

Decolonizing the Department: Peter K. J. Park and the Profession of Philosophy

LEAH KALMANSON

Drake University, USA (leah.kalmanson@drake.edu)

Peter K. J. Park's book Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon is a call to action for academic philosophers. As Park shows, philosophical historiography, as we have come to know it, is a relatively recent invention indebted in large part to Immanuel Kant's adherence to a contentious theory of racial essentialism. Park argues that this racism undergirds Kant's work on the history of philosophy—it informs his arguments for the exclusion of African and Asian sources from the canon and his insistence that philosophy flowered spontaneously among the Greeks with no influence from the non-Greek-speaking world. Indeed, other philosophical historiographies available in Kant's lifetime traced the origins of philosophy to a variety of regions, such as India or Egypt, and contextualized the work of the Athenians accordingly. Today, presumably, few philosophers would agree with the notion that the history of philosophy is a record of European cultural ascendancy reflecting the natural superiority of the white race; yet, as the following essay argues, the degree requirements for our programs of study, along with other curricular and departmental structures, together serve to transmit this outdated teleology and the racist narrative regarding white supremacy associated with it.

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I begin with a short story of the troubling classroom experience that prompted my commentary on Peter K. J. Park's book *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon*. In a class on philosophy and postcolonialism, my students and I were discussing the conclusion of the fourth chapter, which is one of the key points in Park's argument, where he makes the case that Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) views on race are indeed *racist*. As Park asks, "Was Kant a racial thinker? According to Bernasconi, he was one of the founding theorists of race. Was Kant a racist? A first-time reader of 'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime' may well be shocked and disturbed by Kant's racial stereotypes and racist remarks" (93). Park elaborates that these statements include Kant's conviction that no African person has ever made any artistic or scientific achievements, and that black skin color is proof of stupidity.

We moved on to the next paragraph in Park's book, which is the culmination of his major claim about Kant, in which he discusses the racial essentialism that informs Kant's anthropology and history of philosophy. In Park's words, "Kant taught that the Hindu race did not develop philosophy because they did not have that capacity. In his anthropology lectures, Kant explicitly attributes this lack *not* to the form of government or customs of the Asians, but to their descent (*Abstammung*). Montesquieu had famously argued that the form of government or customs of a people determined its character. Kant taught his students that it was the other way around. It is race that determines the form of government and the customs." In other words, for Kant, it is no accident of history that philosophy only exists in Europe. Rather, white Europeans are the *only* people to have developed philosophy, while *all* non-white people lack philosophy, because of their inherent characteristics as members of different races. Park's final remark in the fourth chapter holds that Kant was a central figure responsible for shaping the "modern scientific discourse of race" and for "the exclusion of Africa and Asia from the history of philosophy and for rising Eurocentrism in the discipline" (95).

After making it through the upsetting comments about black skin color and concluding the chapter on this strong claim about racial essentialism, there was a moment of silence, as the students and I digested

everything. After a pause, I looked at the class and said, “I guess you wonder why we still teach a guy like Kant, don’t you?” And then, the single African American student in the room looked at me and said, “Yeah.”

I had this student on my mind while preparing my commentary on Park’s book. How do we as philosophers explain our disciplinary and professional practices to students? How do we defend teaching a philosophical canon that contains so many known racists and patriarchs? As I have come to see, the great majority of philosophy departments are structured around the same canon and the same historical narrative that Park shows is a recent invention, constructed only a few hundred years ago through the purposeful and racially-motivated interventions of figures such as Kant, Christoph Meiners (1747–1810), Wilhelm Tennemann (1761–1819), Dieterich Tiedemann (1748–1803), and, later, G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). In this brief commentary, I want to focus on the material in Park’s book that directly impacts—or should impact—the discipline and profession of academic philosophy as we practice it today.

