it can shed light not only on the social meaning of oppression in the lives of severely marginalized people but also offer greater clarity on the nature of oppression in elite spaces.

Manne writes,

Hope, to me, is a belief that the future will be brighter, which I continue not to set much store in. But the idea of fighting for a better world—and, equally importantly, fighting against backsliding—is not a belief; it’s a political commitment that I can get on board with. (185)

Such commitment is laudable and necessary, especially if it presages an even more pugnacious and critical turn in Manne’s theorization of misogyny. Entitled concretizes the themes of Down Girl and also reads as a transitional work: the embers of fighting spirit, Manne reports, are only newly lit. I am eager to see how their glow helps shape future directions in her contributions to the struggle against women’s oppression.

NOTES


Irigaray and Politics: A Critical Introduction


Reviewed by Fulden İbrahimhakkoğlu
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Laura Roberts’s Irigaray and Politics situates the contributions of the French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray within the larger framework of political theory and ponders the social and political resonance of her ideas in a globalizing world. As the reader progresses through the chapters, it becomes more and more apparent that Roberts’s inquiry into the larger political significance of Irigaray’s oeuvre is guided by a decolonial sensibility and meticulous attention to interlocking systems of oppression. Roberts
employs a feminist methodology in thinking through lived experience and social positionalities. From the outset, she is explicit about the historical background that informs her engagement with Irigaray. She notes that witnessing the dismantling of apartheid as a white South African woman “provided a distinct, perhaps decolonial, lens through which [she] first encountered irigaray’s philosophy” (6). Roberts’s analysis through this lens offers a refreshing approach to Irigaray’s intellectual heritage. She reads Irigaray’s work in conversation with some unlikely interlocutors, including but not limited to, Gayatri Spivak, Silvia Federici, and bell hooks, whose philosophical connections to Irigaray have thus far been underexplored. In this sense, Roberts makes an original contribution to the existing literature on Irigaray, while at the same time identifying, through an Irigarayan framework, the vulnerabilities of the political theory on the Left, which, she suggests, continues to be dominated by male thinkers residing in the West. “What’s left of the Left,” she writes, “misunderstands the feminist politics of experience; they fail to see the relevance of the politics of desire and the affirmation of alternative ways of becoming subjects” (ix). The book, in this way, seeks to fill an important gap, not only in Irigaray scholarship, but also in political theory at large, as the author rethinks some contemporary social movements from an Irigarayan lens. In this way, the book serves as a reminder of feminist “schemes, methods, practices of tactics” (ibid.) that bear on the political through an analysis that centralizes Irigaray but also goes beyond by way of reconsidering Irigaray’s work in the context of postcolonialism, globalization, and local struggles that seek to respond to global problems.

Beginning from the question of sexual difference, Irigaray’s philosophical challenge, Roberts argues, “opens up new foundations and possibilities of rethinking politics based on relational sexuate subjects” (3). As a critique of the universal subject posited by Western philosophical and cultural traditions, Irigaray seeks to rethink subjectivity not through the model of oneness or sameness, but from out of sexuate difference or as she puts it, twoness. This move enables Roberts to envision other forms of relationality that would not be based on domination, to which the model of the universal subject is susceptible. That is to say, starting from this question of sexuate difference, one would be able to envision inclusion beyond assimilation. Arguing against reductionist readings of Irigaray that portray her as an essentialist, Roberts sets out to explore the nuances in Irigaray’s thinking on sexuate difference and the possibilities for radical social and political change that such thinking embodies. Roberts suggests that Irigaray seeks to bring out the difference (i.e. alterity) at the very heart of philosophy and politics, in an attempt to undermine the hegemony of the One—that is, the narcissistic sameness that permeates Western thought. This ontological challenge, as Roberts puts it, “gives rise to a politics of grace and wonder, requiring us to rethink our relations with one another, and to constantly push the boundaries, to crack open time and to invent the new” (6). The new, here, refers not only to new subjectivities, and accordingly, new ways of seeing, feeling, being, and relating; but also, as Roberts demonstrates later in the book, new ways of socially organizing and building pockets of resistance and communities of care.

The first chapter focuses on Irigaray’s ambivalent relation to psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis can often serve as a tool to diagnose, classify, and treat individuals as part of the efforts toward regulation and normalization, Roberts’s engagement with Irigaray’s psychoanalysis in this chapter shows that it can also be used for a cultural diagnosis or a symptomatology of a political kind, and thereby help facilitate social change. Roberts notes that, while Irigaray uses the conceptual tools that psychoanalysis offers to bring sexuate difference to the fore, she is also highly critical of both Freud and Lacan, who defined “female sexuality as lacking” (27). At the end of this chapter, Roberts thus establishes an important and insightful connection between Irigaray’s thought and contemporary decolonial philosophy. She suggests that Irigaray’s diagnosis of Western culture as “a culture of narcissism, supporting and supported by the universal (masculine) narcissistic subject” (13) is analogous to what bell hooks has called a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (32). “Contemporary decolonial philosophers, in various ways,” she writes, “illustrate the connections between world historical, socio-political events and how these continue to enable epistemic privileging of the phallocentric logic of western metaphysics which nurtures this narcissistic subject that founds western metaphysics” (35). Irigaray’s critique of western phallocentrism, in other words, is amenable to a decolonial analysis.

Roberts then goes on to explore imaginings of “an autonomous feminine subjectivity” (45) that would disrupt this culture of narcissism that privileges sameness. She suggests that Irigaray’s project is not only critical, but also creative: “Irigaray is concerned with creating a positive feminine symbolic and a feminine divine in order to bring about a feminine subjectivity that allows for a woman-to-woman sociality in which women, as autonomous sexuate subjects, can relate to and love one another as sexuate subjects” (79). Defending Irigaray against common criticisms of essentialism, Roberts argues that rather than seeking to define “woman,” Irigaray aims to open up the symbolic for women’s self-articulation that is yet to come. That is to say, Roberts suggests that Irigaray seeks to carve a space for the emergence of a new subjectivity (i.e. feminine subjectivity), which has previously been foreclosed under the hegemony of the One (i.e. masculine subjectivity that is accepted as universal). Feminine subjectivity, in this regard, is not something that is pre-given and waiting to be discovered, but rather something to be invented.

Next, Roberts focuses on Irigaray’s later work which deals with questions around ethics. Taking, as a starting point, Irigaray’s ethics of relating to the other with love, attentiveness, responsivity, and wonder (instead of narcissistic arrogance), Roberts provides a sketch of an anti-imperialist ethics by engaging with Spivak’s Irigarayan ethics, where radical uncertainty and alterity are central to women’s solidarity. Bridging ethics and politics, the last chapter focuses on an Irigarayan approach to home, family, and community as political sites. In this chapter, Roberts explores the resonance of Marxist feminism in Irigaray’s thinking and considers social movements like municipalism that seek to reconfigure the aforementioned sites through a “feminisation of politics” (155)—that is, the valorization of feminine values, like attentiveness and
empathy, within the sphere of politics. Roberts concludes that Irigaray’s project is at once both philosophical and political: “It is a political-philosophical project, a politics that is founded upon the recognition of the sexuate other in the emergence of subjectivity, and gives rise to a politics of grace and wonder, and requires the courage to step into the unknown, to push the boundaries to crack open time and to invent the new” (159). Here Roberts’s analysis presents a novel way of thinking about Irigaray’s critical/creative political-philosophical project by drawing connections with contemporary social movements. These connections help ground the theory and render it concrete and historically situated for the readers.

Roberts’s analysis presents the complexity of Irigaray’s ideas in a clear, nuanced way. This thoughtful treatment of Irigaray, however, is not mirrored by an equally attentive consideration of Irigaray’s use of language in complex, obscure, metaphorical, and performative ways—especially in her earlier writings—that seek to disrupt and undermine the phallocentric symbolic order and give birth to the new. Of course, Roberts does not altogether overlook the significance of style: “Irigaray’s poetic and dialogic writing style mimics the qualities of fluidity and openness she sees connected to the feminine body” (87). This, however, is the extent to which the book explores the role of style in Irigaray’s thought, which seems like a missed opportunity. A more elaborate take on the ways in which Irigaray uses language in captivating ways, performing the very thought she seeks out to explore by way of taking the reader on an imaginative journey through her poetic style of writing would have further strengthened Roberts’s argument about the role of the critical/creative in Irigaray’s political-philosophical project.

Grounding Irigaray’s thought in political action is an important strength of the book. Bridging theory and praxis, Roberts’s narrative moves from the question of sexuate difference to subjectivity and imagination, from questions around ethics to postcolonialism, women’s solidarity, and social movements. More than an eloquent introduction to Irigaray’s thought, then, Roberts’s book seeks to make insightful connections between these different fields and bodies of literature. It thereby establishes much needed connections help ground the theory and render it concrete and accessible, without diminishing her philosophical complexity. While she makes a valuable contribution to scholarship by rethinking Irigaray in the postcolonial context, it is clear that Roberts’s engagement also resonates well beyond the confines of academia.

Throughout the book, Roberts offers a compelling analysis that establishes novel connections between Irigaray’s thought and various other figures within political theory, like hooks, Spivak, and Federici. In this way, the book identifies and responds to important gaps in Irigaray scholarship and ventures into hitherto unchartered territories. Roberts’s account is a clear and concrete take on a complex, difficult thinker, which makes this book a good fit for both specialists and non-specialists. While making important contributions to Irigaray scholarship, thanks to its clear style of writing and conciseness, *Irigaray and Politics* would equally be suited for consideration in undergraduate seminars.

Roberts’s book both provides a clear introduction to Irigaray’s thought and offers space to expand the larger significance of the conceptual toolbox offered by Irigaray’s writings. In this sense, it speaks to Irigaray scholars, political activists, and those who are unfamiliar with Irigaray’s work alike. Roberts somehow manages to render Irigaray’s thought concrete and accessible, without diminishing her philosophical complexity. While she makes a valuable contribution to scholarship by rethinking Irigaray in the postcolonial context, it is clear that Roberts’s engagement also resonates well beyond the confines of academia.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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FROM THE EDITOR

Lori Gallegos
TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

At a time of living and working from a distance, many of us are struggling with isolation, a heavier workload, and other threats to the health and well-being of ourselves and our loved ones. In the midst of these hardships, the efforts others make to create and sustain our cherished communities can be vital and should not be taken for granted. It is with gratitude for the ongoing work of my colleagues who contribute to the Latin American and Latinx philosophical communities—by sharing their research, inviting conversation, inspiring thought, and helping others to refine their ideas—that I proudly introduce the four articles that make up this issue of the newsletter.

The issue begins with the winner of the 2020 Essay Prize in Latin American Thought. In his award-winning essay, Rafael Vizcaíno clarifies the nature of the secularity that grounds liberation philosophy. Focusing on the work of Enrique Dussel, Vizcaíno shows that liberation philosophy as secular does not disavow religion, but rather critiques fetishism in any form, including atheistic fetishization. Liberation philosophy’s secularity is thus one that remains open to the traditional philosophical question of the Absolute.

Our second essay received an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Essay Prize competition. Author Mariana Gómez examines the possibility of constructing a Hispanic identity that will serve to transform the conditions of Latin America’s most oppressed groups. She challenges José Medina’s radical pluralist approach, which involves making explicit the experiential commonalities among Latin Americans in the midst of their diversity. Gómez focuses on the case of Mexico to argue that there is no collective experience amongst the people in Latin America, and that positing a collective experience does harm by obfuscating genuine conflicts of interests among different racial groups.

The next essay introduces readers to the work of the Mexican philosopher Vera Yamuni Tabush (1917–2003). Author Andrea Pitts describes the theoretical significance of Yamuni’s work, and situates it in terms of Yamuni’s perspective as a Lebanese migrant in Mexico. Pitts shows that Yamuni’s critiques of European colonial interests, defense of Palestinian independence, and interest in developing a critical voice among women in the history of philosophy are the basis of her critical interventions in philosophical debates among her contemporaries in the Hyperion Group.

The newsletter concludes with an essay by Tadd Ruetenik, which explores Gloria Anzaldúa’s ideas about multiplicitous identity and temporality by applying them to the problem of what has been derided as the “alternative truth age.” In what he takes to be the spirit of Anzaldúa’s work, Ruetenik defends the unorthodox view that allowing for multiple stories might be more beneficial than insisting upon an overarching account of history.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the FALL 2021 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on any topic related to Hispanic/Latino thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as reflections, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by members of the Committee on Hispanics.

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

DEADLINES

Deadline for spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. Deadline for the fall issue is April 15. Authors should expect a decision by June 15.

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor, Lori Gallegos, at LoriGallegos@txstate.edu, Department of Philosophy, Comal Building 102, Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666.
This way of doing philosophy contrasts with the methodological separation between faith and reason, but liberation philosophy affirms secularization as a universal secular community of reason and theology toward the course of Latin American history. This is how liberation philosophy was born.

Enrique Dussel quickly emerged as a noted contributor to both movements while maintaining a strict division between the two, with philosophy geared toward a universal secular community of reason and theology toward a particular religious community of faith. Despite such a clear separation, however, liberation philosophy has often been discredited for its close association to its theological counterpart—thereby purportedly lacking originality and depth. Yet I argue that it is precisely liberation philosophy’s secularity that offers one of its most distinctive and original contributions to philosophy, in large part because of its unconventional construction of secularity; that is, it is not positioned in direct opposition to the religious. That such unconventional secularity has yet to receive comprehensive attention is why the seemingly “religious” language of liberation philosophy continues to baffle its critics. Where some see a theology in disguise, I see an audaciously atheist liberatory philosophy, especially when it comes to the philosophy of religion.

ARTICLES
Which Secular Grounds? The Atheism of Liberation Philosophy

Winner, 2020 APA Essay Prize in Latin American Thought

Rafael Vizcaíno
DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

La secularización era el nombre falso del fetichismo; y el ateísmo de las izquierdas era un primer momento dialéctico, cuyo segundo momento era una afirmación del Absoluto como liberación.¹

— Enrique Dussel

INTRODUCTION
It has been something of an accepted but misunderstood refrain that Latin American liberation philosophy employs the methods and approaches of liberation theology in the philosophical arena, effectively putting liberation theology on secular grounds.² While this formulation is true insofar as philosophy is not bound by the hermeneutics of any particular religious tradition, a closer reading of both movements’ methodologies complicates the presumed meaning of secularity in this interpretation. On the one hand, liberation theology is already partly secular in that it deploys the social sciences to diagnose and chastise the sinful character of material oppression. On the other hand, liberation philosophy affirms secularization as a methodological separation between faith and reason, but not rooted in an undialectical understanding of secularity as secularism.³ This essay clarifies the nature of liberation philosophy’s secular grounds.

While not the sole representative of liberation philosophy, I center the work of Enrique Dussel, as his intellectual production spans both liberation philosophy and liberation theology. His work is thus the most capacious entryway into the relationship between these two movements. I demonstrate how liberation philosophy’s secularity is not one that disavows religion, as with the undialectical understanding of secularity as secularism. On the contrary, liberation philosophy’s secular grounds require a constant engagement with religion, not in the hermeneutics of any specific tradition, but with “the traditional question of the Absolute.”⁴ This way of doing philosophy contrasts with the secularist repudiation of religion that dominates within much of philosophy’s radical circles, which is why liberation philosophy has repeatedly been “ghettoized and relegated to the ‘safe’ area of theological studies,” as Eduardo Mendieta has argued.⁵ It is my contention, however, that liberation philosophy’s secular grounds are an original contribution to philosophy that can provide the foundation for a decolonial and postsecularist liberation philosophy, particularly a liberation philosophy of religion. This would be an account of religion with an ethico-political existential dimension as humanity’s liberatory search for meaning, expressed as the search for the Absolute. Moreover, I argue that this dialectical modality of secularity advances epistemic decolonization, for it reveals the undialectical understanding of secularity as secularism to be an aspect of coloniality, an obstacle rather than a benefit for Latin American philosophers seeking to gain a better understanding of our historical conditions.⁶
To clarify this point, it is necessary to articulate how Dussel deploys secularism as a broad framework for liberation philosophy. In addition to the aforementioned interpretation of secularization as a methodological separation between theology and philosophy (the classic faith-and-reason debate), there is a prior and more important understanding of secularization that connotes a certain atheism. One of the first prominent historical examples of this modality is found, somewhat ironically, in the early messianic communities that would go on to form Christianity. When these early Christians defended a belief in the Divine as "transcendental exteriority," as the Other to the Roman cosmos, they contradicted the latter's intrinsic divinity in a way that precipitated an accusation of atheism and their subsequent persecution. In conceiving of the cosmos as "created, that is, not-God," these early Christians initiated a process of secularization that would eventually give way to the empirical study of God's creation. Put differently, because the cosmos is not-God, it can be studied with tools other than revelation. The atheism of a self-proclaimed divinity (the negation of the Roman cosmos) thus becomes the precursor to the methodological separation between reason and revelation, between philosophy and theology as independent domains. This separation would become one of modernity's essential epistemic divisions.

The historical irony of the Christian origin of secularization was crystallized in the Renaissance, when Christian theology confronted the latest conclusions from the empirical sciences. No longer the wretched of the Roman Empire but an imperial force in its own right, the Church now found itself in a powerful position of social, political, and cultural domination. At this historical juncture, Dussel argues, the Church had the opportunity to deepen the process of secularization that once gave birth to it by articulating that scientific rationality is not "in opposition to the values necessary to faith," and embracing it. The Church, however, did not defend such separation between faith and reason—its own outgrowth of Christianity's own secularizing emergence—and instead rejected the new scientific forms of knowledge, creating "an antiinity that should never have been: science versus Christianity." The dialectics of secularization initiated by the atheistic critique of the Roman cosmos thus came to a halt and ended the fruitful complementarity between faith and reason. The Medieval Church's failure to deepen the process of secularization by rejecting scientific rationality resulted in an undialectical reaction. Solidified as an antireligious secularism, this undialectical reaction has reigned in scientific and philosophical circles ever since, most evident in the figures and inheritors of the Radical Enlightenment. Contrary to the first atheist modality and the second modality of complementarity between faith and reason, the undialectical modality of secularity as secularism disavows religion as a source of criticality and liberatory potential.

That the dialectics of secularization came to a halt in modern secularism has conditioned the development of both liberation theology and liberation philosophy. Both movements are invested in moving away from secularism as an undialectical modality of secularity, thus jumpstarting the process of secularization from their own respective domains of inquiry. They each diagnose the modern secular/religious impasse as a type of fundamentalism that must be overcome. To that end, liberation theology famously reached out to the secular social sciences. Liberation philosophy followed suit, but on the other end of the divide. This is why liberation philosophy has been committed to developing a dialectically secular account of religion as a source of liberation that recovers the "atheist" modality critical of false divinities or "fetishes." Such "anti-fetishism" establishes liberation philosophy's secular grounds. I shall now briefly outline this project.

AN ATHEIST LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

A liberation philosophy of religion is systematically developed in the fifth volume of Dussel's first Ética, aptly subtitled, "An Antifetishist Philosophy of Religion." This is a project that includes an analysis of "fetishization" as the process by which an entity encloses itself and assumes itself to be an absolute source of power and legitimacy. It is an account of the self-divinization of the Same at the expense of the Other. This concept of fetishization sheds light on the aforementioned case of Christianity—a movement that started as a messianic and atheist anti-imperialist project but became the religion of the Roman Empire. Such processes of fetishization saturated the Crusades, the colonization of the Americas, and the European wars of religion. Fetishization in this case denotes the self-enclosure of Christianity into the Absolute—i.e., into Christendom. The task of the philosopher of liberation is to diagnose fetishization wherever it occurs. It means being atheistic of the fetish that demands compulsory worship. Such atheism, as the "negation of the negation," is indeed the first thesis of Liberation Philosophy. Here, the religious moment par excellence is that which comes after the negation of the fetish; it is the affirmation that "Divinity is Other than any system." In other words, the negation of the false divinity is itself substantiated by the positive affirmation that true Divinity can only be found beyond the system, as the Absolute Other. As "infinite exteriority," the affirmation of the Absolute provides criteria to accuse any system of being guilty. Without such affirmation of infinite exteriority, any given system risks enclosing and absolutizing itself into a self-sufficient false divinity, a new fetish. Liberation philosophy essentially understands religion to be this anti-fetishist practice. It is the affirmation of the Absolute Other as true Divinity, as infinite exteriority, that gives one the footing to be an "atheist of every system." The radical aspect of this formulation of re- and the epigraph to this essay—
criticizes an undialectical understanding of the process of secularization, exemplified by a certain kind of Marxism, for its inadequacies in mounting a full critique of fetishism. For Dussel, the infamous Marxist critique of religion as “the opium of the people” rightly advocates for an atheism of the fetish. But in its inability to take the next step of affirming exteriority, Marxist critique closes on itself, thus leaving the possibility to emerge as a new fetish of its own (as seen in Soviet bureaucracy): “Forgetting the second moment has distanced the left from the peoples who explain their daily lives, in the Lebenswelt, with symbols, rituals, and cults.” This is why secularism (as secularism) became the false name of fetishism.

One of the original contributions of liberation philosophy, then, is the articulation of the second moment that follows the negation of the fetish missing in the Marxist critique of religion: “the affirmation of the Absolute as liberation.” For if there is an Absolute, Dussel claims, “it ought to be Other than every historical system.” It is the affirmation of the Absolute as infinite exteriority, as “perfect justice,” that can trigger the dialectics of secularization once again, where secularization no longer implies fetishism.

Such articulation of liberation philosophy’s secularity has gone largely unnoticed in its reception, even amongst its supporters. For instance, Eduardo Mendieta’s English translation of this formulation partially obscures the fact that Dussel is here calling for the reinterpretation of the meaning of secularity. Mendieta translates the first clause of this passage, originally in the past tense (“La secularización era el nombre falso del fetichismo”), into the English present tense (“Secularization is the false name of fetishism”). In my view, this slight modification makes it difficult to see (1) the fact that the process of secularization at some point went wrong, becoming “the false name of fetishism,” and (2) that restoring the properly dialectical and critical aspect of secularization is one of liberation philosophy’s crucial tasks.

That such articulation of secularity has not received the careful attention that it deserves may also explain why components surrounding this reinterpretation have been a constant source of criticism, especially from other Latin American philosophers. Ofelia Schutte, for instance, finds Dussel’s “critique of secular-scientific education” to be “conservative in its stand against modernity.” From the very brief sketch I have offered above, it should be clear that such criticism does not take into account the way in which liberation philosophy affirms secularization at the expense of rejecting secularity. In other words, it is true that liberation philosophy is critical of secularism, but because it is not secular enough. The rejection of secularism does not come from a reactionary religious intention, but from a radically atheist secularizing position that is just as critical of fundamentalist iterations of religion. This is the sense in which I argue that liberation philosophy’s critique of secularism should be understood as being both postsecularist and decolonial, insofar as secularism is to be overcome for being “an Eurocentric and metropolitan ideology typical of the colonialist expansion and fruit of the theoretical conception of the Enlightenment and liberalism.” In this formulation, liberation philosophy is prepared to contribute a specifically Latin American decolonial position to the “postsecular debate” regarding the shifting roles of religion and secularity in late modernity.

More recently, Nelson Maldonado-Torres has similarly criticized the move in liberation philosophy to understand the affirmation of the Absolute as part of a praxis of liberation from domination. For Maldonado-Torres, this is a conflation between the “trans-ontological” (beyond Being) and the “sub-ontological” (below Being) realms that, in his view, results in the problematic a priori normative grounding of liberation philosophy. While this is a point that I am unable to fully address in this essay, as it requires an exposition of analogy and revelation concerning transcendental and empirical alterities, it should be clear that the anti-fetishist methodology is also meant to avoid any such problematic collapses. The notion of fetichization is here utilized to understand the false absolutization of an entity. In this sense, the Absolute is what fully escapes our grasp, thereby avoiding false confusions in any historical praxis of liberation. Liberation philosophy does argue, however, that the Absolute is expressed, for instance, in the popular imaginary of the oppressed. And far from being the exclusive domain of theology, it also ought to be the subject of philosophical interest. This is why philosophy cannot avoid “the God of the mythical narrative of the Latin American popular imaginary.”

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have sought to illuminate the nature of liberation philosophy’s secular grounds. The secularity to which liberation philosophy ascribes is not an undialectical modality of secularity as secularism, which disavows religion as a source of criticality and liberatory potential. On the contrary, liberation philosophy cultivates a secularity that retrieves a prior semantic meaning of secularization—an atheism of the fetish. Dialectical in nature, this modality of secularity respects religious re-ligion as the critique of the fetish. It is therefore attuned to the ways in which re-ligion can and must provide sources of criticality and liberation within changing contexts of domination. From the perspective of liberation philosophy, secularism, as the undialectical modality of secularity, proves to be not the solution to fetichization but another shape of the fetish that has absolutized itself into a new totality. Liberation philosophy endeavors to overcome such limiting secularity by leaving room for the Absolute as true infinite exteriority; as the excess that escapes the system and thus grounds an anti-systemic critique. The affirmation of this Absolute, as the regulative ideal of perfect justice, is the religious moment par excellence. There is, then, a religious element in all liberatory praxis. With this insight begins a postsecular and decolonial liberation philosophy, especially a liberation philosophy of religion.

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the audience and organizers of the 2019 Philosophies of Liberation Encuentro at Loyola Marymount University, where I first presented some of the ideas defended here and received valuable feedback, especially from Dussel himself. I thank Grant Silva for introducing me to Dussel’s work a decade ago and for offering feedback on an earlier draft. Alix Genter also provided helpful feedback on a near final draft. Lastly, my sincere gratitude to the APA Committee on Hispanics for their confidence in the value of my work.

NOTES
1. Enrique Dussel, Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, and the filosofía de la liberación: con respuestas de Karl-Otto Apel y Paul Ricoeur (Guadalajara, México: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1993), 24. My translation of this passage is “Secularization was the false name of fetishism; and the atheism of the left was a first dialectical moment, whose second moment was the affirmation of the Absolute as liberation.” In what follows, all Spanish to English translations are mine.
3. Enrique Dussel, Pablo de Tarso en la filosofía política actual y otros ensayos (Mexico City, Mexico: San Pablo, 2012).
12. Dussel, Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica, 413.
16. Ibid., 34-35.
17. As an act that leaves no alternatives to truth, fetishization also explains why medieval theology is effectively incapable of affirming the autonomy of new forms of scientific rationality.
18. Dussel, Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista, 45, 35.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Dussel offers Hegel as an example of the divinization of secular modernity, where world history and the history of philosophy both culminate in “Spirit worshipping itself in and through [European] man.” Dussel, Filosofía ética latinoamericana V: Arqueológica latinoamericana: Una filosofía de la religión antifetichista, 44.
26. Dussel, The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation, 12. In his Las metáforas teológicas de Marx, Dussel goes on to develop what I argue is a postsecular reading of Marx. I analyze the originality of this interpretation in a manuscript in progress.
28. Ibid., 11.
32. Dussel, Hacia una Filosofía Política Crítica, 409.
36. This formulation is not without its problems. I explore the potentially colonialist ramifications of such notion in a forthcoming essay.

Radical Pluralism and the Hispanic Identity

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INTRODUCTION
In his writing, “Pragmatic Pluralism, Multiculturalism, and the New Hispanic,” José Medina argues for a pragmatic reconstruction of the Hispanic identity given the vast ethnic diversity within Latin American countries. As Hispanic cultural differences have come under suspicion and a post-ethnic American identity is often invoked, Medina urges that a reconstruction of Hispanic identity is needed now more than ever. To adequately articulate the nature of the Hispanic identity, he suggests that a pragmatic account of radical pluralism can allow us to reconstruct an intrinsically pluralist identity that is singular through shared collective experiences. For Medina, radical pluralism offers the best
way to collectively elucidate Hispanics’ experiences as it anticipates political unity and multiculturalism across Latin America.²

In this paper, I argue that Medina’s account of pluralism is not adequate for describing Hispanic identity, as it problematically presupposes the existence of a collective experience common to every Latin American. Furthermore, I claim that Medina’s reliance on an experience-based reconstruction of identity will reproduce oppressive tendencies already at the forefront of Latin American politics. By highlighting the incommensurable differences that exist within historically colonized countries, I conclude by gesturing at another approach that suspends the desire for a unified identity for the sake of liberation in Latin America.

MEDINA’S ACCOUNT OF RADICAL PLURALISM

The aim of conceiving a singular radical pluralistic identity, according to Medina, is to unify Hispanics with a common history of colonial oppression and a common project of liberation.³ But achieving this new pluralistic identity means reconstructing the old one. For that purpose, Medina begins building his account of radical pluralism by turning to a reconstructive model of identity inspired by Deweyan pragmatism, which he calls a critical reconstruction of collective experiences (hereafter, CRCE). This model (or rather, process) broadly consists of an examination of experience that allows individuals and groups to reconstruct a new identity with reconstructed accounts of experience. By taking this approach, Medina explains that experiential commonalities between individuals will become more explicit, and a reconstruction of a group identity will be possible.

Essentially, CRCE involves a twofold task of inquiry into conditions and consequences.⁴ First, there is the genealogical task in which individuals critically inquire about their past. Here, one examines the conditions of her past experiences as they inform her present self-image. For instance, if marginalized individuals engage with this backward-looking inquiry, they may come to find internalized racist beliefs that have been historically cast upon their self-image, which they can now deconstruct. Second, there is the projective task whereby individuals engage with their future. Here, they explore new possibilities by creatively reworking their self-images for a new identity.⁵

On an individual level, CRCE specifically benefits individuals who are members of marginalized racial groups as they acquire a better self-understanding and a creative agency in recreating their new identity on their own terms. They gain significant self-empowerment as they can break free from an inner grip of prejudice.⁶ Medina refers to this type of self-empowerment as a spiritual emancipation. On a collective level, if members of marginalized racial groups follow CRCE, the self-knowledge they acquire will help reveal their shared histories and futures. Once complete, Medina trusts that CRCE can function as the foundation for relationality amongst the radical diversity that confronts marginalized people both on an intracultural and intercultural level.

For instance, as commonalities between individuals emerge via CRCE, Medina explains that the facilitation of intracultural understanding and communication will arise. By sharing experiences of oppression and empowerment with one another, they can build an identity amongst their group despite their diversity. Once said ethnic group reaches the point in their development where they have engendered sufficient empowerment, they can then focus on improving relations with other groups. Medina’s goal in advocating for CRCE is to reconstruct an ethnic identity on an intercultural level for all Latin Americans. In his terms, Hispanics are now in a position to reconstruct and collectively take on the identity of the New Hispanic.

To articulate how a reconstruction of identity is possible for the Hispanic community, Medina relies on the work of José Martí, a Cuban political thinker whose philosophical views provide the constructive elements of the pragmatist approach to ethnic identity.⁷ In line with Medina’s view, Martí believes that Latin Americans must undergo a cultural transformation that prompts them to re-examine their current identity. Furthermore, Martí argues that a genuine cultural transformation depends on Latin Americans’ understanding, criticizing, and expressing themselves by reworking the self-images already available to them to create new ones.⁸ In this way, it is apparent that Martí’s approach to the cultural transformation of the Hispanic identity is similar to Medina’s use of CRCE.

As Medina sees it, Martí’s analysis of Latin America provides further support for the idea that Hispanics are ready to acknowledge their collective experiences. Thus, it is critical that Latin American countries first fulfill the genealogical task of inquiring and repairing their historical ignorance about their cultures. Upon taking on such an introspective task, Martí believes that Latin Americans will realize that they must critically acknowledge the colonial mentality they inherited regarding their Indigenous lineage. Also, Latin Americans will come to find that their current cultural and political agency is largely determined by imitations of Eurocentric models, ideas, values, etc. As such, Martí encourages Hispanics to strive for their spiritual emancipation to undo the colonialist self-hatred they have towards their current image by re-appreciating Indigenous customs and traditions on an intracultural level.

Once Latin American countries independently fulfill the genealogical task and gain an adequate appreciation for their Indigeneity, they can take on the projective task towards reconstructing a collective identity on an intercultural level. In addition to acknowledging their common history, which concerns the repression of Indigeneity, Martí’s work foundationally describes the common future Hispanics must work towards. Put simply, what is most important is that Hispanics collectively attempt to move beyond the imitative tendencies that inform their identity. More specifically, they must interrogate the parts of their identity that rely on imitating the history, customs, and traditions of the United States.

All Latin Americans, both Martí and Medina agree, must work towards fighting a common oppressor. Because non-Latin America has played a significant role in constructing
many well-known racist misconceptions and inaccuracies about the Hispanic identity, Martí specifically cautions Hispanics to stop imitating American “truths” or values based on falsities. Martí uses the United States as the point of commonality between various Latin Americans because by critiquing the United States, they will develop more purposeful liberation projects. Most of all, they will understand that they must seek liberation under the New Hispanic identity. With a new identity that embraces radical pluralism, Medina states that Hispanics’ intercultural projective tasks will have to become politically creative.

To begin this political journey, Martí suggests that Hispanics should start by electing new political leaders who are willing to study Latin America’s diverse realities. Given the creative agency demanded by CRCE, Medina believes these politicians can properly recognize those realities via CRCE and thus be able to create original forms of government that emancipate Hispanics from colonial politics. While not yet fully knowing what these forms of government will look like, Martí emphasizes that Latin Americans must aim for their communities’ social and political emancipation from their countries’ oppressive conditions. The mark of this liberation, Martí concludes, will be the genuine transformation of the material conditions of the lives of members of oppressed groups.

Stated frankly, I regard Medina’s account of radical pluralism as a compelling theoretical apparatus, as it attempts to unify vast diversity with the aim of liberation for Latin America. Yet, I do not think his account is capable of reconstructing the Hispanic identity, as it relies on reconstructed experiences. I argue that Medina’s radical pluralism cannot historically account for a collective experience common to every Latin American and, therefore, cannot compose a singular intercultural Hispanic identity. Although Medina uses Martí’s discussion of Latin America to support his argument, I believe that Medina employs an oversimplified articulation of Latin American history, especially as it relates to identity. ¹⁰

In what follows, I show that even attempting to conceive of a singular pluralistic identity compromises Latin American liberation. To support my argument, I first provide evidence that will help reveal the limitations of Medina’s approach to constructing the New Hispanic. In particular, I use an analysis of Mexican history recounted by Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla and cultural analyst María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo. With their work, I will demonstrate that the reconstruction of a single intercultural identity across Latin America via CRCE is not achievable for even one historically colonized country alone.

