

“Citizens of the Universe”: Bryan Van Norden and the Taking Back of Philosophy

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Van Norden’s Manifesto

Among the philosophers cited by Bryan Van Norden in the final chapter of his *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017) is Bertrand Russell, who praised philosophical contemplation for its capacity to expand “not only the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections.” Such contemplation, Russell continues, “makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest.”¹ Like Joshua’s Israelite army at Jericho, Van Norden wants to destroy walls, but not in order to invade the city of a perceived enemy. Rather, by shouting and trumpeting the benefits of multicultural philosophizing, Van Norden is encouraging everyone with a philosophical interest (which may, in some sense, be every human being *simpliciter*) to tear down the barriers that prevent the broadening of philosophical horizons (159). The barriers, as Van Norden sees it, are principally those constructed by an ethnocentric “Anglo-European mainstream” (2), which tends, largely through ignorance and prejudice, to neglect or disparage philosophical traditions outside the Western canon. A consequence of this ethnocentrism is that “less commonly taught philosophies” (LCTPs) remain underrepresented among the teaching and research activities pursued in philosophy departments, not only in the Western world but also in certain non-Western countries whose educational institutions gravitate towards the Western model. (As we know, “globalization” is all too often a euphemism for Western cultural imperialism.)

Van Norden also wishes to defend the value of philosophy more generally against attacks from anti-intellectualist politicians—who treat the category of “philosophers” as a paradigm of useless good-for-nothings—and from loudmouth public intellectuals, especially scientists, who vaunt the superiority of science over philosophy, typically on the grounds that science is capable of disclosing genuine truths about the universe whereas philosophy amounts to mere idle speculation. So the burden of Van Norden’s manifesto is not only to reclaim philosophy from those who would allow its pursuit in academic environs to remain blinkered by a monocultural mindset, but also to rescue philosophy’s humanistic ideal from the

misunderstandings fostered by a cultural milieu in awe of the achievements of natural science. As Wittgenstein observed in the 1930s, philosophers are as guilty of falling prey to this awe as is anyone else, for many of them “constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does.”² Although Van Norden does not cite Wittgenstein on this point—and would almost certainly take exception to Wittgenstein’s vision of philosophy as “purely descriptive”—he does recognize that philosophers share a significant portion of the blame for the widespread perception of philosophy’s futility. Instead of continuing philosophy’s ancient legacy of inquiring into how one ought to live, professional philosophy in the modern era has become increasingly academic in the worst sense of the word. Card-carrying “analytic” philosophers have frequently busied themselves with authoring arcane thought experiments—or, more often, embellishing existing thought experiments with their own minor tweaks—which encourage hyper-specialization rather than opening up dialogues about what is important in human life.

Along the way, Van Norden also takes a swipe at “Continental thinkers,” many of whom he considers to be typified by Jacques Derrida, who, in the opinion of Martha Nussbaum (among other non-Derrideans), leaves the reader hungering for something philosophically substantial beyond all the verbal dexterity and clever textual analysis.³ If one were inclined to wonder whether such second-hand dismissals of Continental philosophy are not overhasty, Van Norden might remind us of the warning issued in his preface: that he has sought to fulfil his editor’s request to inject some cheekiness into his prose, and in doing so has “not shied away from being openly partisan” and more “sardonic” than he would normally be “in the classroom or in a scholarly publication” (xxiii–xxiv).

Though perhaps lacking in philosophical rigor, then, Van Norden’s book nevertheless presents arguments that demand to be heard. On the whole, I agree with him. Having devoted a good deal of my academic career—and of my life—to the study of philosophies deriving from South Asia (in addition to many deriving from Europe and elsewhere), I thoroughly concur that such study can be philosophically valuable and life-enhancing, potentially saving one from the perils of an overly narrow perspective on the world and on human modes of engagement with it. For the purposes of this essay, however, I shall focus on elements of Van Norden’s arguments that need, in my view, to be thought through more carefully than Van Norden is able to do in the relatively small space that his manifesto affords. I concentrate on two issues in particular. First, in the next two sections, I offer some reflections on the overall impression given by Van Norden that incorporating non-Western material into standard philosophy curricula is not a difficult task and that all it really requires is the will to overcome

a culturally myopic inertia. While I admit that the difficulties should not be overestimated, I also wish to highlight some reasons why they should not be underestimated either.

