

Introduction: How Can and Should Philosophy Be Expanding its Horizons?

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Abstract

The Royal Institute of Philosophy volume of which this paper is an introduction is on the theme of 'Expanding Horizons'. But what does it mean for philosophy to fruitfully expand its horizons? The contributions to the volume suggest at least five profitable ways. First, by looking to other philosophical traditions for new perspectives on familiar questions and alternative methods, questions, and ways of understanding. Second, by looking to what has been neglected or overlooked in our own histories of thought. Third, by developing novel methods, in addition to argument, for investigating philosophical issues. Fourth, by embracing different modalities for doing philology, such as the literary. Fifth, by reflecting on the practice of comparative philosophy to better understand the extent to which philosophy can and should be universal. Together, these approaches both increase the range of voices heard in philosophy and the scope and ambition of the discipline.

There are not many intellectual or cultural practices which enjoyed their most fertile periods when they settled into widely agreed and established ways of doing things. In the Western history of ideas, Ancient Athens, Renaissance Italy, Enlightenment Amsterdam, Edinburgh, and Paris all stand out largely because those were times when new ideas flourished, marking a break from the past. Art forms of all kinds are divided into periods, each of which began with a new way of working.

In the late twentieth century, however, Anglophone philosophy seemed to have settled into a comfortable groove, happy to pursue a familiar range of questions, drawing on a canon of classic texts and a narrow corpus of contemporary academics' work. It rarely looked to other disciplines or cultures.

Perhaps one reason for this was that it was too influenced by a precedent that looked in some ways like an exception to the general rule, but which was actually another example of it. Natural science had flourished to such an extent that it had in most people's eyes seized philosophy's crown as 'queen of the sciences', a throne philosophy had in turn taken from theology. Science was becoming a runaway

success, it seems, because it had settled on a general method of experimentation and observation that its practitioners all agreed on. Could philosophy flourish as much if only it could find its own special methods and domain of enquiry?

In mainstream academic philosophy in Britain and America throughout much of the twentieth century the generally accepted answer seemed to be yes, even if assent was generally implicit. Philosophy used the tools of logical and conceptual analysis to answer fundamental but non-empirical questions, such as the meaning of 'meaning', the nature of causation, the basis of morality, the principles of justice, and so on. These tools had been honed over millennia and there was no need to borrow any from other disciplines or traditions.

Much good work was produced under this programme. But as the century drew to a close, more and more people were concerned that philosophy had become too narrow, too parochial. One danger was that it was spending too much time answering questions only other philosophers were asking. Another was that it was dealing only with artificially demarcated sub-questions and not the larger, more important ones. Philosophical debates about free will, time, justice, causation, identity and so on were just leaving out a lot of what makes those issues so interesting and important.

It was time for philosophy to expand its horizons. That process has been underway for some years and it was our intention in this volume, and in the lecture series on which it is based, to both encourage and celebrate it.

But what does 'expanding horizons' mean and how is it to be achieved? Just as an open mind is not a virtue if it uncritically lets everything fall into it unfiltered, so expanding horizons is a futile quest if it takes you anywhere and everywhere without discrimination. The essays in this volume provide examples of what expanding horizons should mean and why it matters.

The most obvious horizon-stretcher is almost literally geographical: look to what has been done in the name of philosophy in distant lands. It surprises many that Western philosophy has not routinely done that for centuries. It had its reasons, it just turns out they weren't very good ones. Ignorance, prejudice, and a sense of cultural superiority explains much, but not all of it. More recently, one root cause is that same conviction that Western philosophy had found its own, distinctive *modus operandi*, its key questions and canonical texts. When practitioners glanced at Chinese, Indian, East Asian, African, indigenous American philosophy and so on, they saw diverse disciplines separated by a common disciplinary label, not philosophy as we know and do it.

Belatedly, this dismissiveness has been shown to be unfounded. There is more common ground than first glances suggest, as five papers in this volume ably demonstrate.

First, non-Western philosophers can provide fresh ways of looking at (too) familiar questions. Noburu Notomi for instance, reveals how Japanese philosophers often read Plato very differently from their contemporary Western counterparts. When these Western philosophers read Plato, Notomi claims, they make four background assumptions concerning the primacy of empirical science for understanding reality, the absolute centrality of the 'I' in experience, a devaluation of representation and imagination, and a confinement of philosophy to academic research. Notomi's critique is challenging in at least two senses of the word: these assumptions are so deep-rooted that it is hard to see them for what they are, and to even countenance the idea that they might be wrong threatens to undermine our image of what philosophy is.