**MEXICO: THE PROBLEM OF FICTITIOUS IDENTITIES**

In his book, “México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization,” Bonfil Batalla argues that Mexico has historically established a national narrative under a fictitious identity and an incorrect reality.¹¹ Mexicans, he explains, tend to understand Mexico as a perfectly unified civilization of both Mesoamerican and Spanish culture without acknowledging that they each share these cultures to a different degree. According to Saldaña-Portillo, a reason Mexicans have come to understand their country and themselves in this way is largely a result of how Spanish colonists contributed to the geographical planning of Mexico; for Mexico’s geography paradoxically excludes and includes the existence of Indigenous communities and experiences.¹²

Spanish colonists, Saldaña-Portillo argues, created racial geographies that plotted Indigenous people in particular landscapes in the service of depleting those communities and forming new communities of identity.¹³ While the Spanish confined Indigenous people in certain landscapes (e.g., ejidos), they legislatively established the land as a representational space of democratized mestizaje. In other words, while Mesoamericans were geographically separated from the Spanish, the Mexican government symbolically rendered those communities as equally “Mexican.” As a consequence of the Spanish’s strategic geographical-political planning, Mexicans began to render any semblance of their Indigenous lineage as entirely historical. As Bonfil Batalla sees it, many communities today “are Indian without knowing they are Indian.”¹⁴

What both Bonfil Batalla and Saldaña-Portillo’s work implies is that Spanish colonialism not only created long-lasting effects on the Mexican identity but also on Mexicans’ understanding of experience. Under a fictitiously unified “Mexican” identity, those of mostly Mesoamerican origin cannot politically account for their experiences of oppression as Indigenous people. So, even as they suffer the worst of the economic, political, and social consequences of the hierarchal racial categories that exist in Mexico, Indigenous experiences seemingly do not exist. Conversely, those of mostly Spanish origin have reaped not only various benefits of colonialism but also enforce neocolonial practices as they hold positions of power in the Mexican government. And the Western political ideologies (e.g., capitalism) that inform these practices inherently disallow any Indigenous values to work against the country’s regime. Inequality thrives in Mexico as long as experiential differences are ignored.

If the historical analysis of Mexico’s fictitious identity can teach us anything, it is that when a fictitiously unified ethnic identity exists, noting the existence of collective experiences will face unsailable difficulties. Even if Mexicans decided to undertake the challenge of identifying as a New Hispanic via CRCE, as they begin at the intracultural level, I ask this: How exactly would they go about reconstructing a New Mexican when the Old (current) Mexican is a fictitious identity with no real bearing on similar experiences? I claim that it is not possible to reconstruct an already misconstrued identity without political disunity. As I now turn to my objections, I hope to prove that even if Hispanics manage to follow the logic of CRCE all the way through, the Hispanic identity will only face further misunderstandings of experience.

**OBJECTIONS TO MEDINA**

First, supposing it were possible for Hispanics to follow Medina’s articulation of CRCE, I argue that the process would result in a Hispanic community that does not properly recognize each group’s oppressors.
If all Hispanics individually complete the genealogical task of CRCE and gain self-empowerment, without emphasizing racial or cultural differences, they would gain disproportionate amounts of self-empowerment. Hispanics who have benefited from colonialism would likely gain an unnecessary level of self-empowerment when, in reality, more Indigenous individuals require it on a higher level. Additionally, the genealogical task for many might facilitate motives for cultural appropriation as not all Latin Americans share an Indigenous lineage. If they genuinely lack a colonial mentality, those of more colonial heritage must realize that they have no given right to practice Indigenous customs. As many have benefited from colonialism, we must be careful in presupposing that all Hispanics share the same genealogy.

Second, if Hispanics complete CRCE, upon trying to find commonalities with one another, Indigenous and white Hispanics will rediscover their inherently conflicting values that cannot be fixed by electing new political leaders. As Medina fails to address the different values between Western and Indigenous politics, I claim that CRCE cannot guarantee the political unity Medina aims for. In his work, Medina presupposes the existence of some type of equality in Hispanics’ historical experience, which leads him to expect that differing values in Latin America are commensurable. However, since Westernized Hispanics have failed to recognize Indigenous experiences and values for so long, CRCE may instead motivate them to stop seeking political unity, as they might consider implementing their values in politics. As other critics of pluralism have pointed out, pluralism is “not a pragmatically viable response to value conflict,” especially with historical asymmetric power dynamics. To me, trying to find collective experiences will not allow Indigenous groups to overlook value conflicts as they have had extensive experiential differences from white groups. CRCE simply cannot promise politically feasible results.

Medina might argue, however, that the genealogical task of CRCE should anticipate these abovementioned issues, as it is supposed to help one evaluate how her past conditions have informed her current living conditions. In fact, Medina might say that I have pointed out something that cannot be fixed by electing new political leaders. As Medina fails to address the different values between Western and Indigenous politics, I claim that CRCE cannot guarantee the political unity Medina aims for. In his work, Medina presupposes the existence of some type of equality in Hispanics’ historical experience, which leads him to expect that differing values in Latin America are commensurable. However, since Westernized Hispanics have failed to recognize Indigenous experiences and values for so long, CRCE may instead motivate them to stop seeking political unity, as they might consider implementing their values in politics. As other critics of pluralism have pointed out, pluralism is “not a pragmatically viable response to value conflict,” especially with historical asymmetric power dynamics. To me, trying to find collective experiences will not allow Indigenous groups to overlook value conflicts as they have had extensive experiential differences from white groups. CRCE simply cannot promise politically feasible results.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION
In summary, I have argued that Medina’s radical pluralism is not achievable for the Hispanic community, as members do not have a collective experience that binds them into a singular identity. In other words, I maintain that Medina misses a critical fact about Latin American identities—there are incommensurable differences that Latin Americans have historically never been able to accommodate under a real identity precisely because they lack collective experiences. To support my argument, I used Mexico’s history vis-à-vis identity as a driving example of the differences other Latin American countries may have. I also explicating the problematic implications of following Medina’s endorsement of CRCE and the political difficulties his account as a whole may face.

To conclude, I want to mention some of the implications of my argument. While my criticisms of Medina rely on the claim that there is no collective experience amongst all Latin Americans, I believe there is another discussion to be had about the plausible benefits of acknowledging experiential differences. For one, explicitly acknowledging those differences will allow us to better address Latin America’s political problems, as the presupposition of collective experiences has been a direct cause of vast inequality within and across Latin American countries.

I believe experiential differences explain why it is so pragmatically challenging to construct the Hispanic identity under a pluralist paradigm, and it is preventing us from seeing the colonialist political values upheld currently. But once we emphasize experiential differences, we can understand the more significant task at hand. That is, by suspending the search for a common identity, Hispanics can concentrate on a more pragmatic way to liberate Indigenous communities in Latin America. If Martí is correct in saying that liberation is the genuine transformation of the
material conditions of the lives of members of oppressed groups, then perhaps we must first put our attention there, starting with the decolonization of Indigenous land.

NOTES
2. Ibid.
3. While there are debates about calling someone from Latin America a “Hispanic” instead of “Latino/a,” because the term is legible and Medina makes no distinction between the terms in his essay, I also continue to use the term “Hispanic” in what remains of this paper. Historical context on this terminology can be found in Francisco Hernández Vázquez and Rodolfo D. Torres, *Latino/a Thought: Culture, Politics, and Society* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
5. Ibid., 201.
6. A clear example of the completion of these tasks is that of several Mexican-Americans in the United States who have taken on a more politically informed self-image known as Chicanos/as.
8. Ibid., 218.
9. Ibid.
10. One of Medina’s historical oversimplifications I do not get to discuss in this paper is Latin Americans who do not have Indigenous (Indian) lineage, but African lineage. The experiences of the Afro-Latinx community, much like in Latin American countries, are unacknowledged in his discussion.
13. Ibid., 9, 18.

**Shifting the Geography of Revolution: Mestizo Nationalism, Pan-Arab Independence, and Feminist Philosophy through the Writings of Vera Yamuni Tabush**

**Andrea Pitts**

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The writings of Vera Yamuni Tabush (1917–2003) play a significant yet unorthodox role in twentieth-century Mexican philosophy. Yamuni, Costa Rican by birth and of Lebanese parentage, earned her doctorate in 1951 under the direction of the exiled Spanish philosopher José Gaos at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). There, she worked alongside a group of existentialist thinkers during the 1940s and ‘50s known as *El Grupo Hiperión* (“The Hyperion Group”), a generation of philosophers whose writings are distinguished by their attention to themes of universalism/particularism, alienation, and historicism within the context of Mexican intellectual history. Yamuni’s publications, spanning from the 1930s to the 1990s, also address questions within ontology, existentialism, and philosophy of history. However, her work is distinct from that of other *hiperiones* in that she also engaged carefully with issues in Arabic philosophy, Islamic thought, and feminism. As such, Yamuni’s work serves as an important contribution into the creative philosophical work conducted by women during this period of Mexican philosophical history. While a number of commentators have explored the writings of Yamuni’s contemporary, Rosario Castellanos, who also studied at UNAM during this period, Yamuni’s work has not yet been as carefully examined within Anglophone discourses of Mexican philosophy. I offer here a brief opening into the theoretical significance of her work, focusing specifically on how her critical contributions intervened in philosophical debates among *El Grupo Hiperión*.

While Yamuni’s work commands more time and attention than I can provide here, in this paper, I situate Yamuni’s corpus and her philosophical perspective as a Lebanese migrant in Mexico within the context of the nation’s mid-century philosophical discourse of *lo mexicano*. My central claim is that Yamuni’s critiques of (1) European colonial interests in the Levant, (2) her defense of Palestinian independence, and (3) her interest in developing a critical voice among women within the history of philosophy provide important points of tension against the broader discourse of *lo mexicano* circulating during this period. To elaborate these claims, first, I briefly describe the discourse of *lo mexicano* as it existed during the 1940s and ‘50s in Mexico to highlight some of the context for her work. Second, I situate Arab migration to Mexico to contextualize her standpoint within a broader national context during this period. Notably, I outline migration from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the regions that are now known as Lebanon and Syria to offer a sketch of the context for Lebanese migrations in Mexico during Yamuni’s early years at UNAM. Lastly, I situate Yamuni’s writings on European imperialism, Arab independence movements, and feminism within these contexts. The goal is thereby to demonstrate how her work can be read as bearing important theoretical and political relevance within the philosophical milieu of post-revolutionary Mexican philosophy. Notably, building on Lewis Gordon’s decolonial formulation of “shifting the geography of reason,” I propose Yamuni’s life and work as shifting the terms of Mexican philosophy away from the mestizo nationalism of post-revolutionary Mexico, and towards a transmodern geography of revolutionary movements including those of the Arab world.

**I. EL GRUPO HIPERIÓN AND THE DISCOURSE OF LO MEXICANO**

Within the context of Mexican philosophy, existential questions regarding the significance and meaning of identity, including national and cultural identities, became prominent during the post-revolutionary period beginning roughly around 1909. The group known as *el Ateneo de la
Juventud (the Athenaeum of the Youth) included significant theorists such as José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Alfonso Reyes, and Pedro Henríquez Ureña. They sought, among other efforts, to define themselves against the philosophical and political doctrines that existed during the thirty-year reign of Porfirio Díaz, the president ousted during the revolution. Within this context, a number of philosophers of the Ateneo sought to redefine systems of aesthetics, metaphysics, and ethics in order to address the prevailing reliance on scientific doctrines that had marked the industrial and economic booms, as well as the philosophical traditions of the previous century. Guillermo Hurtado, a current historian of Mexican philosophy, writes that Antonio Caso, a member of the Ateneo, was the first philosopher in Mexico to explore themes regarding the particularity of the Mexican existential situation. Notably, Caso’s writings made two significant contributions to the study of Mexican identity. He claimed that Mexican philosophers needed new tools to explore their circumstances following the revolution, and that the previous era’s emphasis on Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill was not fit for the conflicting political, historical, and cultural circumstances of Mexico. Specifically, the Mexican revolution’s rejection of purely scientific and economic models for interpreting social norms required philosophical methodologies in line with the Ateneo’s interests in aesthetics, moral philosophy, and politics. Caso chose, then, to utilize vitalist and personalist views of the imagination and spontaneity to theorize the circumstances of Mexico’s placement in the context of a broader intellectual world history. Several of Caso’s prominent influences were Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Such philosophical threads of research were also present among the writings of Caso’s colleagues, including Vasconcelos and Henríquez Ureña. The general view was that an emphasis on duration, aesthetic intuition, and moral personhood would prevent the reduction of normativity to scientific determinism, the latter view characterizing much of the philosophical doctrine under Porfirio Díaz.

Following Caso, one of his students, Samuel Ramos, extended this trajectory of analysis and completed, in 1934, an extended study of Mexican identity titled El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México. Ramos’s work was an existential treatise of the conditions of Mexican being and the relationship between this form of being and that of other geopolitical forms of existence. Ramos argued that lo mexicano—“the Mexican”—was characterized by an inferiority complex due to his constant comparison to Europeans. Struggling to find identity within both European and indigenous cultures, “the Mexican,” in this sense, considers himself false, fraudulent, and without value. Ramos’s proposal was to restate the locus of value from within this fraught situation, and accept that there is no prior model for Mexican existence. This turn toward the situation and context of Mexican thought, then, eventually under the guidance of Spanish exile José Gaos, would lead to the generation of philosophers known as el Grupo Hipérion.

Gaos’s own philosophical work was deeply influenced by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Hurtado writes of Ortega: “For Ortega, the error of the philosophy has been to take man as a definable entity outside of his historical, social, political, moral, etc. circumstance. The man does not exist, there are men in specific circumstances, beings in the world and in time.” The following generation of philosophers, los hiperiones, took up this call by both Ramos and Gaos to examine the concrete circumstances that made up the meaning of mexicanidad [Mexicanness] and, accordingly, they published a significant series of articles and books between 1948 and 1952. These efforts often coalesced around the distinct naming of “lo mexicano”—the typified character of Mexicanness, and a number of conceptions of the moral, religious, and social features that characterize Mexican being. For example, Emilio Urranga writes in 1952 Análisis del ser del mexicano [Analysis of Mexican Being] that the central existential feature of mexicanidad is the realization “of the radical contingency of being,” of humankind’s accidentality and lack of necessity and purpose. In this sense, as Carlos Alberto Sánchez has noted in his recent book on el Grupo Hipérion, the insufficiency or insubstantiality felt by Mexicans in comparison to Europeans marks their prescient insight into the accidentality and lack of purpose inherent in being itself.

However, as one might expect, criticisms of this discourse of lo mexicano abound, including feminist work and contemporary philosophical scholarship that marks the essentialism,androcentrism, romanticized and primitivizing indigenismo, and the selective readings of history that appear throughout many of the writings by philosophers of this period. However, within the work of Yamuni, I propose that we find a contemporary interlocutor of los hiperiones, who offers a significant albeit indirect critique of their articulation of lo mexicano. Notably, she too was a student of Gaos, and completed her dissertation in 1951, a work titled Conceptos e imágenes en pensadores de lengua española. The project was a sustained study of the meaning of “thought” within Spanish-language philosophical traditions, including extensive analyses of theorists such as Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, José Enrique Rodó, José Martí, and José Vasconcelos. While her dissertation is worthy of further analysis than I have space for here, I will instead focus, in the final section of this article, on Yamuni’s writings before and after the 1940s and ’50s, to develop the claim that these works demonstrate a significant series of reasons to critique the discourse of lo mexicano in terms of its framing of the cultural, racial, and gender politics of Mexico. To better understand her critique, however, it will be helpful to briefly offer some biographical details of her life and some of the historical circumstances of the emerging Mexican nationalism in which her work was situated.

II. MASHREQI MIGRATION TO CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

One important historical trajectory to trace for Yamuni’s life and work would be to examine the waves of Mashreqi migration to Costa Rica and Mexico during the nineteenth century. We know, for example, that Yamuni’s father was born in 1881 in Lebanon. His decision to migrate, as we can glean from birth records and analyses of Lebanese migration in the nineteenth century, was likely due to the
conflict between the Druze and Christian Maronites in what eventually became Lebanon (Bejos Yamuni, Vera Yamuni’s father, was also a Maronite). A civil war was being waged during the 1860s in what is today Lebanon between the Druze and the Maronites, which also implicated the French (supporting the Christian Maronites) and British (supporting the Druze) interests in collapsing or controlling the Ottoman empire. Between 1860 and 1900, some 120,000 people migrated from the region to the US, Australia, and Brazil. Between 1900 and 1914, 210,000 more people migrated as well. Some of these emigres who left Lebanon also ended up remaining in Costa Rica, which is where Yamuni was born and lived until her late twenties.

For our purposes, this migration history bears relevance for the presence and cultural prominence of Arab migrants in Central America and Mexico. In particular, the relevance of Arab migration in Mexican culture and political discourses remains a contested issue, and, Yamuni’s writings, as I hope to show below, will present some of the philosophically relevant issues regarding the nationalist discourses of lo mexicano. More generally, Mashreqi migration to Mexico boomed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and as Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp describes, Lebanese Mexicans, in particular, came to establish an elite middle-class in the following decades of the twentieth century. However, as Alfaro-Velcamp also argues,

From President Porfirio Díaz (1886–1911) to post-revolutionary President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), Mexican policy makers aimed to bring Mexico out of underdevelopment by reclaiming “Mexico for Mexicans.” This effort, however, has led to an ambivalent treatment of foreigners. Immigrants, mostly Europeans, who were perceived to potentially “better” the nation with skills and capital—and in some cases fair skin—were welcomed by Mexican elites and policy makers. Meanwhile, the Mexican populace often felt exploited by these foreigners. Other immigrants such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Middle Easterners did not meet the criteria of “bettering” Mexico, yet they provided necessary services to the Mexican people. Some even prospered from direct dealings with the poor. These immigrants, often storekeepers or peddlers, improved the lives of campesinos and rancheros with commercial options such as purchasing items outside the stores of hacendados, yet many Mexicans still subscribed to anti-Druze sentiments.

Referring to the discourse of lo mexicano, Alfaro-Velcamp also describes the tensions that many Mashreqi migrants experienced with respect to the rise of mestizo nationalism in the twentieth century. In this vein, the strong nationalist sentiment that attempted to unify and homogenize diverse populations across Mexico often erased existing Indigenous communities, as well as the significant contributions of immigrant populations throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For example, in the post-revolutionary period, the era of the Ateneo de la Juventud and el Grupo Hiperión, many Mashreqi immigrants in Mexico were portrayed as “carrying disease and increasing poverty and criminality” in the country. Also, because the US Disease Act of 1891 targeted the exclusion of Middle Eastern and Asian migrants due to the racially motivated belief that they were more likely to carry contagious diseases, this led to the emergence of a prominent set of smuggling networks across Mexico into the United States. Anti-Arab sentiments continued throughout the 1920s and ’30s through accusations by Mexicans that Arabs were cheats, liars, and swindlers in their business affairs. Also during this period, however, a number of Lebanese migrants began developing ethnic enclaves within Mexico. Camila Pastor de Maria y Campos attributes some of the emergence of these Lebanese enclaves and the accompanying forms of identification as Lebanese to efforts of the French during the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s. Following World War I and the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire to the French and British, the regions that would later become known as the independent states of Syria and Lebanon were put under French rule from 1922 to 1943. Pastor writes that the French government, while occupying Lebanon and Syria, retained a vested interest in Lebanese and Syrian migrants abroad. Notably, records from French administrators who sought to classify these “Syro-Lebanese colonies” in Mexico noted some 20,000 migrants in the country. Moreover, in order to shore up French imperial and economic interests in both the Levant and in Mexico, French administrators sought to demarcate specific Mashreqi populations within Mexico. Pastor traces one French administrator, M. Charpentier, who was responsible for writing the census report on Syro-Lebanese migrants in Mexico. Charpentier used a class-based metric to distinguish between “an urban bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie of small shop owners and established merchants, [on the one hand, and on the other] a nebulous mass of [Mashreqi peddlers, merchants, and workers] who subverted the French colonial project and the concerted efforts of the migrant elite to collaborate with it by taking little interest in their politics.” Moreover, she writes:

The visibility of poverty evoked orientalization and racialization. Those migrant populations that could successfully present themselves as European, and therefore white rather than Semitic, had more probabilities of social ascent. This French class–civilizational distinction, echoed by the migrant elite, contributed to legitimizing the differential relationships established by the mandate authorities with the early migrant elite and the peddling majority. It also justified, and in fact called for, the migrant elite’s institutional leadership and cultural and economic mediation. Moreover, another axis of demarcation impacted Mashreqi migrants in Mexico during this period as well. Namely, as Pastor writes: “The other axis sorts migrants according to their proximity to France as expressed through allegiance to the mandate project.” Whether or not the migrants supported French occupation would determine how they were viewed as upholding the modernization and betterment of the nation-state.
It was thus within this context that Yamuni would travel to Mexico in the 1940s to begin her studies at UNAM in Mexico City. During the time, the planning of Mexico’s first Centro Libanés (Lebanese Center) was being formed in the city, and the wealth from textile industries that had been booming during and after the second world war also fueled the institutional developments of an elite class of Mexican Lebanese citizens. As such, I hope to situate Yamuni’s work within this contested and vibrant series of historical, political, and philosophical contexts in Mexico City.

III. YAMUNI’S WORK IN CONTEXT

Importantly, Yamuni is cited among Mexican philosophers as the earliest feminist philosopher in Mexico. In this regard, Graciela Hierro writes in a 1998 interview: “They always say that it was I who brought feminism to philosophy, but I would say that it is Vera Yamuni who brought feminism to philosophy in Mexico” (Prada Ortiz 2016). Before moving to Mexico, she was publishing on feminist themes as early as 1944 in the Costa Rican journal Repertorio Americano. Regarding Yamuni’s encounters with sexism while at UNAM (1945–1955), she notes that she was encouraged by Gaos to pursue a systematic study of the positive contributions of Hispanophone philosophy in her thesis. However, she also writes of Goas’s negative views regarding women. Namely, she compares Goas with another mentor with whom she studied in Costa Rica, Joaquín García Monge. She states that García’s ideas about women were much better than Goas’s and that unlike Gaos, her previous mentor’s ideas were "without any prejudice." She writes, in 1998, “My discussions and struggles with Goas about the topic of feminism were many and later he changed his position.” Goas’s writings support this as well, in 1982 he states that his “experience as a professor” of women at UNAM led him “to the exact opposite ideas than those of the tradition,” which were that women are intellectually inferior to men. Notably, Goas’s turn and the influence of Yamuni on him point to the neglect and ignorance of a number of men during the 1940s and ‘50s at UNAM regarding women’s contributions to philosophy.

However, after finishing her studies at UNAM and teaching for several years (1955), Yamuni traveled to Paris to study French and Arabic, and from there she traveled to Algeria and Lebanon to enrich her studies as well. Throughout the 1960s, she wrote a number of essays outlining the philosophical relationship between Arabic and Spanish philosophy, and studying specific figures in Arab philosophy, including publishing on Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century philosopher and historiographer, and translating the work of Avicenna into Spanish in 1965. Additionally, she wrote in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s about the roots of the Israeli-Palestine conflict and published works in marked defense of Palestinian independence during that period as well. As Grace Prada Ortiz notes of Yamuni’s work, as a scholar in Arab Studies, she sought to explain the worldview and varied beliefs of Arab peoples, and the forms of European domination in the Middle East that led to the need for pan-Arab solidarity movements.24

For example, in a review written in 1961, shortly after her studies and travels to the Middle East, she offers a direct critique of a French author’s historical account of the Middle East. She writes that the book, Destin du Proche-Orient by Pierre Rondot, “is not a book for Arab nationalists” and that despite the book’s treatment of themes regarding the current politics of the Middle East, the book actually “demonstrates the nationality and French patriotism of the author.” She critiques Rondot for overlooking the role of the French in “establishing colonies or ‘mandates’” in the Middle East through the Sykes-Picot Treaty. Moreover, she faults his lack of attention to the manner in which the British deceived Sharif Hussein of Mecca and exploited Arab participation against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Rondot also leaves out, she notes, the scramble for the territories of the Middle East that transpired through the Sykes-Picot treaty.

From this short analysis, and from her other writings outlining struggles for independence in Arab countries, we do not find an aspirational attitude toward the civilizing mission of the French or other European powers. Notably, in a piece titled “Arab Countries in their Struggle for Independence” (1971), Yamuni outlines European occupation throughout the Middle East, beginning with the French campaign in Egypt in 1798. Additionally, she writes of Zionism in the twentieth century comparing it to the colonization of Africa: “[Since] the 19th century, Europe, without any problems of conscience, conquered and distributed Africa. Zionism was influenced by such an attitude.” Citing a work by a Zionist of the late nineteenth century, Theodor Herzl, Yamuni proceeds to analyze the connections between European imperialism and the establishment of the State of Israel.

We can glean that Yamuni’s writings do not appear to fit comfortably within the frameworks of lo mexicano or the Lebanese Mexican elite class emerging during the twentieth century. More concretely, her work rejects the nationalist framings of homogenization, and the mythologizing of ancient origins that is present in forms of both indigenismo and orientalism that were prominent during post-revolutionary Mexican philosophy. In these veins, her work demonstrates a relevant distance from the aspirational whiteness and class ascension that characterize some social practices within the context of mid-twentieth-century Mexico.

Returning to Gordon’s articulation of “shifting the geography of reason,” within which he writes: “Shifting the geography of reason means, as we take seriously the South-South dialogue, that the work to be done becomes one that raises the question of whose future we face.” In this, Gordon’s call is to consider which struggles and which calls for liberation to uphold through our work. Thus, to interpret Vera Yamuni’s life and writings, a contextualist analysis suggests that we can perhaps best understand her work through what Enrique Dussel has called “transmodernity.” Linda Martín Alcoff describes Dussel’s conception of transmodernity as such:

The idea of the transmodern is . . . designed in part to retell the story of Europe itself with an incorporation of the role of its Other in its formation, surely a more accurate and more comprehensively coherent account. But it is also to retell the story of world history without a centered formation.
either in Europe or anywhere; no one becomes the permanent center or persistent periphery, which would result if European modernity were taken to be the uncaused cause. In this way, Dussel presents the idea of the transmodern as one that has both inclusivity and solidarity: it is more inclusive of multiple modernities without signifying these under the sign of the same, and it offers solidarity in place of hierarchy, a solidarity even extended to European modernity.30

Accordingly, examining the relationships between Lebanon, Costa Rica, Mexico, and European empire through the lens of Yamuni’s life and writings offers philosophical trajectories beyond both the more common Eurocentric universalizing narratives, and beyond the unifying and homogenizing appeal of mestizo nationalism. In this thread, Yamuni’s feminist writings on women in Arabic literature, including Scheherazade, the narrator of One Thousand and One Nights, demonstrate Yamuni’s own commitment to “multiple modernities” and historical trajectories that have shaped her own political and cultural feminist location.31 For example, Yamuni positions Scheherazade as emblematic of the complexities of Muslim women’s control and power over speech. This emphasis on women’s narrative presence within Arab intellectual history and literature, and her defense of pan-Arab independence from European colonial rule, offers a transmodern approach that displaces any presumed unified voice consciousness of women within the context of twentieth-century Mexican philosophy. As such, her approach stands in contrast to the figurations of lo mexicano that were circulating among her contemporaries throughout the mid-century. We can thereby consider her work as offering a transmodern framing of philosophy and feminism, which although they include European authors such as the British author Virginia Woolf, the Greek poet Sappho, and the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, did not merely erase or displace questions of Arab literary and philosophical contribution.32 For these reasons and her philosophical commitments to multiple paradigms of intellectual value and struggle, Yamuni’s life and work offer an important approach within twentieth-century Mexican philosophy. She is thus someone whose life and writings, I hope, will be further studied and appreciated within future scholarship in this field.

NOTES

1. Yamuni also directed the first course in mathematical logic at UNAM in 1953. Gabriel Vargas, “Cronología de la filosofía mexicana del siglo XX.” In Esbozo histórico de la filosofía en México (Siglo XX) y otros ensayos (Monterrey: CONARTE / Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2005).


5. Ibid., 267.


7. Ibid.

8. See, for example, Rubí de María Gómez Campos, El Sentido de Sí: un ensayo sobre el feminismo y la filosofía de la cultura en México (Mexico D.F: Siglo XXI, 2004), and Hurtado, “Dos mitos de la mexicanidad.”

9. The term “Mashreqi” refers to the geopolitical spaces between the Mediterranean Sea and Iran.


13. In fact, the foremost billionaire of Mexico, Carlos Slim Helú, a civil engineer and founder of a Mexican telecommunications company, is now the seventh richest person in the world, and is of Lebanese parentage.

14. Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, So far from Allah, so Close to Mexico (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 15.

15. Ibid., 20.

16. Also during this period (1937), a number of Syrian and Lebanese families received threatening letters from the Ku Klux Klan stating that they would come to Coahuila from Texas and harm them. The content of these letters were so grave that they eventually led to the then-president Cárdenas writing a letter to those representatives of the Syrian and Lebanese communities in Coahuila that the governor of the state would protect them. Accordingly to Alfaro-Velcamp, these letters raise questions about how Texas-based Ku Klux Klan members knew of the small communities of Middle Eastern migrants in Mexico, and perhaps whether disgruntled residents of Mexico may have communicated with the Klan during this period (ibid., 114-15).


18. Ibid., 174.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.


26. Ibid., 483.


28. For more on Mexican Orientalism, see Laura Torres-Rodríguez, “Orientalizing Mexico: Estudios indostánicos and the Place of India in José Vasconcelos La Raza Cósmica,” Revista Hispánica Moderna 68, no. 1 (2015): 77–91; Andrea J. Pitts, “Occidentalism...


32. See, for example, Yamuni’s essays such as “Reflexiones sobre Virginia Woolf” (1944), “Safo, mi guía de siempre” (1944), “El mundo de las mil y una noches” (1961), “La mujer en el pensamiento filosófico y literario” (1966), and “El feminismo y el neofeminismo de Simone de Beauvoir” (1993).

Gloria Anzaldúa, Hybrid History, and American Philosophy

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The best history, one might think, is the version that most closely matches what actually happened. What actually happened, however, is expressed in a story. Apart from that, it becomes difficult to imagine why what actually happened would matter. To read a book by understanding each individual word, but in a random order, is to know the contents of the book, perhaps, but it is not to understand the book. What’s more, to read a book properly, and then provide a detailed account of what happened in the book, and nothing more, is not to have really understood the book.

This interest in history as what actually happened, I argue, is in question now, particularly in the context of the contemporary United States. I would like to present an unorthodox view here, namely, that what has been recently derided as an alternative truth age represents, for better or worse, a more authentic expression of the multicultural American culture than that at which a what-actually-happened history has provided. In a multicultural, there are multiple histories that can be either synthesized or just admitted as incompatible. Either way, history has to be conceived differently, evaluated differently, and even imagined anew. For better or worse, the United States is at a breaking point, conceptually if not also politically, and attempts to hold it together with an overarching story are not guaranteed to work.

What follows is an explanation of what I will call the idea of hybrid history, and centering this idea on the life and work of Gloria Anzaldúa, who identifies herself as a person with multiple and simultaneous identities, drawn from multiple and simultaneous traditions. She is known as a philosophical border-cropper, whose life and work is especially relevant for a time in which there is increasing attention to political and geographic border questions regarding the United States and Mexico. With our eyes directed toward Anzaldúa, we can ask whether it is realistic to have one history for a country. If so, is it essential to have the most comprehensive history, one that captures what actually happened but from multiple perspectives? Or is it permissible, if not beneficial, to have multiple stories, even if these stories seem to be in conflict, and thus overall incomprehensible? If it is the case that we are indeed living in an alternative truth age, perhaps Anzaldúa might be of use to us, if only as a reminder that comprehensibility involves holding together many things at once, not necessarily in creating and maintaining one clear and distinct idea about the things.

Anzaldúa seems to express both the many and the one as part of a poem:

This land was Mexican once
Was Indian always
And is.
And will be again.1

What follows in this paper is in large part an elaboration of these brief lines. Rather than see them, for example, as an expression of a political revolution involving a change in ownership of the land, I think we can see it as an expression of an ultimately unknowable land over which we tell multiple stories.

THE CARTERIAN TIME SPAN
To explain the relevance of considering the idea of multiple stories about one land, I provide an anecdote involving a former US president’s curious understanding of history.

In 2016, after touring a creationist theme park in Kentucky, Jimmy Carter was interviewed about his experience, and he noted that he personally believed in evolution. Yet, he added, “If God created it four billion years ago, or six thousand years ago, it doesn’t matter to me.”2 This idea seems to be based, for better or worse, on a legacy of popularized pragmatism. The context is likely the seemingly interminable dispute between creationists and evolutionists. And yet both groups are likely to find Carter’s statement unsatisfactory, if not offensive. Creationists would say it is yet another instance of worldly corruption, shown in the fact that a former president of what they think of as a Christian nation would deny what they believe is the true Christian teaching. On the other hand, evolutionists would find it to be disappointing, if not harmful, that a scientist and former president of a secular nation would sanction the right to believe in things contrary to what evolutionists believe are settled fact. Carter puts himself in the position of validating two contradictory histories. And for him what actually happened—or precisely how long what actually happened, happened—is just not that important.

We can classify the four-billioners and the six-thousanders as two types of historical communities. This idea should not seem completely foreign to us. Different Indigenous communities, for example, conceived of time in different ways. Interposed on a system of an occupying culture, this resulted in the overestimation among some of the significance of events that might occur in North American, and even world history in the year 2012.
This chock of cultures is, of course, not unprecedented. For example, in Scott Pratt’s 2002 book Native Pragmatism, the author argues that it is plausible that Native Americans, as much as European philosophers and psychologists, were influential on the development of pragmatism in the early United States. “To account for the development of American thought,” he says, “we may refigure the frontiers as borders, as regions of interaction, exchange, and transformation.” He notes, significantly, that “some aspects of the border are surely aspects of conquest, that is, ‘frontiers’ of European expansion and the accompanying destruction of Native life and culture.” This is not the end of the story, though, since “borderlands are regions of colonization,” in addition to being “regions of decolonization.” Pratt’s overall argument is that “much of what American philosophy is known for can be traced to its origins in the borderlands between Europe and America and its ‘originality’ to well-established aspects of Native American thought.”