1 A Very Special Kind of History

Following from the point above about racial essentialism, one of the most important arguments that Park makes is that philosophers can no longer claim that Kant was simply a victim of his time, that is, that he absorbed a racist worldview from prevailing currents. To the contrary, theories of race were hotly debated, being divided among a range of positions, some quite egalitarian. As Park shows, Kant chose to advance a contentious theory of racial essentialism that in no way reflected a consensus among his contemporaries. A core thesis of Park’s book is that Kant’s racism undergirds his work on the history of philosophy—it informs Kant’s arguments for the exclusion of African and Asian sources from the canon and his insistence that philosophy flowered spontaneously among the Greeks with no influence from the non-Greek-speaking world. Again, as Park makes clear, Kant was here advancing what we might call a fringe view, which was not representative of the diversity of opinions on philosophy’s history available to Kant at that time. But this fringe view went on to influence the Kantian School, and then Hegel, and from there to assume a dominant position within academia. Today’s philosophy departments are the inheritors of a historical narrative, a canon, and a general program of study shaped by the dubious racial theories of Kant and Hegel.

The historical narrative in particular is problematic on several levels. On the one hand, the narrative is informed by the racial essentialism discussed above. That is, a certain picture of philosophy’s historical trajectory (from its Greek origins, through its advances associated with modernity and the enlightenment, and on to the contemporary period) was promoted by figures such as Kant and Hegel and reflected their commitment to various racial stereotypes. On the other hand, as Robert Bernasconi says, in this so-called history of philosophy, “the basic rules of good history are disregarded” (15).¹ Park takes us through Kant’s philosophical arguments for why the history of philosophy is, indeed, an atypical sort of “history.” As Kant says, the history of philosophy is “so special a kind that nothing of what is recounted therein could happen without knowing beforehand what should have happened and therefore also what can happen” (Qtd. in Park, 23). In other words, philosophy is premised on a collection of a priori truths, and so the actual unfolding of the development of the academic profession over time is of no consequence. For Kant, philosophical truths are akin to theorems of mathematics—they exist independently of their discovery and articulation by human beings. Moreover, in a move that underscores his racial essentialism, Kant promotes the idea that only the people of a certain race, thanks to what he claimed were inherent racial characteristics, are capable of understanding and developing these truths.

The philosophical question of mathematic truth aside, I doubt that many people today would seriously hold this view of the history of philosophy. And yet, to return to Bernasconi for a moment, as he says: “For fifty years or so historians of philosophy have believed that they can write a work in the history of philosophy

and brazenly rewrite the arguments of the canonical philosophers, if they think they can improve on what those philosophers had managed for themselves” (15). Bernasconi cites Bernard Williams’ claim that Descartes’ work was “ambiguous, incomplete, [and] imperfectly determined by the author’s and his contemporaries’ understanding”; and so, Williams himself sets out write a “rational reconstruction of Descartes’ thought” (15). Williams explains that the history of philosophy faces “a cut-off point, where authenticity is replaced as the objective by the aim of articulating philosophical ideas” (15). Bernasconi comments: “Clearly the casualty of such efforts is an understanding of the historical dimension of a philosopher’s work and I believe that this leaves anyone who takes this route ill-equipped to address the question of the coexistence in the same thinker of both racism and moral universalism, which is why they tend to ignore one or the other, usually the racism” (15).

Williams’ characterization of the cut-off point between the practice of history and the practice of the history of philosophy only echoes Kant’s claim, nearly two hundred years earlier, about the very special type of history that is the history of philosophy. Again, I doubt that many philosophers today believe this. For example, when teaching Greek philosophy, many of us take pains to stress that the ancient Greek worldview is quite foreign to us now, and we try to help students understand the claims of Greek philosophers in a culturally and historically appropriate context.

Although few people today would present philosophy to our students as the transmission of a priori truths that need no historical contextualization, we nonetheless still pass on this naïve understanding of philosophy’s history, not necessarily in our individual classrooms, but in our departments as a whole. That is, departmental structures themselves can communicate the centrality of white European thought—as when, for example, a department’s courses in “ancient” and “modern” philosophy trace a predictable path from the Greeks to Kant, or when programs for majors and minors include non-Western courses only as electives. Apart from the issues of historical accuracy, we must question whether this intellectual climate contributes to the well-known lack of demographic diversity in academic philosophy. Compared to other disciplines in the humanities, philosophy awards fewer degrees to students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities;² and professionals in academic philosophy also remain overwhelmingly white and male.³ Philosophy is impoverished by the exclusion of diverse perspectives, both in terms of the individuals who populate the profession and the authors who comprise the canon; ultimately, it risks losing its vitality and relevance by becoming increasingly insular in an increasingly globalized world. If we are to help build more diverse and inclusive philosophy programs, then what are the structural changes to academic departments that need to be made?