Nilanjan Das looks at a question that has been highly salient in the West for decades now, but from a very old Buddhist perspective. The nature of the self and its identity was put centre stage by Derek Parfit in his 1971 paper 'Personal Identity' and later his book *Reasons and Persons* (1984). In that book, Parfit has a short, one page appendix, in which he says it has been pointed out to him that his view has striking similarities with that of the Buddha. Parfit goes no further with this and simply notes with pleasure that the Buddha would have agreed with him. In retrospect, it seems extraordinary that such a tireless reader and researcher never thought it worth his while to go away and study the Buddhist texts in question.

Das provides us with an account of some of what Parfit might have found in his discussion of the *Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma (Abhidharmakośabhāṣya)*, by the 4th to 5th-century Abhidharma Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu. Vasubandhu is clearly grappling with one of the very same questions Parfit and his critics had to deal with: if there is no singular, self-contained, indivisible, unchanging self, only the flux of experiences, how can we even talk about an 'I'? Das's essay is a real I-opener.

Amy Olberding casts fresh light on familiar issues by showing how early Confucian philosophy provides a way of thinking about troublesome emotions that is very different from the template set out by the Ancient Greeks, which set the agenda for Western philosophy to come. The dominant Greek approach, exemplified by Socrates and the Stoics, is, broadly speaking, to avoid feelings like anger or even grief by coming to appreciate their futility and irrationality. The title of Olberding's essay captures the Confucian alternative

pithily: 'Getting Good at Bad Emotions'. The point is not to avoid discomforting or difficult emotions but to get better at dealing with them. This is not just a challenge to Western philosophy but to dominant ideas in Western culture.

With all the three contributions mentioned so far, it's easy enough to recognise the common ground, even as we see how very differently it is cultivated. In contrast, Leah Kalmanson shows how non-Western traditions have considered issues that have gone almost unnoticed in the West. The methods of philosophy in the West are all to do with forms of reasoning. In Asia, however, there is a whole different set of tools in the kit: contemplative practices. What we generally lump together as 'meditation' can be ways to prepare for rational thought or attempts to do something different from it: achieve a kind of acute or heightened awareness that allows us to see more clearly. For too long such ideas have been dismissed by analytic philosophers as having nothing to do with reasoning as we know it. Kalmanson suggests this is wrong.

Roger Ames's challenge is even more fundamental. Western philosophy has generally been characterised by forms of 'substance ontologies', meaning accounts of the grounds of being that postulate some kind of unchanging substance, be it material or mental. Chinese thought, however, is less concerned with such metaphysical substances. Events are more fundamental than things, while creatures such as ourselves are not so much 'beings' as 'becomings'. Borrowing the Greek word *zoe* or 'life', Ames creates the neologism 'zoetology', the art of living, as an alternative cosmological focus to ontology. Again, to those trained in the Western tradition this might sound more like New Age woo-woo than philosophy. One hint that this is far from the truth is that a similar, Eastern-inspired process understanding of nature can be found in the very empirical and rational physics of Carlo Rovelli.

Horizons can also be expanded without leaving for foreign shores. One lively family of research areas looks again at what has been missed within our own cultures and traditions. The somewhat crude but not entirely inaccurate way to characterise what has been left out is: pretty much everything not led by the thinking of white men. Chike Jeffers offers one example of this in his exploration of the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, 'long known as an African American intellectual and activist of towering importance' but only recently 'recognised as a philosopher of uncommon depth and historical significance'. One reason why Du Bois has been ignored is that the issues he wrote about were not even recognised as essentially philosophical ones. This is curious since there is a long tradition of thinking about justice in philosophy. Why should racial justice not be included?

Lewis Gordon takes this challenge to rethink the structural and institutional racism of philosophy further in his call to ‘decolonise’ philosophy. Campaigns to decolonise academic curricula have received a lot of media attention, much of it ill informed, some of it downright hysterical. Certainly the framing of the issue as a ‘culture war’ of the ‘woke’ against either the defenders of bigotry or common sense, depending on your point of view, is not helpful. Gordon’s essay is essential reading for anyone who wants to go beyond the polarised social media debate and dig into the substance of the issue.