Pratt’s history is selective, and he establishes links between ideas without relying on finding concrete records that would prove a transmission of ideas. But Pratt's work is not out of place in American philosophy. Again, if we acknowledge that Indigenous people might have a different way of conceiving of historical fact, we can see Pratt’s contribution as a form of myth-making, neither useless nor implausible. As Vine Deloria explains, “Indian tribes had little use for recording past events.” Rather,

“The way I heard it” or “It was a long time ago” usually prefices any Indian account of a past tribal experience, indicating that the story itself is important, not its precise chronological location. That is not to say that Indian tribes deliberately avoided chronology. In post-Discovery times, some tribes adopted the idea of recording specific sequences of time as a means of remembering the community’s immediate past experiences. It is worth noting that past tribal experiences were bound to a community, and not merely fancied by an individual storyteller. The historian is bound to the people through a the-way-I-heard-it history of American philosophy. If the story is believed to correspond to the reality. But this fact suggests that there is something more to our understanding of history than merely the extent to which we want or need to refute it. In doing so, it seems to me, we should also want just as much to refute that provided by Deloria. From Deloria we have a historical consciousness set in opposition to both of these competing Western views. It rejects the importance of time span and insists rather on a story about the exploitation of the Earth. It could be that those who wish to refute the six-thousanders, and maybe even the Carters who tolerate them, are likely uncomfortable refuting the beliefs of Indigenous people. But this fact suggests that there is something more to our understanding of history than merely the extent to which the story is believed to correspond to the reality.

ANZALDÚA: THE NONE AND THE MANY
What we see, then, is at least three histories here. One insists on the time span of a literally interpreted Judeo-Christian Bible, while another requires a far greater time span in order to account for natural change. It is likely possible to refute the second one if one chooses to do so, but the question I want to ask is precisely why we would want or need to refute it. In doing so, it seems to me, we should also want just as much to refute that provided by Deloria. From Deloria we have a historical consciousness set in opposition to both of these competing Western views. It rejects the importance of time span and insists rather on a story about the exploitation of the Earth. It could be that those who wish to refute the six-thousanders, and maybe even the Carters who tolerate them, are likely uncomfortable refuting the beliefs of Indigenous people. But this fact suggests that there is something more to our understanding of history than merely the extent to which the story is believed to correspond to the reality.

In one sense, my proposal here is modest in that it simply suggests that the story of Gloria Anzaldúa become part of a the-way-I-heard-it history of American philosophy. If the story is about natural and hybrid peoples, we need a place for the hybrid peoples too, and this should not be the well-defined traditional place inhabited by the Protestant white male subject of frontier adventure. Anzaldúa identifies herself, implicitly, as a hybrid person. However, she does not support the exploitation of the planet. Rather, she believes in a multiplicity in personality that allows her to transcend what we have come to see as natural boundaries. Anzaldúa’s frontier philosophy is an ungrounded movement between cultures, races, ethnicities, and sexualities.

More ambitiously, perhaps, my proposal requires us to consider that the alternative truth era is indeed upon us, and this is not as bad as it seems. It entails that we accept a
radically pluralistic idea of American history. Again, Anzaldúa is important here. Similar to Deloria, she is engaged in the development of new historical consciousness, one that Jacqueline Doyle refers to as the "collective birth of a new culture." More specifically, Anzaldúa promotes two forms of consciousness, a mestizaje consciousness that is located in "the synthesis of many sites at once," and a nepantla consciousness that "affiliates herself with no side at all." This amounts to an expansive process of identification in the North American continent, what we can think of as a Pan-American version, for example, of Walt Whitman's famous contradictory self-identification. Whitman is large, containing multitudes, but these were presumably limited to the US border; Anzaldúa is larger, containing more multitudes, spanning borders.

Especially earlier in her career, Anzaldúa was trying to be a multitude. "Simultáneamente, me miraba la cara desde distintos ángulos," she says, invoking mystical art. "Y mi cara, como la realidad, tenía un carácter multiplice." She can be interpreted as multiple-Marys standing on a serpent, while, as she says, "Something in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths." Or perhaps she is the serpent, the unsettling force underneath the foot of those hybrid people attempting earth domination. She is also the unsettling force underneath those hybrid people whose stories attempt human domination by creating a story that legitimizes colonialist violence.

Demographic shifts in the United States signify that white supremacy is due for a fall. The mestiza consciousness is leaking into the American psyche, which provokes the kind of psychic restlessness that results in many collisions among, for example, white supremacist viewpoints and multicultural viewpoints, each with a different history. One of these indicates a wish to return to a mythical beginning, while the other one wants to move forward toward a utopian end. As Anzaldúa says in her poem, the land both is Mexican and will be Mexican at the same time. The land both is Indian and will be Indian at the same time. Anzaldúa is Mexican and she is Indigenous, but not mixed. It is perhaps only a little bit of an exaggeration to say that Anzaldúa is a figure who provides a new theory to unite time and space.

SPIRITUAL PRAXIS
To talk about this time and space multiplicity, it is necessary to talk about Gloria Anzaldúa's spirituality, an essential part of who she is, and thus what she writes. Chris Tirres has stressed the importance of spirituality in the work of Anzaldúa. He identifies three different philosophical positions: a "realist" position that assumes spirits are real; a "pluralist" position, "which affirms that spirits are both literally and imaginarily present"; and a "functionalist and pragmatic option" that considers "whether or not the spiritual journey makes positive changes in a person's life." Tirres notes that "Anzaldúa's pluralism is evident in her defense of imaginal journeys as both literally and imaginarily present. Wary of intellectual imperialism, Anzaldúa does not want to have to decide definitively between one or the other." Anzaldúa's spiritual praxis involves "trying to create a

The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

Anzaldúa does not say that the source of the struggle is interior, as a traditional idealist might; rather she can be interpreted as saying that the place of the struggle is inferior. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe explains in regards to Anzaldúa, "Personal experience which might be taken as individual or unique, is actually a function of the socio-political forces that extend well beyond the individual." Anzaldúa is thus neither a passive victim stuck in her own world nor an active reformer focused only on the outer world, but a spiritual revolutionary taking the conditions imposed upon her and transforming them. Anzaldúa is a transcendentalist poet who promotes changes of heart first and only then a pragmatist philosopher who acknowledges the fundamental interconnectivity of self and world.

Anzaldúa's spiritual praxis is that of creating a new myth. She says she is cultureless, challenging "the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos" and also, paradoxically, "participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet." This culture is deep, drawing from the same hidden source that motivated the transcendentalists in the United States. "Man is a stream whose source is hidden," says Emerson, famously. Anzaldúa refers to this same kind of hidden source in terms of her own geography:

I have to surrender to the forces, the spirits, and let go. I have to allow el cenote, the subterranean psychic norias or reserves containing our depth consciousness and ancestral knowledge, to well up in the poem, story, painting, dance, etc. El cenote contains knowledge that comes from the generations of ancestors that live within us and permeate every cell in our bodies.

The cenotes of Central America have existed for just as long, for example, as any New England stream or pond that collects it. Henry David Thoreau muses about this with a peculiar sense of history. "Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden, Walden Pond was already in existence," perhaps as a mythical pool.
for countless “unremembered nations’ literature.” The underground lakes of central America are metaphors just as deep as legendary Walden Pond, and just as good of a referent for unremembered people. To find an American literature, and I would argue an American philosophy as well, we must go to the cenotes, and apt representation of the fluidity of identity, and of time and space in the American consciousness.

ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITY AND SPIRITUAL PRAGMATISM

To talk about Pan-American philosophy, we must acknowledge that the project is often vague. As much as it might lead to the kinds of tangential, subjective, and imaginative musings that, for example, philosophy professors have been trained to control, this popular-metaphysical philosophy is not as far from philosophy proper as we might believe. This is especially true when we consider American philosophy. William James described philosophy as “our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.” If we are to criticize James here, it is on the “individual” part. James sees each of us as an individual agent existing in the cosmos; Anzaldúa is less individualistic than James, seeing herself as the individual embodiment of communities existing in the cosmos.

We might think that James’s definition of philosophy serves to allow Anzaldúa to enter, but she was already in. In fact, in terms of American philosophy, Anzaldúa might be closer to the norm than James. In Mexican popular religion, according to social anthropologist Renée de la Torre, there is already a mixture of “las cosmovisiones indígenas familiarizadas con la magia, el curanderismo, el animismo, y el ‘paganismo’” with “el catolicismo articulador de la devoción a los santos y vírgenes, el milagro y el ritualismo, pero también la espiritualidad nueva era y la neoestoteria.” This, along with cultural globalization, tienden a universalizar las religiones históricas, y a generar novedosos hibridismos en contacto con las tradiciones esotéricas, con los nativismos exóticos, y con creencias seudocientíficas, gestando nuevas narrativas y dotando a las practicas populares de novedosas eficacias simbólicas, por lo general dentro de una visión terapéutica o mágica.

Anzaldúa is a representative of what de la Torre summarizes as a “practica cohabitada y regenerada constantemente por el sincretismo,” in which “se vive permanentemente los procesos de redefinición y reinterpretación del sentido práctico de la religión.” Resisting definitions allows religion to be adapted in practice in response to changing circumstances, making it therapeutic rather than dogmatic, and, for better or worse, magical as much as rational.

Again, I want to suggest that it is time to adapt to a new world of philosophy. This world includes, in addition to traditional philosophers of North, Central, and South America, those that fall outside of the norms established by these philosophers. This need for philosophy to adapt is evident, for example, upon consideration of the World’s People Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, which took place in 2010 in Bolivia. Participants spoke not just of the Kyoto Protocol, the result of traditional philosophical-legal deliberation, but also of the need to follow “traditional ecological knowledge.” Anzaldúa scholar Joni Adamson interprets this knowledge as being part of “an ‘alternative modernity,’” which calls on all the world’s people to turn away from an “irrational logic” that threatens all life on Earth.

“Modernity” can refer specifically to a project of technological development, or it could refer more extensively to the whole project of philosophy identified, for example, with the traditional white male sextet of Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. More extensively, the critique of modernity involves what Anzaldúa scholar Tace Hedrick refers to as “the appeal to ancient or primitive knowledges as a foundation for the rebirth or renewal of the present.” And Anzaldúa needs to be part of that. According to Hedrick, Anzaldúa serves as “an antidote to the sense that modernity’s emphasis on technology, science, and rationality had precipitated a spiritual crisis.”

Given an appreciation of the Anzaldúan critique of modernity, claims that Darwinian evolution has created a similar spiritual crisis for Christianity are at least understandable. Carter’s historical ambivalence expresses a spiritual crisis in America, one that can end up being productive. The problem, however, is that the Christian crisis differs from the Anzaldúan crisis in that, among other things, it assumes a spirituality limited to its own form of Christian spirituality. In this respect, we can see Anzaldúa calling for an upheaval of Christianity, too.

MESTIZA IMAGINATIONS

At this point, we can re-read Anzaldúa’s verse:

This land was Mexican once
Was Indian always
And is.
And will be again.

This is a prediction of revolution, in a sense as political as one likes to consider it. This is a revolution of thought at the least, involving new consideration of history. As Michelle Bastain argues, Anzaldúa does not “assert a linear history of the South-West US. Instead, she writes a history of the borderlands that affirms and recognizes its contradictory historical trajectories simultaneously.” Hedrick says that Anzaldúa replaces “a sense of time (past) with . . . a deep space of the psyche” And as Felicity Amaya Schaeffer puts it most succinctly, “She queers notions of time and space.”

One can be offended by what has been specifically created by historical imagination. Such creations can suggest, for example, conservative worldviews that some believe are bad, or radical worldviews that frighten others because of their material implications. Yet it seems to me to be a strange kind of offense that can be elicited simply by considering that some history is not an accurate copy of some postulated state of affairs anterior to any story that is being told about it. Our claims about the plausibility of a story do not involve only consideration of the what-actually-happened of the
matter, but a consideration of a story in relation to other stories. And this plausibility involves consideration of how the stories work in relation to other parts of our experience. Offense at the idea of imaginative history amounts to a preference for what Serge Grigoriev calls a "pre-conceptual vision of reality, of the kind that would be delivered by an impartial camcorder in the sky." Conflicts arise “because different conceptualizations of reality, undertaken with different interests in the mind, are obliged to measure up” to this ideal,” an ideal that must be ahistorical because it is outside of any engagement or interest in history. Perhaps history is shifting from the impartial recording of events to what we might call, admittedly with a touch of oddness, an omnipartial representation of events. To take Anzaldúa seriously here is to take seriously her mestiza identity, that is, her omnipartial identity in which many things are occurring at once.

This requires a mestiza imagination. Rubén Medina, following Arjum Appadurai, distinguishes “fantasy” from “imagination.” The former is un pasatiempo elitista y una forma de escapismo. La imaginación, en cambio, representa las aspiraciones de una comunidad y sobre todo constituye un factor en la agencia de las personas. Por tanto, realidad e imaginación no se ven ya como en oposición, sino como entidades complementarias, que afectan mutuamente, es decir, que inciden sobre la agencia de los individuos.28

On this view, imagination is pragmatic, representing ends-in-view for a community. What Anthony Lioi, for example, explains in terms of sacred symbols also applies to myths. As he says, the “peculiar power” of myths “comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import.”29 This fundamental task seems especially difficult when considering the feasibility of developing an overarching myth to encompass the diverse perspectives of what we call “America.” The colonizer myths are normative for the colonizers, while the Indigenous myths are authentic only for the Indigenous. The task is thus contradictory and difficult. As Gregory Pappas explains, Anzaldúa’s multifaceted border-crossing existence make us consider the importance of a cultural metaphysics, which he refers to as a “landscape of all cultures.” He extends this cultural metaphysics to the individuals themselves:

On our map of political nations, we do not recognize the border between two nations as some distinct third nation, that is, it does not have the same ontological status. Does it then make sense to talk about border cultures as being cultures or as having a distinctive existence in the landscape of all cultures?30

To deny the ontological status of political borders is to reject the presumed legitimacy of the conquest that has established these borders. As Benay Blend accurately states it, Anzaldúa lives in a “synthesis of the conqueror and the conquered.”31 So perhaps the answer to Pappas’s question is that, for Anzaldúa, there are indeed no border cultures, but there exists rather a no-border culture. It is this no-border culture that would neutralize the colonialist history. A conquerer’s history tries to justify the colonial violence; Anzaldúa accepts the violence, without the justification. Rather, her spiritual practice accepts suffering in hopes of transforming it.

AVOIDING THE PHILOSOPHICAL BORDER GUARDS

In his 1994 article “Half-Hearted Pragmatism,” Gerald Mozur argues in favor of “transhistorical truths—beliefs that hold good for all epochs.” His choice of examples, though, seems to me to reveal the most important issue. Mozur says “such transhistorical beliefs as ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ hold good across all contexts subsequent to the one in which it was first formulated and in which the events occurred.”32 Yet how is it, we might ask, that crossing the Rubicon, which references a military event, has come to mean what William James referred to in “The Will to Believe” as a momentous decision, that is, one which is the opposite of a trivial choice in which “the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise?”33 Anzaldúa says that the American condition is indeed momentous, that is, irreversible. It is not possible to return to anyone’s particular ownership of the land, since land is not the kind of thing that can be owned. Rather than deny that colonization took place, or insist that colonization took place, our response could be the creation of a new form of conceptual, spiritual, and ultimately political border-crossing. Attempts to stop such border-crossing by referring to the way things really are—whether those things are nation, gender, or original event of creation—will confront the figure of Gloria Anzaldúa straddling the Rio Grande like a mythical giant. What makes her compelling is her willingness to accept blurred boundaries of class, gender, sex, language, race—as well as nation—while also somehow maintaining a personal integrity. One is drawn into this creative tension, perhaps even recklessly, as one tries holding together the various parts as loosely as possible without experiencing a repellant dispersal. “En vez de dejar cada parte en su región y mantener entre ellos la distancia de un silencio,” Anzaldúa says, it is “mejor mantener la tensión entre nuestras cuatro o seis partes/personas.”34 According to Marisa Belausteguigoitia Rius, this means that “la tensión que demanda al cruce entre subjetividades diferentes producen una textualidad llena de atravesamientos, de negociaciones entre opuestos, con el fin de aceptar, entender y recodificar lo ajeno.”35 Acceptance, understanding, and recodification are themselves temporary states, and so border-crossings are perpetual. Nothing can be completely forgotten, and nothing can be tenaciously maintained.36 Still, it is difficult for me to see how it would be bad, all things considered, if any transhistorical truth supposedly behind “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” was forgotten. And Anzaldúa is an invitation to a transgressive form of imagination, a spiritual crossing of the Rubicon that makes unnecessary the kind of material crossings of the Rubicon that characterizes colonialist history.
NOTES
5. Ibid., 2.
8. Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 66. “Simultaneously, I was looking at my face from different angles. And my face, like reality, has a multitudinous character.” Of note is Anzaldúa’s possible reference to Walt Whitman’s famous line about being large and containing multitudes.
9. Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 73.
11. Ibid., 132.
12. Qtd. in Tirres, 137.
15. Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 80-81.
17. Henry David Thoreau, Walden (New York: NAL Penguin, 1980), 123. As Kevin Dann puts it, “Thoreau’s martial attitude” involved believing that “he was doing daily battle with a godless adversary,” something that Dann calls “as much historical reality as personal myth” (164). Kevin Dann, Expect Great Things: The Life and Search of Henry David Thoreau (TarcherPerigee, 2018). The blending of history and personal myth is thus not unprecedented in American philosophy.
19. Renée de la Torre, “La Religiosidad Popular: Encrucijada de las nuevas formas de la religiosidad contemporánea y la tradición (el caso de México),” in Ponto Urbe: Revista do núcleo de antropologia urbana da USP 12 (2013): 7. To be clear, de la Torre offers a critique of the therapeutic and magic vision when it represents individual menus of belief a la carte (13).
20. Ibid., 18.
23. Perhaps Anzaldúa represents the eventual destruction of a largely white nation-state, or of the nation-state altogether, in favor of what Martina Koegeler-Abdi calls a “vision of planetary citizenship beyond essentializing frames of reference” (79). Or, as Claire Joysmith notes, “hybridity and novelty proposals of mestizaje are, ironically, often perceived in (central) Mexico as unsettling, even threatening, particularly when they are gender related and when they demand that we seriously and pragmatically rethink mobile cultural identities” (49).
28. Rubén Medina, “El Mestizaje a través de la Frontera: Vasconcelos y Anzaldúa,” Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos 25, no. 1 (2009): 122. “Fantasy is an elitist past time and a form of escapism. Imagination, on the other hand, represents the aspirations of a community and over all constitutes a factor in personal agency. Thus, reality and imagination are not set in opposition, but rather as complementaries that mutually affect each other, that is, that influence individual agency.”
34. Anzaldúa, Reader, 166. “Instead of leaving each part in its region and maintaining a silent distance among them, it is better to maintain a tension among our four or six parts/personas.”
35. Marisa Belausteguigoitía Rius, “Límites y fronteras: la pedagogía del cruce y la transdisciplina en la obra de Gloria Anzaldúa,” Estudios Feministas 17, no. 3 (2009): 765. “The tension that results from an intersection among different subjectivities produces a textuality full of transgressions, of negotiations between opposite, to the goal of accepting, understanding and recodifying that which is alien to it.”

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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Agnes B. Curry

UNIVERSITY OF SAINT JOSEPH, CONNECTICUT

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us all and prompted us to adapt in unexpected ways so as to support the personal and community survival that is the soil for learning. This edition of the newsletter focuses on teaching and pedagogy, and includes records of two creative regroupings, one at the community level and one in the university level.

The newsletter opens with the offering by Deidra Suwanee Dees, EdD, Director/Tribal Archivist of the Office of Archives and Records Management for the Poarch Band of Creek Indians in Alabama. In “Cultural Infusion in the Pandemic: Creek Symbology,” Dees chronicles a workshop she led for her coworkers that allowed participants not only to explore and reanimate meanings from the historical image that was the focus of the workshop, but also to weave in new relevancies vital for their going on together in these times. The images generated by the participations are worth pondering in their own right, while the workshop format is adaptable to various contexts. We invite readers to consider how it may be utilized in Native communities in new ways: for members of living cultures and knowledge-systems, the work of reweaving the past with current conditions is never finished.

The article that follows is by Alex-Andrei Ungurenap, a senior undergraduate student at Windsor University. His paper, “The Roles of Land and Stories in Relational Pedagogy for Indigenous Resurgence,” delves into a story from the Lower Similkameen Band of the Interior Salish people. The story, “Coyote Challenges God,” is of particular salience for pondering the implications and stakes of decolonizing education.

The final item in the newsletter, a syllabus by Shelbi Nahwile Meissner of Georgetown University, offers a way to introduce Indigenous philosophy to undergraduates that responds both to our pandemic-induced teaching challenges and the possibilities of social media such as Twitter.
Indian Education Association Convention in 2019. The curriculum infused indigenous cultural philosophies into the workshop using art painting with Native art symbolism.

In January of 2020, before the pandemic hit, Dr. Dees implemented what she learned by leading the "Cultural Infusion" workshop with our team utilizing turtle symbology. Because the workshop was successful, she scheduled the September 25 workshop, this time using the image of the cross inside circles which derived from the Fundaburk sisters’ book in our Special Collections Library. This ancient symbol was found on artifacts crafted by Indigenous peoples of the present-day southeastern region of North America, often referenced in modern times as medicine wheel.

This project followed Cajete’s philosophical perspectives on education about the teaching and learning processes which are centered in community-based philosophies. The original carving was taken from the land of our ancestors, a sacred place, and represents stories that were passed down from our elders. Following community-based philosophies, the project was developed in a contemporary setting but founded upon traditional Muscogee values that adhere to the spirit of unity.

“How do we work together while we are separated?” Dr. Dees asked herself. The COVID-19 pandemic dictated that this workshop be designed differently than the prior workshop. The six staff participants—Dr. Dees, Jon Dean, Leasha Martin, Luvader Cejas, Clayton Coon, and Chad Parker—were separated in their offices behind closed doors following our Tribal Council’s safety guidelines. When leaving our individual offices, we were required to wear our facemasks but were not permitted to congregate together to prevent community spread.

The answer soon came to her. “We need six parts of a whole,” Dr. Dees said, representing unity of the team and unity of the medicine wheel. She asked the Marketing Manager, Ms. Jennifer Chism, to print the medicine wheel image on an oversized four-foot paper. Equal parts of the paper image were cut into six pieces and distributed to mailboxes outside staff office doors, along with paint supplies. Rather than sitting together at the conference table as we did at the prior workshop, staff painted their assigned portion behind closed doors without knowing each other’s design.

During the four-hour project, the team met via Zoom several times for interaction on symbology and painting designs. Questions arose: “What do the eighteen circles mean? What do the four circles stand for?” The Fundaburks had not answered these questions for us in their book, but described the image as a shell gorget (armor) which showed a variation of the cross. They said this image was found in present-day Hamilton County, Tennessee.

The team discussed possible meanings by the original carver(s). Elements of the project focused what Merculieff and Roderick describe as earth-based knowledge, attention to relationships, working/thinking as a group, discussions of stories from our elders, reflection, and experiential learning. These individual elements worked together to form the whole of the project.

Staff infused meaning into their art pieces—pandemic, Hurricane Sally, turtle shell shakers. Records Officer Jon Dean said that his portion “represents hardships experienced this year such as COVID-19, racial tensions, and natural disasters. The colored internal rings represent the frontline workers as we battle these hardships—emergency medical services personnel, law enforcement, and fire fighters.” He said the core represents faith, strength, and guidance from Creator to help us in our struggle.

When we were finished, we showed each other our art pieces via Zoom. Artist compliments abounded. When the paint was dry, Jon Dean affixed the six parts together on the glass window that looked into the Archives File Room from the hallway so that staff could see the finished artwork as a whole. Separately—wearing facemasks—staff viewed the whole symbol we had painted—a beautiful creation!

We were left to ponder the meanings of the ancient ones who carved this image while we infused meanings of our own into new Creek symbology. Mvto.

NOTES

The Roles of Land and Stories in Relational Pedagogy for Indigenous Resurgence

Alex-Andrei Ungurenasu
WINDSOR UNIVERSITY

Western education has always been a source of pain and adversity for Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. For a long time, this pain has been felt through the various residential schools that worked toward killing the spirit of Indigenous children and forcing them to conform to settler culture. While residential schools no longer operate today,
Indigenous children, teenagers, and young adults often have no other option but to enroll in Western schools and colleges. Although these institutions do not make it part of their mission to erase indigeneity, they still continue to reshape and limit Indigenous children’s education. Whereas pedagogy in Indigenous cultures is relational, stories-based, and land-based, Western education constrains students within a universalist and objectivist model. The exchange of knowledge in Western education is only meant to go one way—from teacher to student—and all of the necessary knowledge is supposedly contained in textbooks and curriculums. Indigenous resurgence is not possible within the Western neoliberal education system because it is within the latter’s nature to discourage Indigenous children from discovering and learning about the world as active subjects.

To stay true to the principles of my argument, I center my reasoning on Harry Robinson’s (Similkameen Band, Salish) story “Coyote Challenges God.” Drawing primarily from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s (Anishinaabeg) discussion on “Land as Pedagogy” in her book, As We Have Always Done, I contextualize stories and pedagogy as part of her Radical Resistance Project. I focus on the living being of land as Indigenous Place-Thought as Vanessa Watts (Bear Clan, Six Nations) relates it in her article, “Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans,” to emphasize the role of land in relation to other beings in Indigenous stories, epistemology, and pedagogy. I further refer to Jo-ann Archibald’s (Sto:lo First Nation) experiences from her book, Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit, to convey Coyote as learner and partner-in-learning and to compare Coyote’s epistemological journeys with Binoojiinh’s and Nanabush’s as told by Simpson. I discuss Bill Cohen’s (Okanagan) work with the Okanagan nkw̓aqs n̓g̱ n̓x̣̓w̓ and smn̓m̓a̓y̓a?tn i? i? k̓l̓ sq̓í̊xt̓at Cultural Immersion School as praxis and as an example of using stories-based and land-based relational pedagogy as part of Indigenous resurgence. Lastly, I address the tensions between Simpson’s Radical Resistance Project and the Western neoliberal system in terms of what the goals for Indigenous relational pedagogy ought to be and to what extent it ought to be carried out. In this paper, I argue that land and stories play an essential role in establishing the relational nature of Indigenous epistemology and must therefore be a part of any pedagogical model aiming for Indigenous resurgence.

The following story, “Coyote Challenges God,” is told by Harry Robinson of the Lower Similkameen Band of the Interior Salish people and transcribed by Wendy Wickwire, who is professor emerita in the Department of History at the University of Victoria.

Coyote travels along and meets an old man. He claims he’s the older of the two. The old man invites Coyote into a contest of his power.

Coyote was walking. And then he see somebody walking ahead of him. Looks like this man is walking from here. And he walks. And pretty soon they get together. And they met. And he looked at him. He was an old man, a very old man, that one he met. White hair. Look old. And he talk to him. And I do not know for sure what they were saying. But anyway, they talking to one another. But Coyote says to him, “I’m the oldest.” You young. I’m the oldest.” Coyote, he claims himself, he’s older than him. And this man told him, “No, you young. I’m the older.” “Oh no,” Coyote says, “I’m older. I been waking all over the place.”

And he tell him all what he have done, and explain him how much power he was, and so on. But he didn’t know he was the one who gave him that power. So the old man told him, “All right, if you got the full power, I like to see.”

All right. They walked a little ways and they see a little mountain. Not small. It’s kinda big mountain. He stopped there. And then this old man told him, “If you got the power the way you say, a lot of power, I want to see you move this mountain and put ‘em in another place, if you got the power.” Coyote says, “Why sure, I got the power.” He says, “All right. I like to see you move that mountain.”

So Coyote, he use his power and he moved that mountain just by his thought. And the mountain, it seems to move and sit in another place. All right. The old man told ‘em. “All right, you’ve got the power.” Then they go a little ways and they see a lake. Pretty good sized lake. And the old man told ‘em, “Now you move this lake from that place and set it in another place. Same as you do that mountain, if you got power.”
Coyote said,
"Sure, I’ll move ’em."
"All right, let’s see you move it."

So he use his power and he move that lake and set it in a different place.
And he told the old man,
"Now you see, I move it.
I told you I got the power."

All right.
The old man told ’em,
"All right, I can do it."
So they went back.
And he going to move that mountain.
The old man takes the power away from him.
He didn’t know.
He try to move the mountain back to the place.
He couldn’t make it.
Can’t do it.
Old man told him,
"All right, we go back to that lake and you can move that mountain back into place."

So they went back and he said,
"All right, you move that back in place."
Try to move but they couldn’t move it.
And the old man told ’em,
"You always say you got a lot of power.
But you can’t move ’em back."
"Well,” he says, “I don’t know.”
"Yeah, you don’t know but I do.
I am the one that give you that power in the first place.
So you used that power and you’ve got the power and you moved that.
But now I take that power away from you for a little while.
And then you couldn’t move it.
All right.
Now I give you the power back.
Then move it."

Well, still he didn’t know, but he get the power back.
Then he moved the lake into place.
And he moved the mountain into place.
Then told him,
"Now that’s the last thing you can do.
Now I take the power away from you and I’m going to take you and I’m going to put you in a certain place and you’re going to stay there till the end of the world.
Because the reason why I’m going to do that with you, you’ve done a lot of good things and you’ve done a lot of bad things.
And it seems to be the bad you have done, it’s more than the good.
So that’s why I’m going to put you in one place.
And you going to stay there until the end of the world.

Just before the world is going to be the end, I can let you go.
Then you can go in the place all over again just like you do before.”

And the old man left him on a boat on the water and told him,
"You’re going to be there all the time."

The boat, it goes around itself by wind.
And Coyote stay in there all the time.
For a long time Coyote was there on the water sitting on that boat.
And he eat right there.
And he got a fire, and the fire never go out.
Just like it was when he first set the fire.
It was like that all the time.
And been there a long time.
Just like he put him in jail.

Coyote and God’s interactions in the story can help us contextualize the way through which the Western education system stunts the potential for Indigenous peoples to understand and live with the land. In many interpretations of the story, God is taken to represent white settlers and the technologies that they brought with them upon their arrival on Turtle Island. Coyote, whom I refer to as “they/them” despite Robinson mostly using “he/him” (he also occasionally uses “they/them” and “’em” when referring to Coyote), embodies Indigenous peoples and their ways of being on the land. Coyote’s powers—the ones that they manifest in this story, at least—relate to the land on which they walk and the different rock and water formations that exist there.

When Coyote meets God, Coyote uses their knowledge (mind) to move (affect) the mountain and the lake. In other words, Coyote shows God what they know about the land and how they interact with it in the same vein that Indigenous peoples taught settlers about the plants and soils of Turtle Island. While God claims to have given Coyote those powers, it is up to interpretation whether those powers are the knowledge that Coyote borrows from God or if they are actually Coyote’s traditional knowledge which God then assumes ownership of in a patriarchal way. If we take both interpretations to be true, Coyote’s inability to move the mountain and the lake back to their original spots may be the result of God having interfered with Coyote’s knowledge. God may have disabled Coyote’s powers in the same way that white settlers prevented (and, through settler surveillance, continue to prevent) Indigenous peoples from living authentically on their land by militarily occupying land and killing (or limiting Indigenous people’s access to) animal wildlife. As God temporarily returns Coyote their powers only to then exile them to a certain spot, so does the modern Western neoliberal education system limit the potential of Indigenous youth. In Western schools, Indigenous children are taught by non-Indigenous teachers and are forced to accept the settler vision of the world. One aspect of this vision, as it pertains to land and natural life, is that humans have dominion over plant and animal life and can therefore abuse the latter as they please. By going through the
Western education system, Indigenous youth learn some things about the world and how they can interact with it to certain extents, but these ways are not their own traditional knowledge. Just like Coyote, Indigenous youth are stuck on a boat that goes around itself—this boat being Western schools—and kept at a distance from their true potential as active learners and movers in the world.

Indigenous resurgence therefore places itself in complete opposition to the Western neoliberal model in its scope to create empowered Indigenous individuals and communities who can effectively carry out Indigenous nation-building projects. As Simpson relates in her account, the colonial agenda of the Western neoliberal education system often forces learning upon Indigenous youth “using the threat of emotional and physical violence” and through institutionalized coercion. Consent, which is integral to Indigenous pedagogy, is missing entirely in most Western educational institutions, and at best it is extracted with the promise of progress in Western capitalist society. For many Indigenous peoples, including Simpson, the experience of Western education consists “of continually being measured against a set of principles that [require] surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda in order to fulfill those principles.” Western education creates a competitive learning environment wherein true learning and discovery are not the main goal. In most public and private schools, the goal is to accept, internalize, and regurgitate the pre-established facts of settler society. For example, some schools and teachers may provide short, inaccurate, and redacted accounts of the European settlers’ history on Turtle Island, often ignoring or simply mentioning in passing the crimes and violence committed against Indigenous peoples. Western educators place more emphasis on disseminating information concisely and efficiently than on nourishing critical and creative minds. Any goal related to students’ personal development is conceived only insofar as it ensures that they will become successful participants in the settlers’ capitalist society.

Against the Western neoliberal education models, Simpson proposes Indigenous stories-based and land-based pedagogy as part of her Radical Resistance Project. Resistance and resurgence are interlinked for Simpson and other Indigenous scholars and activists because resurgence requires acts of resistance, and resistance, in most cases, perpetuates resurgence. Simpson encourages the creation, maintenance, and strengthening of intelligent Indigenous relationality respective to each Indigenous community as a means of “propelling [Indigenous peoples] to rebel against the permanence of settler colonial reality and not just ‘dream alternative realities’ but to create them...in spite of being occupied.” Indigenous pedagogy ought to be radical because, if its goal is to fuel resurgence, it must also actively resist Western neoliberal pedagogy.