Second, I pick up on a threefold distinction that Van Norden introduces in his final chapter, between what he calls a “hermeneutic of faith,” various “hermeneutics of suspicion,” and “relativism” (see 139–142). While potentially fruitful as a starting point, the distinction, as Van Norden articulates it, omits certain possibilities and oversimplifies others. Notably, it omits what I, following the Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher D. Z. Phillips, am inclined to call a *hermeneutics of contemplation*. Moreover, by characterizing relativism in the way that he does, but then asserting baldly that it does not deserve to be taken seriously, Van Norden seems to preclude, *a priori*, a number of philosophical viewpoints that, I suspect, he would not really want to preclude—such as the perspectivism of Nietzsche, the internal realism advocated in some of Hilary Putnam’s writings, and certain interpretations or appropriations of the Jain “doctrine of many-sidedness” (*anekāntavāda*). Even if, after due consideration, one rejects these viewpoints as philosophically untenable, that is a very different matter from refusing to take them seriously in the first place.

“Bringing into Dialogue”: Underplaying the Difficulties?

Taking Back Philosophy’s longest and most philosophically substantial chapter is chapter 2, “Traditions in Dialogue.” It is here that Van Norden provides specific examples of how non-Western philosophical ideas might be discussed in relation to existing issues in the curriculum. Noting, for instance, that a philosopher such as Descartes merely takes it for granted “that there must be individual substances distinct from all their qualities” (43), Van Norden recommends invoking as a counter-position the Buddhist “ontology of states rather than things” (44). This latter viewpoint is usefully propounded in the form of a dialogue between a Bactrian king and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena in the Pāli text known as *The Questions of King Milinda* (c. first century BCE). Van Norden’s other proposals include: confronting Hobbes’ conception of human nature as ruthlessly competitive with the more benign Confucian conception argued for by philosophers such as Mengzi (fourth century BCE); contrasting an Aristotelian understanding of ethical cultivation with Confucian, Buddhist, and Neo-Confucian versions; and turning to Chinese philosophers to enhance discussions of the problem of “weakness of will” in ethics. While admitting that, on account of his own areas of expertise, his choice of examples leans towards Chinese philosophy, Van Norden is confident that comparable examples could be drawn from other LCTPs, such as Indian, African, Native American, African-American, feminist, Islamic, Jewish, Latin American, and LGBTQ philosophies (82). This is no doubt

true, and the chapter does a convincing job of fulfilling its aim, which is to illustrate the bringing into dialogue of voices from philosophical traditions that were not, originally, in actual dialogue with one another. I am concerned, however, that by cherry-picking examples in the way that he has done, Van Norden presents an unduly rosy picture of comparative cross-cultural philosophy. There are, in my view, also potential difficulties that ought not to be underplayed.

Van Norden’s sanguinity is typified by a comment about Indian philosophy. “[A]ny acquaintance with Indian philosophy,” Van Norden affirms, “reveals that, in terms of both methodology and subject matter, it is philosophical even according to the most narrow standards that Anglo-European philosophy might supply. Just open a book!” (82). In response to this, I should like to emphasize: it depends on *which* book you open. One of my own principal areas of expertise is the *darśanas* (roughly, “schools” or “viewpoints”) of classical Indian philosophy known as Sāṃkhya and Yoga. The most authoritative texts of these schools are commonly referred to as the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and *Yogasūtra*, respectively, both of which date from around the fourth or fifth century CE. If one were to naively open either of these texts, it is unlikely that one would be able to make much of them, even in English translation, without a good deal of surrounding contextual and interpretive information. The *Sāṃkhyakārikā* comprises a series of seventy-two two-line stanzas, each of which, despite forming a coherent semantic unit, is extremely dense. And the *Yogasūtra* is composed in the style typical of many classical Indian philosophical treatises, which involves the stringing together of a series of pithy statements or half-statements, each being an individual *sūtra* (literally, “thread” or “suture”) that is often barely intelligible without an accompanying commentary. Indeed, recent scholarship has suggested that the 195 *sūtras* (or 196, depending on which version one consults) that constitute this text were never presented in manuscript form independently of the commentary known as the *Yogabhāṣya*, the combined text-plus-commentary being designated the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*.⁴

