**Curricular diversification and metaphilosophical myopia**

Birmingham philosophy of education seminar, 18/1/23

1. **Preliminaries.**

I offer an argument for diversification of university-level philosophy curricula—focused on a concern which I call **metaphilosophical myopia**, which, among its harms, encourages a kind of **hermeneutical injustice** towards certain forms of philosophy.

Motivation: my experience teaching Buddhism and Daoism, which students failed to understand, and sometimes unfairly derogated, because they were oblivious to their ethos of moral quietism.

1. **Myopia.**

Myopia: a problematically narrow, limited, confined vision of X that prevents one from recognising, evaluating, appreciating, or understanding aspects of X which lie outside of one’s vision.

Myopia as a metaphor connotates (a) an unduly and problematically limited vision of X, which (b) tends to have bad epistemic effects, and can (c) extend to dispositions to dogmatic, closedminded behaviour that protects that narrow vision from expansion.

Bad effects of myopia include feeding other failings – obliviousness, tendencies to caricaturing, arrogance, dismissive attitudes, practical overconfidence (cf. Kidd on corruption).

Dimensions of myopia:

1. **narrowness**
2. **shallowness**

Opposed epistemic values are **broadmindedness** and **depth**, which expand the kinds and range of epistemic possibilities a person can experience and engage with, and providing a richer context for the cultivation and exercise of certain virtues.

Defined this way, myopia, of whatever sort, is hardly something we should want to accept, and surely something we should want to challenge and correct in our students.

Consider concerns of some earlier philosophers of education:

1. Oakeshott on the need to ‘release’ students from ‘preoccupation’ with the values, fixations, and convictions integral to their ‘surrounding world’, which, if internalised, entrench ways of understanding that are ‘distorted, one-dimensional, and *false* to its object’ (Bakhurst).
2. Peters on ‘monadic myopia’, an individual failing fed by curricula that impose ‘a windowless tunnel vision … determined by [one’s] own preoccupations’.
3. **Metaphilosophical myopia.**

MM as a problematically limited, narrow, confined conception of philosophy – the diversity of its forms, aims, practices, relations to other cultural and epistemic projects, and so on.

1. **Metaphilosophical narrowness**: an inability to recognise or accept a wider range of forms of philosophy (eg Ladyman and Ross’s scientism; Derrida’s Hellocentrism)
2. **Metaphilosophical shallowness**: an inability to realise or admit that certain forms of philosophy have kinds of *deeper* significance (eg Collingwood on 1930s Oxford philosophy).

MM is especially pernicious in students, in the formative stages of their education. Installing an expansive vision should be an early and urgent task for a philosophical education (for other reasons, too, such as truthfulness – cf. Cooper).

Example of MM: the variety of **philosophical goals**:

* To advance social justice.
* To articulate (and perhaps endorse) a misanthropic appraisal of humankind.
* To cure what Wittgenstein called ‘mental cramps’.
* To deepen our ability to appreciate beauty.
* To defend the epistemic abilities on which everyday life depends.
* To describe the fundamental structures of human experience.
* To enable individual release from *saṃsāra*, ‘the wheel of suffering’, rebirth, and *karma*.
* To enhance one’s relationship with God.
* To justify (or challenge) the authority of the state.
* To motivate withdrawal from the pressures and corruptions of the mainstream world.
* To question prevalent presuppositions and predilections.
* To restore a deteriorating cultural tradition.
* To safeguard the moral values on which civilized human life depends.
* To secure (or deny the possibility of) knowledge of the nature of reality as it is ‘in itself’.
* To support (or put a brake on) scientific enquiry.
* To urge on us (or resist) a pessimistic appraisal of human life.

MM can take the form of obliviousness to certain goals, inabilities to understand them, failures to contextualise certain goals (eg van Fraassen on Christian metaphysical doctrines).