To resist, in this case, means to reject educating Indigenous youth within Western schools. Simpson’s suggestion is to recreate “the conditions within which [relational] learning [occurs], not just the content of the practice itself.” Since these conditions are not available in most Western schools, they must be recreated outside of Western institutions. Western schools and curriculums are not compatible with Indigenous relational learning because “it is impossible to generate a curriculum for ‘that which is given to us lovingly from the spirits,’ and because it doesn’t make sense for everyone to master the same body of factual information.” As long as Western schools make use of standardized testing and universalist curriculums and learning expectations, they do not create opportunities for children to come into learning on their own. Even in class activities such as science labs, students are forced to follow specific, pre-established steps and achieve expected outcomes. Within Western schools, Indigenous ways of knowing and being are only appropriated as content for lesson plans, but they are almost never integrated as the methodology for the lesson plans themselves. Without creating “a generation of people attached to the land and committed to living out [their] culturally inherent ways of coming to know,” Simpson suggests that Indigenous peoples risk losing the very ways through which they come to know and themselves in relation to the land. Indigenous peoples who go through Western education without resisting it risk only knowing the land through the eyes of the settlers; likewise, they may construct their identity through the eyes of the settlers and the harmful and untrue stereotypes that the latter attribute to Indigenous peoples. Simpson argues that “radical resurgent education is therefore at the heart of the Radical Resurgence Project because it rebelliously replicates nation-based Indigenousity.” In other words, a radical Indigenous pedagogy is the only means by which Indigenous youth can actualize themselves as Indigenous citizens within their nations. As long as they are forced to go through Western educational institutions, Indigenous youth are always under the threat of settler assimilation.

Relational pedagogy is a deeply personal and reciprocal means of coming to know the world, and it is essential to Indigenous learning and nation-building. By telling the story of Binoojiinh discovering maple sap and its useful qualities, Simpson explains the way through which relational learning manifests and the reasons why it is conductive to disseminating knowledge. In the story, Binoojiinh observes Ajidamoo (Squirrel) nibbling and sucking on a tree’s bark. Following Ajidamoo’s example, Binoojiinh likewise begins nibbling and sucking on the bark, discovering that it contains sweet water. At home, Binoojiinh shares their discovery with their mother, who believes them. The next day, Binoojiinh takes their mother and other family members to the tree to show them their discovery. When Binoojiinh takes their elders to the tree, they know that they will be believed by the elders and that their discovery will be well appreciated by their community. Because this relationship of trust exists between Binoojiinh and their elders, they feel confident in sharing their discovery. In many Western schools, on the other hand, novel ideas are discouraged by teachers. I know that even in Romania, for example, literature students at both the high school and university levels often have their ideas dismissed by their teachers and professors. In such instances, teachers assume a position of superiority which implies that their views are the only correct ones and that students should not question them. Contrary to this, relational pedagogy encourages everyone to participate, and the relations of trust that exist between community members ensure that their suggestions will be welcomed with an open mind. Therefore, relational pedagogy...
produces more opportunities for learning by creating safe and familiar spaces for ideas to be articulated—compared to Western pedagogy, wherein students often hesitate to ask questions or express their own views for fear of being dismissed by unsympathetic educators.

The relational approach likewise fosters curiosity and critical thinking as students take an active role in teaching themselves and sharing their learnings with others. Whereas students who complete science labs in Western schools only do so because they know that they must achieve a certain result, students who engage in relational pedagogy go through the process with a sentiment of wonder and a lack of pre-established expectations. Rather than following a set of instructions, they observe the present conditions and assess how to go about testing hypotheses. The result may be the same as the one obtained by students in Western schools, but their coming into knowing of it is significantly different. The role that Western teachers have is to tell students what to do; in relational pedagogy, the teacher’s role is to engage with students as partners in learning. While the relationship of age-based respect remains between students and elders, the position of superiority commonly held by Western teachers does not exist in relational pedagogy. Mistakes, in this context, are not seen as failures, but as lessons for future attempts. In her account of learning and writing about stories, Archibald is aware that she needs “to keep coming back to the Elders to learn more and to have them check [her] storywork weaving process.” Even though there is no established “right” way, relational pedagogy recognizes that knowledge is enriched through conversation, mutual trust, and sharing.

Besides creating opportunities for learning, relational pedagogy contributes to the Indigenous resurgence project by reproducing Indigenous relationships and values. Simpson notes that “the radical thinking and action of [Binoojiinh’s] story are not so much in the mechanics of reducing maple sap to sugar, but lie in the reproduction of a loving web of Nishnaabeg networks within which learning takes place.” Relational pedagogy automatically strengthens the bonds between those involved. In this way, language and culture get passed on to new generations, and elders likewise learn new things from the youth and the new worlds that they are faced with. Simpson emphasizes that “when realized collectively, [coming to know] generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, interdependent, and self-regulating community-minded individuals.” In the context of the Radical Resurgence Project and any other Indigenous nation-building initiatives, these are the kinds of individuals and communities that can realize the former. Since relational pedagogy is inherent to most Indigenous cultures, its practice is necessary for creating Indigenous warriors and nation-builders.

Stories are essential to relational pedagogy because they present us with situations wherein characters interact with one another and with the land; these interactions and the way through which they are told can inspire various lessons for different individuals. Simpson’s story with Binoojiinh is one example of such stories. After telling it, Simpson notes that stories are not meant to have one universal meaning; rather, the same story can hold different lessons depending on the time in one’s life when they are introduced and reintroduced to it, so that “after they live each stage of life through the story, they then can communicate their lived wisdom through six or seven decades of lived experience and shifting meaning.” In Simpson’s case, Binoojiinh’s story has prompted different knowledge in the different years in which she has either told or listened to it. Stories are a fertile source of meaning and they only become more impactful as they are repeated throughout one’s life. Introducing children to stories at a young age is good because “younger citizens might first just understand the literal meaning. As they grow, they can put together the conceptual meaning, and with more experience with [their] knowledge system, the metaphorical meaning.” Stories are representative of knowledge because they build upon themselves in the same way that knowledge does through experience. Similarly, Simpson cautions that not all Indigenous stories take place in precolonial times and that, as an example, Binoojiinh’s “story happens in various incarnations all over [their] territory every year in March when the Nishnaabeg return to the sugar bush.” Indigenous stories are timeless not only in the sense that they are hundreds and thousands of years old, but that they reoccur at different places and at different times. Robinson’s story with Coyote and God is interpreted differently within a colonial context than it would be in a precolonial context, and different lessons can be observed in each case; while the former may inspire one to question settler authority, the latter might teach another to be humble about their abilities.

The relational aspect of stories is evident in Nanabush’s journeys around the world. After completing the first journey, Simpson tells us, “Gzhwe Manidoo asks him to go around the world another time. This time with Ma’iingan, the wolf, as his companion. Relationality gives birth to meaning. Repeating the journey again in relation to another being shifts and deepens understandings.” On his first journey, Nanabush has learned certain lessons from the places and peoples whom he visited. On his journey with Ma’iingan, however, he is able to not only meet new people and notice different things, but to also relate all of this to Ma’iingan. Ma’iingan can make Nanabush aware of things that he has not noticed during his first journey, and even the relationship that they share as travel partners can help Nanabush learn new lessons about travelling and visiting. Ma’iingan surely learns plenty of new things as well from his travels with Nanabush. Simpson observes that while, indeed, “lived experience leads to transformation... there is a limit to the fluidity, and that’s the web of ethical relationships that working in cohesive manner with each other, create more life.” Stories show us how different relationships can manifest to remind us of our own relationships with those around us.

Similarly, Coyote is not alone in Robinson’s story. Before they meet God, Coyote walks around on their own and experiences the land in a certain way; their knowledge of the land influences their powers. However, once God joins Coyote, Coyote’s perspective and behavior changes. In their travels around the land, Coyote and God show each
other different things. In the end, Coyote loses their powers and autonomy because of their interactions with God. One could say that, by not considering that God gave Coyote their powers, Coyote fails to recognize the importance of their relations with others and with the land. This is another one of the possible lessons that can be inspired from the story. Archibald indicates that “how Coyote sees the world and comes to make sense of it through interrelationships is critical to understanding” lessons from Indigenous storytelling.6 Just as the meanings in Binoojinh’s and Nanabush’s stories depend on the peoples and land with whom they interact, so do the lessons that Coyote learns (or does not learn) depend on the various characters that they meet. As a Trickster, Coyote “is a transformer figure, one whose transformations often use humor, satire, self-mocking, and absurdity to carry good lessons” and who “has the ability to do good things for others.”7 Just as creation stories serve specific roles when they are told, so do Trickster stories highlight certain elements of the Indigenous human experience. Coyote’s intents are neither wholly good nor wholly bad. They represent humans through their faults and through their good deeds. Stepping outside of their stories and into our world, Coyote “can change and live on through time as people interact with [them] through stories” so that, in a way, they can help us “to reflect and to gain understandings, [challenge] and [comfort us] just like a critical friend.”8 Just as Coyote is a learner, so are we; and, as Archibald suggests, we can be partners in learning with Coyote. Coyote, Binoojinh, Nanabush, Mā’iilgan, and other characters found in Indigenous stories simultaneously maintain relations with the land and characters in their stories as well as with us.

As indicated several times throughout this paper, land plays as much of a role in stories and relational pedagogy as any other characters and teachers do. The scope of Nanabush’s journeys is to visit “with every aspect of creation: the rivers, the lakes, the oceans, the plants, the animals, the spirits, the mountains, the prairies,” and “the northlands,” and to recognize, name, and develop meaningful relationships of reciprocity with each of those.9 The plants, animals, and spirits are put in the same context of relationality as geographic features because the latter have beings and lives of their own, and, consequently, form relations with everyone that comes across them. Pedagogy, Simpson suggests, should not only be land-based, but the land itself “must once again become the pedagogy.”10 While “land-based” is often meant as “related to the environment” or “events that take place in nature,” Simpson argues that the land and its features themselves have the capacity to teach us.

The fact that land is alive and conscious also means that land has agency and the ability to produce meaning. Watts relates how, in the Anishinaabe creation story, Gzhwe Manidoo creates First Woman (Earth) and how, from First Woman, human and non-human beings gain their thoughts and agency; “the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated,” Watts tells, is Place-Thought.11 This automatically puts all of us in relation with the Earth and every other being on it. We must also note that Watts insists on emphasizing that Gzhwe Manidoo’s act of creating First Woman really did take place, that it was “not imagined or fantasized” and that it “is not lore, myth, or legend.”12 Taking these stories as facts is crucial because we must acknowledge them not simply as theories but as real practices. These stories, as aforementioned, reoccur whenever they are told; Coyote is walking around (or sitting on their boat), Binoojinh is making discoveries, and Nanabush is visiting places and peoples together with Mā’iilgan. These are stories that not only could happen, but have happened, are happening, and will continue to happen as long as we live in Place-Thought and derive our agency and meanings from her.

Since we gain our ability to learn from Place-Thought, we must also protect the land in order not to lose our source for meaning in the world; for Indigenous peoples and for the purposes of Indigenous resurgence, engaging with and protecting Place-Thought is an essential responsibility. Watts remarks that, for “Indigenous peoples, it is not only an obligation to communicate with Place-Thought” through ceremonies, “but it ensures [their] continued ability to act and think according to [their] cosmologies.”13 Similarly to how Indigenous youth must resist Western education in order to actualize themselves as Indigenous citizens and nation-builders, so must they consistently acknowledge and defend their relations to the land in order to know themselves through it. Another way to look at Coyote’s doings in Robinson’s story is to recognize that Coyote forgets about their ties to the land and its features. Coyote moves the mountain and the lake, but, after being influenced by God, they no longer know how to move them back. For Indigenous peoples, learning from the land as pedagogy means acknowledging their relations to the land in order to continue living with the land as Indigenous peoples—and, in Simpson’s words, as they have always done.

Just as Indigenous stories are not simply theories but real practices, we can observe land-based and stories-based relational pedagogy at work in several recently-opened Indigenous schools and initiatives across Turtle Island. In this paper, I will only observe nknmplqsnʔ snənnaməʔʔʔnʔ k̓l sqilxʷtst (the North Okanagan-Head of the lake, learning place/centre of, for/toward our Sqilxʷ ways—and which I refer to as “NSS”), a cultural immersion school established by a group of Sqilxʷ parents and extended families with the assistance of the Okanagan Indian Band in 2006.14 Along with revitalizing the Sqilxʷ language, the school’s mission is to implement Sqilxʷlcawt pedagogy. Cohen describes Sqilxʷlcawt pedagogy as an educational model wherein “parents, elders, teachers, and their ‘tools’ (Capitkwł, language acquisition, theories, methods, curriculum, activities) in the extended family sphere are in a collectively responsible and nurturing relationship to the children at the centre of the web, which is connected, with many strands, to place, ecology, and biodiversity.”15 In other words, this is precisely the model of relational pedagogy which Simpson advocates for in her book. Furthermore, Cohen emphasizes that they “had to treat the children in a loving way and make their learning experiences enjoyable and challenging” to prove their belief that “everyone has potential for leadership,” that “everyone is a teacher,” and that “everyone is a learner.”16 In recognizing that the relations between students and teachers need to be loving
and egalitarian, the parents and family members at NSS ensure that their children will become curious, confident, and empowered learners and leaders with the skills and knowledge to become active Sḵilxw citizens and nation-builders.

As an essential part of Indigenous relational pedagogy, stories likewise make up much of the NSS’s curriculum as a means of forming and reinforcing the students’ relational and land-based knowledge. Cohen’s telling of the school’s history sees it as a story where Coyote, having been failed by the Western education models, is aided by Fox—symbolic of collective research and new understanding—who “is gathering, trying out, and activating the knowledge ‘tools’ to restore Coyote’s creative, transforming potential.” From its very conception, the NSS is tied to story and modeled in a way that helps students understand their place in the school by relating themselves to Coyote. Furthermore, among the Captikwl stories picked by the elders is Robinson’s “Coyote Challenges God.” In the school’s curriculum, the story teaches students that “power and wisdom are associated with the ability ‘to put things back’ because [they] are part of a larger system of knowledge and evolution,” and, “if [they] cannot put things back in their place, then [their] survival is threatened.” This interpretation echoes Indigenous peoples’ responsibility to engage with Place-Thought as a means of preserving their culture and identity. Of course, students may understand the story differently and share their interpretations with the class, which furthers the story’s learning potential.

Cohen specifies that the Captikwl stories collected by the Okanagan elders are meant to “assist in community and national rebuilding” and to reconnect the students “to each other in terms of extended families and communities, and to the tlmxwulaxw, the territorial ecology that provides for [them].” Since the school is located on traditional Okanagan land, the stories relate to the places and beings specific to the area. The inclusion of Robinson’s story fits well given that Robinson himself was Okanagan. Cohen also notes that “in immersion lessons, students [learn] about the complex Okanagan family systems, geography (mountains, lakes, creeks, roads, etc.), Okanagan place names, resource areas, terms and uses for animals and plants, and traditional ways of respecting animals and plants that are harvested.” The students at NSS therefore listen to the stories and learn the Sḵilxw names of the places and beings that surround them, which further solidifies their engagement with and learning from Place-Thought. By knowing these things, they are able to authentically respect their relations within Place-Thought. Lastly, the stories are integrated in various ways besides directly telling them; these ways include “referring to them in day-to-day activities” and “adapting them to play with the children,” and they therefore “form an interconnected web of relational knowledge and collective responsibility.” By normalizing and affirming the role of stories throughout their daily activities at NSS and at home, the students internalize the stories and refer to them in their conceptualizations of the world and their own relations to it.

An important concern that can be raised against Simpson’s view of Indigenous relational pedagogy within the Radical Resistance Project is that, by rejecting the Western neoliberal education system, Indigenous youth are ill-prepared to navigate the hypercapitalistic system with which they are inevitably faced. Simpson makes it clear that Indigenous relational pedagogy “did not and does not prepare children for successful career paths in a hypercapitalistic system.” In saying this, one may wonder what exactly Indigenous relational pedagogy prepares Indigenous youth for if not to navigate settler society. Some may even raise the point that Indigenous youth need certain skills to get by in settler society, such as an understanding of mathematics in relation to finances. Indeed, as Cohen points out, “very strong resistance to the school from within the Okanagan community arose expressing the hegemonies: ‘It’s going to make them stupid, fall behind,’” and so on. Like the members of the Okanagan community, parents and extended family members may worry whether a radical approach to Indigenous relational pedagogy could impede their children from keeping up with their non-Indigenous peers.

However, in the school’s planning phases, “Indigenous schooling projects were researched to determine the ones that were producing fluent, confident kids who were also succeeding in secondary, postsecondary, Indigenous, and world communities.” The group involved in the NSS’s conception ensured that other similar schools and initiatives with high rates of success in their missions already existed on Turtle Island and around the world. Soon after the school’s opening, though, “the children’s language acquisition and confidence in speaking and being Okanagan grew and began to resonate through the community,” which was beginning to see “that [it] is possible to be Sḵilxw, to be Okanagan, speak [their] language, and free [themselves] from the dominion of colonizing hegemonies.” The NSS’s success signals that Indigenous relational pedagogy can achieve both cultural and language revitalization and the formation of capable, skilled, and often more confident students.

While some of the school’s curriculum may occasionally borrow content from Western schools, its methodology is entirely different in its relational nature. Simpson responds to the question of surviving in a hypercapitalistic system by claiming that, “if [they] are going to survive this [system] as Nishnaabeg, [they] need to create generations of people who are capable of actualizing radical decolonization, diversity, transformation, and local economic alternatives to capitalism.” We must remember that Indigenous relational pedagogy does not necessarily dismiss all of the conclusions that Western society has reached. Instead, it offers alternative means of reaching them that focus less on the individual and more on the community to which they belong. Since everything emerges from Place-Thought, the knowledge produced by land and stories naturally refers learners (which includes all beings to some extent) to how they ought to navigate the real world and their relations therein. In this sense, Indigenous relational pedagogy actually provides students with a more personal and authentic understanding of the world—of which Western neoliberal education models are often ignorant and misleading.
The Indigenous pedagogical practices at the NSS highlight the transformative role and power of forming loving relations between students and teachers—both of which are learners in their respective ways. Stories help accentuate these relations and they eventually become parts of the students’ lives, which the latter constantly revisit and learn more lessons from. All of this, of course, is possible because of Place-Thought, which allows for meaning and agency to take form between all beings. The relations that form within Place-Thought help beings better understand the world and themselves. Therefore, for the purposes of Indigenous resurgence projects, Indigenous relational pedagogy assists in the creation of authentic and communal strategies for navigating the world. For other Indigenous communities who wish to establish their own schools, the NSS provides a resourceful model that can then be adapted to correspond to their own respective stories, lands, languages, modes of communal organization, and other cultural practices. Furthermore, Indigenous relational pedagogy produces the Indigenous citizens and nation-builders who can resist Western neoliberal systems of oppression and colonization. When God puts Coyote on a boat in Robinson’s story, he assumes that he has stripped Coyote completely of their powers. However, Coyote still has their fire; and together with Fox and all their relations who are willing to help, Coyote can regain their powers and leave the boat well before the world ends.

NOTES

2. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 162.
3. Ibid., 149–50.
4. Ibid., 153.
5. Ibid., 154.
6. Ibid., 155.
7. Ibid., 158.
8. Ibid., 173.
9. Ibid., 146–49.
11. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 154.
12. Ibid., 151.
13. Ibid., 152.
15. Ibid., 152.
16. Ibid., 184.
17. Ibid., 183.
19. Ibid., 5.
20. Ibid., 6.
21. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 183.
22. Ibid., 160.
24. Ibid., 21.
25. Ibid., 32.
27. Ibid., 246.
28. Ibid., 256, 246.
29. Ibid., 256, 141.
30. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 172.
32. Ibid., 254, 173 (emphasis added).
INSTEAD of two 90-minute lectures every week, students will spend their class time in a videoconference with their pod discussing the readings and working through the activities in the digital curriculum. This means that twice a week for ~90 minutes during our assigned class time, students will be dialoguing with their three-person pod as they work through the curriculum. Each pod is also assigned a mandatory weekly 15-minute video meeting with me during our course’s assigned meeting time.

In addition to the mandatory 15-minute weekly check-in, I am also hosting a Weekly Coffee Hour (time TBD). This weekly coffee hour is entirely optional and very chill. Students will use this time to ask questions pertaining to class—e.g., we can catch up on concepts that you need clarified, we can discuss your plans for the final project, or we can screen-share to fine-tune your contributions to the digital curriculum. Everyone is welcome to pop in or out, camera on or off, individually or as a pod, but the weekly coffee hour will be casual, public, and optional. I will also be available for video/voice chat by appointment, anytime day or night via email, and via Twitter (our class hashtag is #GUPHL156).

WEEKLY FLOW

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mondays</th>
<th>Tuesdays</th>
<th>Wednesdays</th>
<th>Thursdays</th>
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<td>Over the weekend or on Monday, read weekly reading assignments. Heads up: The reading loads for some weeks are heavier than others.</td>
<td>Meet with your pod during class time to work through the weekly assignment in the workbook. Though how you choose to use your time to meet the deadline is up to you as a pod, my recommendation is that you use your Tuesday meeting to discuss the readings and answer the prompts on the weekly “Sticky notes” slide.</td>
<td>Sometimes, though rarely, you will have an individual writing assignment in your workbook that you should complete on Wednesdays so you can share about it in your Thursday meeting.</td>
<td>Meet with your pod during class time to finish working through the weekly assignment in the workbook. Though how you choose to use your time to meet the deadline is up to you as a pod, my recommendation is that you use your Thursday meeting to finish whatever activity has been assigned to your pod that week.</td>
<td>At some point on Thursday night or Friday during the day, complete your individual Correspondence and Reflection slide on your own time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pods 1, 2, 3, and 4 have a 15-minute meeting with me on Tuesdays.</td>
<td>Pods 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 have a 15-minute meeting with me on Thursdays.</td>
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LEARNING POD

Each student has been assigned to a small “learning pod” made up of three students from the class. Each pod will complete the course by working together to complete an interactive digital curriculum in the form of a course workbook I’ve designed on Google Slides. Students will meet with their pods twice a week over Zoom. The Zoom meetings are scheduled and organized as recurring meetings by the learning pods (see link to instructions below in Course Meetings sections). The assigned learning pod will remain together for the entirety of the semester and create the final project together at the end of the term.

COURSE MEETINGS

On the first day of class, each learning pod will schedule a meeting on Tuesday and Thursday from 12:30 PM–1:45 PM ET that reoccurs every week throughout the term. Each pod should make sure to schedule the Zoom meeting under their Georgetown Gmail account (for privacy reasons) and also to make sure to invite the instructor to their recurring meetings as well (sm3551@georgetown.edu). These recurring Zoom meetings will serve as “class time,” in which each pod will discuss the weekly readings and work through the different elements of their weekly assignments. Though it is ultimately up to each pod to choose how to use their time to meet the weekly assignment deadline of 11:59 PM on Friday evenings, my
recommendation is that class-time on Tuesdays be used for completing the discussion prompts in the course workbook and class-time on Thursdays be used for completing any additional weekly assignments in the course workbook.

**WEEKLY 15-MINUTE MEETINGS WITH SHELBI**
During the course meetings, each pod will also have an assigned time slot for a mandatory 15-minute meeting with the instructor to ask questions and seek clarification about the weekly readings and assignments. Those assignment meeting times are as follows:

Pod 1: Tuesdays - 12:30 PM–12:45 PM ET
Pod 2: Tuesdays - 12:46 PM–1:01 PM ET
Pod 3: Tuesdays - 1:02 PM–1:17 PM ET
Pod 4: Tuesdays - 1:18 PM–1:33 PM ET
Pod 5: Thursdays - 12:30 PM–12:45 PM ET
Pod 6: Thursdays - 12:46 PM–1:01 PM ET
Pod 7: Thursdays - 1:02 PM–1:17 PM ET
Pod 8: Thursdays - 1:18 PM–1:33 PM ET
** Pod 9: Thursdays - 1:34 PM–1:49 PM ET

**COURSE READINGS**
Each week, there are several assigned readings that each student should complete on their own time before their weekly meeting with their pods. *Readings* take the form of academic articles, news stories, YouTube videos, opinion pieces, etc. All of the articles as well as links to any online sources can be found on the course Canvas page under “Modules.” Each week has its own module.

**INTERACTIVE DIGITAL CURRICULUM: AKA “COURSE WORKBOOK” (40%)**
Each learning pod has their own customizable course workbook consisting in Google Slides I’ve organized around weekly readings, weekly discussions, and weekly assignments. This workbook will be sent to each pod during the first week of the course. The three members of each pod are expected to work through this curriculum together and edit the slides as they go along. Each set of weekly slides has a weekly planner slide (where I’ve listed the assignments for that week), a post-it note slide that has discussion prompts for pod discussion, a group activity slide or two themed around the weekly readings, as well as a Correspondence and Reflection slide to be completed by individual pod members on their own time. Each week, these slides should be completed by 11:59 PM ET. You will see due date reminders on each weekly planer slide. Google Slides automatically saves any edits to the slides, and I begin grading them for completeness and robustness in the late evenings every Friday.

Students will find detailed instructions pertaining to the weekly assignments, as well as other helpful information, in the “Speakers notes” section at the bottom of the slide editor.

I have provided each pod with a template set of slides. You are welcome to leave the slides’ formatting and style exactly as it is (though be sure to change the names of the contributors, etc. and fill in your own answers where necessary). Each pod is also welcome to customize the slides as they see fit, but please:

- Do NOT delete or reformat any of your pod mates’ work from your slides. You are solely responsible for your individual responses on the slides as well as the collaborative projects you work on as a pod during Zoom discussions.
- Do NOT delete or reformat any assignment slides or instructions until all the members of your pod agree. It is best to set a policy as a pod that any edits or answers to collaborative assignment slides will be made as a group during live Zoom calls.

I have provided some basic tips for how to edit your slides (e.g., how to duplicate slides) in the slides themselves, but I am happy to offer more assistance should you need it. Here are some helpful links for the basics about Google Slides:

- Google Slides Basics
- Editing Master Slides and Layouts
- Google Slides Collaboration

**CORRESPONDENCE AND REFLECTION SLIDES (30%)**
The Correspondence and Reflection slides can be found at the end of every set of weekly slides in the course workbook. These should be completed by each student individually on their own time by Fridays at 11:59 PM ET. In these slides, I ask that students reflect on their readings and weekly activities, highlighting or emphasizing keywords they are tracking throughout the term and sharing their honest feedback and questions about the new concepts they are encountering in their readings. I will respond to any direct questions on these slides and use these slides to assess how thoroughly the students have engaged with the course content. These Correspondence and Reflections slides are worth 30% of the student’s grade.
COMMUNICATION WITH INSTRUCTOR
The instructor will be available for questions and clarification during the mandatory 15-minute meetings scheduled with each of the pods, as well as for the optional Weekly Coffee Hour (Fridays, 11:00 AM–12:00 PM Zoom.) The instructor is also available by appointment for individual Zoom conferences, and by email at all hours. The professor can also be contacted via the Canvas chat and via the Canvas inbox. Also feel free to start conversations or share interesting relevant content using the class hashtag #GUPHL156 on Twitter. (Keep in mind that Twitter is public!)

(OPTIONAL) WEEKLY COFFEE HOUR
Because we do not have much opportunity to meet face-to-face in this course, it’s important to me that I dedicate an office hour solely to your course (instead of sharing it with my other students in other courses) at a time that works best for most of you. Weekly Coffee Hour will be held Fridays, 11:00 AM–12:00 PM on Zoom (see the course Canvas homepage for a Zoom link). We can use this time to chat about the class, catch up on ideas that need more clarification, or to brainstorm about your final projects. Attending the Weekly Coffee Hour is optional, but encouraged.

FINAL PROJECT (30%)
Though in-class time will be dedicated to planning and working on this project, it is also expected that students will collaborate with their pod mates outside of class-time to complete the final project. Final projects are due December 8. For more information on the final project, see the rubric on the course Canvas page.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:
1. Students will be able to analyze texts related to Indigenous political philosophies and identify recurring themes, concepts, people, and events.

2. Students will be able to propose their own interpretations and narratives about the significance and interrelations of the texts noted in (1).

3. Students will be able to conceptually organize and detail philosophical elements of Native American resistance movements, including but not limited to theoretical frames such as: Indigenous feminisms, sovereignty, land ethic, decolonization, revitalization.

4. Students will be able to contextualize the class material in their individual research interests, research programs, and lived experiences, and to convey this in a final presentation as well as a final paper.

5. Students will be able to engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue with their colleagues about the materials we visit with in class.

6. Students will be able to master (1–5) while maintaining a respectful and productive learning and teaching environment.

COMPONENTS OF STUDENT EVALUATION:
Assessment of student progress will include weekly writing assignments, participation in class discussion boards, and a final project. The following scale will be used, as was determined by an in-class vote:

- Weekly Readings and Assignment in Interactive Course Workbook = 40%
- Weekly Correspondence and Reflection Slides = 30%
- Creative Final Project with Gift = 30%

(BOILERPLATE GU SYLLABUS TEXT)

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, individuals with disabilities have the right to specific accommodations that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Some accommodations might include note takers, books on tape, extended time on assignments, and interpreter services among others. Students are responsible for communicating their needs to the Academic Resource Center, the office that oversees disability support services (202-687-8354; arc@georgetown.edu; https://academicsupport.georgetown.edu/disability/), before the start of classes to allow time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. The University is not responsible for making special accommodations for students who have not declared their disabilities and have not requested an accommodation in a timely manner. Also, the University need not modify course or degree requirements considered to be an essential requirement of the program of instruction. For the most current and up-to-date policy information, please refer to the Georgetown University Academic Resource Center website. Students are highly encouraged to discuss the documentation and accommodation process with an Academic Resource Center administrator.
ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION
One of the central tenets of Georgetown’s educational mission is cura personalis, a Latin phrase meaning “care of the whole person.” Georgetown is committed to showing care and concern for each student by creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment that follows universal design principles to meet the needs of its diverse student body.

I am committed to creating a learning environment for my students that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives and experiences, and honors your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.). If your name or pronoun needs to be corrected, please let me know early in the semester so that I can make the appropriate changes to my records.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
Students at Georgetown University are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and personal integrity. Although most Georgetown students conduct themselves in accordance with these standards, occasionally, there are students who violate the code of conduct. Cheating harms the University community in many ways. For example, honest students are frustrated by the unfairness of cheating that goes undetected and students who cheat can skew the grading curve in a class, resulting in lower grades for students who worked hard and did their own work.

Academic dishonesty in any form is a serious offense, and students found in violation are subject to academic penalties that include, but are not limited to failure of the course, termination from the program, and revocation of degrees already conferred. All students are expected to fully adhere to the policies and procedures of Georgetown’s Honor System and to take the Honor Code Pledge.

HONOR CODE PLEDGE
In pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life I commit myself to respect and to uphold the Georgetown University honor system:

• To be honest in every academic endeavor, and
• To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community as we live and work together.

PLAGIARISM
Stealing someone else’s work is a terminal offense in the workplace, and it will wreck your career in academia, too. Students are expected to work with integrity and honesty in all their assignments. The Georgetown University Honor System defines plagiarism as “the act of passing off as one’s own the ideas or writings of another.” More guidance is available through the Gervase Programs. If you have any doubts about plagiarism, paraphrasing, and the need to credit, check out Plagiarism.org. All submissions must be your original work. Any submission suspected of plagiarism will be immediately referred to the Honor Council for investigation and possible adjudication. All students are expected to follow Georgetown’s honor code unconditionally. If you have not done so, please read the honor code material located online at the Honor Council website.

SUPPORT SERVICES
Georgetown recognizes that COVID-19 has a significant impact on everyone in the Georgetown community. Georgetown offers a variety of support services for students that can be accessed online and has put together this newsletter which aims to provide you with information about well-being resources and virtual meetings that can connect you with mental health professionals on and off campus during this time. Below are some resources available to you:

• Academic Resource Center | 202-687-8354 | arc@georgetown.edu
• Counseling and Psychiatric Services | 202-687-6985
• Institutional Diversity, Equity & Affirmative Action (IDEAA) | (202) 687-4798

TITLE IX/SEXUAL MISCONDUCT
Georgetown University and its faculty are committed to supporting survivors and those impacted by sexual misconduct, which includes sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and stalking. Georgetown requires faculty members, unless otherwise designated as confidential, to report all disclosures of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator or a Deputy Title IX Coordinator.

If you disclose an incident of sexual misconduct to a professor in or outside of the classroom (with the exception of disclosures in papers), that faculty member must report the incident to the Title IX Coordinator, or Deputy Title IX Coordinator. The coordinator, will, in turn, reach out to the student to provide support, resources, and the option to meet. [Please note that the student is not required to meet with the Title IX coordinator.]
Please note that University policy requires faculty to report any disclosures about sexual misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator, whose role is to coordinate the University’s response to sexual misconduct. Georgetown has a number of fully confidential professional resources who can provide support and assistance to survivors of sexual assault and other forms of sexual misconduct. These resources include:

- Jen Schweer, MA, LPC, Associate Director of Health Education Services for Sexual Assault Response and Prevention (202) 687-0323 | jls242@georgetown.edu
- Erica Shirley, Trauma Specialist, Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS), (202) 687-6985 | els54@georgetown.edu

More information about reporting options and resources can be found on the Sexual Misconduct Website.

TITLE IX/PREGNANCY AND PARENTING ACCOMMODATIONS
Georgetown University is committed to creating an accessible and inclusive environment for pregnant and parenting students. Students may request adjustments based on general pregnancy needs or accommodations based on a pregnancy-related complication. Specific adjustments will be handled on a case by case basis and will depend on medical needs and academic requirements. Students seeking a pregnancy adjustment or accommodation should follow the process laid out on the Title IX website. Discrimination based on sex, including sexual misconduct and discrimination based on pregnancy or parenting status, subverts the University’s mission and threatens permanent damage to the educational experience, careers, and well-being of students, faculty, and staff.