Owing to the difficulty of understanding either the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* or the *Yogasūtra*, even when—or sometimes *especially* when—read in conjunction with traditional commentaries, the vast majority of modern scholarship surrounding these texts, both in India and in the West, is primarily exegetical in nature: it is an attempt merely to understand what the texts are saying, which is, of course, a necessary prerequisite for undertaking any philosophical engagement with them. My own approach has included drawing comparisons with aspects of Western philosophy, such as Kantian transcendental idealism and the phenomenology of Brentano and Husserl, for the purpose of explicating what I take to be the most coherent interpretation of the

Indian material. Provided one avoids simply imposing Western models upon the original sources, such comparisons can be illuminating. There is a sense in which this comparative approach brings Western and Indian philosophies “into productive dialogue,” yet it does so primarily for exegetical ends, not in order to set up an argument between two or more rival philosophical positions. Furthermore, the exegetical enterprise also demands several other factors, most notably a high degree of competence in the language in which the sources were composed—in this case classical Sanskrit—plus a thorough acquaintance with the philosophical milieu out of which the sources arose.

Competence in the language is vital because texts such as the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and *Yogasūtra* contain numerous technical terms that lack any straightforward English synonym. For example, the *Yogasūtra* defines its central term, *yoga*, as *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*. But what does *citta-vṛtti-nirodha* mean? The range of possible translations is extensive. *Citta* is something like “mind” or “consciousness”; a *vṛtti* is, literally, a “turning” (related to Latin *vortex*), and hence can denote a “whirl” or “ripple” in a body of water. In view of what comes later in the text, *citta-vṛtti* can be understood to mean “changing states of mind”⁵ or, in one influential early translation, “the fluctuations of mind-stuff.”⁶ *Nirodha*, meanwhile, derives from a verbal root meaning “to hold back, stop, hinder, shut up, confine, restrain, check, suppress, destroy,”⁷ thus suggesting that yoga consists in the “stilling” (Bryant) or “restriction” (Woods) of the states or fluctuations of the mind. But arriving at an approximate translation such as this hardly resolves the question of meaning. To understand what, for the school of philosophy known as Yoga, “stilling the mind” amounts to requires a detailed study of the text as a whole and probably of several commentaries on it as well.

With regard to the philosophical milieu out of which Sāṃkhya and Yoga arose, available historical evidence is extremely thin. We have the names of authors to whom the primary texts have traditionally been attributed: Īśvarakṛṣṇa in the case of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and Patañjali in the case of the *Yogasūtra*. But we have no reliable biographical information about them. And neither of them claims to be the originator of the philosophies presented in the texts. The author of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* states explicitly that he is merely expounding doctrines that have been passed down from the “highest seer,” which is generally treated as an epithet of a legendary figure named Kapila;⁸ and the *Yogasūtra*, enigmatically, declares Īśvara (roughly, “the Lord”—not to be conflated with Īśvarakṛṣṇa) to be “the teacher of the ancients, because he is not limited by Time.”⁹ Thus, we do not really know when or where the philosophies of Sāṃkhya and Yoga originated; we can merely speculate on the basis of snippets of information derivable from traditional commentaries, supplemented by comparative analysis of ideas contained in the

classical sources and similar ideas expressed elsewhere, including in texts for which we have independent reasons for regarding as historically either earlier or later than the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* and *Yogasūtra*.