Effects of MM about philosophical goals:

1. failing to grasp that an individual, movement, or tradition *has* philosophical goals.
2. grasping their goals but failing to accept them *as* philosophical goals.
3. attributing to them philosophical goals that differ from their actual goals.
4. **Hermeneutical injustice.**

Claim: a metaphilosophically myopic curriculum/student/teacher does an injustice – a **hermeneutical** **injustice** – to the occluded kinds of philosophy.

Definition: a hermeneutical injustice is done when metaphilosophically myopia erodes our ability or willingness to fairly interpret and make sense of certain kinds of philosophy on their own terms or as serious, if different kinds of philosophical activity to those we know. Certain forms of philosophy are, unfairly, made to seem deficient in various ways.

Some examples of metaphilosophically myopic hermeneutical injustice:

1. Massimo Pigliucci, ‘On the Pseudo-Profundity of some Eastern Philosophy’.

What is the sound of one hand clapping?” “What did your face look like before your ancestors were born?” These are some allegedly profound questions posed by Zen masters […] It is also the sort of philo-bubble that gives philosophy a bad name – and sells plenty of titles in the Eastern philosophy section of bookstores.

1. Michael Dummett on analytical philosophy as the apotheosis of the history of philosophy:

[O]nly with the rise of the modern logical and analytic style of philosophizing was the proper object of philosophy finally established, namely ... the analysis of the structure of thought, [for which] the only proper method [is] the analysis of language.

Many sources of MM – ‘cultures of justification’ (Dotson), ‘double binds’ (Olberding), self-serving metaphilosophical prejudices, scientism, dogmatism, xenophilia and neophilia (Kidd) – which can be challenged by philosophical curricula that are expansively diversified in the right ways.

Some can be challenged structurally, others pedagogically, and others by reforms of the discipline and pre-university philosophy. Consider Kotzee on curricular diversification and herm injustice:

. Teaching a canon of ideas and works by actors from a particular cultural tradition makes that form of culture accessible to students; conversely, not teaching other cultural traditions forecloses students’ understanding of that cultural tradition. Educationalists alert to epistemic injustice ask how decisions about the curriculum enable or block students’ understanding of particular social experiences and encourage or inhibit the ability of students from particular cultures to express their particular understanding of the world.

Implementing the curricular ideal of expansive pluralism will be hard work—but we might be more inclined to do that work if we appreciate (a) the harms of metaphilosophical myopia and (b) the kinds of hermeneutical injustice it can foster.

**IJK**

**www.ianjameskidd.weebly.com**

**Sources cited:**

Bakhurst, David (2016) ‘Education and Conversation’, David Bakhurst and Paul Fairchild (eds.), *Education and Conversation: Exploring Oakeshott’s Legacy* (London: Bloomsbury), 5-26.

Cooper, David E. (2008) ‘Teaching and Truthfulness’, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27: 79-87.

Dotson, Kristie (2012) ‘How Is This Paper Philosophy?’, *Comparative Philosophy* 3.1: 3-29.

Dummett, Michael (1978) *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth).

Kidd, Ian James (2019) ‘Epistemic Corruption and Education’, Episteme16.2 (2019): 220-235.

Kidd, Ian James (2021) ‘Reloading the Canon’, *The Philosopher’s Magazine* 93: 57-63.

Kotzee, Ben (2017) ‘Education and Epistemic Injustice’, Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to Epistemic Injustice*(New York: Routledge), 324-335.

Ladyman, James and Don Ross (2007) *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalised* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Oakeshott, Michael (1989) ‘The Voice of Liberal Learning’, Timothy Fuller (ed.), *Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Olberding, Amy (2015) ‘It’s Not Them, It’s You: A Case Study Concerning the Exclusion of Non-Western Philosophy’, *Comparative Philosophy* 6.2: 14-34.

Peters, R.S. (2015/1959) *Authority, Responsibility and Education* (London: Routledge).

Pigliucci, Massimo (2006) ‘On the Pseudo-Profundity of Some Eastern Philosophy’, *Rationally Speaking* blog, 23 May.