GEORGETOWN LIBRARY
If you have a question for a librarian you can go to their "Ask Us" page where you will have the option to chat online, send an email, or schedule a Zoom appointment to discuss a research topic, develop a search strategy, or examine resources for projects and papers. Librarians offer an overview of and in-depth assistance with important resources for senior or master’s theses, dissertations, papers and other types of research. This service is available to currently enrolled students who need assistance with Georgetown-assigned projects and papers. Please review the Services & Resources Guide for Online Students for additional information.

ERESOURCES
Students enrolled in courses have access to the University Library System’s eResources, including 500+ research databases, 1.5+ million ebooks, and thousands of periodicals and other multimedia files (films, webinars, music, and images). You can access these resources through the Library’s Homepage by using your NetID and password.

LEARNING RESOURCES
Georgetown offers a host of learning resources to its students. Two that you might find particularly helpful in this course are the Writing Center and Refworks.

- The Writing Center offers peer tutoring by trained graduate and undergraduate students who can assist you at any point in the writing process. They help at any stage of your writing process, from brainstorming to revision. Tutors can offer advice on thesis development, use of evidence, organization, flow, sentence structure, grammar, and more. The Writing Center will not proofread or edit papers; rather, they will help to improve your proofreading and editing skills to become a better writer. Appointments can be booked online through their website.

- Refworks is an online research management tool that aids in organizing, storing, and presenting citation sources for papers and projects.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT
All students have 24/7 access to Canvas technical support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, including live chat and a support hotline at 855-338-2770. Use the ‘Help’ icon in the lower left of your Canvas window to view all available support and feedback options. If you’re looking for help on a specific feature, check out the Canvas Student Guide.

COURSE SCHEDULE:
Introductions:

Week 1: (Thursday, August 27)

To read before meetings:
- Decide over email which pod member will send the Zoom meeting invite for the first day of class on Thursday; be sure to include Shelbi on the email with the Zoom meeting invite link. Look over syllabus, the course Canvas page, and the interactive digital curriculum aka Google Slides workbook.

Tuesday – no class!
Thursday – video-conference work on Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Week 1 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, August 28.

Unit I: Sovereignty

Week 2: (Tuesday, September 1 & Thursday, September 3)

To read before meetings:
- Explore this resource: https://native-land.ca
- Read "Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgement” (On Canvas)

Tuesday*: video-conference work on Week 2 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference work on Week 2 assignment slides with pod.

Week 2 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, September 4.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

Week 3: (Tuesday, September 8 & Thursday, September 10)

To read before meetings:
- Read "To understand the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, you need to understand tribal sovereignty,” which can be found at https://www.vox.com/2016/9/9/12851168/dakota-access-pipeline-protest
- Read "The Monacan Indian Nation: Asserting Tribal Sovereignty in the Absence of Federal Recognition” (On Canvas)

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 3 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 3 assignment slides with pod.

Week 3 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, September 11.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

Unit 2: Land

Week 4: (Tuesday, September 15 & Thursday, September 17)

To read before meetings:
- Watch: "Oak Flat and Rio Tinto: The Law, the Lies, and the Queen Valley Confrontation" at https://youtu.be/jH0b8Eka0SA
- Read Kyle Powys Whyte’s, "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Justice” (On Canvas)
- Read Esme G. Murdock’s “Mirroring Nature” (On Canvas)
- Watch "Young Kumeyaay Women Lead Protests Against Border Wall” at https://youtu.be/GJg4tprTqmY

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 4 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 4 assignment slides with pod.

Week 4 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, September 18.
* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 5:** (Tuesday, September 22 & Thursday, September 24)

To read before meetings:
- Watch “Defending the Water: Resistance to Industrial Fragmentation” at https://youtu.be/dFNPkLUj1ZU
- Watch “Canada’s Toxic Chemical Valley” at https://youtu.be/UnHWZE0M-_k
- Read Rachael Leigh Nickerson’s “Defending Stolen Land: Ceremony, Becoming, and Rethinking our Relations” (On Canvas).
- Watch “The Land Owns Us” at https://youtu.be/w0sWiVR1hXw

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 5 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 5 assignment slides with pod.

* Week 5 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, September 25.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Unit 3: Decolonization**

**Week 6:** (Tuesday, September 29 & Thursday, October 1)

To read before meetings:
- Read Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s, “Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor” (On Canvas).
- Read Ari Sahagun’s blog about Tuck and Yang’s piece at http://arilikeairy.org/responses-to-decolonization-is-not-a-metaphor/
- Explore this collaboratively compiled Google.doc full of resources for understanding decolonization. Pick 2 or 3 new resources on your own to read carefully. Prepare to share with your group a summary of what you read as well as your reactions to it. [Google Doc no longer available]

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 6 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 6 assignment slides with pod.

* Week 6 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, October 2.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 7:** (Tuesday, October 6 and Thursday, October 8)

To read before meetings:
- Watch “Tending the Wild” on KCET at https://youtu.be/TbxLv9EEzs8
- Check out the resources at https://resourcegeneration.org/land-reparations-indigenous-solidarity-action-guide/. Pick 2 or 3 new resources on your own to read carefully. Prepare to share with your pod a summary of what you read as well as your reactions to it.
- READ FINAL PROJECT RUBRIC: ON CANVAS. Prepare to brainstorm final project ideas with your pod.

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 7 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 7 assignment slides with pod. * Week 7 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, October 9.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.
Unit 4: Indigenous Feminisms

**Week 8:** (Tuesday, October 13 & Thursday, October 15)

To read before meetings:
- Look through “Maze of Injustice” from Amnesty International at [https://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/mazeofinjustice.pdf](https://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/mazeofinjustice.pdf)
- Read Lily Grisafi’s “Living in the Blast Zone: Sexual Violence Piped onto Native Land by Extractive Industries” (On Canvas)

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

* Week 8 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, October 16.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 9:** (Tuesday, October 20 & Thursday, October 22)

To read before meetings:
- Read Lisa Kahakole Hall, “Navigating Our Own ‘Sea of Islands’: Remapping a Theoretical Space for Hawaiian Women in Indigenous Feminism” (On Canvas)
- Read Maile Arvin’s “Indigenous Feminist Notes on Embodying Alliance Against Settler Colonialism” (On Canvas)
- Read Kristie Dotson’s “On the way to decolonization in a settler colony: Reintroducing Black feminist identity politics” (On Canvas)

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

* Week 9 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, October 23.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 10:** (Tuesday, October 27 & Thursday, October 29)

To read before meetings:
- Deborah Miranda, “Extermination of La Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish Missions” (On Canvas)
- Read Saylesh Wesley’s “Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts’iqw’iye smesstiyexw slhâ:li” (On Canvas)
- Read Kim TallBear’s “Making Love and Relations Outside Settler Sex and Family” (On Canvas)

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

* Week 10 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, October 30.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

Unit 5: Cultural Revitalization/Reclamation

**Week 11:** (Tuesday, November 3 & Thursday, November 5)

**FINAL PROJECT WORK WEEK.**

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.
Week 11 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, November 6.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 12:** (Tuesday, November 10 & Thursday, November 12)

To read before meetings:
- Read Jacobs’ “I Don’t Want Our Languages to Die” (On Canvas)
- Read McCarty et al “Critically Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies” (On Canvas)
- Explore this site https://www.hauolimauloa.org/partner/aha-punana-leo
- Read “The Fight to Save CHamoru” at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/13/the-fight-to-save-chamoru-a-language-the-us-military-tried-to-destroy
- Explore this site: https://www.alaskanativelanguages.org/about

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod. Week 12 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, November 13.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 13:** (Tuesday, November 17 & Thursday, November 19)

To read before meetings:
- Read Jaqueline Murphy’s “Have They a Right?” (On Canvas).
- Watch “The Revitalization of the Hupa Women’s Coming of Age Ceremony” which starts at 57:21 in this video: https://youtu.be/8bZXVjktNzs

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Week 13 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, November 20.

* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 14:** (Tuesday, December 1 & Thursday, December 3)

To read before meetings:
- Meissner – PHL 156: Intro to Indigenous Philosophy - Syllabus - Fall 2020
- Watch “Decolonizing Cuisine with Mak-’amham” at https://youtu.be/aBAU0PRL3EE
- Watch “The Native American Master Chef Bringing Back True American Cuisine” at https://youtu.be/WacTucju_PE
- Read Jessie M. Vallejo’s “Revitalising language through music: a case study of music and culturally grounded pedagogy in two Kanien’ké:ha (Mohawk) language immersion programmes”
- Check out 3-4 of the songs in this playlist: https://youtu.be/R3JGzeINAwI

Tuesday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Thursday*: video-conference and complete Week 1 assignment slides with pod.

Week 14 group and individual assignment slides should be completed on Google slides by 11:59 PM ET on Friday, December 4.
* 15-minute video-meeting with Shelbi will be assigned and scheduled during one of these regular meeting times.

**Week 15:** (Tuesday, December 8 & Thursday, December 10)


**Week 16:** (Tuesday, December 15 & Thursday, December 17)

No class. Final exams for other classes.
FROM THE EDITOR

Dwayne Tunstall
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION
This issue begins with our “Footnotes to History” section. Stephen Ferguson and I shine our spotlight on the Black “proletarian intellectual” Hubert Harrison. Harrison was a brilliant and influential writer, orator, educator, critic, philosophical materialist, and political activist in Harlem during the early decades of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, Harrison’s materialist philosophy has not been the subject of any studies by African American philosophers.

Stephen Ferguson and I are proud to present an unpublished talk, “COVID-19, Capitalism, and Death: How and Why Black Lives Matter,” by John H. McClendon III. McClendon was one of the keynote speakers at the Fourteenth African American Intellectual Thought Symposium at Fresno State University. We would like to thank Professor Thomas Ellis, the coordinator of the Africana Studies Program, and Ms. Chelsea Beeson for her hard work behind the scenes in organizing the symposium. A special appreciation goes to Dr. Malik Simba, the visionary founder and creator of this long-standing and vital thought-provoking series of conversations.


Lastly, we have a review of George Yancy’s Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America by Adebayo Oluwayomi.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION
The APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between ten and twenty pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between five and seven pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and The Chicago Manual of Style formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

DEADLINES
Fall issues: May 1
Spring issues: December 1

EDITOR
Dwayne Tunstall, tunstald@gvsu.edu

FORMATTING GUIDELINES
• The APA Newsletters adhere to The Chicago Manual of Style.

• Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an “em dash” (—) instead of a double hyphen (––).

• Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:


FOOTNOTES TO HISTORY

Hubert Harrison (1883–1927)

Born April 27, 1883, in Concordia, Danish West Indies (now St. Croix, Virgin Islands), Hubert H. Harrison was a brilliant and influential writer, orator, educator, critic, philosophical materialist, and political activist in Harlem during the early
decades of the twentieth century. He played unique, signal roles in what were the largest class radical movement (socialism) and the largest race radical movement (the New Negro/Garvey movement) of his era. Labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph described him as “the father of Harlem radicalism,” and historian Joel A. Rogers considered him “the foremost Afro-American intellectual of his time” and “one of America’s greatest minds.” Following his death on December 17, 1927, due to complications of an appendectomy, Harrison’s important contributions to intellectual and radical thought have been neglected.

Born to parents of Afro-Caribbean descent, Harrison emigrated to the United States in 1900 as a seventeen-year-old orphan and lived in New York City. He completed his secondary training at DeWitt High School, graduating with honors as the top student in Latin and history. Financially unable to attend college, he passed the Civil Service examination and worked in the postal service.

While working at the post office, he continued his studies independently and extensively read sociology, literature, history, economics, and philosophy. His philosophical study comprised reading Herbert Spencer, Henry Thomas Buckle, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Karl Marx, and V. I. Lenin. But it was his studies of Marx and Lenin that inspired him to join the Socialist Party where he worked closely with Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Bill Haywood, and Morris Hillquit. Harrison’s articles in the International Socialist Review, The Call, The Modern Quarterly, and The Truth Seeker represented some of the earliest efforts at a materialist analysis of the African American experience. [See, for example, his brilliant critique of the mythology surrounding Abraham Lincoln as the “Great Emancipator.”]

The racist character of the Socialist Party led Harrison to the “Race First” doctrine. He founded his own Black Nationalist organization, Liberty League, and was editor of its journal, The Voice of the Negro. He later became editor of The Negro World, the organ of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Harrison was most known not for his publishing and writing, though he was extensively engaged in that arena, but for his tremendous oratory. Harrison’s major influence stemmed from his street orations during lunch hour at Wall Street, in Madison Square, and especially evenings, first at West 96th Street off Broadway and later on Lenox Avenue. A pioneer of the soapbox tradition in Harlem, crowds would listen for long periods to the broad range of lecture topics he would present and his penetrating analysis. His ability to make complex subjects clear and simple, and the power of his logic and presentation mark him as the quintessential proletarian intellectual of his day.

Despite his lack of formal degrees and training, The Truth Seeker compared his intellectual ability with such thinkers as Mark Twain, Luther Burbank, Thomas Huxley, Moncure P. Conway, and Ernest Haeckel.

REFERENCES


ARTICLE

COVID-19, Capitalism, and Death: How and Why Black Lives Matter

John H. McClendon III

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Our topic, “The Coronavirus and the Virus of Racism: Race, Class, and Gender,” is not only the subject matter of our discourse. More importantly, it essentially frames
Still, Capitalism, Coronavirus, and the Road to Extinction.

Likewise, it follows that issues of everyday recourse are subjected to immense doses of insecurity, living their lives under the constant threat of joblessness, homelessness, loss of status and starvation. In a similar fashion, the environment which could be protected is systematically destroyed for profit, and killer viruses which could be contained are unleashed. Undoubtedly, Covid19 has become the archetypal example that lays bare "the destructive impulses of a system in which the very fundamentals of existence are subjected to the requirements of profit".

The fact the coronavirus is a pandemic simply means that it is global in character. Correspondingly, we must acknowledge the capitalist mode of production is a world-system. Thus, this involves global labor migration and international commodity exchange markets under the control and power of the largest corporations in the world. A significant dimension to corporate capitalist operations concerns the management of the international labor force and commodity exchange by means of effective communication channels.

Subsequently, the required telecommunications apparatus of the international capitalist system mandates reliance on the most advanced tech companies. We unearth that these tech giants are nonetheless capitalist corporations with tremendous power over communication and their position of power successively leads to immense wealth. Likewise, it follows that issues of everyday recourse are also concretely linked to questions about power and wealth—the primary context for meaningful deliberation on race, class, and gender—which occur within the capitalist political-economic social order.

Today, we all had to link into Zoom for this symposium—an instantaneous example of our present dependence on online technology—as a protective measure against disease and death. Simultaneously, it really enhances a very profitable venture for Zoom. COVID-19 has greatly benefited Zoom as a corporate-capitalist interest. In an article, "Zoom Turns Record Profit Thanks to Coronavirus Shutdowns," NPR reporter Shannon Bond informs us Zoom reported higher sales and profit in the three months from May through July [2020] than it did all of 2019. . . . In the second quarter, sales more than quadrupled from a year ago to $663.5 million, well above $500 million that Wall Street analysts were expecting. Profit ballooned to $185.7 million from just 5.5 million in the same quarter last year. . . . The company has seen a big surge in use of its free service and has been pushing to convert many of those users to paying customers.

In the midst of increased economic instability for workers, adjoined with drastic upsurges in coronavirus infections and deaths, the prosperity that Zoom now experiences is typical in the domain of the largest corporations. In just the first six months of the pandemic, Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway gained $56 billion in profits and still managed to lay off more than 13,000 of its employees. The coronavirus pandemic proved quite fruitful for the Walton family of Walmart and its shareholders. Despite doling out over $10 billion to its investors, 12,000 workers at Walmart were laid off. As reported in the Washington Post, “America’s Biggest Companies are Flourishing during the Pandemic and Putting Thousands of People Out of Work.”

This article reports that Jensen Huang, Chief Executive of Nvidia (a company producing graphic chips), remarks, “With all that’s happening around the world, it’s really unfortunate. But it’s made gaming the largest entertainment medium in the world.” Data for Nvidia sales revenue from 2019 to October 2020 show a marked increase of +46 percent. Still, the picture presented by Nvidia’s growing sales revenue is not simply an indicator of how the capitalist economic world is all fun and games. It is estimated that at the minimum, 100,000 small businesses closed in just the first two months of the pandemic. In April, the unemployment rate reached 14.7 percent, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. On December 10, 2020, the Economic Policy Institute recounted, “Unemployment Claims Hit the Highest Level in Months.” Although capitalists were raking in immense profits, we should not ignore the grim circumstances confronting the working-class. Nearly 26.1 million workers were either facing unemployment or experiencing a drop in hours and pay because of the pandemic.

Moreover, latest findings indicate that "COVID-19 has killed 1 out of every 800 African Americans . . . . One study using data through July of 2020 found that Black people ages 35 to 44 were dying at nine times the rate of white people the same age. . . . “ Citing another recent study, Liz Theoharis states, “Indeed, the myth of scarcity, like other neoliberal fantasies, is regularly ignored when politically expedient and conjured up when the rich and powerful need help. The pandemic has been no exception. Over the last nine months,
the wealth of American billionaires has actually increased by a third to nearly $4 trillion. . . .” Theocharis continues, “more than 400,000 Covid-19 cases are associated with the lifting of eviction moratoriums, forcing people out the safety of their homes.” She aptly summarizes this situation, “As COVID Rages, We are Experiencing Mass Abandonment Amid Abundance.”

ON THEORY AND METHOD: EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION GUIDED BY PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

From the onset, one can plainly see that our discussion has been fortified with statistical indicators. It is mandatory we bring into our examination empirical data in order to facilitate the description of the actual state of affairs and confirm generalizations that serve as first approximations. But at the crux of our deliberation are broader philosophical considerations, which require our undivided attention. And only in that way, we will avoid the risk of falling into vulgar empiricism. Wherein, we are caught in merely describing what is most apparent and neglect what remains as most essential to the topic under review. Throughout the discussion, the following questions form the conceptual background directing the course of our investigation.

We must ask: Is racism a system within itself? Does it operate as an autonomous system? If not, what is the systemic structure that grounds and anchors racism? Is the same course of analysis applicable regarding such categories as class and gender? Can one make sense of the contemporary idea of “class” or “class contradictions” as a tangible reality, standing apart from present-day capitalism? Or are we confronting ideological phenomena such as “classism” and “gender bias”—wherein the solution resides in training initiatives that bring the perpetrators of classism and gender bias to another level of consciousness?

Must we conclude that the capitalist system—the dominant (material) force influencing the lives of white and male segments of the working-class—essentially orbits around misconceptions pertaining to race, class, and gender? In contrast, does capitalist exploitation—with its attendant ruling class interests—foster misconceptions about race, class, and gender? Successively, how can we best characterize and sequentially define the notion of false consciousness? Finally, what can best serve as our method of investigation?

For the investigation on race, class, and gender, our methodological approach starts from the analytical framework that the given aforementioned factors are not merely correlated in terms of some kind of subjective notion about intersectionality. Instead, it is argued that the systemic foundations grounding racism in its connection to gender oppression in reality emerges from the material conditions attendant with capitalist exploitation and its subsidiary bourgeois culture and ideology. It follows that class is not just as a single factor residing within the triad of race, class, and gender.

Rather, class is conceptually subsumed via the elaboration of how class relations are in accord with capitalism and its structural function as the definitive mode of production under review. Subsequently, race, class, and gender are not autonomous factors having equivalent value on the spectrum of theoretical significance as well as practical outcomes affixed to empirical indicators. Philosophically this means our examination is built on the standpoint of dialectical materialism, which necessitates the employment of a political economic critique of capitalism in its relevant implications.

ON THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN DEATHS AND THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC: WHY CAPITALISM AND RACISM ARE MORE THAN RISK FACTORS FOR DYING OF COVID-19

For a great number of Black people, racism is a relentless material condition of life. This creates multiple stressors that have an immediate effect on the quality of health, especially in poor Black working-class communities. The multidimensional nature of stress caused by racism inevitably impacts the quality of both physical and mental hygiene in the African American community. In her book Good Health for African Americans, Barbara Dixon provides an account of how day-to-day life for African Americans is a continual matter of coping with racism.

As racism persists, Black rage seethes and grows. Studies have shown that people who have the most control over their lives experience the least stress. Thus, the president of a car company suffers less stress then the assembly-line worker, and not just for obvious financial reasons. The more control you have over your life and its circumstances, the less stress you feel. And racism deprives people of control. . . .

Dixon continues,

[The] low-end job where you receive less respect than coworkers, the salesperson who waits on a white person when you were in the store first, the waiter who is rude or ignores your presence—all make you feel powerless. A burning anger slowly grows in you. Every Black person has experienced this, and you and I all know what it means. Scientists have always intuitively felt that anger is linked to the unusually high rates of hypertension and other diseases in blacks.

It is widely known that certain underlying health conditions are indicators for the greater risk of coronavirus infection. These preexisting conditions include an assortment of ailments and illnesses such as cancer, hypertension, heart disease, kidney and respiratory ailments, along with diabetes. In the penetrating “How COVID-19 Hollowed Out a Generation of Young Black Men,” Elliot Robbins notes,

Black people have much higher rates of hypertension, obesity, diabetes and strokes than white people do, and they develop those chronic conditions up to 10 years earlier. The gap persisted this year [2020] when the Brookings Institution
examined COVID-19 deaths by race; in each age category, Black people were dying at roughly the same rate as white people more than a decade older.11

Due to its institutional nature, the process of declining health conditions emerges as intergenerational and begins early in life. For illustration, there is a probability that children birthed by women with diabetes will develop a greater propensity for the disease. Born into such conditions is just the first step. If one lives in a poor Black family with inadequate health insurance, it follows that the cost of medicine and frequent visits to the doctor become hurdles that ultimately accelerate diabetes into the more dangerous condition of kidney disease. The allocation of medical service for kidney disease respecting racial demographics additionally complicates the situation.12 As Lizzie Presser explains,

Even clinical care can work against them [Black patients]; doctors estimate kidney function using a controversial formula that inflates the scores of Black patients to make them look healthier, which can delay referrals to specialists or transplant centers. . . . Black Americans are 3 to 4 times more likely than white Americans to reach kidney failure. Even at the final stages of this disease, they are less likely to get a transplant. When patients get to dialysis, they enter a system in which the corporations that stand to profit from keeping them on their machines are also the gatekeepers to getting a transplant. DaVita and Fresenius, its main competitor, control about 70% of the dialysis market.13

Clearly, the systemic manner of exploitative capitalist social relations, combined with contiguous racist institutions, collectively inhibit healthy life opportunities for Black people. The shadow of death remains as a tenacious stranglehold on Black lives. The critical problems of unemployment, homelessness, disease, and death are not only the results of how capitalism (in the perverse context of COVID-19) maintains its conventional cycle of reproduction, accumulation, and expansion. But it also entails multiple forms of ruthless repression. This includes relentless assaults on Black workers that fight back about hazardous work conditions due to coronavirus. The National Employment Law Project conducted a survey in June 2020, which reveals,

The COVID-19 epidemic has shined a light on the unsafe and abusive conditions many workers endure. Many workers—especially Black workers—go to work even though they believe they are seriously risking their health or their families’ health. Workers do so because their employer has not adequately responded to their health and safety concerns or, even worse, they fear that their employer will retaliate against them for raising these concerns. For Black workers in particular, these beliefs are grounded in the reality that structural racism has made them especially vulnerable to contracting the virus and suffering serious complications or dying.14

Now I will begin by outlining what are the pivotal issues surrounding the analysis of “The Coronavirus and the Virus of Racism.” It is immediately transparent that the presupposition concerning “The Virus of Racism” is an analogy based on the natural elements affixed to the coronavirus as a pathological agent. It follows that the latter (racism) is truly a social designation, which by way of analogy, correspondingly assumes the form of natural attribution. Consequently, this signifies that racism is an impending danger to a healthy social life.

African American philosopher William R. Jones was among the first to advance that racism—as a form of oppression—analogically constitutes a virus.15 With the suitable methodology or grid of oppression, Jones argues that one can frame a theoretical structure, which outlines the necessary liberation strategies centering on economic, social, and political conditions. Accordingly, despite being a pernicious virus of oppression, racism is predictable and hence subject to the requisite antidote or vaccine. Dr. Jones further elaborates,

Methodologically, the virus-vaccine design comprises two phases. Phase one gives dedicated attention to the infectious agent—the “virus of oppression”—acquiring as much knowledge as possible about its composition and vital processes—in other words, an accurate phenomenology (grid) of oppression. Phase two develops a specific vaccine or antitoxin that neutralizes or destroys the noxious agent. It is important to note that phase one controls the entire enterprise in that the products of phase two are customized to fit antithetically the constitution of the virus that phase one uncovers. Obviously, the efficacy of the vaccine (the therapy) depends upon how accurately we map the virus’s survival mechanism. If the findings in phase one are inaccurate, phase two will be hit or miss.16

Jones contends that our critique of oppression must be explicitly substantive in detailed and comprehensive in scope. Issue-oriented reactions are insufficient means for developing systemic analysis. While the virus of oppression assumes multiple forms, they remain integrally linked together. It is a constant fact, when we start our inspection with police violence via state terrorism and proceed to racist medical malpractices, which are attached with the lack of insured health-care, we unearth that in all of these cases—death looms large on the landscape of Black lives.17

We readily understand how recent movements such as Black Lives Matter can possibly facilitate radical social transformation, specifically respecting African American survival and the impending dangers attached to both State Terrorism and COVID-19. Relating to State Terrorism, let us review a 2018 article published in the Journal of the National Medical Association. In this detailed study, “The Relationship Between Structural Racism and Black-White Disparities in Fatal Police Shootings at the State Level,” the authors initially state,
Of all firearm homicides in the world, 82% occur in the United States. Of these firearm homicides, 59% of the victims are Black, even though Black people comprise just 14% of the population. Nationally, Black people are eight times more likely to be killed by a firearm than White people. This Black-White disparity in firearm homicide in the U.S. has been widely recognized and has recently gained public attention in the context of fatal police shootings. Although the striking disparity in firearm death between Blacks and Whites has been documented for decades and a similarly striking racial disparity in the shooting by police of unarmed people has been reported the underlying cause of these disparities is still unknown. 

After conducting research that chiefly examines social aspects including residential segregation, gaps in incarceration rates, educational attainment, economic indicators, and employment status, the authors concluded: “These findings suggest that structural racism is an important predictor of the Black/White disparity rates of police shootings of unarmed victims across states.” The conjunction of these social aspects, along with the merging of the twin coercions—State Terrorism and COVID-19—crystallized in the tragic murder of Breonna Taylor.

We must not overlook that Taylor was a frontline worker, employed as a technician in emergency care. Facing the direct and immediate threat of the coronavirus, Taylor risked her life each day as an essential worker. Nevertheless, her death resulted from a fatal shooting at the hands of vicious cops. On September 24, 2020, the National Medical Association issued the following statement:

The National Medical Association proudly stands with American on a daily basis. . . . Her life came to a premature end after an unnecessary and unprovoked encounter with police in her home. The unfortunate reality is that Breonna Taylor is dead most likely because she lived in a community where the families of the judges who issue No-Knock Warrants and the police who execute them do not live. To disregard the set of discriminatory circumstances that make Breonna Taylor’s death a reality is to ignore the structural racism that results in the death of so many African Americans on a daily basis.

The NMA continued, “It is this systemic racism, deeply embedded both in our legal and law enforcement systems, in which African-Americans are too often excluded from well-established police protocols and judicial precedents while often being subjected to arbitrary and capricious behavior.” In responding to the Breonna Taylor killing and the other myriad of murders by the police, the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) conducted mass demonstrations. Successively, BLMM faced the conundrum of violent police repression on the ground as well as the increased risk of COVID-19 infection. Thus, the very fight against racist oppression is a life and death struggle immediately connected to health.

Therefore, we must ask why and how is racism a danger to healthy living? Does racism have a definitive relationship to actual (natural) viruses in any concrete material sense? If it is the case, how can we describe and define this connection? Can racism penetrate into standard medical practices and research procedures? Can we plausibly claim that racism is a deadly agent functioning in a comparable manner to COVID-19? Or more precisely, does racism in its social function have derivative health outcomes that are pathological? Is it solely racism that poses as the danger? Or is it how capitalist relations of production configure the precise social position of Black people within its class structure that ultimately results in greater exposure to infectious diseases and higher mortality rates?

Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones, public health specialist and Black physician, insightfully conveys the following analysis. When “once infected we [Black people] are more likely to die because we carry a greater burden of chronic diseases from living in divested communities with poor food options [and] poisoned air and because we have less access to health care.”

What should not be neglected is that capitalist real estate interests profit from such “divested” communities. Likewise, supermarket food chains profit from these distribution procedures, and polluted air derives from industrial concerns in pursuit of profits, which originate at the expense of maintaining sustainable environments. Concomitantly, health care is first and foremost a for-profit undertaking, which is integrally tied to corporate pharmaceutical interests.

In response to questions about selling remdesivir for fighting coronavirus, the CEO of Gilead, Daniel O’Day, declared, “we could have charged $48,000 per dose.” Then he followed with “we have decided to price remdesivir well below this value” to “ensure broad and equitable access at a time of urgent global need.” He quoted a price of $3,120 for each treatment. Rolling Stone writer Matt Taibbi states, Gilead even undercut the prediction of the Institute for Clinical and Economic Review. . . . A watchdog that calculated a fair price for remdesivir at $4,500 per course of treatment. When Gilead announced a price below that level, it caused a tremor on Wall Street, as its share price fell. The company had already offended the Gods of Capitalism by donating hundreds of thousands of existing doses of remdesivir to the government. What self-respecting American corporation voluntarily undermines its own market?”

Then, Taibbi explains, Not Gilead, as it turns out, and really, not any pharmaceutical company. What Americans need to understand about the race to find vaccines and treatments for Covid-19 is that in the U.S., even when companies appear to downshift from maximum greed levels and it’s not at all clear they’ve done this with coronavirus treatments the
production of pharmaceutical drugs is still a nearly riskless, subsidy-laden scam.26 Of special note, corporations like Johnson and Johnson “targeted Black women, and particularly overweight Black women, for marketing its powder while knowing it contained carcinogenic asbestos. They also hid that information from regulators and the public.”27 Herein the notion of gender specific concerns of Black women’s health is immediately linked to corporate capital. In view of the above scenario, the end-result materializes in the oppressive settings attendant with life circumstances typically found among Black working-class communities. The principal lesson from these circumstances is that human misery, disease, and death is only one side of the capitalist coin. The other side is the correlative and necessarily perversely reality that under capitalism dire conditions create immense markets for accumulating profits.

BLACK WORKERS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: WORKING FOR A LIVING CAN MEAN DEATH

In June 2020, the National Employment Law Project in their survey, “Silenced About COVID-19 in the Workplace,” stated the following:

Our results suggest that virus transmission in the workplace may be exacerbated by employer repression and that the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black communities may be related to greater exposure of Black workers to repressive workplace environments. These findings are especially important now, as more businesses reopen and the dangerous implications of penalizing workers for raising health and safety concerns will only grow.28

The survey continues that it was discovered that some 38 percent of workers continued to work despite serious concerns about the health risks to them and their families. Among Black workers, the rates are even qualitatively higher. “Three out of four Black workers (73 percent) have gone to work even though they believed they may have been seriously risking their health or the health of family members.”29

Dr. Camara Jones goes on to emphasize how the precise class position of Black workers (within the US capitalist system) is specifically menacing and destructive in terms of sustainable health conditions. Therefore, when assessing the coronavirus impact on Black women and men, it is the precise capitalist class relations in play that actively grounds race and gender outcomes. Jones notes,

We are more exposed because of the kinds of jobs that we have: the frontline jobs of home health aides, postal workers, warehouse workers, meatpackers, hospital orderlies. And those frontline jobs—which, for a long time, have been invisible lives and undervalued in terms of the pay—are now being realized as essential work. . . . It is tied to residential and educational segregation in this country. If you have a poor neighborhood, then you’ll have poorly funded schools, which often results in poor education outcomes another generation loss. When you have poor educational outcomes, you have limited employment opportunities.30

Capitalism performs a decisive role respecting the financial structure of educational institutions. One way is the transformation of public schools into private business enterprises. Viewed as small businesses, certain charter schools profited handily from the pandemic. The relief funds given to charter schools—via the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)—due to the coronavirus included Primavera online charter school in Chandler, Arizona. The school was the recipient of a $2.2 million forgivable loan, in spite of the fact in Arizona public schools were not subject to reduced funding related to the coronavirus. At the same time, “The school also shipped $10 million to its lone shareholder: StrongWind, an affiliated company owned by the Primavera’s founder and former CEO Damian Creamer.”31

Damian Creamer and others have effectively transformed public education into a private capitalist venture, receiving large sums of tax dollars, under the veil of the coronavirus pandemic. Though workers in need of immediate relief, confronting frontline dangers of disease and death, receive meager pay, while working in hazardous conditions. In view of these facts, the class question emerges as front and center in deciphering the political economy of COVID-19.

The brunt of the coronavirus on the African American working class has been accentuated by the fact that the countless number of Black employees in the service sector have direct contact with customers and other workers. While we unearth production workers—for instance in the auto industry, warehousing jobs, and meatpacking—work in close quarters. The great number of essential workers providing healthcare are immediately in contact with people infected with the coronavirus and other contagious diseases. “More than 2,900 US healthcare workers have died in the Covid-19 pandemic since March, a far higher number than that reported by the government... People of color have been disproportionately affected, accounting for about 65% of deaths in cases in which there is race and ethnicity data.”32

In addition to African American workers employed in nursing homes, a considerable sum of Black people are patients in these facilities. Employment with the federal government as airline screeners has resulted in more Black workers infected—with some even dying. Scores of Black workers find employment with penal institutions. And dare we mention the disproportionate number of incarcerated African Americans. This array of private and public sector jobs continues to be “hot spots” at this moment of upsurge in coronavirus infections and deaths.