We may also look to the texts of rival Indian philosophical schools, such as those of Vedānta, Nyāya, Buddhism, Jainism, and others, to find arguments against the views of Sāṃkhya and Yoga. But we should be wary of uncritically accepting interpretations of Sāṃkhya and Yoga put forward by proponents of these rival schools, just as we should be cautious about accepting interpretations of the rival schools presented in partisan Sāṃkhya and Yoga commentaries. As with any philosophical tradition, the painting of one’s opponents’ views in unfavourable colours can often prove to be a means of bolstering one’s own position that is too tempting to resist. The floors of many traditions are littered with discarded straw men, and that of Indian philosophy is no exception. This is why close attention to the original sources is indispensable, which, in turn, is why scholars have gone—and continue to go—to great lengths to furnish as much information, both contextual and based on close readings of the texts themselves, about what the sources are saying. Hence, while not all work in Indian philosophy is philological and interpretive in nature, a substantial amount of it is. So to imply, as Van Norden does, that one merely has to pick up a book on Indian philosophy and one will immediately see that this tradition is much like that of Western philosophy—with which it can readily “be brought into productive dialogue”—is, as it stands, in need of qualification. *Some* Indian philosophy lends itself to this purpose, but much of it needs to be studied at considerable length in relation to its own cultural context before it can be utilized for the sort of manufactured cross-cultural argumentative exchanges that Van Norden illustrates by means of his own examples from Buddhist and Chinese sources.

These points that I have been making about the need for careful examination of original texts, informed by some knowledge of the language in which they were composed and of the cultural milieu from which they derive, bear upon Van Norden’s response to what he deems to be a “bad argument . . . against diversifying the curriculum” (32). The purportedly bad argument takes the form of the question “What would you have us cut? We can barely cover Western philosophy as it is!” Van Norden’s response acknowledges that the coverage of Western philosophy would indeed have to be reduced, but adds that covering all of Western philosophy was never a realistic prospect in the first place; since compromises are already being made, the replacement of some Western philosophy by content drawn from non-Western or other LCTPs would not be a radically new departure in this respect. But is the argument to which Van Norden is responding really so bad? In my view, Van Norden’s response overlooks a significant

difference between, on the one hand, introducing new material into a curriculum from within the philosophical tradition that is already being predominantly taught and, on the other hand, introducing material from a very different philosophical tradition. I shall elaborate this point below.

Philosophizing Within and Across Traditions

Having admitted the importance of comprehending “how doctrines and practices of argumentation are situated in their particular cultures,” Van Norden observes that “it is equally important to avoid the misconception that philosophy in the West is monolithic” (30). This is true, and it is a poignant reminder that there is no absolute differentiation between what we might call *intra-traditional* and *cross-traditional* philosophizing, respectively—intra-traditional being the discussion of philosophical topics with reference to only one tradition (e.g., “Western philosophy” or “Chinese philosophy”) and cross-traditional being the discussion of such topics with reference to two or more traditions. Traditions, after all, are rarely sharply bounded: they tend to be both porous and internally variegated, frequently blurring into one another. As Van Norden highlights in chapter 1, there has in fact been cross-fertilization between, for example, Chinese and European philosophy since at least the seventeenth century. So the idea of discrete and entirely heterogeneous philosophical traditions is naïve. It does not follow, however, that distinctions between different traditions cannot be made, for even if they have fuzzy edges, traditions may nonetheless be distinguishable in rough and ready terms. Indeed, any contention that philosophies from non-Western traditions ought to be integrated into the curriculum presupposes that traditions are distinguishable.

My point is not that cross-traditional philosophizing should be avoided, but that the potential challenges it poses should be properly appreciated. In some instances, finding ways of overcoming these challenges—or of simply recognizing their existence—is apt to make cross-traditional philosophizing all the more worthwhile, for doing so may, among other things, reveal philosophical possibilities (including possible understandings of what philosophy *is*) that would not otherwise have come to light. But entering into cross-traditional philosophizing with the blasé expectation that, in practice, it is no different from intra-traditional philosophizing carries the risk of being counter-productive. It carries this risk because, if students expect to be able to understand arguments from two or more traditions and to bring those arguments into dialogue when their knowledge of all but one of the traditions is extremely limited, there is a danger that an injustice will be done to the arguments from the less well-understood tradition or traditions.

