**Curricular diversification and metaphilosophical myopia**

*Nottingham Philosophy of Education 1/9/22*

**Preliminaries.**

Anecdote of student obliviousness to traditions of ‘moral quietism’ (eg Buddhism, Daoism) and their consequent inability to properly understand, on their own terms, those traditions.

I see this as a sort of **metaphilosophical myopia** and think guarding against it should be an aim of **curricular diversification** efforts (cf. van Norden).

**Metaphilosophical myopia.**

Myopia as limited vision – a constrained perception or understanding of something, a failure to achieve a proper perspicuous perspective on it, which prevents us from appreciating it for what it is, ‘on its own terms’. Pejorative sense of ‘myopic’ – fixed on a single aspect.

Dimensions of myopia:

1. **Narrowness**
2. **Shallowness**

Opposing epistemic values are **depth** and **broadmindedness**: enhancement of our abilities to experience and engage with an expanded range of epistemic possibilities.

Many symptoms of **myopic thinking** – eg tendencies to crude caricature, obliviousness to actual epistemic possibilities, imaginative impoverishment, failure to properly situate one’s own views in relation to others, tendencies to epistemic overconfidence, superficiality, crudity, etc.

**Metaphilosophical** **myopia** as a limited vision of philosophy – relative to historical and cultural diversity of its forms – the radical plurality of philosophical goals, practices, social organisation, and relations to other cultural activities and epistemic projects (eg political, scientific, religious).

MM can involve failures to **imagine**, **recognise**, **understand** alternative kinds of philosophy. It can also extend to **metaphilosophical dogmatism** – denying or derogating the worth, seriousness, merits of alternative kinds of philosophy.

Consider myopic obliviousness to the range of **aspirations** or **goals** that have animated a range of historically and culturally diverse philosophies – including, *inter alia*:

* To advance social justice.
* To articulate a misanthropic appraisal of humankind.
* To cure ‘mental cramps’ (Wittgenstein).
* To deepen our ability to appreciate beauty.
* To defend various epistemic abilities on which everyday life depends.
* To enable personal release from ‘the wheel of suffering’.
* To enhance one’s relationship with God.
* To justify (or challenge) the authority of the state.
* To motivate withdrawal from the ‘prison house’ of the social world (Epicurus).
* 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.

Such goals vary in their intelligibility and salience – depending on moral, cultural, and metaphysical commitments. But we should take this as an invitation to enquiry, curiosity, and inquisitiveness.

**Curricular diversification.**

Proposal: one aim of curricular diversification should be to challenge metaphilosophical myopia, to actively expand our sense of the range of forms that can and has been taken by philosophising.

Ideal of **expansionist pluralism** – historical, cultural, methodological, axiological.

No expectation or requirement that students accept or endorse these diversified forms. But we should encourage broad, deep, expansive thinking – opposing obliviousness, narrowmindedness, and shallowness about philosophy:

1. R.S. Peters on *monadic myopia* – to ‘shut [one’s] ears arbitrarily to … different accounts … to limit [one’s] view of the world – to take refuge in a kind of monadic myopia’ – ‘a disease endemic to the human condition’.
2. D.Z. Phillips on *hermeneutics of contemplation* – ‘prioritise understanding the variety of ways of being human over the advocacy or condemnation of any of those ways in particular … to disclose “possibilities of sense” within human forms of life and discourse’ (Burley).

HC reflects ‘a certain kind of interest in human life, born of wonder at it’ (Phillips).

1. Oakeshott on education as disciplined ‘initiation’ into ‘an inheritance of human achievements of understanding and belief’ – exploring alternatives to ‘current dominant feelings, emotions, images, ideas, beliefs’ – ‘kaleidoscopic movement’.

‘Conversation’ metaphor – many voices, different topics, ‘genial flow’, variety, vitality.

Back to the myopia of the students: a contingent failure to appreciate wider forms of moral philosophy (quietist convictions, goals, practices) – a failure to discern ‘possibilities of sense’, there to be explored.

Curricular diversification can help us challenge that latent myopia:

1. Inform them of the existence of traditions of MQ.
2. Explain origins, character, and rationale of forms of MQ.
3. Locate MQ within wider cultural, philosophical, and historical context.

Otherwise, the students will remain metaphilosophically myopic: unable to recognise or understand certain forms of philosophy – oblivious to, or incapable of recognising, intelligible forms of philosophy.

If left unchecked, myopia can mutate into dogmatism – not a quality to esteem in a student.

I think there’s a **hermeneutical injustice** lurking in these issues – a wrongful and unfair inability to identify and appreciate the intelligibility of certain forms of philosophising. But that’s for another time.

IJK

**REFERENCES**

Burley, Mikel (2018) ‘“Citizens of the Universe”: Bryan van Norden and the Taking Back of Philosophy’, *Expositions* 12.2: 69—84.

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

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

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

Phillips, D. Z. (2007) ‘Philosophy’s Radical Pluralism in the House of Intellect – A Reply to Henk Vroom’, Andy. F. Sanders (ed.). *D. Z. Phillips’ Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses* (Aldershot: Ashgate), 197–211.

van Norden, Bryan van (2017) *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press).

Some problems with MM:

1. It can encourage **obliviousness** to the plurality of forms of philosophy, of the many aspirations and concerns of historical philosophical communities, of the historical contingency of the philosophical tradition, and the cultural particularity of the forms we inherited.
2. It can encourage **homogenous** conceptions of philosophy – as if it was, everywhere, always, done in the same way, for the same reason, animated by the same concerns.
3. It can encourage **self-privileging** of one’s own conceptions of philosophy, as if one’s own are the standard against which others should be appraised, as if all those early forms were preludes to one’s own.
4. It can encourage **self-aggrandisement** – seeing one’s own philosophising as the pure instantiation of the philosophical enterprise, the most perfect exemplification of its practices, the best realisation of its values, etc.

Some bad effects of MM: (i) ‘obvious’ objections seem far more powerful, (ii) philosophers in the traditions seem ‘dumb’ because one misconceives the nature of their activity, (iii) whole other ways of understanding the nature of moral life are occluded, (iv) elevated risks of parochialism and cultural chauvinism and racism.

I’m concerned with the **horizon-fixing** effects of myopia: one’s explorations of philosophy get constrained within an artificially narrow horizon.