

JUSTIFYING THE MARGINS: INCORPORATING ASIAN PHILOSOPHIES/STUDIES INTO THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

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The place of Asian Studies, especially Asian philosophies, in the undergraduate curriculum should not be relegated to the margins, nor should its inclusion in the curriculum need any justification whatsoever; for example, why would teaching Confucian Philosophy, which is rooted in the longest continuous civilization on the planet, not be considered a viable, necessary, and integral component in the undergraduate curriculum? Because our universities developed a curriculum almost exclusively around the western canon, the inclusion of ways of thinking of nonwestern peoples is minimal at best in our colleges and universities today.¹ Even as undergraduates in the politically open and aware early 1970's, we petitioned our Philosophy Department for a course in "Oriental Philosophy"; with the assistance of a sympathetic professor we ultimately prevailed. This professor agreed to teach the course, but was always just "one chapter ahead." Unfortunately for him (and us too), he lacked any formal training in nonwestern philosophy and was destined to learn along with us. The age of multiculturalism, which grew out of a need to recognize large groups of nonwhite Americans, opened the door for courses in Asian Studies, and for the study of Asian philosophies. The nature of the changing world also opened this door because some Asian countries became economic and political forces that were in need of reckoning. We experience the rush at serious institutions today to learn more about Chinese thought and culture, as if the Chinese just now appeared. Who are they, how do they think, and what will they do with Hong Kong, and will they buy our products we ask. Those of us who had some training in an area of Asian Studies began to think that perhaps there would be a return on our investments of trying to penetrate completely different ways of thinking, and what appeared to us then as exotic worldviews. Change occurred, however.

Because of the assault against multiculturalism today, tighter budgets, the assault on affirmative action, and a management style of administering our higher educational institutions, we find ourselves in positions of having to justify the inclusion of Asian Studies in the undergraduate curriculum, especially in the core curriculum. What follows is an attempt to justify, in general and theoretical terms, what should not really need any justification at all, that is, the place of Asian Philosophies and Asian Studies in the undergraduate curriculum. This justification attempts to suggest reasons why necessary skills acquisition is more realizable, and may even have a higher success rate,

in Asian Philosophies/Studies courses than in more Western oriented core courses.² Although the focus of this paper is directed to the inclusion of a general survey course in Asian philosophies in the undergraduate curriculum, I think the arguments offered apply to other Asian Studies courses or even more specific courses in Asian philosophy. Also, similar arguments apply, I believe, to the justification of other non-western courses in the undergraduate curriculum such as courses in Latin America, African Studies, and perhaps even area studies such as Women Studies.

Unlike many disciplines that have emerged or evolved from philosophy, philosophy itself is particularly well suited to various forms of pedagogical approaches that not only pass on information to students, but also sharpen student skills in problem solving, working with and through concepts, and communication. In "On the Ethics of Teaching and Ideals of Learning,"³ Robert Audi addresses five approaches to teaching: historical, problem solving, comparative, process, and the dialectical. The historical approach enhances a student's ability to locate the great ideas of the world in their appropriate chronological context and shows students how such ideas develop within respective traditions. The problem solving approach introduces students to the field's major problems and some selected methods of resolving those problems. Through a comparative approach, students can engage themselves in comparisons and contrasts with other worldviews. A process approach forces students to do the work in question: writing, experimenting, and producing (philosophical) arguments. Finally, the dialectical approach uses discussion. Sometimes this discussion will take a Socratic form. Audi further states that "any good teacher has some command of these approaches; the best teachers can combine them and shift from one to another." (Audi, 33).

Each of these approaches to teaching is employed easily in disciplines like philosophy and provides an even greater opportunity for success in a survey core course on Asian philosophies. Because of "curricular restraints," most philosophy departments cannot offer specific courses in Indian Philosophy, Chinese Philosophy, or Japanese Philosophy. Offering even more specific courses such as Daoism, Buddhist Ethics, Samkhya Metaphysics, and so forth is totally out of the question unless the department and/or institution has a serious commitment to educate its students beyond the confines of the Western tradition. This situation of curricular restraints is most unfortunate because many

ideas found within Asian cultures are uniquely different from their Western counterparts. These uniquely different ideas often offer the western student a meaningful means of understanding his or her own worldview and the values that emerge from this background. By introducing general Asian philosophies/studies courses into the core curriculum, the results and goals inherent in Audi's five approaches are achievable and realizable.