2 What We Teach and How We Teach It

My go-to strategy in cases like this is to change the names of things, and I have been rightly criticized by like-minded colleagues who would say that this amounts to a cosmetic adjustment, not a structural change. That said, the first point that concerns me is the series of courses that usually fall under a department’s required classes in the history of philosophy. In many U.S. philosophy departments, requirements for the major and/or the minor include a history component that covers, at least, courses such as Ancient Philosophy and Modern Philosophy, and at times additional courses on Medieval Philosophy, Twentieth-Century Philosophy, among others. Courses that follow this particular historical periodization tend to comprise mostly, if not exclusively, Western content. Turn to a department’s non-Western offerings, if there are any, and you will likely find courses such as Chinese Philosophy, Indian Philosophy, Buddhist Philosophy, and so forth. In other words, the curriculum reinforces for students the idea that Europe is marked by important historical developments while Asian traditions are monolithic and ahistorical. This problem cannot be solved by including more non-Western content in existing Ancient Philosophy courses or by offering separate courses titled, for example, Ancient

Chinese Philosophy. The deeper problem, as Park's work reminds us, is that "ancient" and "modern" are not neutral historical markers; rather, they pertain to European history and, moreover to a certain teleological view of European progress from ancient and "primitive" to modern and "enlightened" forms of culture and governance, a point already familiar to historians in postcolonial studies.⁴

In the service of establishing more inclusive terminology, my first inclination is to rename courses to avoid the remnants of this teleological accounting of history. That is, if we want to teach Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, then we should perhaps call the class "Athenian Philosophy circa 400 BCE." My next inclination is to consider ways to incorporate culturally appropriate historical markers. So, in light of my own areas of specialization, I might teach classes called "Han-Dynasty Philosophy" or "Warring States Ruism."⁵ But these name changes imply a structure-level intervention, because the question arises: What do we *require* that students take for the major and minor, and what do we categorize as "elective"? That is, if we want students to be familiar with past philosophers, then what are the compelling reasons to make Athenian philosophy a requirement and Han-dynasty philosophy optional?

Consider Park's discussion of competing portrayals of the role of Greek philosophy in the history of philosophy. Many histories, both before and after Kant, did not posit the Greeks as the originators of philosophy, but instead contextualized the influence of the Athenians in a variety of other ways. By my count, Park reviews over twenty histories of philosophy written between the 1500s and 1800s, which either attribute the origins of philosophy to a non-Greek source (such as Egypt or India), or which survey multiple philosophical traditions originating in different areas, including (to name just a few) Persia, Ethiopia, China, and, in one case, Canada (by which the author meant the indigenous peoples of the Americas) (see especially 70–7). In other words, "world philosophy" was once the mainstream. As Park says: "That philosophy was exclusively of Greek origin was an opinion held by only three published historians of philosophy in the eighteenth century" (8)—namely the same Meiners, Tiedemann, and Tenneman whose theories influenced Kant and Hegel. So, Park's research allows us to make the claim, fairly confidently, that the Greeks enjoy the status they do today largely because they were appropriated in the late 1700s into the racist narrative of world-historical development promoted by a small subset of scholars at the time. And, we in philosophy departments today have to decide how we will resist perpetuating this narrative. So, again, I think that attention to the names of the courses in the history of philosophy series leads very quickly to discussions about restructuring whole departments, as we find ways to articulate our justifications for requiring or not requiring the study of the Athenians for students seeking the degree.

In addition to this concern about the historical narrative that we pass on to students via avenues such as degree requirements, Park's book also raises concerns about the canon that we are transmitting. This brings me back around to my experience in my postcolonialism class, and the question of how I articulate to students the benefit of teaching Kant. As a woman in philosophy, I have to question why my own lesson plans for modern European philosophy contain only male philosophers. The active scholarly lives of women in Europe's modern period are well documented; their writings are freely available.⁶ And yet, I am utterly guilty of not teaching these women in my classes. I tend to consider some people, like Kant, to be so important that their presence is non-negotiable on the syllabus, and I consider their work so difficult that it requires weeks of semester time to teach; and so, I end up prioritizing space for these male voices.