Needless to say, defining what a tradition consists in is no easy task. But in the case of philosophy, one of the common characteristics is its broadly conversational nature. It is no accident that Plato presented the bulk of his philosophy in dialogue form, for philosophy is typically pursued through communication with others: ideas are sharpened and arguments are refined by subjecting them to interrogation and contestation. Even when a philosopher, such as Descartes, adopts the conceit of having sought to devise a philosophical system “from first principles” by sitting alone in an isolated room,¹⁰ there nevertheless comes a point when the system must be tested out in the public arena and responded to by fellow philosophers, whether in face-to-face dialogue or in written form. Thus, when Alfred North Whitehead described “the European philosophical tradition” as “a series of footnotes to Plato,”¹¹ he was, in part, emphasizing (albeit by means of deliberate exaggeration) the extent to which this tradition constitutes an ongoing succession of responses and counter-responses. Novel thoughts may arise from time to time, but not in a vacuum: they are invariably stimulated by ruminating upon the thoughts of others, even if those others lived and died several hundred years earlier. Western philosophy, we might say, is, like art or culture in general, a conversation over time.¹² When communicating with one another, philosophers “count on mutual understanding insofar as they exploit a shared heritage, refer to a common canon, and use a common language (even if their language is broken into different dialects).”¹³ And something similar may be said about, for example, the philosophical traditions of China and India, and about other traditions as well: there need not be a common language in the sense that all contributors to the conversation must speak, say, Classical Chinese or Sanskrit, but the tradition gains its coherence from a certain shared heritage and set of reference points.

A consequence of the conversational nature of philosophical traditions is that one’s understanding of current discussions in philosophy is likely to deepen by studying the history of the subject, for current discussions—when pursued competently—will be aware of, and will be responding either explicitly or implicitly to, ideas that have come before. Hence, one’s insight into Kant will be enhanced by studying the thought of Descartes and Hume, and one’s comprehension of Heidegger improves from learning about Aristotle, Kierkegaard, and Husserl. In the case of Chinese philosophy, the work of Mengzi and Zhu Xi will be better understood if one also studies Confucius. And in Indian philosophy, one needs to have some acquaintance with Abhidharma and Yogācāra Buddhism, and with classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga, if one is to appreciate how Śaṅkara, in his commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*, tries to differentiate his own nondualist philosophy from those other viewpoints. So, too, will one need some familiarity with the Upaniṣads, and perhaps the *Bhagavad Gītā* as well, to grasp the

background of Śāṅkara's own thought. In turn, knowledge of Śāṅkara's nondualist version of Vedānta is needed if the later Vedāntic systems, such as the "qualified nondualism" of Rāmānuja and the dualism of Madhva, are to be adequately interpreted. And so on.

Again, none of this rules out the possibility of incorporating non-Western philosophy into the curriculum, but it does suggest that gaining a genuinely rich understanding of many important philosophical works will require learning about the traditions in which they are embedded. That takes time. And learning about a different tradition takes more time than learning about another work within a tradition with which one is already familiar. The investment of such time is apt to be well rewarded, for it facilitates not merely a new viewpoint within an existing set of disputes but, potentially, a radically new vista upon a divergent disputational landscape—a way of seeing things from a different cultural as well as a different philosophical perspective, perhaps one that deploys a markedly different conception of what, from a Western point of view, has been called philosophy. But the investment of time is significant, and this significance ought not to be glibly dismissed on the grounds that compromises are already being made in the coverage of Western philosophy. Building a philosophy curriculum that is cross-traditional and multicultural should be done. But doing it well is not easy.

Hermeneutics and Neglected Options

Turning now to Van Norden's concern with philosophical methods, I want in this penultimate section to consider the threefold distinction that Van Norden adumbrates—between what he calls a "hermeneutic of faith," various versions of a "hermeneutic of suspicion," and, thirdly, "relativism." According to Van Norden, a hermeneutic of faith consists in reading texts with an attitude of hope that one may discover in them qualities of "truth, goodness, and beauty," whereas a hermeneutic of suspicion involves seeking motives behind a text "that are unrelated to its truth or plausibility"—motives such as economic or political advantage "as well as sexist, racist, or imperialist conceptions of the world" (139). Without wishing to reject either of these hermeneutical orientations, Van Norden proposes that a focus on suspicion has become pervasive in the humanities and social sciences, and that departments of philosophy "are often the last refuge of the hermeneutics of faith" (140).