The Historical Approach

Explaining the historical development of ideas is accomplished more easily within the context of a given particular tradition. If a professor, for example, traces the development of India's Materialist schools from their Brahmanism roots to Jainism's synthesis of ascetic (*Parsvanatha*) and natural (the *Ajivikas*) strands, students become sensitized immediately to the dynamic process of historical development. They also learn about particular aspects of Indian historical development. What is more important, the foundation for the Buddha's reaction (and subsequent influence on the world) is understood more easily. What is most important, however, when students investigate the historical development of ideas in a tradition other than their own, something significant is likely to occur because there is a diminished tendency to identify with the presented material. When students minimize their personal identification with the presented material, they are less inclined to project their own views and values, which often impede the learning process and real understanding. Although some identification with the presented material is crucial for learning to take place, too much identification only validates and reinforces unexamined prejudices and presuppositions.⁴

Further, students are less inclined to project their ideas about the nature of values, beauty, and reality on to the "other" tradition. If students do project their own tradition onto an unrelated one, then the apparentness of this projection is more easily pointed out to them, and ultimately seen by them; for example, if students project their contemporary Christian Post-Platonic perspective when trying to understand the pre-Socratic penchant for ascertaining the *archē* (beginning principle or primal origin) of all things, it will be more difficult for the professor to correct this teleological tendency. Facing the "other" is a means of understanding oneself.

By teaching from a historical approach, the necessity to situate ideas in their cultural and historical context is crucial. Students learn that ideas do not exist in vacuums and that ideas change our conception of self and reality more than the occurrence of mere events. Why would Descartes, for example, ever postulate the *cogito* at the relative expense of the material world? By understanding

Descartes' moment in history (directly after the shift from the geocentric view of the universe to a heliocentric one) students can understand why this devout Catholic rescues human beings from the periphery of the universe through his *cogito ergo sum* and places them, again, at its center. Often, this point is lost on beginning students because they are too extended in their own religious investments or moored in their sense of self to apply this Cartesian move to their own lives. However, when students momentarily immerse themselves in another tradition, without the operative foundation of their own, they are more likely to see that their senses of value, beauty, and reality are not necessarily exempt from the same type of cultural and historical influences.

Problems Approach

In an Asian philosophies course, professors can easily design assignments to sharpen students' problem solving and communications skills. Students can select a philosophical issue from a menu of typical western problems, for example, whether the moral life is equivalent to the good life, and then investigate the nature of the problem from the perspective of each tradition studied in a typical Asian philosophies survey course. We usually teach the traditions of India, China, and Japan in the typical survey Asian philosophies course, although other cultural traditions might be chosen as well. In such courses, students learn that problems, and their solutions, are contextualized within certain time frames in particular traditions; the problem solving approach resonates with the historical approach. Students also learn that any attempt at resolutions vary according to the intellectual, social, political, and cultural needs of each tradition. Again, when students do not have a culturally vested (self)interest in the outcome of a problem, like survival after death or the existence of God, they become more inclined (and do so more quickly) to develop critical thinking skills that are requisite for being a good student, but even more crucially, to become ultimately a good global citizen. The Problems Approach is easily applied to disciplines other than philosophy.

A helpful analogy to apply here is the study of Latin or Ancient Greek. Learning Latin (or Greek), which is unfortunately out of vogue nowadays, is really a more effective and efficient way of learning the structure of English; it is more efficient and effective than studying English itself because, as Heidegger once informed us, we live in our language. Reflecting on our own language is a difficult and burdensome task because of the closeness between the way we think and our native language. Similarly, our own problems of value and meaning are too closely connected to our worldviews for any objective and comprehensive understanding. By being engaged in a problem solving approach

in an Asian philosophies course (or courses of a similar nature), students learn more efficiently how to apply the learned skills to their own problems, and the problems of their own cultural context.

Comparative Approach

Naturally, the study of an Asian tradition or culture lends itself to the engagement of comparisons and contrasts. Carrying out the comparative approach is more natural in an Asian philosophies/studies course that surveys several traditions than trying to teach comparative skills in a western oriented introductory class. This approach blends nicely with the problems approach by guiding students to select an issue from a menu of typical western problems and map how the nature of a selected problem changes from the perspective of each tradition. Students need not confine themselves to western problems or issues. If an Asian philosophies/studies survey course began with the Indian tradition, the issue of suffering (*dukkha*) is of central significance. Within that particular tradition, students can investigate the differences of the pre-Buddhist responses to the elimination of *dukkha* and then compare their findings with the early Buddhist rejoinder. A professor can build upon this assignment by having students compare their conclusions to the Chinese and Japanese traditions where Buddhism is later introduced, but where suffering is not given the same emphasis as in the Indian tradition. Again, students learn a lesson about the different cultural influences that contribute to ideas and the problems encountered in any particular context. Also, through the comparative process, students are compelled to encounter their own beliefs, values, and presuppositions in a more reflective manner by constantly engaging the “other.”

Through comparisons and contrasts of other worldviews, students understand more easily the development of their own values, beliefs, and presuppositions. Further, students can appreciate the views and values that at face value appear alien to theirs and learn that certain values transcend both cultural and historical differences. It surprises many students that the moral principle of honoring and respecting one’s parents, most closely associated with the Semitic tradition, has a parallel, and an even more prominent role, in Confucian filial piety (*hsiao/xiao*). Moreover, *xiao* is an integral part of a complex system of values that may (or may not) resonant with western values.