The astute examination of the dominant material interests that control the operation of these institutions must become the centerpiece of our critical analysis. By dominant material interests we mean the objective class concerns affixed to
political economic decisions and actions. Thus, dominant material interests dictate that paying higher wages reduces profit margins. Likewise, expenditures on the maintenance of the workplace environment that concern health and safety are costs that ultimately negatively impact profits.

A graphic illustration of this principle is the meatpacking industry in Waterloo, Iowa. With their penetrating article, Michael Grabell and Bernice Yeung describe “The Battle for Waterloo: As COVID-19 Ravaged this Iowa City, Officials Discovered Meatpacking Executives were the Ones in Charge.” The impact of the world capitalist system on labor migration becomes evident in the instance of Waterloo and meatpacking, where the corporate power of Tyson Foods has hegemony.33

This multinational workforce also includes Black workers that migrated to Waterloo, from Mississippi, over a century ago. The historical formation of the present configuration of workers in Waterloo offers important insight into the power relations surrounding race and class, i.e., the material (class) interests that control the operation of meatpacking and the attendant problems about COVID-19 facing Black workers. Grabell and Yeung remark:

Some [African Americans] who settled in town found work in the most unsavory parts of a family-owned packinghouse. Then . . . meatpacking became a path to the middle class for thousands of Black workers from the South, and an avenue toward empowerment as their union led a historic fight for civil rights in Waterloo. But many of those hard-won gains disappeared as the meatpacking industry evolved.

Grabell and Yeung continue:

A new company, which would become Tyson, reconfigured the work, slashing wages and demanding faster labor in tighter quarters. When workers across the Midwest balked, the industry turned to immigrants and refugees from some of the most vulnerable parts of the world. . . . Few realized how the power dynamic had shifted until the Tyson Waterloo plant became the epicenter of contagion this spring, pitting a corporation with the risk of the workplace environment that concern health and safety are costs that ultimately negatively impact profits.

With the scale of the crisis growing, Black Hawk County Sheriff Tony Thompson, who heads the county’s emergency management commission, joined with other local officials to urge Tyson to close the plant. But they were rebuffed, not only by Tyson whose CEO would publicly blame communities like Waterloo for bringing the virus into its plants but by Gov. Kim Reynolds, who resisted virus restrictions and blocked local officials from shutting businesses themselves.35

Such relentless realities bring to the fore the pressing need for the philosophical critique of the conceptual terminology that frames our discussion on COVID-19 vis-à-vis race, class, and gender. For illustration, what does it mean that Black women employed in nursing homes—for meager wages and long hours—are suddenly designated “Essential Workers”? So far, they continue to receive the same low pay, while facing the greater risk for COVID-19.

Philosophically, we know the idea of “essential” denotes the fundamentally defining feature of a given entity, subsequently that connotes a certain importance on a scale of value. If one loses a pancreas, kidney, or lung, they are more essential to necessary physiological functions than losing our hair. Since hair is more apparent, we can readily observe the process of balding.37 However, more generally and as a matter of principle, “appearance” does not have the same value as “essence.” Likewise, the manner in which things appear can in fact occlude the essence of the reality behind the appearance.

The designation of “Essential Workers” unequivocally signifies they are fundamentally important to the operation of capitalism. But the logic that governs the capitalist system stands on antithetical grounds. Hence, we have the additional low wages of Black women working in nursing facilities. For the capitalist, a cardinal material interest comes into play, viz. the essential need for labor to exploit. In the coronavirus context if a worker is “Essential,” then such labor becomes compulsory. Compulsory labor means you have no choice; one must work. Hereafter, the risk of coronavirus is effectively discounted, if not dismissed. This material interest sequentially assumes an ideological form, where “Essential Workers” gain a measure of public acknowledgment and even praise, while continually receiving low wages for hazardous work. This philosophical critique leads to a political economic question.

Why has the present debate over $900 billion stimulus deal not included at least $1,200 stimulus check for low-paid workers and only $600 was the compromise number? Rep. Rashida Tlaib patently recognizes the contradiction: “I’m hearing as we try to debate this COVID relief package that we can’t afford to give the people another $1,200 stimulus check. . . . Well, guess what, I know exactly where we can get the money to pay for it. And I believe Jeff Bezos knows exactly where as well.” In fact, Tlaib proposed that the US fund another round of checks by reversing President Trump’s 1.5 trillion tax cuts passed in 2017. Trump’s tax cuts served the billionaire, CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos’s class interests quite well. Amazon did not pay federal taxes for both 2017 and 2018, although it earned $3.03
billions and $10.07 billion in those successive years. In 2019 Amazon earned $11.59 billion and paid federal taxes at approximately 1.2\% percent.\textsuperscript{36} Even former US secretary of labor Robert Reich comments, “Bezos and Amazon, as well as every major employer in America, can easily protect their workers. And the richest nation in the world can easily provide every American adequate income support during this national emergency. But under Scrooge capitalism, they will not do so unless forced.”\textsuperscript{37}

Yet, despite what seems as a bold declaration, the question as to why it did not happen, Reich fails to ask. The question escapes Reich. He frames the fundamental contradiction in subjective terms, that is, the individual selfishness of capitalists. The issue continues as more foundational and fundamental than Bezos and others embracing the Scrooge ethos. In contrast, it is the capitalist system—in its monopoly finance stage—align with bourgeois state intervention on behalf of corporate interests. We uncover corporate capital’s wealth and power dictates the very course of how the entire system functions via the exploitation of workers.

This last claim is empirically supported by Congresswoman Tlaib’s assessment on the debate over the $900 billion stimulus deal. The argument that insufficient funds limits allocations to workers is not fundamentally an ethical issue about selfishness. Many Amazon workers, nonetheless, understand why the argument about insufficiency serves as an ideological ploy. At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Amazon warehouse workers demanded better safeguards for protection against infections related to working conditions. This included the needed shutdown at facilities where workers suffered from the virus.

The executive director of the Warehouse Worker Resource Center, Sheheryar Kaaoosji, notes, “Amazon has a consistent pattern of trying to block and hide information. This is not the kind of response the second biggest employer in the country should be making.”\textsuperscript{40} Unfortunately, Kaaoosji does not understand capitalist class contradictions and conflict. Amazon’s response is quite consistent with preserving its huge profits, which are based on the callous exploitation of its workers.

Robert Reich adds, “Jeff Bezos is worth $180bn, making him the richest person in the world. . . . Bezos has accumulated so much wealth over the last nine months that he could give every Amazon employee $105,000 and still be as rich as he was before the pandemic. So you’d think he’d be able to afford safer workplaces. Yet, 20,000 US-based Amazon employees had been infected by the coronavirus.”\textsuperscript{41} Alas, Reich comments on Jeff Bezos and Amazon suffer from the same defect as we found with Kaaoosji. Bezos and Amazon are not concerned with the workers’ welfare; the bottom line, from the standpoint of capitalists, can be stated in the following question: At what cost does one reduce the profit margin?

Bezos is directly involved in class conflict with Amazon workers across the globe. Although Amazon workers have battled to form a union, they remain unorganized. Nevertheless, outside union support from the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) has facilitated worker demonstrations and strikes. From Staten Island to Italy, Amazon workers have fought for safeguards against the coronavirus.

In March 2020, Chris Smalls was fired (in retaliation) for leading a strike at the Staten Island facility over demands for better protection of workers against COVID-19. Smalls and others wanted Amazon to close and clean the site after a worker tested positive with the virus.\textsuperscript{42} Also, “it took an 11-day strike for workers at one fulfillment center in Italy to win increased daily breaks, a detailed agreement on cleaning and sanitizing practices at the facility, and staggered break times and working distances.”\textsuperscript{43}

Given Amazon’s refusal to document the number of coronavirus infections, the workers in turn countered by compiling “a crowdsourced database based on notifications at facilities across the U.S.”\textsuperscript{44} Only on October 1, 2020 did Amazon report that 19,816 frontline workers had been infected with COVID (including Whole Foods Market) which transpired between March 1 and September 19, 2020. Significantly, this accounting did not include “its network of third-party drivers, which handle a portion of last-mile deliveries.”\textsuperscript{45} At this time, California is conducting court proceedings due to Amazon’s failure in responding to outstanding subpoenas about not reporting on COVID-19 cases in the state.

When we move from a singular focus on Amazon as paradigmatic of corporate capitalist’s interests to the general results of the over $900 billion stimulus deal, the outcome is the brazen and shameless display of capitalist power and wealth. While millions of workers face diminished incomes, unemployment, hunger, homelessness, disease, and death, the COVID-19 relief bill offers $200 billion in tax breaks. An estimated $120 billion of those tax breaks will go to the richest 1\% percent.”\textsuperscript{46} . . . Included in this package are: “A $2.5 billion break for racecar tracks; 6.3 billion for business meals, i.e. the ‘three-martini lunch’ deduction; a new provision under the Paycheck Protection Program that allows forgiven loans to also be tax deductible, giving businesses the ability to ‘double dip; into the program; The bill also creates an independent commission to oversee horse racing, at the behest of Mitch McConnell.”\textsuperscript{47}

It is from this capitalist political economic context where we can better grasp racism and national oppression in its material implications. Heidi Shierholz of the Economic Policy Institute perceptively declares, “Black and Latinx communities have seen more job loss in this recession and have less wealth to fall back on. The lack of stimulus hits these workers the hardest. Further, workers in this pandemic are not just losing their jobs—millions of workers and their family members have lost employer-provided health insurance due to losing their jobs in the downturn.”\textsuperscript{48}

If we comprehend that racism is not only attitudes and beliefs about the existence of superior and inferior races, but more importantly behavior and social institutions that provide material support for such attitudes and beliefs,
then our investigation must start with a critical examination of the conditions surrounding concrete and objective social relations, institutions, and practices that engulf the collective lives of Black communities. Dr. Evelynn Hammond astutely observes,

It’s the social conditions that continue to produce these vulnerabilities in certain populations, and not the people somehow are inherently biologically different. But, again, if you think about this in terms of those vulnerabilities that people have based on the social conditions that they live in, they may live in communities with high density, they may live in houses where there are lots of people living in small spaces, they may do work where their more exposed to something like a coronavirus. Those are the conditions that make them vulnerable.9

The concept of pre-existing medical conditions among African Americans cannot be reduced to the notion of “racial traits” or “race characteristics.” Nor can Black cultural patterns and African American lifestyles remain the solitary point of departure for uncovering the causes for the high rate of coronavirus infections in the Black community. Those of us seeking to defend Black lives must remain on guard against the ideological prop of “blaming the victims,” which in turns justifies relentless capitalist exploitation and its accompanying racist/national oppression.

THE INTELLECTUAL BATTLE TO DEFEND BLACK LIVES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: CONCERN ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH PRACTICES TRANSPires AS AN IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

Black intellectuals, medical professionals, and public health experts must remain diligent in upholding a high standard of scholarly responsibility, i.e., providing critical and precise interpretation of the legacy of racism in medicine, health care, and scientific research.10 We cannot blindly follow the dominant institutions regarding their conventional medical practices with respect to Black patients, scientific research findings, and corresponding modes of collecting and interpreting the data. Given its racist moorings and legacy, historically Black people have been legitimately skeptical and fearful of the professional medical practitioners and institutions and more generally the health care system in the United States.11

The urgent need for the organized response of Black intellectuals, medical professionals, and public health experts is imperative. The individual efforts of members of this cohort remain insufficient in light of the institutionalized nature of the health care system and professional medicine. For example, as recent as December 20, 2020, Black physician Dr. Susan Moore died of the coronavirus. She documented her racist treatment before her eventual demise. Moore had to literally beg for the specific medication of remdesivir—the COVID-19 medication that was previously mentioned in our discussion—and was left in a state of severe pain for hours before receiving the necessary narcotics.12

In the New York Times article “Black Doctor Dies After Complaining of Racist Treatment,” John Eligon reports, “Susan Moore . . . said the white doctor at the hospital in suburban Indianapolis where she was being treated for Covid-19 had downplayed her complaints of pain. He told her that he felt uncomfortable giving her more narcotics... and suggested that she would be discharged.” Moore responded, “I was crushed,’ she said in a video posted to Facebook. ‘He made me feel like I was a drug addict.’” Eligon continues,

In her post . . . she showed a command of complicated medical terminology and an intricate knowledge of treatment protocols as she detailed the ways in which she had advocated for herself with the medical staff. She knew what to ask because she, too, was a medical doctor. But that was not enough to get her treatment and respect she said she deserved. “I put forth and I maintain if I was white . . . I wouldn’t have gone through that.”13

What we can take from this tragic experience is that racist medical malpractice has to be confronted on a unified and widely organized scale. The pernicious legacy of racism within professional medicine is deeply ingrained and the most effective means of fighting it requires our collective resources firmly presented in an organized fashion. Anything less permits the continuation of tragic deaths on the doorsteps of our African American communities.

Indeed, from the start, the American Medical Association’s Jim Crow policies excluded Black physicians as members. Subsequently, the National Medical Association was organized in 1895, one year prior to the infamous Homer Plessy decision by the Supreme Court. Racist practices and policies were institutionalized into the very foundations of the medical field and this has resulted in apartheid-like disparities.14 In no uncertain terms, Elliot Robbins pronounces,

For generations, public health experts mostly ignored the disparities. When they did pay attention, they invariably blamed the victims—their [that is African Americans] “unhealthy” behaviors and diets, their genes, the under-resourced neighborhoods they “chose” to live in and the low-paying jobs they “chose” to work. Their chronic illnesses were seen as failures of personal responsibility. Their shorter life expectancy was written off to addiction and the myth of “black-on-black” violence. Many of those arguments were legacies of the slave and Jim Crow eras, when the white medical and science establishment promoted the idea of innate Black inferiority and criminality to rationalize systems built on servitude and segregation.15

What should not be overlooked is the historic African American resistance to slavery and the collective drive post-slavery for human liberation. The notion of Radical Reconstruction denotes the decade after slavery ended with the Thirteenth Amendment. In alliance with African Americans, white Republican politicians—representing
As for the latter was an ideological rationalization for the former. Hoffman’s work ignored lynching and racist social conditions. He claimed the high mortality rate among African Americans was due to a dominant racial characteristic of weak physical constitution among Black people. In turn, Hoffman argued that slavery had protected Black people from early death and it was a benevolent institution that essentially improved Black longevity. Three decades after slavery, he claimed, Black people were not only falling behind white people regarding social progress, but African Americans were also rapidly dying and facing extinction. Clearly, Hoffman’s justification for this ideological rationale was firmly located in the pseudoscience on racial characteristics as natural dispositions. He was firmly in step with the rise of Social Darwinism.

African American intellectuals such as Professor Kelly Miller and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois critically examined and challenged Hoffman’s book. From a methodological viewpoint, Miller and Du Bois rejected the notion of intrinsic racial traits as an explanatory framework and surrogate for what were indeed oppressive social institutions and conditions.

From the onset in his text, Hoffman claimed that he was speaking strictly in a non-biased fashion on behalf of science. An immigrant from Germany, Hoffman noted he did not have any particular interest in perpetrating racism. Nevertheless, African American sociologist Kelly Miller offers a sharp critique of Hoffman’s claim of racially neutral treatment. Kelly states, “freedom from conscious personal bias does not relieve the author from the imputation of partiality to his own opinions beyond the warrant of the facts which he has presented. Indeed, it was seen that his conclusion was reach from an a priori considerations and that facts have been collected in order to justify it.” As for Hoffman’s thesis, Du Bois notes,

The work begins with a consideration of the numerical development of the race, and the author points out that here the Negro has lost ground in comparison with the white race, both north and south. His smaller rate of increase is connected with his larger death-rate which threatens is extinction. This death-rate, which is largest for constitutional and respiratory diseases, is traced by the author to the influences of certain “race traits and tendencies” rather than to the conditions of life. . . . [Hoffman] believes that along with a progressive improvement in the physique of the white American has gone a deterioration in that of the black... The author finally concludes that the cause of the failure so many people’s and the struggle of life is the lack of those race characteristics for which the Aryan is pre-imminent; and the Negro shows evidence of the same fatal shortcomings.

Du Bois concludes, “To sum up briefly, the value of Mr. Hoffman’s work lies in the collection and emphasis on a number of interesting and valuable data in regard to the American Negro. Most of the conclusions drawn from the facts are, however, of doubtful value, on account of the character of the material, the extent of the field, and the unscientific use of the statistical method.”

Nevertheless, given Hoffman’s professional status as an employee of Prudential Life Insurance Company, the book had an immediate impact on how insurance policies were rendered regarding African Americans. The most immediate outcome was the conclusion that African Americans were a high risk when it came to insurance policies. According to Hoffman, since African Americans were naturally disposed toward poor health and shorter lifespans, offering insurance involved greater risks for capitalistic investment. It was all a matter of natural traits rooted in supposed forms of racial makeup. Therefore, Hoffman’s research—on behalf of the American Economic Association—served as a powerful ideological weapon in the defense of the exploitation and oppression of Black people.

What are the lessons gained from this confluence of actions issuing forth from violent attacks, legalization of white supremacy, and pseudoscientific claims on race for us today? How can this historical legacy account for the present plight of African Americans, especially in face of this current pandemic?

For one, capitalist institutionalization of insurance policies—particularly health insurance coverage—remains a primary source for why African American working people rank higher among the uninsured than whites. Regarding health coverage, for 2017, while non-Latino whites were at 5.9 percent regarding the uninsured rate, African Americans were at 10.5 percent, nearly twice as many. Additionally, for African Americans under the age of 65, approximately 12 percent were without health insurance. Sofia Carratala and Connor Maxwell continue to report, “The United States is home to stark and persistent racial disparities in health coverage, chronic health conditions, mental health, and mortality. These disparities are not a result of individual or group behavior but decades of systemic inequality in the American economic, housing, and health care systems.”

What Carratala and Maxwell ignore in their analysis is that what they describe as “systemic inequality in the American
economic system" is more accurately the exploitative class structure of the US capitalist system with its attendant forms of racial and national oppression. It is this capitalist system that frames how housing and health care really functions. But there are two main points of significance concerning their analysis. One, the examination of disparities uncovers the effects of systemic causes. Two, the causal factors are systemic capitalist class exploitation along with racial and national oppression and not something endemically associated with African American behavior such as designated "race traits." Already, current research has publicly disclosed the real danger resides in the design and application of requisite technology, which identifies how medical services must be allocated on the basis of designated racial demographics. Erin Brodwin discloses, "In the case of the hospital algorithm, for example, the system used cost to prioritize patients' medical needs—which proved to be problematic, because health spending for Black patients was less than for white patients. [Tech's] shortcomings on addressing racial disparities in health is also the product of disparities within tech companies themselves. The staff and leadership of many major tech companies remains overwhelmingly white—potentially impacting everything from product design to decisions about what types of health research are worth investment."

As recent as November 30, 2020, the CDC had to revise previously undercounted data on African American death rates from COVID-19. The CDC initially reported that the death rate for African Americans was twice the rate for whites. Yet, Ishena Robinson reports, "An adjusted data report published by the agency this week now shows that Black people are actually dying from the coronavirus at almost 3 times the rate of their white counterparts. The change came after Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) requested that the agency account for the disproportionate age breakdown in Covid-19 deaths experienced by people of color for different racial demographics. . . ." As Black physician Dr. Adewole Adamson warns, "If your decision-makers all look the same, you're going to come up with some biased tools." He also remarks, "It's just like with Covid-19: We didn't know there was an issue until we started collecting data on race and ethnicity." The imminent dangers adjoined to health and mortality become saliently an issue of how social institutions, relations, and practices are organized and governed. In sum, who owns, controls, and manages hospitals, clinics, and medical research facilities, sequentially determine how they make the key decisions about policies relating to medical care and research which vitally impact Black people's lives.

In the same respect, administration over how policing is conducted remains with those vested with police power, which is sanctioned by the state and not by the African Americans that are victims of state terrorism. In view of the kind of hegemonic power that circumscribes African American survival, we can disclose the very import of "Black Lives Matter" in all of its manifold and complex dimensions.

In the month of December, the BLMM emerged in Columbus, Ohio, to protest the killing of Casey Goodson Jr., shot by a county sheriff deputy. On Tuesday, December 22, another Black man was murdered by Columbus police. It is reported that the 47-year-old Andre Hill had a cell phone in his hand, which police claimed was a gun. In the prior Goodson case, though he was a licensed gun owner, the sheriff's office reported he was a dangerous threat to public safety. Nonetheless, the evidence from this shooting indicates he was shot in the back while entering his home. The Black Lives Matter Movement now must gear up again and take to the streets.

ON CAPITALISM AND DEATH: WHY THE BLACK WORKING-CLASS STRUGGLE MATTERS

When we transition directly to the political economic matter of profitability contra mortality—under capitalism—the fundamental contradiction becomes most apparent. Şahan Savaş Karataşli argues, "The real problem is that under capitalism any strategy or form of action that could potentially save millions of lives is immediately rejected if it has the side effect of temporarily halting or slowing the pace of capital accumulation. It is crystal clear that the class character of capitalist relations is deeply at odds with the state's manifest aim of protecting citizens' lives. Government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic reveal once again that when rulers around the world realize that they need to make a choice between risking either capital accumulation or human lives, most opt for risking/sacrificing the latter without much hesitation."

The current empirical data consistently supports the political economic analysis of capitalism presented by Karataşli. "When Apple announced its quarterly earnings in the spring, chief executive Tim Cook eagerly shared all the company was doing to combat the coronavirus, from manufacturing and distributing face shields to donating $15 million to relief efforts in the earliest days of the pandemic. But those investments stood in stark contrast to the $50 billion Apple said it planned to spend on stock repurchases—an amount so closely watched by Wall Street Journal that one analyst asked why it appeared slightly lower than previous years." Karataşli further demonstrates how the contraposition between capital accumulation and state regulations fostering rational policies come into conflict and are not just apparently issues concerning ineptitude in public health policy:

Interestingly, what appears at the first sight as 'ineffective government responses' to the Covid-19 pandemic—turn out to be more beneficial than its alternatives. Proposed strategies such as flattening the epidemic curve by means of 'social distancing' and 'slowing down' [business activity] are indeed
counter-productive for capital accumulation for most sectors. . . . This is why, as far as capital accumulation is concerned, it is more rational to let the disease spread and wait for it to disappear on its own then to prolong social distancing and slowing down, which would eventually exacerbate the existing economic stagnation and crisis in the capitalist world economy. 19

This last point is most instructive. Karat asli effectively dismantles the ideological justification for the specious idea of “herd immunity.” When re-examining this statement, “as far as capital accumulation is concerned, it is more rational to let the disease spread and wait for it to disappear on its own,” we clearly uncover why the idea of “herd immunity” continued as a frequent reframe of the Trump administration. The rationale for “herd immunity” is not about medical science, rather it is a blatant effort at preserving capital accumulation. Given that Dr. Anthony Fauci has been under the political health care bureaucrat, he has remained rather frustrated on the grounds of his commitment to medical science. Although working on behalf of the bourgeois state apparatus, Fauci cannot comprehend the full ramifications aligned with the political economy of capitalism vis-à-vis COVID-19.

Dr. Clarence Spigner insightfully remarks,

The United States’ market-oriented healthcare system has proved to be a breeding ground for COVID-19, especially among poor people who could not afford healthcare. . . . African Americans and others with underlying or pre-existing conditions exacerbated by social inequalities suffer and die at disproportionately higher rates under our present healthcare system. That reason, rather than race, underlies the explosion of COVID-19 in African American communities across the nation. 20

Spigner makes transparent that the “market-oriented healthcare system,” which is no more than health care for capitalist profits disregards the needs of poor Black and other working-class families. Despite lacking comparable resources and technology available in the US, Cuba not only provides free health care for all of its citizens, but has implemented comprehensive and systematic coordination measures for addressing COVID-19. Not to mention, Cuba per capita outcomes far surpasses the dismal policies of the Trump administration. Additionally, Cuba also trains African American students (and others from around the world) to become physicians. As for the African Americans at Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM), the main goal in mind rest on serving Black people under threat of the coronavirus due to preexisting conditions. 21

In conclusion, when I visited Cuba, I heard the slogan, “Socialism or Death.” The Cuban people know very well the history of capitalism in Cuba. How it harshly repressed and indeed attempted to brutally destroy the very existence of Cuban social and cultural life. Embarking on the road of socialism, toward a new social order, is not only possible but an imperative for the Cuban people.

The lesson learned, the stark battle between socialism and capitalism is essentially about the choice between life and death. Our present crisis with the twin evils of State Terrorism and COVID-19 are clearly death sentences. We are disproportionately situated amid those killed by police and also among the over 300,000 coronavirus fatalities. Compromise with capitalism on the grounds it is the only game in town is not only a failure of vision, respecting the future, significantly, it is the utter disregard for the historic struggle that encapsulates “How and Why Black Lives Matter.”

NOTES

1. I want to extend my gratitude to Professor Thomas Ellis for the invitation to participate in the 14th African American Intellectual Thought Symposium at Fresno State University. Ellis is the current Coordinator of the Africanas Studies Program at Fresno. In addition, I would like to thank Ms. Chelsea Beeson for her hard work behind the scenes in organizing the symposium. And, lastly but definitely not least, my special appreciation to Dr. Malik Simba for the invitation to publish this paper in the American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience.


5. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


15. For a similar analogy using cancer as a trope, Amilcar Cabral in his eulogy of Kwame Nkrumah states, “The African peoples and particularly the freedom fighters cannot be fooled. Let no one,
and tell us that Nkrumah died from cancer of the throat or any other sickness, No, Nkrumah was killed by the Cancer of betrayal, which we must tear out by the roots in Africa, if we really want to liquidate imperialist domination definitively on this continent.


19. Ibid.


21. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Our illustration about hair has a unique twist linked to capitalism and hair care. Although facial hair is biologically useless, Clark and Bryant cite a New York Post article about men paying up to $8,500 in acquiring facial hair transplants. Josh Clark and Chuck Bryant, “Facial Hair is Biologically Useless: So Why do Humans Have It?,” *Wired*, December 20, 2020.


41. Reich, “Jeff Bezos Became Even Richer Thanks to Covid-19, But He still won’t Protect Amazon Workers.”


45. Ibid.


50. For an excellent example of the kind of research that effectively challenges racist scholarship in public health policy and medicine, see Clarence Spigner, “COVID-19: The Myth and
53. Ibid.
61. Ibid., 133.
68. Whoriskey et al., "America’s Biggest Companies Are Flourishing During the Pandemic and Putting Thousands of People Out of Work."
69. Karataşli, "Pandemic’s Lesson: Global Capitalism is Uneven and Dangerously Particularistic."
71. For an excellence account on African American physicians trained at Cuba’s Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) and their assessments on COVID-19 health care policy, see the YouTube presentation, "Cuban Trained Doctors—Confronting COVID-19" Published on September 13, 2020. Produced by Ed Mayes, Private Television.

BOOK REVIEWS

A Welcome Leftward Turn to Marxism: Ferguson on the Philosophy of African American Studies


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Philosopher Stephen C. Ferguson II forges an intellectual breakthrough with his dialectical synthesis and critical analysis respecting the philosophy of African American Studies. To date, Ferguson’s area of inquiry—philosophy of African American Studies—has not received the same attention within the field of African American Studies. We discover, for example, that history, literature, the arts, and social sciences as disciplines have received far greater treatment than philosophy as objects of investigation. Concurrently, philosophers have for the most part found that doing the philosophy of race is a sufficient nod in the direction of African American Studies.

For those partisans in African American Studies, perhaps the reason for this lacuna resides in the fact that the philosophy of African American Studies inverts the process of analysis, wherein African American Studies become of the very object of inquiry. Thus, the philosophical question of theory and method in African American Studies become the driving force in Ferguson’s treatment. Ferguson employs the dialectical and historical materialist (Marxist) method of analysis to African American Studies. Ferguson’s Marxist philosophical analysis of the Black experience has two immediate outcomes. First, class struggle is integral to the examination. And, secondly, the idealist metaphysical constructions and mystical formulations on Blackness/African identity are subject to critique.

Unlike most philosophical inquiry, Ferguson’s book is a philosophical work that effectively explores the historical—material—context of African American Studies. In his introduction, Ferguson demonstrates how contending conceptual frameworks and ideologies were manifested...
in the early stages of African American Studies (AAS). Black nationalist (Afrocentric) ideology was one of many voices and thus not the only current in AAS. Consequently, the philosophical treatment of Blackness or the Black experience was not limited to nationalist review. At the center of its critical materialist insights and dialectical approach is the crucial methodological problem of locating the meaning of Blackness or defining what is the Black experience. Ferguson is explicitly detailed about this issue. He steadfastly rejects any approach that relies on metaphysical abstraction or mystical constructs that attempt to define the nature of Blackness. Moreover, he eschews resorting to methods of analysis that presumes some kind of Black philosophical perspectival or African worldview. From the onset, Ferguson informs us that Blackness (i.e., the Black experience) is the object of investigation/subject matter of AAS.

**Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness** is the product of Ferguson being an astute scholar in both fields of study. Just as biochemistry demands expertise in biology and chemistry, the same holds true for the philosophy of African American Studies. I have observed African American philosophers that were not scholars in AAS as well as scholars in AAS that were not philosophers. The fact remains there are very few that wear both hats. Ferguson remains both a scholar of philosophy and African American Studies. Ferguson’s critical examination concerning the philosophy of African American Studies comprises the culmination of years of study and research aimed toward building a framework of unitary inquiry.

Ferguson’s unique locus enables deeply probing into African American Studies with a sharp philosophical lens. Simultaneously, he writes to a broad reading audience, inclusive of those within AAS and philosophy. Clearly, Ferguson appeals to a wide audience, nevertheless, he maintains a high level of erudition and penetrating insights. Scholars, students, and the general reader can grasp his arguments without fighting through a high degree of technical jargon, which we often find with academic philosophical works. Ferguson is not caught in the jungle of academic jargon nor the never-never land of neologisms.

What is exceptional about Ferguson’s position is not only his professional training and expertise but also (more importantly) his political locus as Marxist philosopher. As Marxist philosopher—in the intellectual tradition of C. L. R. James—Ferguson takes us on the road to “Dialectical Materialism.” Where James was concerned with “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity,” Ferguson makes a specification on this general proposition. Thus, we have “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Black Humanity” as represented in the discourse on African American Studies. From the philosophical standpoint of dialectical materialism, Ferguson grounds James’s pioneering efforts.

Another point of originality comprises how Ferguson highlights the material—on the ground—student-led struggle for African American Studies. With the apt phrase, “Class Struggle in the Ivory Tower” Ferguson conveys that African American Studies was not merely an addendum to the curriculum of higher education. Instead, the birth of African American Studies was strategically part of the radical movement. This movement sought to fundamentally transform the very foundations of the Ivory Tower.

Subsequently, the first chapter, “Class Struggle in the Ivory Towers: Revisiting the Birth of Black Studies in ‘68,” substantially comprises content that is historical in its character. Here the reader decipher that AAS is the direct product of struggle. More particularly, how the intensification of class struggle was situated in the specific context of fighting racism. The movement for AAS was based on the combined forces of the Black working-class community and its young African American students on white campuses, circa the late 1960s. In the wake of increased political agitation for changes in the academic environment for African American students, various working-class forces emerged in the vanguard. Among those forces were Marxist-Leninists and leftist elements that gave voice to the Black proletarian character of the student struggle.

For illustration, Ferguson informs us about the often overlooked Afro-American Institute at Antioch College. This exploration into the Marxist led program at Antioch is of no small matter. This Institute faced the full weight of state censure from the federal government while correspondingly Yale University received capitalist (corporate) funding to sustain its burgeoning African American Studies program. Ferguson makes clear to the reader such differences were rooted in the class/ideological orientation of these respective programs.

The esteemed Marxist scholar Professor Robert N. Rhodes played a decisive role in the development of the Institute and the emergence of AAS more generally. A walking encyclopedia and genius of first mark, many students at Antioch and later Ohio University—not to mention community activists throughout the country—were beneficiaries of his broad wealth of knowledge. Unfortunately, Prof. Rhodes died in December 2014. Given the paucity of works that acknowledge Rhodes’s African American Studies contributions, it follows that his legacy remains virtually unknown to the general public. After Rhodes’s passing, his life summary appeared on the Ohio University website. It comes as no surprise that this obituary notice turned to Ferguson’s text for vital information on the Rhodes legacy. Ferguson’s thoughtful deliberations on Rhodes open a new window into not only Rhodes but also more generally the decisive impact of Marxist influences on the development of AAS.

However, the value of Ferguson’s text is not only in the fact that he identifies the left-wing activists of emergent AAS but also he outlines the historical process, which demonstrates how the left and specifically Marxist proponents were later marginalized within the field. Ferguson documents that the demise of Marxism and the ascendancy of Afrocentrism are two sides of the same coin. This was philosophically expressed, in AAS, with the decline of the dialectical materialist outlook and the corresponding emergence of subjective idealism. The reader should take note how Ferguson keenly displays how this historical shift was
manifested as philosophical vantage points in AAS with idealism and dialectical materialism are contending worldviews.

Hence, Ferguson’s penetrating critique of the philosophical muddle surrounding Afrocentrism and the politics of African cultural identity sans a critique of capitalism. This is especially significant for those fellow students and scholars that are recently introduced to African American Studies. Ferguson offers a stringent philosophical critique of Afrocentricity, and chapters two through five become must reading for the student of AAS. Especially young students that aim to capture how the current philosophical state of affairs in AAS came into existence. Ferguson studiously uncovers that the present state of affairs is the product of intense ideological struggle.

In the contemporary intellectual milieu, where the Afrocentric paradigm is dominant, I think many will turn to Ferguson’s work to clarify their comprehension. He informs us that Afrocentricity is philosophically rooted in subjective idealism, along with its attendant pitfalls respecting the embrace of the “Utopian Worldview.” The bulk of his text—chapters two through five—offers the most thorough-going critique of Afrocentricity in AAS to date. For example, Chapter 3, “New Wine in an Old Bottle?: The Critique of Eurocentrism in Marimba Ani’s Yurugu,” is a critique of what a number of Afrocentrists view as the quintessential philosophical text of Afrocentrism.