Although Van Norden does not cite Paul Ricoeur in this connection, it is from Ricoeur that the distinction between a hermeneutics of faith (or a "hermeneutics of recollection") and a hermeneutics of suspicion derives. For Ricoeur, these notions have specifically religious implications: a hermeneutics of suspicion is an interpretation that strives to demystify religion

(in the manner exemplified by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) whereas a hermeneutics of recollection is one “that tries to grasp, in the symbols of faith, a possible call or kerygma”¹⁴—a religious message that speaks to one personally. Evidently, Van Norden is extending these terms beyond the sphere of religious texts and symbols to encompass approaches to the interpretation of texts more generally. What both he and Ricoeur neglect is the possibility of an approach that, while being properly philosophical, endeavours neither to demystify and debunk nor, necessarily, to discover values to adhere to. The neglected approach, which has been dubbed by D. Z. Phillips a *hermeneutics of contemplation*,¹⁵ is one that prioritizes understanding the variety of ways of being human over the advocacy or condemnation of any of those ways in particular: it aims to disclose “possibilities of sense” within human forms of life and discourse, salvaging them from the tendency, especially common among philosophers, to prematurely foreclose certain possibilities in the haste to develop general theories. As with Wittgenstein’s note of caution about philosophers being beguiled by the methods of science, a hermeneutics of contemplation eschews the “craving for generality” in favour of giving due attention to particular cases.¹⁶ Far from ignoring matters of truth, goodness, and beauty, a contemplative hermeneutics would investigate the variety of meanings that the concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty can have in multiple contexts, instead of assuming from the outset that each of these concepts must have an essential and uniform meaning across all contexts of use.

Given its opposition to essentialism and its emphasis on the recognition of a plurality of ways of being human, a hermeneutics of contemplation is well suited for cross-cultural philosophical inquiry. It is concerned, precisely, with finding “intriguing conceptual possibilities,” which is part of what Van Norden himself aims to achieve in his exposition of alternative philosophical perspectives (82). So, I submit, a hermeneutics of contemplation deserves a place alongside the hermeneutics of faith and of suspicion in the list of options available to the multicultural philosopher.

Van Norden’s own third option, however, is what he calls “relativism.” Yet it is not *really* a third option in Van Norden’s eyes, since he considers relativism to be philosophically worthless—not even deserving to be taken seriously (140). Despite this, Van Norden does go to the trouble of distinguishing two varieties of relativism: cognitive and ethical. Cognitive relativism is the view that the truth-value of any proposition “depends upon the perspective from which [it is] evaluated” (140). The view has long been recognized to be incoherent, Van Norden remarks, because it undermines itself: if it is held to be objectively true, then it asserts,

inconsistently, that there is at least one nonrelative truth; but if it is held to be true merely relative to the proponent's perspective, then it provides no basis for anyone else to accept it.