Process Approach

The process approach focuses on the actual doing of a discipline. The process approach is best combined with the problem solving and comparative approach, but might be combined with others. Combining the process approach with

the comparative and problem solving approaches is accomplished easily because students are already generating (philosophical) arguments or synthesizing ideas from several traditions. The Asian philosophies/studies course provides a genuine and natural opportunity for the process approach. When engaged in writing and arguing from the parameters of another culture or tradition, students are forced to be more imaginative than when tethered to their own tradition. They are also encouraged to make connections where they normally might be unable because they do not have the burden of any foundational basis for immediate appeal. Students will seek to develop their own intellectual hooks to hang material as they render some order to the strange new chaos they have encountered. To make their course experience more intelligible, in either academic or personal terms, the Asian philosophies/studies student often is more inclined to engage in the “doing” of the course.

The process approach, especially when combined with others, creates an in-class climate that can be more interactive than other types of classes. It is a widely held view that students learn better through process than by being passive learners. We have discovered, for example, that teaching composition in process and allowing for a series of rewrites improves student performance. Emphasizing the process of learning in our classes makes our classes more interesting for students and enhances their ability to learn and master some techniques of the discipline. Further, we can incorporate writing in process for strengthening critical thinking skills.

Dialectical Approach

Robert Audi suggests that the dialectical approach “enhances both intellectual and speaking skills.” (Audi, 33). The Asian philosophies/studies survey offers only one advantage over other (philosophy) courses with respect to the dialectical approach. The dialectical approach where “discussion is used, often Socratically, to unfold ideas, problems, and texts” (Audi, 33) is as easily employed in the Asian philosophies/studies survey class as it is in most other (philosophy) courses. However, there might be a slight advantage for the Asian philosophies/studies course, or other nonwestern courses, when it comes to the interpretation of texts, especially if the professor is familiar with the language of the text. Most of the texts used in an Asian philosophies/studies survey will be written in an ancient language, which creates added problems of translation because of the significant differences between Asian languages and English. For example, asking a student to compare the professor’s translation of the first verse of the *Laozi*, “*Dao* that can be spoken is not the constant *Dao*,” with the translator’s, “The *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal

Dao,” will make her consider: 1. how to speak what she has been told in both translations is unspeakable (the content of the verse) and 2. how she will articulate the significant difference in meaning that occurs in the subtle changes between the translations (the interpretation of the verse). Although we learn such lessons from the texts of Plato, for example, the meanings of those lessons are more transparent because of the linguistic relationship between Attic Greek (or other western language texts) and English; there are many underlying assumptions about substance present in western languages that seduce students (and all of us) to think in particular kinds of ways. There is, of course, no relationship, linguistic or conceptually, between Chinese and English.

Conclusion

An Asian philosophies/studies survey course not only provides students with a general survey of the development and evolution of aspects of the varieties of Asian thought, but it also provides a unique understanding of their own western worldview. Students will learn to reflect about themselves through a continuous comparison and contrast of nonwestern ways of thinking. Students will more closely reflect on western ways of social organization by investigating totally different arrangements. They will reflect on their own relationship to the natural environment by discovering radically different ways of interacting and defining themselves with the natural world. In an Asian philosophies/studies survey course, students learn to develop a more global perspective, and a greater appreciation for the differences of Asian groups.

Philosophy as a discipline is especially suited to the infusion of Asian Studies into the undergraduate curriculum because it concerns itself as a discipline, perhaps uniquely so, with the bigger picture. Philosophers have always concerned themselves with the ideas, ideals, aspirations, attitudes regarding issues of life and death, and how we collectively arrange ourselves in search of the good life. Although less dramatic and ideal, but every bit as crucial, students acquire critical thinking skills more easily, which promote and enhance more successful lives. Philosophy, both East and West, has always sought such a comprehensive understanding.

In a world of the “bottom line,” curricular “dumbing down,” and “reasonable graduation rates,” genuine and comprehensive understanding is crucial. Incorporating Asian Studies, especially Asian Philosophies, into the undergraduate curriculum is not only timely given the nature of our current world, it provides an opportunity to sharpen students’ skills in achieving a more comprehensive under-

standing, which is in scarce supply today, but will be in high demand tomorrow. *

¹ Asian Studies was, of course, not the only exclusion.

² The goal of this paper is not to offer empirical support for such a conclusion, but is to suggest an academic justification and a framework for an empirical investigation, with respect to the acquisition of certain thinking skills.

³ See *Academe*, Vol. 80, #5 by Robert Audi. Audi’s article is the main source for the ensuing discussion.

⁴ This detrimental aspect of identification often occurs with Americans when they learn about U.S. History. Americans identify themselves as bearers of rights, but often have difficulty understanding that the notion of private property is just an extension of an atomically defined self who finds himself or herself in a society, which is defined as a mere collection of other selves, each having equal rights. This identification obfuscates the whole issue of private property and obscures the question of human and animal rights. We can also recall the project of Socrates, who has become our model of the teacher *par excellence*, and the goal of his method: first to question his students and second make them question themselves concerning their inherited values and presuppositions.