One of the many benefits of Park's book is that it has cleared up what remained of my sentimental allegiance to the so-called canon as I have received it. Women from the modern period sit in obscurity only because I am actively helping to obscure them. When it comes both to rethinking degree requirements, and to rethinking the canon, I have come to see that philosophy departments as a group need to embrace a certain amount of messiness. In other words, a neat and tidy historical narrative is almost always misleading; a neat and tidy canon is almost always exclusionary. Embracing this messiness may mean fundamentally restructuring our

departments and our degree requirements, rethinking what we mean by an education in philosophy, indeed, redefining philosophy itself.

In Park's very final sentence, he states: "When one day the history of philosophy ceases to do what it does in the service of philosophy, philosophers will cease to teach it" (151). Undoubtedly the history of philosophy has served philosophers well, but mainly white American and European philosophers. As Park says, "In the nineteenth century, the history of philosophy was one of the subjects most regularly covered in philosophy lectures at German universities. [...] The history of philosophy ingrained in [students] the canons of philosophy, which in turn reinforced a particular vision of German and European identity" (151). The history of philosophy was undoubtedly such a popular topic because it presented a fairly self-congratulatory picture of European identity. This only underscores the disconnect that urgently needs to be addressed: On the one hand, as I have said, I doubt that many philosophers in the classroom explain the history of philosophy as the record of European ascendancy on the world-historical stage, or as reflecting the natural superiority of the white race, or as transmitting a priori truths that only this one race can access; yet on the other hand, the degree requirements for our programs of study, as well as our current canon, together serve to transmit this outdated teleology and the racist narrative regarding white supremacy associated with it. Given all this, it is indeed time to cease teaching the history of philosophy as we normally teach it; not only because it no longer serves us, but because we can do better in the service of philosophy. With Park's book on the table, if we do not act, then we are no longer unwitting but knowing accomplices in a racist program of philosophical study.

Leah Kalmanson is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa). Her research areas include Asian philosophies and postcolonial studies. Her articles appear in the journals *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, *Continental Philosophy Review*, *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, *Hypatia*, *Philosophy East and West*, and *Shofar*, and she has edited the collections *Confucianism in Context* (with Wonsuk Chang, SUNY Press, 2010), *Levinas and Asian Thought* (with Frank Garrett and Sarah Mattice, Duquesne University Press, 2013), *Buddhist Responses to Globalization* (with James Mark Shields, Lexington Books, 2014), and *Comparative Studies in Asian and Latin American Philosophies* (with Stephanie Rivera Berruz, Bloomsbury, 2018). She currently serves as Assistant Editor at the *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*.

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- 1 Robert Bernasconi, "Will the Real Kant Please Stand up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (January/February 2003): 13–22.
 - 2 "Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Degrees in Philosophy," *Humanities Indicators: A Project of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, updated April 2016 <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/indicatordoc.aspx?i=266> (accessed 11 January 2017).
 - 3 "Member Demographics," The American Philosophical Association <https://apaonline.site-ym.com/?demographics> (accessed 11 January 2017).
 - 4 See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," *Representations* 37 (1992): 1–26. Park's own book makes clear that the periodization of philosophical history was a contested issue, and that different scholars offered widely divergent accounts. Chakrabarty, other historians, and theorists associated with postcolonial studies have addressed the problematic teleology of historical periodization that denies non-Western peoples any meaningful role in the world-historical narrative.
 - 5 For a discussion of the use of the term "philosophy" itself in such contexts, see Kalmanson, "If You Show Me Yours: Reading all 'Difference' as 'Colonial Difference' in Comparative Philosophy," *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 7, no. 2, (Fall 2015): 201–13; and also my introductory comments to a special issue of *ASIANetwork Exchange* on teaching comparative philosophy in Kalmanson and Sarah Mattice, "Introduction: The Rewards and Challenges of Comparative Philosophy in the Undergraduate Classroom," *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 23, no. 2, (Spring 2016): 83–90.

⁶ See, for example, Project Vox, a database of women in philosophy during the early modern period (projectvox.library.duke.edu).