Ethical relativism, meanwhile, “asserts that the truth or falsity of evaluative claims (and only evaluative claims) depends upon the perspective from which they are evaluated” (141). It is unclear to me why Van Norden refers to “evaluative” rather than merely ethical claims here. If he means to include all evaluative claims—such as aesthetic, legal, political, and religious, as well as ethical ones—then the form of relativism at issue would be more aptly named *evaluative relativism* or *value relativism*. But, in any event, Van Norden, while admitting that the view is not incoherent in the way that cognitive relativism is, considers it to be “a banal dead end in philosophy” (141). It is a dead end because it affords no practical guidance about what, ethically, to think or do. If one maintains that the truth-value of ethical judgments is relative to individuals, then no help is offered for someone trying to make an ethical judgment; and if one maintains that the truth-value of such judgments is relative to cultures, then no help is offered in cases where divergent judgments are present within the same culture (and trying to determine which “subculture” one belongs to is unlikely to help either, Van Norden adds). If one were to claim that ethical relativism fosters tolerance towards other peoples and cultures, then one would have overlooked a crucial implication of ethical relativism itself—that whether one should be tolerant is dependent on one's own (cultural or individual) perspective. All of these are fair points. In fact, one might get the impression that, by making them, Van Norden comes close to appearing as though he is taking relativism seriously as a position, or set of positions, that deserve to be countered. But Van Norden's self-confessed grumpiness about relativism seems out of step with his overall openness to conceptual possibilities. Indeed, his characterizations of relativism are so quick and dirty that they run the risk of foreclosing discussion about more subtle positions that many would call versions of relativism—positions which, even if one disagrees with them, undoubtedly do deserve to be treated with philosophical seriousness. (As Van Norden says in connection with Buddhist, Confucian, and Neo-Confucian philosophers, “It's fine to tell me that you don't agree with them, but philosophy is not about teaching only figures whom you agree with” (82). The same applies, I am contending, to the work of sophisticated philosophical relativists.)

I do not have space here to go into detail about versions of relativism that warrant serious philosophical scrutiny, but, as a starting point, one might mention the “perspectivism” of Nietzsche, the “internal realism” of Hilary Putnam, and certain interpretations of the Jain “doctrine of many-sidedness” (*anekāntavāda*). In the case of Nietzsche, we are confronted with an eloquent and provocative non-systematic thinker who revels in metaphor and hyperbole.

Notoriously, when railing against “positivism”—which he characterizes as the insistence that “There are only *facts*”—Nietzsche replies, “No, facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing.”¹⁷ By Van Norden’s lights, the claim that there are no facts, only interpretations, would appear to suffer from the incoherence of cognitive relativism: if what is asserted is to be taken as true, then, in effect, what we are being asked to accept is that it is true—and hence a fact—that there are no facts, which is incoherent; alternatively, if we treat the assertion as the mere expression of an interpretation, which overtly disavows any claim to be factual, then we are left wondering why we should accept it. This would be a tempting way of evading the challenge that Nietzsche, in his work more generally, poses; for if we take the time to go beyond superficial readings, we are apt to find a multifaceted thinker who, in certain places, strives to carry through a radical rejection of the very norms of rationality upon which the superficial readings depend. For instance, in many places, Nietzsche celebrates the affirmation of life over the affirmation of truth: in these moods, Nietzsche regards the essential question as being not whether a judgment is true or false—or even coherent (by conventional standards)—but rather “to what extent it is life-promoting.”¹⁸ This shift of priorities—from truth to “life,” or indeed, in other places, from truth to *power*—is profoundly unsettling for the philosopher who can see no purpose in philosophical argumentation if it is not directed towards truth. But that capacity to unsettle us—and not infrequently to advance a startlingly perceptive observation about life or the world (which, ironically, may strike us as all too *true*)—is part of the wonder of reading Nietzsche. Relativist or not, he deserves to be taken seriously—and I suspect that Van Norden would agree (not least because he cites Nietzsche several times in his book).

As for Putnam, he put forward his internal realism in the early 1980s as an alternative to metaphysical realism, which he defines in terms of three main theses: first, that “the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects”; second, that “[t]here is exactly one true and complete description of ‘the way the world is’”; and third, “Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and sets of things.”¹⁹ Internal realism, by contrast, maintains that the question “*what objects does the world consist of?*” makes sense only within what Putnam variously terms a “theory of description,” a “scheme of description,” or a “conceptual scheme.” On this view, it makes no sense to suppose that objects could exist *as objects* independently of any conceptual scheme, for it is the conceptual scheme that divides up the world into distinguishable objects. While some commentators would construe this as a form of antirealism, Putnam calls it internal *realism* because it maintains that the objects we, as individuals, perceive and think about do really exist independently of our

own thoughts and perceptions, albeit not independently of the conceptual scheme within which our perceiving and thinking are occurring. In effect, then, Putnam's theory—which, admittedly, he later came to modify and partially disavow—amounts to a form of conceptual relativism: what counts as an object (how we conceive of it), and hence also the truth about any object, is relative to a conceptual scheme—that is, to a system of concepts that operates within a given human community. Again, as with Nietzsche's perspectivism, Putnam's internal realism seems to fall within Van Norden's definition of cognitive relativism, for it does indeed assert that “the truth or falsity of all claims depends upon the perspective [in this case, the conceptual scheme] from which they are evaluated.” And yet, I presume Van Norden would agree that the numerous philosophers who have engaged, whether sympathetically or critically, with Putnam over this view—including Putnam himself—are not thereby making the mistake of taking seriously something that does not deserve to be.