So far, all the forms of expanding horizons mentioned have essentially been about letting hitherto unheard voices be heard. Both Joanna Burch-Brown and María del Rosario Acosta López look to further this goal, but with an emphasis not only on whom we hear but the methods we use to hear them. Burch-Brown considers how philosophers might contribute to important social debates concerning historical injustices and how to rectify them. It is tempting for philosophers to think they can do this simply by applying their expertise to the question in hand. For example, if the issue is reparations for past racial injustice, they can simply think through the ethics of reparations and decide how it applies to the case in point. Burch-Brown argues that this is far too limited. By engaging with people directly affected by the issues, philosophers can come to appreciate the force of more arguments than they could dream up in their studies and seminar rooms. Only then will they be able to use their skills to formalise the arguments in their strongest forms and be able to present arguments for or against, and genuinely help participants in the debate to clarify their positions.

Listening to those directly involved is all central to Acosta López’s project of doing justice to testimonies of traumatic experiences, with particular reference to those suffered in Colombia’s recent civil conflicts. Traditional philosophical methods are not up to the task. They assume that utterances reveal their ‘semantic content’ or ‘truth conditions’ transparently, when trauma makes such clear, objective, and dispassionate speech impossible. We need new ‘grammars of listening’ or ‘*gramáticas de lo inaudito*’ in order to hear these experiences on their own terms. Otherwise, philosophical accounts of justice and what it requires simply cannot connect with urgent, real-world issues of injustice.

Acosta López’s approach suggests that there is – or should be – more for philosophy to do than simply pronounce on the validity and soundness of arguments. Philosophy is at its most basic level a way to help us build a better, more accurate picture of the world.

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There are more tools to help us do that other than logic and argument, as Helen De Cruz and Jonardon Ganeri show. Both suggest that there can be a more literary approach to philosophy, one which shows rather than tells. Logical proofs are sometimes called ‘demonstrations’ but stories and fictions can be other forms of demonstrations of how the world is.

De Cruz’s provocative suggestion is that more matters in philosophical writing than the truth and falsity of its propositions. Texts also have ‘moods’ and these can be important not only because they affect how we read the arguments, ‘scaffolding the reader’s attunement’, as she puts it. The purpose of a piece of philosophy may be to transform us, to make us see the world differently. Hence, ‘Mood is not just window dressing but an important element of philosophical writing and understanding, which cannot be reduced to the cogency of arguments’.

Jonardon Ganeri makes the case that the great Portuguese poet and writer Fernando Pessoa is also a philosopher in his own right. Pessoa wrote through the voices of various ‘heteronyms’, which Ganeri describes as ‘another I, a self that is not one’s own’. This is not the same as writing pseudonymously, where one writes as an another. Heteronyms are aspects of the writer’s self, expanded into fully formed personalities. Ganeri makes a compelling case that Pessoa’s heteronymic writings provide a unique and revelatory insight into the nature of subjectivity.

Expanding our philosophical horizons opens up many doors. But it might be worried it opens up too much. What are we to make of all this diversity? Must we give up on any aspiration for universal truth? The last two contributions to this volume address this challenge in different ways.

Eileen John considers its relevance to one specific area of philosophy: aesthetics, which theorises artistic and sensory experience. She asks whether there can be a global aesthetics or whether a proper appreciation of the different approaches taken in different times and places leaves us with an irreducible plurality. John refuses to rush to a neat answer. Rightly so: it is more than enough to set out many of the unexplored questions and issues. Tentatively, however, she concludes that although ‘the universalising ambition’ that characterises philosophy cannot be entirely given up, it ‘has to be held loosely, self-consciously, and self-critically’.

The final contribution, by Tamara Albertini, is an invitation to think differently about how we undertake the whole project of comparative philosophy. She argues that we must go beyond ‘inter-cultural dialogue’ and become guardians of each other’s traditions.

This requires a profound intellectual hospitality, ‘a world where civilizations are each other’s cultural and spiritual “food”’. It is a beautiful dream, albeit one Albertini accepts we are far from fulfilling.

I would like to note that one lecture from the series did not manage to make the transition to a contribution to this volume due to circumstances beyond the author’s control. You can, however, watch Owen Flanagan’s talk ‘The Ethics of Anger and Shame’ on the Royal Institute of Philosophy’s YouTube channel, along with the other lectures in the series. Many have been developed a great deal for this volume, some are almost completely different. It is as though our speakers have modelled what it means to live with ever expanding horizons by showing how even over the course of a few months their own thinking has grown and evolved.

Philosophy in the English-speaking world today is marvellously diverse. Some of what is currently flowering may bloom for a short while and then disappear. But at the risk of stretching the horticultural metaphor too far, much of what is planted will take strong root, and much will cross-pollinate to create yet more new branches of enquiry. The ground on which philosophy grows is wider and more fertile than ever. But the work of cultivation is never done. That which ceases to grow, dies.