Ferguson points out that while many credit Molefi Asante with pioneering Afrocentricity, Ani provides the most comprehensive elaboration on the Afrocentric critique of Eurocentrism. Ferguson tells us that Ani’s central thesis is the reduction of Eurocentrism to Plato’s architectonic. Although Ani majored in philosophy—as an undergrad—her grasp of the history of philosophy and even the fundamentals of Plato’s thought, Ferguson uncovers, is rooted in basic errors of an empirical and conceptual nature. For example, Ani argues that Plato was a materialist and his materialism is foundational to Western thought and its ancillary imperialist legacy.

Ferguson clarifies how Plato’s idealism contra materialism grew out of the particularity of his milieu and Ani’s reductionism misses the point about Plato’s locus in the history of philosophy. Ani’s attempt at grounding the legacy of Western imperialism in Plato’s “materialism,” Ferguson reveals, is an idealist subterfuge that distorts not only the history of philosophy but also our understanding of Western imperialism and white supremacy. Absent from Ani’s reflections is that the dialectical materialist philosophical viewpoint offers a critical perspective of capitalism.

In Chapter 4, “The Utopian Worldview of Afrocentricity” Ferguson continues critically dismantling Afrocentricity, while the fifth chapter, “What’s Epistemology Got to Do with It: The ‘Death of Epistemology’ in African American Studies,” invites us to reexamine how the Black critique of the notion of “white ideology” in the social sciences fell into the trap of subjectivist idealism. From this development—circa the 1970s—Ferguson moves to tackle the more recent work of Patricia Hill Collins.

He especially addresses Collins’s principal notion about the configuration of Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Ferguson effectively demonstrates there is a concerted line of continuity from the “Utopian Worldview” to the “Death of Epistemology.” This becomes most evident as we witness Collins’s conflation of the sociology of knowledge with epistemology. The content of knowledge—epistemology—is effectively reduced to its context—sociology of knowledge. Wherein context transpires as a host of “lived-experiences” accredited to various groups of Black women. Instead of articulating how a materialist epistemology is relevant to assisting the liberation of Black women, Collins simply posits a subjective approach to the construction of a sociology of knowledge. By the demarcation of epistemology from the sociology of knowledge, Ferguson’s treatment of the “Death of Epistemology” in AAS transpires as a monumental contribution to the field and undoubtedly will aid students new to AAS.

Although Ferguson’s book is a serious work of scholarship, the conscientious reader is afforded the opportunity to actually enjoy a humorous moment or two, while working through the intricacies of philosophical inquiry, historical details, and social analysis of African American Studies. As a first-generation major in Black Studies, I was especially delighted at Ferguson’s keen attention to the historical details; particularly the theoretical and ideological complexities of this neoteric field and its ancillary political and ideological conflicts over the direction of African American Studies. With his book, African American Marxists and Marxism are no longer absent from the discussion of AAS and the philosophical fashion of Afrocentricity is readily exposed.

In conclusion, this book is the most significant philosophical examination of Black Studies to emerge in the past forty years. Ferguson provides both critical materialist insights and creative dialectical approaches to this important field of study. Ferguson’s Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness is a must-read for those who seek to utilize AAS as a weapon of liberation.

The Disposable Man—Grotesque White Fantasies of Black Male Death in George Yancy’s Backlash

George Yancy, Backlash: What Happens When We Talk Honestly about Racism in America (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2018).

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In Backlash, George Yancy examines what it means to be embodied as Black and to be the target of white racist hatred, as exemplified by the numerous racist messages he received for daring to write a “love letter” to white Americans requiring them to risk their white selves in order to dismantle the structures of white supremacy and
structural oppression. This work is courageous, to say the least, especially noting that it was written at a time when white ethno-nationalist rhetoric has become mainstream in national political discourse in the United States. Now, white people are no longer covert in their exhibition of racist attitudes or ashamed to blatantly avow racist thoughts against those who do not identify as members of the dominant white racial group. The present political dispensation in the United States has made it possible for racism to be normalized so much so that torch-wielding white nationalists are able to march openly on university campuses, evoking fear, violence, and racialized hatred akin to that of the Jim Crow era. College campuses are now being targeted as sites for the display of orchestrated racialized hatred, and college professors are punitively censured for expressing their academic freedom and the fundamental right to free expression—especially when such academic freedom is focused on grappling with the problem of racism in America, or what Derrick Bell refers to as “the Social Affliction of Racism in America.” Through the mobilization of white fears, economic anxieties, and political worries by a coalition of white ethno-political platforms, right-wing media outlets, and complicit college administrators, many race-scholars have either been silenced or “forced” into exile. As the subtitle of this book shows, Yancy is one of the courageous professors who dared to speak honestly about racism in America. He dared “to love” in the face of vitriolic hatred directed at him by white people.

It is tempting to regard Yancy as a hero for penning his “Dear White America” letter and for building upon his thoughts about it and the backlash in this book, because Americans love superheroes. Within the American imaginary, especially the American fictional imaginary, there are all sorts of fantasies associated with superheroes. Male superhero characters, such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Ironman, and Aquaman, are loved for their fantastical prowess and superhuman abilities to rupture the normal order of things. In fact, they are mostly regarded as “incredible men.” However, these characters all share something in common; they are fictional representations of whiteness and the signification of the power white males wield within this society. They possess the power to rupture the normal order of things without experiencing life-threatening backlash. But Yancy is no hero, or, at the very least, he is not trying to be a hero. He was simply trying to bear or offer a message of love to white Americans. However, for daring to bear such a love message, he became an anti-hero, and deemed to be disposable. Yancy’s Backlash reveals another kind of fantasy within the American racist imaginary: the Black man as the disposable man in the white imagination.

In fact, he is the anti-hero who dared to bear the message of love in a society that is not willing to entertain or give serious consideration to such an ethos of love. This idea of love that Yancy articulates in his letter and expresses in this book is not the romantic kind of love that overlooks human failures. Neither is it the kind of love that comes with no strings attached. It is a kind of love that requires white Americans to recognize how they continue to benefit from the structural inequalities that have been historically built into the fabric of this society. This kind of love also makes a demand on them to honestly search their hearts and to reflect on their status in this society, in order to recognize and admit how their whiteness protects or shields them from the many harrowing systems of discrimination that confronts the lives of non-white peoples almost daily. This is similar to what Martin Luther King, Jr. describes in Strength to Love, as having that capacity “to look beneath the surface.” It has the power to dispel “the darkness of racial injustice.”

In this book, Yancy introduces the reader to the underbelly of the American imaginary as exemplified by the numerous responses he received from his widely read letter, “Dear White America,” which was published in the New York Times’ opinion column, The Stone, on December 24, 2015. This is why the book is appropriately titled—Backlash. Although the responses from white readers of this letter were varied in style, form, and tone, most of them shared a common feature: expressing the desire to cause death, bodily harm, or destruction to the bearer of such a daring message. It was a cacophony of raw desires to do something harmful, violent, or hurtful to the bearer of such an unsolicited love message that exposes the grotesque white fraternization with the destruction of the Black male body. Emotions like anger, disgust, contempt, and indignation were readily discernible from the tone and content of the white respondents who found Yancy’s letter as evidence of a Black male professor who has forgotten his place of subordination within America’s racially hierarchized society. The white respondents were especially united in their desire to harm him through violent means, including death. Their responses showed that “the struggle against racism is not just an intellectual struggle;” it is a struggle of life and death. From the vantage point of the white reader, Yancy was asking for too much or the near impossible—asking them to interrogate their whiteness and their complicity in structural racism in the United States. In White Identity Politics, Ashley Jardina describes what Yancy is requesting from white readers in “Dear White Americans” as a tough ask because it touches on the fundamental constitution of white identity and the privileges that comes with whiteness. It is a missive that pushed them to come to terms with the tensions between recognizing their privileges and power as a group and how these advantages are systematically unfair or harmful to racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Yet, Yancy hopes that this approach would force white Americans to have an honest and critical conversation about race.

Backlash consists of an Introduction and four chapters. This review will not summarize the Introduction since its contents are integrated throughout the four chapters. Rather, it will identify themes from the Introduction, particularly “taking risks, vulnerability, and growth,” as they arise in each chapter. In chapter one, “The Letter: Dear White America,” Yancy revisits where it all began—the “Dear White America” letter. He rearticulates his true intentions for penning this letter. He imagines this letter as a gift, though one that appeared to be a heavy burden for his intended recipients. Perhaps one of the most challenging and deeply penetrating aspects of the letter is where Yancy implores his white American readers to acknowledge that
they are “racist” while at the same time asking them to accept this as a gift. It is important to state here that in the way Yancy crafts his reflections in his letter, he is not merely engaging in name calling. A more careful reading of it shows that he was interested in asking white Americans who benefit from structural racism to engage in critical self-reflection that would reveal how they are complicit in a social-political system that unfairly gives privilege to whites at the expense of people of color. Engaging in such critical self-reflection may lead to the possibly frightening realization that “to be white in America is to be always already implicated in structures of power.” He hoped that such a realization could engineer a new form of conscious reflection on the part of his white readers to get off their high horse of self-righteousness and self-absorption that prevents them from seeing how they contribute to the problem of racism in America.

In chapter two, “Dear Nigger Professor,” Yancy shares some of the visceral and violent backlash he received from his white readers for his “Dear White America” letter. It is the most difficult part of the book to read because of the sheer multitude of racial slurs and profanities directed at him by many of his white readers. Anyone who has respect for human dignity, irrespective of racial or ethnic affiliations, would struggle to read this chapter. Many of the white responses that Yancy features in this chapter were vile, gloomy, and filled with bile, anger, and violent threats including bodily mutilation and death. The white respondents were clearly offended by the “audacity” of a Black male professor calling members of a white community racists when they cannot even imagine Black people being in a position to chastise them about anything, much less a well-educated Black intellectual doing so. The following excerpts from the book, depicting some of these responses, are instructive. One white respondent, for instance, writes, “This belief that niggers even reason is blatant pseudo-intellectualism.” Another white respondent writes: “calling a Nigger a professor is like calling White Black and Wet Dry.” These kinds of expressions, as well as many others highlighted in the book, expose the true face of anti-Black racism in America—a system of unmitigated hatred that suddenly transforms or reduces a distinguished professor of philosophy (who happens to be a Black male) to nothing (a no-thing, an emptiness, a fictive entity). In this system, any and every Black person is reduced to being a “N-word.” The deployment of the “N-word” to designate Black dis/embodiment is part of the racist ploy to make Black bodies disposable. It is in this manner that many of the white respondents called for the destruction of his Black body for his “racial transgression.”

Yancy’s racial transgression consists in his courage to give an unsolicited gift of love (or love message) to white Americans. The following excerpts from the notes Yancy received from his white readers are particularly striking in their imagination of the literal destruction of the Black body and the eternal silencing of an adjudged Black “pseudo-intellectual.” Here is what one white respondent said they want to do to Yancy: “kick your black ass until you were half dead. . . .” Another respondent said Yancy “needs to have a meat hook lovingly, well, you know, time to use your own imagination!” Yet another respondent was even more creative by imagining a brutal way of kill Yancy, saying that “somebody needs to put a boot up your ass and knock your fucking head off your shoulders. . . .” As if this is not violent enough, someone called for Yancy “to be beheaded ISIS style.” This fraternization between racist white respondents over the destruction of the Black male body is disgusting and abhorrent. It is reminiscent of sentiments related to the tragedy of lynching of Black bodies in America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the destruction of Black bodies in recent times through racialized policing and mass incarceration. However, the racializing nature of these responses reveal the contradiction of Yancy’s message to white Americans in the first place. The message was aimed at helping white Americans come to acknowledge racism as an existential threat to the lives of Black people and other people of color. These responses, unfortunately, strengthen the very existential threat that Yancy hoped his white American readers could work to forestall.

In chapter three, “Risking the White Self,” Yancy introduces the concept of mutual vulnerability as one of the things he hoped to achieve by writing his “Dear White America” letter. Risking the white self involves a process in which white people unequivocally tell the truths about themselves and those in their social group. It also involves both Yancy, as the letter’s author, and the letter’s primary audience, through critical self-reflection, working together to disclose how white people are complicit in perpetuating systems of oppression against oppressed groups in the United States. Yancy’s display of vulnerability led him to disclose his Black male privilege and sexism, as well as his complicity in the oppression of women within a gender-based hierarchy of society. He had hoped that, by being honest about his own male privilege and sexism with his readers, his white American readers would be willing to admit that they benefit from white privilege and that they are complicit with structural racism and racial oppression.

Despite Yancy making himself vulnerable and admitting his own faults, white readers did not reciprocate. Rather, they lashed out against him even as he reached out to them in an honest and loving manner. He considers this backlash to be the result of white fragility, which hinders them from risky their white selves and endangering their participation in a system of privilege and racial comfort that depends on the subordination of people of color. He also considers much of the backlash to the “Dear White America” letter, and the white entitlement undergirding that backlash, to be a defense mechanism put up by white people who benefit from whiteness to detract from the very difficult engagement in critical thinking about their place in a white supremacist society. They could not bear the responsibility for their complicity with structural and racial oppression; they could not bear the burden of whiteness. The negative responses that he highlighted in this chapter shows that his white respondents either misunderstood or undermined the central message of his “gift” to them—the call for white folks to speak out against racism regardless of the risks involved. Nonetheless, Yancy emphasizes the importance of having the courage to speak the truth about white privilege and anti-Black racism despite receiving many negative responses to his call for white readers to
engage in existential self-risking that he called for in his letter. As he reminds us, “I understand that the letter was bold, but in this time of racist toxicity, which has always been the reality in America, we can’t afford to be silent.” He wants his white readers to be able to sacrifice their comfort and “fragility” to confront the problems of racial injustice in America today.

There are at least two problems with the third chapter. First, it is unclear how Yancy justifies his assertion that there is such a thing as Black male privilege. For example, he does not provide an empirically grounded account of Black male privilege, with ways of measuring how it operates in society and detecting its existence. Nor does he account for how males in a subordinated racial group possesses the power necessary to have male privilege. If anything, Black males “do not possess the institutional means to create it or maintain it do not actually have it.” In my view, Yancy still needs to flesh out the concrete ways in which his privilege as a Black male confers structural power to oppress women in empirically measurable terms. His insistence that white Americans had failed to exhibit mutual vulnerability in regard to their complicity in racial oppression is undermined by the overly positive responses he received from his white readers, which he documents later in the book.

In chapter four, “Accepting the Gift,” Yancy reiterates what the gift of the “Dear White America” letter was all about and the criteria for its acceptance. For Yancy, the acceptance of this gift requires being vulnerable, more specifically, a kind of vulnerability that is borne out of genuine self-assessment and a realistic view of the world. It requires piercing the façade uncritically accepted by many Americans, which is of a democratic society that provides opportunities for everyone regardless of their race or ethnicity to achieve the “American Dream.” Since white Americans have the ability to pierce this façade (even though they are prone to racist habits, beliefs in racist stereotypes, and a sense of white entitlement), he thinks that they can at least begin to have a conversation with themselves on the problem of racism in this society by choosing to accept this gift of love he offered to them in his Dear White America letter in 2015. In this chapter, he writes about the necessity of accepting the gift (i.e., love message) originally offered in that letter. As he writes, “this book, which still functions as a letter to you, is an expanded version of that gift and that act of giving.”

However, Yancy is aware that what he is asking for would require an act of courage on the part of his white readers. It may also be conceived of as a dangerous request because it leaves his white readers open to the possibility of being wounded. It has the potential of bursting the bubble of white innocence and preventing them from using the (il)logic of white fragility or white victimhood to mask their complicity and acquiescence to a system of racism in which their whiteness privileges them over non-white people in the United States. In this respect, he characterizes “whiteness” as a site of closure and control, which allows it to continue to position and replicate itself as the summit of institutional power within American society. Yancy describes “whiteness” as involving the process that he refers to as suturing, “whereby white people engage in forms of closure, forms of protection from various challenges to the ways in which whiteness is seen as the norm, its unremarkable everydayness, its value assumptions, and the many ways in which it’s guilty about producing distorted knowledge about itself.” This process is not a good thing for white people to engage in. So he asks his white readers to un-suture, that is, to attempt a candid assessment of the white self. In his view, “un-sutting can function, within this case, as a way of undergoing a radical rethinking of the body as a site of profound vulnerability, and a radical way of being-in-the-world.” There is some evidence presented in Backlash showing that not all of his white readers are sutured or closed. Some of them were able to commit themselves to the act of “un-sutting” he writes about in this chapter. For example, one of his white responders writes: “Thank you George Yancy. You speak for me, through me, though we are different; I am a woman and white.” Another white respondent writes, “Thank you for your words of truth and the gift that they are.” These words, in my view, capture the spirit and substance of Yancy’s message to white America, both in the “Dear White America” letter and Backlash.

There is something to be said about the plight of Black faculty members in the United States being constantly subjected to racist attacks for calling out racism as a problem. This definitely leaves lasting emotional and psychological wounds that goes beyond just the classroom. In Backlash, Yancy describes the time when he broke down in tears after sharing with his students some of the virulently racist remarks he received upon the publication of the “Dear White America” letter. He shared with them how continually imagining the “furious-racist” on the prowl coming to destroy his already dehumanized Black body became a part of his everyday life. In “Words that Wound,” Richard Delgado states how racist insults like the ones Yancy were subjected to “remain one of the most pervasive channels through which discriminatory attitudes are imparted. Such language injures the dignity and self-regard of the person to whom it is addressed.” Those insults injured his dignity and well-being as a professor and as a human. This is something that deserves urgent attention in scholarship across disciplinary lines in higher education in the United States.

In spite of all this, Yancy maintains that he is hopeful that white Americans can begin to think differently about their whiteness within a fluid and relational context. An important first step towards achieving this goal is for white people to acknowledge the ways in which they are racists for reaping comfort while Black and people of color suffer. How should we make sense of this “hopefulness” if white racism is considered from the perspective of racial realism as structural, systemic, endemic, and permanent? According to Derrick Bell, a racial realist view of white racism entails an acknowledgement that our anti-racist actions “are not likely to lead to transcendent change and, despite our best efforts, may be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system we are trying to help.” So how do we make sense of Yancy’s hopefulness (that his white readers will challenge their complicity in racial oppression) if it is examined through the lens of racial realism? Will it...
make any difference at all? Yancy seems to anticipate Bell’s concern that an anti-racist effort asking white people to ‘risk the white self’ may further exacerbate rather than resolve the problem when he writes thus: “I assure the reader that I am not naïve, but I continue to be hopeful, even as my hope feels as it is sometimes complicit with white supremacy.”

The problem with Yancy’s hope that white people will have the courage to risk their white selves is that this will not suffice to rupture the structures of oppression and systemic racism. Consequently, if hope does not work, is pessimism an option? Following James Baldwin, Yancy writes in Backlash that he does not consider himself a pessimist because he is alive. That is, the assurance that life opens room for unimaginable possibilities, e.g., white America changing to such an extent that white people cease to be racists. Yet he declares in the same breath, “I am not an optimist either because white America is far too bleak in its ethical treatment of Black people and people of color. As such, as I continue to hope, I don’t want hope to become a crutch.”

What Yancy truly wants his readers to accept here is unclear. On the one hand, he is hopeful that white Americans can change; on the other hand, he expresses his pessimism about the likelihood that white Americans will actually change.

I think the positive upshot of Backlash, the hope that racists whites can be transformed to interrogate their whiteness and their complicity in structural racism in the United States, does not extend to what Yancy describes as a third alternative to pessimism and optimism—post-hope. He holds that “[p]erhaps what we need is a kind of post-hope.” This involves a painful recognition for Black people that, “[t]o be Black, in this view, is to have always already been sentenced to death in virtue of being Black within a white supremacist world, where I am just waiting to die.”

It is similar to what Abdul R. JanMohamed describes as the existential lot of the Black or “Othered” body within a white supremacist society, which is to become “the death-bound subject.” In my view, what Yancy refers to as “post-hope” is just a variant of pessimism. To imagine the Black subject as eternally death-bound is to put an existential limitation and a mark of finality to possible outcomes for such a being. It is to imagine a world where the hope for a better existential outcome for the Black subject is nonexistent. In other words, it is not to imagine a world where Blackness could ever be humanized, transformed just as the white racist could “hopefully” be transformed. Yet, Yancy maintains that “[p]ost-hope is not being a pessimist or giving up in despair, rather it is a stance that we take that is more realistic.” His version of racial realism as stated here, is unmistakably pessimistic about the existential outcome for Black lives—the certainty of death. This brings the following questions to mind: what becomes the value of Yancy’s hopefulness for the dismantling of structures of oppression and systemic racism if the Black subject is always death-bound in his vision of a post-hope world? What becomes the value of his letter and book urging white people to take risks that would allow them to see themselves as problems? What is the point of all these? Perhaps one should imagine Yancy as a gadfly—a temporal equivalent of Mrs. Biana MacDonald, the intriguing character that Derrick Bell references in Faces at the Bottom of the Well.22

NOTES
3. Colleges are meant to be a place for free intellectual inquiry and dialogical debates even on the most difficult or controversial topics/ideas. But in recent times, not all professors feel that freedom. Across the United States, in the past year and a half, a lot of university professors, have been targeted via right-wing online campaigns because of their research, their teaching or their social media posts. Some have lost their jobs, and others say they fear for their families’ safety. Here are a few examples: Josh Cuevas, an associate professor in the school of education at the University of North Georgia, was subjected to scrutiny by his congressional representative for getting involved in an argument on social media about Donald Trump. Ted Thornhill, an assistant professor of sociology at Florida Gulf Coast University, came under white racist attack, championed by far-right news sites and racist blogs, for daring to teach a course entitled “White Racism.” See Anya Kamenetz, “Professors Are Targets in Online Culture Wars: Some Fight Back,” NPR News, April 4, 2018, https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/04/590928008/professor-harassment; Ted Thornhill, “Why I Teach a Course Called ‘White Racism,’” The Conversation, February 1, 2018, http://theconversation.com/why-i-teach-a-course-called-white-racism-90093.
5. Ibid., 41.
9. Ibid., 15.
11. Yancy, Backlash, 28.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 51.
14. Ibid., 52.
15. Ibid., 38.
16. Ibid., 101.
17. Ibid., 55.
19. Ibid., 35.
21. Yancy, Backlash, 95.
22. Ibid., 105.
23. Ibid., 112.
24. Ibid., 120.
25. Ibid.
27. Yancy, Backlash, 22.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Yancy, Backlash, 101.

35. In Faces at the Bottom of the Well, Bell describes Mrs. Biona MacDonald as an intriguing Black character who risked everything to fight white racial oppression, but when asked about it, she did not say she risked everything because she hoped or expected to win against the whites who held all the economic and political power, as well as the guns. Rather, she recognized that—powerless as she was—she had used her courage and determination as weapons to “harass white people.” See Derrick Bell, Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism (New York: Basic Books, 1992), xii.

AUTHOR BIOS

Dr. John H. McClendon III is Professor of Philosophy at Michigan State University. He is the author of the following books: African American Philosophers and Philosophy: An Introduction to the History, Concepts and Contemporary Issues (Bloomsbury, 2019) with Dr. Stephen C. Ferguson II; Black Christology and the Quest for Authenticity: A Philosophical Appraisal by Lexington Books, 2019); Philosophy of Religion and the African American Experience: Conversations with My Christian Friends (Brill/Rodopi, 2017), C. L. R. James’s Notes on Dialectics: Left-Hegelianism or Marxism-Leninism (Lexington Books, 2005).

FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff  
THE GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Eugene Kelly  
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We welcome our readers to the spring 2021 edition of the APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy. We offer this month two articles and some poetry.

Our first paper is “Teaching Some Philosophical Problems through Computer Science.” The authors are Daniel Lim, a professor, and Jiaxin Wu, an educational consultant, at Duke Kunshan University in China’s Jiangsu Province. They outline a strategy for introducing students to philosophy via computer science. To that end, they show how some problems typical of philosophy emerge from conundrums that computation experts encounter in their efforts to understand the nature and structure of the relatively new discipline of computer science. The underlying pedagogical concept that motivates the authors’ attempt to bring two distinct disciplines in contact is that of “interdisciplinarity,” which, the authors say, “makes a stark contrast between copying and pasting a conceptual formula in a narrow domain and being able to apply the same concept in a different domain. . . . The ability to think across disciplines may be necessary in confronting many of the pressing problems facing our world.”

Students are given computational procedures to implement using Python, a readily available programming language that can be related to some philosophical problems: the functionalist theory of mind, the problem of induction, the problem of the external world and of personal identity, and the validity of (the kalam version of the) cosmological proof of the existence of God. For example, the notion of recursion in computer science, the authors argue, is an entryway into reflections on the notion of infinity—which functions in the kalam argument. The paper concludes with reflections on how the course was evaluated and how it could be improved. One such improvement, they note, might involve using Python to restate and explore the logic of arguments. The paper contains a bibliography.

Our second paper, “Schematics for the Syllogism: An Alternative to Venn,” is by Wallace A. Murphree, Professor Emeritus at Mississippi State University. Prof. Murphree describes and argues for the pedagogical value of a computer program he designed for teaching syllogistic logic to college and secondary-school students. The force of his argument is more clearly visible to those who download and enter the program (to which there is a link in the text). The website contains both the program and an extensive series of help screens to lead readers into the program’s capabilities so they can quickly familiarize themselves with the techniques of its analysis of the categorical syllogism and assess its pedagogical value. Moreover, Prof. Murphree claims that the schematics of his program permit the easy extension of instruction to the numerically expanded logic for which they were originally designed in his book, Numerically Exceptive Logic: A Reduction of the Classical Syllogism (New York: Peter Lang 1991). The author also demonstrates that the representation of syllogisms made possible by his schematics is equivalent to their representation by Venn diagrams. The schematics permit an extension beyond the capacities of the Venn diagrams in that they can make visible as well as check the validity of arguments with numerically flexible quantifiers. Prof. Murphree ends with the enthusiastic invitation to logic instructors “to explore this alternative to the traditional Venn diagram.”

Finally, we happily welcome back to our pages Prof. Felicia Nimue Ackerman of Brown University. She offers us two poetic reflections on teaching during the pandemic.

Those of our readers who would like to write of their experiences as teachers for our publication are welcome to do so. We are also glad to consider articles that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.

We encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material (including technological innovations) that they think may be especially good for classroom use. Though we normally list books and other materials that we have received from publishers for possible review in our Books Received section, reviewers are welcome to suggest material for review that they have used in the classroom and found useful. Please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles for our publication but also when reviewing material for our publication.
in Kunshan, China and was established as a partnership between Duke University in the United States and Wuhan University in China), Daniel Lim developed and taught a 2-credit course (17.5 hours of class time) under the title “Philosophy Through Computer Science.” One aim of teaching philosophical problems through teaching computer science was to offer an interesting course that attracted students wanting to explore one or both of these disciplines. Consequently, the course was targeted at undergraduates (probably first-year students) with little or no experience with either discipline. The course was an elective and did not count toward the requirements for either discipline. It did, however, satisfy the university’s quantitative reasoning requirement, a requirement intended to ensure that all students graduate with critical skills in quantitative analysis and deductive reasoning. Another aim was to enrich the philosophical learning experience by connecting philosophical issues with computational concepts. Some computational concepts were used as launching points for philosophical discussion while others were used to illuminate philosophical ideas in ways that were intended to be less abstract (and, for some, less fantastic). To explore this, Jiaxin Wu, an educational consultant from the Center for Teaching and Learning, conducted a midterm Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) to collect student feedback and observed the class to help assess its pedagogical effectiveness in improving interdisciplinary learning.

Eighteen students enrolled and successfully completed the class. Eleven students had never taken a philosophy class before, and ten students had never taken a computer science class before. So, more than half of the students were either unfamiliar with philosophy or with computer science. Two students would not have taken a philosophy class if it had not been taught through computer science, and ten students were unsure—they may have taken a philosophy class anyway.

To assess their prior knowledge of philosophy and computer science, the students took a pretest before the class began, which focused on topics that would be covered in the class. Mirroring their reported experience in these fields, a little more than half the students missed or claimed ignorance in response to the questions. For example, when asked to convert a decimal number (11110) into its binary counterpart (11011112), a third of the students had no idea what to do, and a third of the students gave incorrect answers. When asked about what external world skeptics claim, fewer than half of the students were able to correctly identify that skeptics deny knowledge of the external world. Finally, when asked about David Hume’s views regarding induction, more than two thirds of the students answered incorrectly, thinking induction was based on a priori reasoning or that Hume believed that it was rationally grounded.

AUTHOR’S BACKGROUND
After completing degrees in computer science at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, Daniel worked as a programmer for several years. Because of his obsession with philosophical questions, however, his career as a programmer was short-lived. After only a couple years, he

ARTICLES
Teaching Some Philosophical Problems through Computer Science

Daniel Lim
DUKE KUNSHAN UNIVERSITY

Jiaxin Wu
DUKE KUNSHAN UNIVERSITY

During the second seven-week session of the spring 2020 semester at Duke Kunshan University (DKU is located

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES
All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author’s name, the title of the paper and full mailing address should appear on a separate page. Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear in the body or the footnotes of the paper. The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA. For example, in writing your paper to disk, please do not use your word processor’s footnote or endnote function; all notes must be added manually at the end of the paper. This rule is extremely important, for it makes formatting the papers for publication much easier.

All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by the members of the editorial committee:

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ARTICLES
Teaching Some Philosophical Problems through Computer Science

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During the second seven-week session of the spring 2020 semester at Duke Kunshan University
quit his job, went back to school, and completed a PhD in philosophy at Cambridge University in 2011. He has been teaching philosophy at the university level since 2012 and from 2018 (though he is part of the humanities division at DKU) has had (because of student demand) the privilege of teaching introductory courses in computer science.

Having had the content of both fields simultaneously (and continuously) stewing in his mind over the past couple years, he was able to appreciate several areas of conceptual overlap. It’s what inspired him to publish two papers in the journal Teaching Philosophy titled “Philosophy Through Computer Science” (2019) and “Philosophy Through Machine Learning” (2020). In those papers he explored ways that specific topics in computer science (e.g., recursion) might shed light on classic issues in philosophy (e.g., the existence of God). Because there were a number of such topics that were readily available to be exploited, he made an attempt to turn these ideas into a course.

Marvin Minsky, one of the founders of artificial intelligence research, is credited with saying, “You don’t understand anything until you learn it more than one way.” We take this to mean that being able to acquire a concept through different points of view is essential to truly mastering it. While we wouldn’t go so far as Minsky, the point that learning something in more than one way can be helpful for deepening understanding is a point well taken. Moreover, appreciation of a given field may be heightened and broadened by appeal to one’s understanding of the possible relations between that field and another one.

In today’s intellectual climate, where the term “interdisciplinarity” is often used, the ability to see connections outside of the context in which a concept is acquired is becoming increasingly important. Not only does this mark a stark contrast between copying and pasting a conceptual formula in a narrow domain and being able to apply the same concept in a different domain, the ability to think across disciplines may be necessary in confronting many of the pressing problems facing our world. The interest in and demand for interdisciplinarity forms an important part of the basic pedagogical motivation behind the construction of this course.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE AS IT WAS TAUGHT

Here are the learning objectives for this course:

1. Summarize and critique philosophical positions on the following topics: external world skepticism, personal identity, the functionalist theory of mind, the existence of God, and the problem of induction.

2. Write rudimentary programs in Python using functions, recursion, and linear regression.

3. Collaborate with others in logically assessing a philosophical issue and putting the issue in natural language that a layperson can understand.

4. Present in oral form an opinion for which one offers justifying reasons.

The textbook used for the computer science elements of the course was John Guttag’s Introduction to Computation and Programming Using Python (MIT Press, 2016). Select chapters were used from the first half of this book. (In a future iteration of this course a different textbook, Charles Severance’s Python for Everybody, might be used. Not only is it freely downloadable, it is accompanied by exercises and video lectures that can serve as an excellent supplement to the course lectures.) For the philosophical elements of the course, a hodge-podge of summary-style articles and book chapters (for example, the editors’ introductions to sections on knowledge and induction from The Norton Introduction to Philosophy [2018]) were used to introduce philosophical issues. There follows a breakdown of the topics covered.

WEEK 1: PYTHON SETUP AND ABSTRACTION

Time was spent helping students install Python programming environments on their computers. Python was chosen for its ease of use and its being (arguably) the most popular programming language today. A programming language such as Python is a way for humans to translate actions that they wish the computer to perform into commands that a computer can “understand” and execute. Of course, computers do not literally “understand” the instructions, nor, indeed, do they “understand” anything at all. All that computers do is perform certain actions on receiving certain information provided in accordance with a strict grammar. Nevertheless, it is a powerful tool that, in essence, turns any computer into a universal machine—a machine capable of performing any task that any other machine can do.

We then introduced abstractions in computer science—how computer programs are useful ways of representing a series of 1s and 0s which, in turn, are ways of representing electrical signals. This was then tied into a discussion of external-world skepticism by way of noting that no matter how hard we study a program, it will never yield knowledge of its “true” nature as electricity. This served as a nice analogy for discussing the disparity that sometimes exists between how things may appear to our senses and what these things truly are.

WEEK 2: PYTHON BASICS

The entirety of this week was spent on developing familiarity with the basic elements of Python. Simple data types (integers, floats, Booleans, and strings) and flow-of-control structures (e.g., conditionals and loops) were covered.

WEEK 3: EQUALITY AND IDENTITY

The equality operator, which checks to see if two variables (or expressions or constants) amount to the same value, was used to introduce students to the problem of identity. Because sameness of value does not always imply sameness of object, a discussion of the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity naturally followed. This point was then used to discuss some puzzles regarding identity using, among other things, the Ship of Theseus.