Finally, it is worth mentioning here the Jain *anekāntavāda*, which translates as “non-onesidedness [hence: many-sidedness] doctrine.” Although most scholars agree that this was not, in its original form, a doctrine of cognitive relativism, it has nevertheless lent itself to overtly relativist interpretations or appropriations. The classic exposition of the doctrine utilizes the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant, in which several blind men each touch part of an elephant and assume, on that basis, that they know what the whole elephant is like.²⁰ Clearly, what the parable does *not* illustrate is the absence of objective truth; indeed, the implication is that a fully enlightened individual—a Jina—would be capable of seeing the whole elephant and hence knowing the whole of reality. But since the achievement of such enlightenment is, for most of us, a very long way off, the parable, and the doctrine it illustrates, is generally understood to promote a strong form of epistemic humility according to which all views should be treated as merely partial and perspectival. This radical perspectivalism has, in certain instances, been construed in relativist terms, which is in fact how it is articulated on one of the most prominent Jain websites, according to which “Jainism developed the theory that truth is relative to the perspective (*naya*) from which it is known.”²¹ My point is not that such interpretations ought to be accepted uncritically, but simply that they should not be dismissed out of hand. “Relativism” is itself a many-sided doctrine—or multiplicity of doctrines—and Van Norden's perfunctory repudiation on the basis of a crude typology does not do justice to the variety.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, then, I concur with Van Norden that philosophical contemplation can enable us to become, in Russell’s phrase, “citizens of the universe” as opposed to being parochially preoccupied with only a miniscule portion of it. Diversifying our philosophical interests to encompass traditions beyond the Euro-American mainstream can contribute significantly to that widening of horizons, and, yes, students ought to be given “the opportunity to be inspired by [for example] Buddhism in addition to Platonism, or Confucianism in addition to Aristotelianism” (Van Norden 101). We should not, however, presume that the task of curriculum expansion is an easy one, not least because learning about a philosopher, or a school of philosophy, from another tradition demands—if it is to result in more than a superficial or distorted understanding—contextualizing that philosopher or school within the larger tradition itself. This amounts to more work than simply introducing another Western philosopher into an existing Western-focused curriculum.

Moreover, I have contended, we should be open to methodological pluralism, too, and recognize more hermeneutical options than the binary picture of “faith” versus “suspicion” sketched by Van Norden. And finally, this openness should preclude casual dismissals of complex and ramified philosophical positions—such as the multiplicity of relativisms—on the basis of cursory definitions that fail to consider actual versions of the positions at issue.

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 161; quoted in Bryan W. Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 154.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 18.
3. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 171; quoted in Van Norden 152.
4. Philipp A. Maas, “A Concise Historiography of Classical Yoga Philosophy,” in *Periodization and Historiography of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Eli Franco (Vienna: Publications of the De Nobili Research Library, 2013), 53–90.

5. Edwin F. Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 10.
6. James Haughton Woods, *The Yoga-System of Patañjali* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 8.
7. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 553.
8. Mikel Burley, *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 51.
9. *Yogasūtra* 1.26, trans. Bryant 103.
10. René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15.
11. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.
12. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 389–394.
13. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Thinking about Thinking: What Kind of Conversation Is Philosophy?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 86.
14. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 343.
15. D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
16. Cf. Wittgenstein 18; D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 63, 87.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §481.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §4.
19. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 49.
20. Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 117–118.
21. “Anekantvad,” Jainworld.com, <http://jainworld.com/education/seniors/senles16.htm>.