WEEK 4: FUNCTIONS AND FUNCTIONALISM

Time was spent learning how to define functions and
WEEK 5: RECURSION AND FILE MANIPULATION

Part of the time spent in this week was focused on recursive programming. A recursive program, as opposed to an iterative program, is one that uses itself in order to solve a problem. So, for example, consider the problem of calculating factorials. 5 factorial (written as 5!) is the product of a given positive integer multiplied by all lesser positive integers: \((1 \times 2 \times 3 \times 4 \times 5)\) which is 120. Notice that 5! can be calculated if one already knows the value of 4!. We can simply multiply 5 by 4! to calculate 5!. In order to calculate 4! we can, in turn, simply multiply 4 to 3! and so on until we reach a “base” case (i.e., 1!) where the recursion stops. Here is one way to code the factorial function recursively.

```python
def factorial_r(n):
    if n == 1:
        return 1
    return n * factorial_r(n-1)
```

First, the function checks to see if the input number \(n\) is equal to 1. If it is, the function simply outputs 1. If \(n\) is greater than 1, the function takes the next recursive step and outputs the product of \(n\) and \(\text{factorial}_r(n-1)\). In order to calculate this, the product of \((n-1)\) and \(\text{factorial}_r(n-2)\) is calculated and so on until the base case is reached.

An iterative solution to the problem of calculating factorials would involve the use of a looping flow-of-control structure. A looping structure can be used to specify how many times a block of code is repeated executed. Here is one way to code the factorial function Unique iteratively.

```python
def factorial_(n):
    result = 1
    while n > 0:
        result = result * n
        n = n - 1
    return result
```

Here a while loop is used to repeat a block of code so long as the condition \(n>0\) remains true. In this case the block of code will repeatedly be executed \(n\) times.

The loop begins by checking to see if \(n>0\) is true. If so, then the product of \(\text{result}\) and \(n\) is assigned to \(\text{result}\) and \(n\) is decremented by 1. On the next iteration, the loop begins by checking again to see if \(n>0\) is true. If so, then the product of \(\text{result}\) and \(n\) is assigned to \(\text{result}\) and \(n\) is again decremented by 1. This cycle repeats until \(n\) finally reaches 0. At this point the while loop terminates because \(n>0\) is no longer true and \(\text{result}\) is returned as the output.

The basic structure for manipulating files was then introduced to students in anticipation of their working (during the following week) with data sets for which understanding of file manipulation is critical.

WEEK 6: GOD AND VISUALIZATION

Using the distinction between recursive and iterative programming, a recent version of the cosmological argument for the existence of God developed by William Lane Craig (1979) was explored. The core argument can be formulated as follows:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

One way premise 2 has been defended is by arguing that it is impossible to form an infinity by successive addition. In other words, it’s impossible to count your way to an infinite since whatever number you’ve counted to (say, 91852105), you can always count to a higher finite number by adding 1. Given that the history of the universe is a temporal series of past events that is a collection formed by successive additions, it follows that the history of the universe cannot contain an infinite number of past events—the universe must have a beginning.

The notion of recursion serves as a nice entry into thinking about infinity because recursion suggests loops that never end. For example, if I write a recursive function without a base case, this function will run forever (if my computer had an infinite amount of memory). Furthermore, the distinction between recursive and iterative programming may provide a distinction that makes one of Craig’s key intuitions in support of premise 2 questionable.

Craig argues: “In order for us to have ‘arrived’ at today, temporal existence has, so to speak, traversed an infinite number of prior events. But before the present event could occur, the event immediately prior to it would have to occur; and before that event could occur, the event immediately prior to it would have to occur; and so on ad infinitum.” One gets driven back and back into the infinite past, making it impossible for any event to occur.”

The idea that it is “impossible for any event to occur” may only pertain to the occurrence of an infinity of events if the events occur recursively. If events occur iteratively, however, then Craig’s intuition may not be true. To see why this might be the case, let’s return to the factorial function. Even if both recursive and iterative functions solve factorials (as described above), they do so in very different ways. No multiplication operations will be executed in the recursive factorial function until the base case is reached. Consider what happens when the following statement is executed:

```python
factorial_r(5)
```

This results in 5*factorial_r(4). In order to calculate this product, factorial_r(4) must first be executed. But this in turn results in 4*factorial_r(3). In order to calculate this product, factorial_r(3) must first be executed and so on. Until the base case is reached (i.e., factorial_r(1)) none of the multiplication operations can be calculated.

Something very different occurs when the iterative version is executed:

```python
factorial_i(5)
```

In this case, multiplication operations will be executed at every iteration of the loop. In the first iteration 1*5 is executed (since result is 1 and n is 5) and stored as 5. In the second iteration 5*4 is executed (since result is 5 and n is 4) and stored as 20. In the third iteration 20*3 is executed (since result is 20 and n is 3) and stored as 60 and so on. Consequently, multiplication operations are calculated on each iteration of the loop starting with the very first one.

These functions can be modified so that the same statements (factorial_r(5) and factorial_i(5)) enter infinite loops. For the recursive function we can simply remove the base case. For the iterative function we can change the while loop so that the condition (n>0) is replaced with the Boolean value, True—this way the condition is always true and the loop never terminates.

Now we can ask, will any multiplication operations ever get executed given that both functions enter infinite loops? I hope you can see, based on what was said above, that multiplication operations will get executed in the iterative version. In the recursive version, however, multiplication operations will never get executed. This is because no base case will ever be reached.

The rest of the course was spent familiarizing students with the matplotlib library, i.e., a set of tools for visualizing data through graphs. A library is reusable code that can be included into one’s programs. (The matplotlib library was originally written by John D. Hunter, a neurobiologist, and has since become a popular way of visualizing data through Python.)

**WEEK 7: MACHINE LEARNING AND INDUCTION**

The final week was spent on the basics of machine learning—using data to shape a computer model that is deployed for making predictions. Though there are a variety of machine-learning techniques, we decided to use the technique of linear regression on account of its simplicity. Linear regression attempts to find a straight line that best summarizes the relationship between two or more sets of numerical data.

For example, consider the heights and weights of various people. In general, there is a rough correlation between a person’s height and weight—the taller you are, the heavier you are. One could, of course, explicitly program a computer with a model to capture this relationship via a linear equation of the form \( y = mx + b \) where \( y \) stands for the y-coordinate, \( m \) stands for the slope, \( x \) stands for the x-coordinate, and \( b \) stands for the y-intercept. Alternatively, one could provide a computer with lots of examples of people’s heights and weights and let the computer, using linear regression, “discover” this linear equation on its own. These two approaches might be analogized with a priori and a posteriori means of acquiring knowledge. The former might be taken as a priori on the grounds that it is “knowledge” that is simply inserted into the computer, perhaps even before the computer is put to use. The latter may be taken to be a posteriori on the grounds that it is knowledge that is acquired via experience, namely, the experience of being exposed to lots of examples.

Given that machine-learning algorithms rely on a posteriori means of acquiring knowledge it is natural to ask: Why should we trust the subsequent inferences that are made based on the models that these machine-learning algorithms generate? No matter how well a model is made to fit existing data, what reason do we have to think that
the model will continue to capture future, still unobserved, data? This is, more or less, the essence of the problem of induction as introduced by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature.*

We can go on to other debates in the philosophy of science such as the following: Is there an epistemic difference between a model that "merely" accommodates existing data and one that makes accurate predictions about a phenomenon that has yet to be observed? This question is one that data scientists also ask (often implicitly) when designing their models. It's interesting that philosophers and data scientists have reached similar conclusions with respect to this. They suggest that epistemic preference can be given to prediction because models that do better with prediction have a better chance of avoiding "overfitting" existing data. Overfitting occurs when a model is tuned so closely to existing data that it fails to make good predictions because it fails satisfactorily to generalize.

**ASSESSMENTS**

The coursework included two written reflection papers (each of 400–500 words), four programming assignments, a final exam, and a group digital poster. The written reflection papers were evenly spaced throughout the course so that students could choose one of two philosophical topics from the first half of the course (external-world skepticism and personal identity) and one of two topics from the second half of the course (functionalism and the existence of God).

These reflection papers were graded according to the degree to which they met the following four criteria: First, the philosophical position discussed (e.g., that there is good philosophical and scientific evidence for the existence of God) had to be clearly stated. Second, a reconstruction of at least one of the arguments used to support the philosophical position had to be concisely stated. Third, critical engagement with the argument (either for or against) had to be demonstrated. And fourth, the language used in the overall paper had to be both grammatically correct and easy to understand.

The programming assignments were made available through an online platform, i.e., a digital service that facilitates interactions between two or more individuals via the internet involving Jupyter Notebooks, a popular platform for providing programming environments online. Students who do not have Python installed on their personal computers can still access a Python programming environment. Moreover, additional software can be added to Jupyter Notebooks to enable automatic grading, making it possible to give students immediate feedback after the deadlines for receipt of their programming assignments.

The final exam consisted of a single question about a topic introduced in each lecture. Since there were fourteen lectures, there were fourteen multiple-choice questions. They included, among others, variations on decimal to binary number conversion, external-world skepticism, and the problem of induction. The exam was not meant to assess depth of understanding; rather, it was meant to ensure that students understood key concepts and were able to use them correctly in the contexts in which they were learned.

The group digital poster was intended to foster discussions among students about the way that the study of computer science might shed light on discussion of some philosophical problems. Students were asked to present a philosophical concept using a computational concept. Each group then recorded a video presentation wherein each member of the group talked about an important part of their poster. (A bit more on digital posters is detailed at the end of this paper.)

**OUR REFLECTION ON THE COURSE**

Based on comments given by students after taking the class, as well as on our own observations, we acknowledge that there was too much content to be covered in a 2-credit class. If offered again, this class should be offered as a 4-credit class while keeping most of the content the same. Not only will this give students more time to get comfortable applying the programming concepts they've acquired, they'll have more time to slow down and read philosophy from the original texts. In the present iteration of the course, philosophical topics (such as external-world skepticism and the problem of induction) were introduced using secondary texts that were easy-to-digest summary essays. Students may get more out of dealing with, say, Descartes's and Hume's actual writings. Not only are the original texts more challenging to understand, but they may also include details that can push the relevant concepts in subtle directions that make them ripe for further discussion.

With an expansion in class credits, at least two additional lectures can be added to the schedule and dedicated to the logic of arguments (with attention to the concepts of premise, conclusion, validity, and soundness) and the art of reconstructing others' (often implicit) arguments. Attention to the logic of arguments is important to introduce early on so that students have a framework through which they can approach the reading and evaluation of subsequent philosophical texts. For example, when they go over Descartes's passages on external-world skepticism, students should be asked to reconstruct Descartes's reasoning by putting it explicitly into premise-conclusion form.

Fortunately, lectures on the logic of arguments fit naturally into the progression of ideas of the current course content. One of the early concepts taught in courses in computer programming is that of the conditional statement. Conditionals are critical for expanding the programmer's ability to manipulate the flow-of-control of a program. And they are useful for thinking through the logic of arguments since they can be seen as direct counterparts of conditionals in philosophical logic. Moreover, conditionals, in most programming languages, can take advantage of Boolean operators ("and," "or," and "not"). Interpreting a philosophical argument as a series of conditionals may be a pedagogically useful exercise.

Take the following deductive argument, for example:

1. Socrates is human.
2. All humans are mortal.
3. Socrates is mortal.
While there are no explicit conditionals here, we could reinterpret this argument using conditionals.

1. Socrates is human.
2. If Socrates is human then Socrates is mortal.
3. Socrates is mortal.

This, then, might look like the following as Python code:

```python
Socrates_is_mortal = None
Socrates_is_human = True
if Socrates_is_human == True:
    Socrates_is_mortal = True
```

Two Boolean variables are created (socrates_is_mortal and socrates_is_human). socrates_is_mortal is assigned a None value representing a state of ignorance regarding Socrates's mortality. Only if "Socrates_is_human" is true will "Socrates_is_mortal" be assigned a true value. Though not all arguments are smoothly rendered as a series of conditionals, many arguments can be regimented in this way.

Regarding the digital poster projects, it was hoped that students would have ventured into new and creative territory, but for the first iteration of this course, most projects were merely elaborations on connections that were already explicitly made during lectures. More thought needs to be put into this because it’s not clear that students had enough preparation or time to generate anything novel. In a future iteration of this course more scaffolding assignments along the way may help students better explore the intersection of philosophy and computer science.

More generally, in future iterations of this course we will focus on several other issues. First, we will revisit the learning objectives in the context of interdisciplinarity and reflect on the long-term goals of offering this course.

Second, we hope to enhance the alignment between the learning objectives and the assessments by developing appropriate assignments to help students explore the intersection of the two disciplines—assignments that go beyond the “traditional” programming or reflection assignments that are common in courses in computer science (e.g., programming assignments) and in courses in philosophy (e.g., writing papers). Third, we will spend more time clarifying the assessment rubrics. Fourth, additional topics that foster philosophical and computational reflection will be developed.

There is definitely a growing interest in computer science, especially as we move rapidly into a world where almost everything we do is being mediated by computers. The growing interest is also evidenced in the enrollment numbers for computer science-related courses. The interest in computer science is even more pronounced when these enrollment numbers are juxtaposed with enrollment numbers for philosophy-related courses at our university. This provides additional incentive for developing classes like "Philosophy through Computer Science" that try to leverage this interest.

This class is by no means the first attempt at pedagogically combining philosophy and computer science. Oxford University and Stanford University, for example, already offer a degree in Computer Science and Philosophy.

However, the class that we describe in this paper may deliver something unique. As far as we can tell there are no classes offered in either the Oxford or Stanford programs that explicitly highlight areas of conceptual overlap between the two fields (students at these two universities take traditional philosophy courses in the philosophy department and traditional computer science courses in the computer science department). Instead of taking classes in their traditional disciplinary silos and asking students to make conceptual connections themselves, this class is built to make such connections explicit.

We end this paper by highlighting an area of conceptual overlap that seemed to be especially effective in stimulating student engagement through their digital projects. Learning about the functionalist theory of mind, after learning how to write their own Python functions, gave students a new way of thinking about functionalism. Instead of simply pondering how there might be different ways of realizing the same function, they learned how this might be done by writing code themselves. Some students, in their digital posters, shared Python code for a "replace" function that they had written in two different ways: one iteratively and one recursively. Not only did this demonstrate their understanding of multiple realizability, but it also gave them room to wonder, on the one hand, whether different ways of carrying out the "same" function really make any difference to how minds generate understanding. On the other hand, they noted a clear example in their own lives in which the way something is carried out does indeed make a difference. There is, after all, a world of difference between a student who writes code merely by copying what someone else has written versus a student who writes code herself.

CONCLUSION

This course provides a new direction in teaching a way of looking at a couple of philosophical issues that may add value to curriculum design at higher education institutions. By connecting some issues in the field of philosophy with computational concepts, (at least some) students in this course will be more interested in the subject matter of both fields, gain some philosophical/critical thinking skills, and come away with rudimentary programming competence.

APPENDIX

Midterm Student Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) Guide

The semi-structured focus group in the form of a Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) session was conducted by Jiaxin Wu from the Center for Teaching and Learning via Zoom. As a formative midcourse check-in process for gathering information from students on their learning experience, this protocol was designed to foster dialogue between students and instructors and is a transparent way for bringing student concerns to the surface in a thoughtful way.
• What do you like about this course PHIL 109?
• What has contributed to your learning?
• We want to know about the following specifics:
  • Workload of a 2-credit course
  • Remote teaching
  • Helpfulness of assignments and feedback
• Do you think learning philosophy through computer science is helping you to better understand the philosophical content presented? How?
• Do you think learning philosophy through computer science is helping you pay more attention during class? Why?
• Do you think learning philosophy through computer science is making the lectures more difficult to follow? Why?
• What suggestions do you have for making improvements?

NOTES
1. Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) is a structured formative mid-course check-in process for gathering information from students about their learning experience in a course. This technique was first implemented by Dr. Joseph Clark, a professor of biology at the University of Washington in 1974. See Appendix.
2. Besides the instructor’s lectures and questions, we looked into the students’ responses, that is, their responses to the instructor in the form of questions, assertions, responses to other student’s comments, and requests for clarification. Reading a passage or responding to rhetorical questions is not what we mean by a “genuine” learning moment, because they are the same classroom techniques that instructors use to draw student attention to the material at hand, but which requires little reflective thought on their part. Three general questions were adopted to guide the class observation protocol. (1) What are the students’ oral contributions to discussion that shows their understanding or their cognitive processes, e.g., responding to a genuine question correctly, assessing the errors in their own assertions, directing critical questions at the instructor, and critically commenting on course materials or on their peer’s contributions to the discussion? (2) What does the instructor or the students do, or what is the atmosphere in the classroom that leads the above kind of genuine learning moments? (3) To what extent does the genuine learning moment benefit from the interdisciplinary nature of the course? To begin answering these questions each video recorded class session was analyzed for categories and themes (e.g., “teaching a philosophical concept through a computational concept,” “concept covered in pre-test,” “thought-provoking philosophical question”). These categories and themes were then converted into codes (i.e., shorthand notation for themes) and compiled into a codebook that listed the codes with their corresponding themes. The codes were then used to systematically label portions of class time in order to assemble data on what was happening in class. We are still in the preliminary stages of analyzing these data.
3. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
5. Python is considered “easier” than other programming languages (such as C) because it is pitched at a higher level of abstraction. Think of the higher-level abstraction we have as car drivers—to make a car move or stop we simply have to press or release pedals. We don’t have to worry about the lower-level details of what these actions do in terms of the mechanics of the car.
6. While this is certainly a popular view it must be noted that there are exceptions—see Preston and Bishop, Views into the Chinese Room: New Essays on Searle and Artificial Intelligence.
7. Flow-of-control statements in a programming language allow code to be executed in a non-sequential manner. Without flow-of-control statements, the statements in a program will simply be executed one after another in the order that they appear until all the statements are executed (statement1, statement2, … ). With a flow-of-control statement (such as a conditional), some parts of a program can be skipped—so control can be exerted over which statements get executed in certain parts of a program and which statements don’t. Consider the following conditional flow-of-control structure: “if boolean1 then statement1 else statement2.” This structure, depending on the value of boolean1, will either execute statement1 or statement2 but not both. In this way certain statements can be skipped when executing a program and the flow (of which statements get executed) can be controlled.
8. The Ship of Theseus is a thought experiment that helps one to think through the question of whether an entity (like a ship) can have all of its parts replaced and still remain the same entity.
9. The concept can usefully be thought of in terms of mathematical functions like y = f(x) which suggests an input-output specification—a mapping that relates two domains. This is generally used in math to relate two sets of numbers. But there is much more that is possible with functions in programming languages. A non-mathematical example of a function may be the act of gripping something. This is also a useful way to think about functions because it provides an example of a function that can be implemented in multiple ways. This is also relevant to functions in programming languages since there are multiple ways of implementing a function defined by an input-output specification.
11. Why was ‘m’ chosen to represent the slope? This is a question that doesn’t have a clear answer—it is usually used in US math classes but the historical reason for this choice is unclear. See the following website for discussion on this. https://www.mathematica.pt/en/faq/letter-represent-slope.php
12. See Thagard, “Philosophy and Machine Learning,” where he (convincingly, we believe) makes the claim that the parts of philosophy concerned with induction constitute essentially the same field as machine learning.
13. See Hitchcock and Sober, “Predication Versus Accommodation and the Risk of Overfitting,” for a detailed discussion of how models that do a better job of prediction have a higher chance of avoiding overfitting.
14. Here are two student comments: “The course was very cool. But the course in the end was a little rushed because we need to turn [in] four assignments within a week [at the end of course].” “One thing I have to mention is that the programming workload should somehow be reduced, since it is still a 2-credit course.”

REFERENCES
Schematics for the Syllogism: An Alternative to Venn

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I have developed a system of schematics that clearly displays syllogistic validity and invalidity by the way the schematics hang together. These can be sketched by hand, but I now have an interactive program which allows the representations of the eight basic propositions to be clicked and dragged into juxtaposition with each other to show what, if any, conclusion follows from any combination of them. I suggest this different approach makes syllogistic study more comprehensible than ever before. I call the program ReasonLines and its web-based version is found at www.reasonlines.com; also, a ReasonLines app is available for android and iOS devices.

An extensive tutorial is provided in the program’s Help Page for beginning students of logic, but those already familiar with the syllogism should easily be able to operate it with the information provided below. It would be helpful to have the ReasonLines program open while reading the information—if not on a split screen, at least on an open tab to be able to switch back and forth. (A split screen may not show all the program’s features.)

HOW THE PROGRAM APPEARS
The basic conventions used in the schematics are these:

- Letters in white and black circles represent original (positive) terms and their (negative) complements, respectively;
- Green and red arrows connecting the letters represent affirmative and negative statements, respectively; and
- Double- and single-ended arrows connecting the letters represent convertible and nonconvertible statements, respectively.

(Incidentally, I have used A, B, C, etc., as the default letters, but they can be changed with a click/tap.)

The layout of a schematic is a rectangle whose bottom corners have places for two terms and whose top corners have places for their respective complements. Accordingly, the categorical statements are represented by the connection of these left and right terms with the appropriate arrows across the rectangle, as follows:

- All A are B = a single-ended, green arrow pointing from A to B,
- No A are B and No B are A = double-ended, red arrow connecting A and B,
- Some A are B and Some B are A = a double-ended, green arrow between A and B, and
- Some A are not B = a single-ended, red arrow pointing from A to B.

Since each categorical statement is one of four equivalent statements (by obversion, conversion, and/or contraposition) each schematic rectangle is completed by the addition of the appropriate arrows for these equivalents. This involves connections to and/or between the complementary terms, then the rectangular arrow-clusters so completed for the statements given above make up the top row of schematics on the opening screen of the ReasonLines. (See this screen at www.reasonlines.com.)

However, not yet included are the statements below having nonA as their subjects:

- All nonA are nonB,
- No nonA are nonB (No nonB are nonA),
- Some nonA are nonB (Some nonB are nonA), and
- Some nonA are not nonB.

So when these together with their equivalents are also schematized, all of the thirty-two possible categorical statements are represented. They are the eight rectangular schematic-arrow-clusters given on the opening screen of the ReasonLines program. Clicking/tapping any one of them lists the four equivalent statements that it represents. (Again, see www.reasonlines.com.)

(It may be well to note here that these representations are exactly what is displayed on the Venn diagram. That is, the overlapping circles for A and B fix four logical spaces, viz., AB, AB’, A’B, and A’B’, and any one of the four spaces can be marked with an asterisk to display a particular proposition, or can be shaded to display a universal one. Moreover, each of these eight possibilities admits of four different statements or “readings,” as an asterisk in AB may be read as “Some A are B,” “Some B are A,” “Some A are not nonB,” and “Some B are not nonA”; and the same is the case, mutatis mutandis, when each of the other spaces is marked either way. Accordingly, the schematics and the Venn diagrams display the very same thirty-two statements.)
HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS
The opening screen of ReasonLines shows a “premise rectangle” above the eight schematics and the “conclusion rectangle” to the right of them. These contain default terms in place. Now if the syllogism to be tested is Barbara, viz.,

All A are B and
All B are C; so
All A are C,

the user will select the schematic having the single-ended, green arrow that will point from A to B—the top left schematic—and drag it onto the premise rectangle. (Clicking the schematic will show this to be the correct one.) Then another premise rectangle with C-terms will automatically appear alongside the first where the user will then drag the same schematic (top left) to connect B to C.

If at this point the AutoSolve button is activated, the same schematic (top left) will appear again in the conclusion rectangle connecting A to C to represent “All A are C.” Of course, the three other equivalents of “All A are C” are represented as well—just as they are on the Venn diagram (although they may be more difficult to discern on the Venn). However, if AutoSolve is off and the schematic is manually inserted for the conclusion, ReasonLines will affirm it; but if any other schematic is selected instead, it will be marked incorrect.

One can tell which, if any, conclusion follows from a set of premises by noting the green arrows of the premises. Specifically, if the tip of one green arrow connects to the tail of another at a middle term, then those premises do yield a conclusion; and what that conclusion is, is represented by the schematic that properly connects the extreme terms of those arrows when the middle terms are eliminated. If the green arrows of both premises are single-ended, then the proper connection requires a single-ended green arrow in the same direction, while if one of them is double-ended, the proper conclusion arrow is double-ended. Incidentally, when both premises of a valid syllogism are universal as in Barbara, each term—white and black—of one extreme will be connected to one term of the other extreme by its own “green arrow path.” One of these paths will run through the white middle term and the other through the black one. Activating the Hints button (or question mark) located beside the conclusion rectangle will change the red and disconnected green arrows to a dim gray color in order to leave any complete “green arrow path” between the extremes highlighted.

Moreover, if the argument has more than two premises—i.e., if it is a sorites—the schematics are to be read the same way. That is, when there is an unbroken “green arrow path” formed by a tip-to-tail linkage at each middle term, all the middle terms can be eliminated, leaving the extreme terms for the conclusion. But the path may not be broken. When the sorites is long and the busy schematics tend to obscure the situation, the Hints function can be useful.

The schematics display the validity of syllogisms that depend on existential presuppositions by employing Fred Sommers’ insight that “Some A’s exist” can be expressed in categorical logic as “Some A are A”; that is, the presupposition is made explicit by the addition of this premise and the argument is handled as a sorites. Accordingly, since

All A are B, and
All B are C; so
Some A are C

requires the presupposition that some A’s exist be valid, the premises are schematized as

Some A are A
All A are B and
All B are C

and the conclusion schematic will show that

Some A are C.

And this method holds for any other universal term required to be existential to make the syllogism valid.

(Note: Letters can be changed by clicking/tapping them and schematics can be entered to the left as well as to the right of the original one.)

THE VENN DIAGRAMS AND THE SCHEMATICS
The Venn diagrams and the schematics display the very same information for the basic syllogisms, and a lattice of connected asterisks placed in the logic areas of a circle of the diagram accommodates conclusions by existential presupposition. But although they seem theoretically equal as far as the basic syllogism goes, I strongly recommend the schematics over the diagrams on two basic counts: 1) I propose that the schematics expose the workings of the basic syllogism more efficiently and more clearly and 2) I propose that the schematics hold a greater utility for categorical reasoning that extends beyond the basic syllogism.

1) For one thing, the equivalent statements of a proposition are easier to distinguish on a schematic than on a diagram, and this makes schematizing “scrambled” arguments much easier than diagramming them. For example, if

All nonB are nonA, and
No B are nonC; so
All A are C

is the argument to be tested, students would schematize it directly and immediately see it to be valid, whereas they likely would need to go through the immediate inferences necessary to “reduce” it to Barbara, viz.,

All A are B, and
All B are C; so
All A are C

to be able assess it by the diagram.

Moreover, students often have trouble diagramming the I and O propositions onto a 3-circle matrix, while these propositions cause no special difficulty on the schematics.
In addition, [quite apart from the AutoSolve feature] schematized premises seem easier to “read” than diagrammed premises. That is, whether any conclusion follows at all is seen at a glance on the schematics by noting whether green arrows meet tip-to-tail at a middle term; and, when they do, the conclusion is clearly indicated by the way those green arrows connect the extreme terms. So at least in these areas the schematics seem more user-friendly than the diagrams.

Furthermore, the schematics reveal how valid arguments take different forms. For example, for any valid argument with a particular conclusion, its Darii (AII-1) form and its Datisi (AII-3) form are always represented by the terms in the green arrow path—according to which converse of the I proposition is the stated one. And for any valid argument with a universal conclusion its two Barbara (AAA-1) forms are always represented by the terms of the two green arrow paths.

Also, whether a term is distributed in a proposition is indicated by whether it lies at the tip of a red arrow or a green one. That is, a red arrow points to the predicate of a negative (=distributed) while a green arrow points to the predicate of an affirmative (=undistributed).

So, I do find the schematics preferrable to the diagrams for basic syllogisms in these respects.

Furthermore, I propose that the schematics hold a greater potential for use beyond the basic syllogism. One way is in dealing with sorites. That is, breaking a 4- or 5-premise sorites into its ingredient arguments and diagramming them individually is tedious and time-consuming and tends to splinter the integrity of the argument, whereas the schematization of the sorites is streamlined and allows it to be surveyed as a whole. Moreover, there is no limit to the number of premises that may be accommodated by the schematics (although, of course, the ReasonLines program has computational limits). Furthermore, when multiple premises are combined with the diagramming difficulty of complementary terms mentioned above the problem becomes more severe for the diagrams. For example, displaying the validity of the following argument would likely require extraordinary effort using the diagrams but, although longer than a standard syllogism, it would not be any harder to schematize.

All B are A,
All nonB are C,
Some nonC are not nonD, and
No D are E; so
Some nonE are not nonA.

This is not to suggest that introductory courses should give more coverage to arguments with multiple premises but rather to point out that the schematics make this a more viable option if it is desired.

Another extension of the schematics beyond the diagrams—and the one that has been most important to me—is their capability of handling numerically flexible quantifiers, such as in:

At least 10 A are B, and
All but 6 B are C; so
At least 4 A are C.

In fact, it was for this specific purpose that I devised the schematics since the Venn diagrams seemed inadequate here. The general theory I proposed is that categorical claims are inherently—although often only implicitly—numerical in that

All A are B literally means All but 0 A are B,
No A are B literally means None but 0 A are B,
Some A are B literally means At least 1 A is B, and
Some A are not B literally means At least 1 A is not B.

Of course, today this is the generally accepted rendition of the particulars and it may be speculated that it was not recognized for the universals originally because the Greek numerals did not contain a zero. But be that as it may, the traditional statements can appropriately be so considered, and as such they constitute the terminal contingent instantiations of

All but x A are B,
None but x A are B,
At least x A are B, and
At least x A are not B.

(These are terminal contingent instantiations since numbers smaller than 0—i.e., negative numbers—result in necessarily false universal propositions while numbers smaller than 1—i.e., 0 and negative numbers—result in necessarily true particular propositions.)

Then on this rendition, Barbara becomes

All but 0 A are B, and
All but 0 B are C; so
All but 0 A are C,

which is but one of an infinite number of possible instantiations of

All but x A are B, and
All but y B are C; so
All but x+y A are C.

Also then Darii becomes

At least 1 A is B, and
All but 0 B are C; so
At least 1 A is C,

which, along with the above example concluding “At least 4 A are C,” are but two instantiations of

At least x A are B, and
All but y B are C; so
At least x-y A are C.

Likewise, both the multiple-premise argument above and, for example,
In the few times I was able to teach numerically quantified logic before I retired, I had advanced students hand-draw the schematics as they were needed. It was they who suggested schematic cards might be prepared in advance as a way to introduce younger students to the basic syllogism, and since retirement I have had tremendous success in my opportunities to volunteer-teach gifted middle school students using the method.

So, it is on basis of that experience—together with the intrinsic perspicuity of the system and the considerations mentioned above—that I am soundly convinced the adoption of the schematics can greatly facilitate the instruction of categorical logic. I recommend it most enthusiastically.

**AFTERWORD**

I have never used the schematics in a standard logic class in college.

My initial point of departure was the contention that categorical statements are—or at least can be considered to be—inherently numerical, although this is often implicit. That is, the traditional A, E, I, and O statements can be cast as

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All but } 7 B & \text{ are } A, \\
\text{All but } 19 \text{ non}B & \text{ are } C, \\
\text{At least } 55 \text{ non}C & \text{ are not } \text{non}D, \text{ and} \\
\text{None but } 23 D & \text{ are } E; \text{ so} \\
\text{At least } 6 \text{ non}E & \text{ are not } \text{non}A.
\end{align*}
\]

are but two possible instantiations of

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All but } w B & \text{ are } A, \\
\text{All but } x \text{ non}B & \text{ are } C, \\
\text{At least } y \text{ non}C & \text{ are not } \text{non}D, \text{ and} \\
\text{None but } z D & \text{ are } E; \text{ so} \\
\text{At least } y-(w+x+z) & \text{non}E \text{ are not } \text{non}A.
\end{align*}
\]

Moreover, infinitely many squares of opposition and other appeals reside in this numerically expanded terrain. But, again, I am not suggesting that introductory courses include such studies. Rather, my claim is that, unlike the Venn diagrams, the schematics provide a gateway into this region for any who may desire to enter. As mentioned earlier, the schematics were specifically designed for this purpose and the capacity can be activated in the ReasonLines program by clicking/flapping the Use Numbers button. (Part Two of the Help Page’s tutorial develops this expanded feature systematically.)

Perhaps the greatest drawback to the schematics is that the eight initial designs may be somewhat daunting. However, I think this is not as formidable as it may initially appear. First, all one needs to know in order to use the program is which individual arrow represents which specific statement. Then as the program is used one should become progressively more familiar with the details of each of the eight complete schematics, and the symmetry of the scheme should emerge with progressive clarity. For example, as they are laid out on the screen it can be seen that

1. the four schematics of the bottom row are the same as those of the top row flipped down;
2. four schematics are basically green (i.e. have two green arrows) and four are basically red (having two red arrows); and
3. four schematics have a basic Z-shape and four a basic X-shape.

With these distinctions any schematic can be uniquely identified—and visualized—by naming its (1) position, (2) color, and (3) shape. For example, the top left schematic is the Up-Green-Z while the next to the bottom right is the Down-Red-X, and so on for the other forms; and users should soon become acquainted with each of these eight schematics individually.

**In Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that I have no empirical data comparing student achievement using the two methods for the syllogism. The fact is that I did not get the ReasonLines apps produced until after I retired and I have just recently succeeded in getting the web based version (www.reasonlines.com) launched.
I propose the schematics as a more efficient, and more insightful way to present the syllogism at whatever level it is considered. Moreover, I have presented the schematics in contrast to the Venn diagram, rather than to the traditional “rules of the syllogism,” because I find the traditional rules to be haphazard, spurious, and theoretically misleading. (See pp 175 ff of *Numerically Exceptive Logic*.) On the other hand, I see the Venn diagrams and the schematics to be theoretically proper and equivalent when applied to the traditional syllogism; I only contend that the schematics have important pedagogical advantages.

**NOTES**


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**POEMS ON TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC**

**The Prof Selects Her Social Distancing**

Felicia Nimue Ackerman  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

*Revised from a version that appeared in The New York Times and The Emily Dickinson Society International Bulletin*

The prof selects her own society,  
Then shuts the door.  
She keeps her social distance of  
Six feet or more.

Unmoved, she notes the careless crowd  
Outside her gate;  
Unmoved, she notes the feeble folk  
Still tempting fate.

I’ve known her not to venture outside  
Her room  
And turn to students that she’s teaching  
On Zoom.

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**The Joy of Zoom Teaching**

Felicia Nimue Ackerman  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

*First appeared in The Wall Street Journal*

When thoughts are what you exchange,  
No need to be at close range.
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