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- 17 – A recent visit to the philosophy departments at Yale/NUS and NUS in Singapore taught me that it is quite possible to develop very exciting undergraduate curricula that integrate analytical philosophy and Asian philosophies, as well as lots of bits of history of dynamic intellectual cultures across time and space.
- 18 – <http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/12/is-european-analytic-philosophy-the-way-of-the-future.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 19 – <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2015/07/genius-and-analytical-philosophy.html>, and <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/02/gary-gutting-is-one-of-the-most-important-and-interesting-intermediaries-between-continental-philosophy-and-mainstream-analyt.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).

Reply to Eric Schliesser



Amy Olberding

I am grateful to Eric Schliesser for his gracious response, and to *Philosophy East and West* and Roger Ames for hosting this discussion. The challenges currently facing the profession regarding exclusionary practices are many, and Schliesser's work at both *NewAPPS* and his newer blog, *Digressions&Impressions*, is sensitive both to how many and how complex these challenges are. Schliesser is correct that my discussion of the profession's conversational patterns is both a bit ungenerous and more than a little ambitious, asking for "revolution" in how the discipline not only talks, but operates. Likewise, Schliesser is right to point out that there are now many, and more than ever before, seeking to probe critically the profession's reflexive habits of mind and, more pertinently, unexamined replications of long-standing hierarchies and sociological patterns. Schliesser's own work on this score is particularly sensitive to several of the issues I address, albeit in different contexts.

In his response, Schliesser observes that I largely neglect many of the more charitable or welcoming remarks sometimes found in the profession's discussions of Asian philosophies. To some extent, this but confesses a familiar psychological effect, the human inclination to attend most to what wounds rather than what pleases. However, it also remarks my own sense of being conflicted about the more generous gestures. Schliesser's parsing of David Chalmers' remarks about Buddhist philosophy of mind captures some of what I find dispiriting: too often even the generous gesture can unintentionally certify or "cement" hierarchies, implicitly casting Asian specialists in a subordinate role. The work of Asian specialists may be found good insofar as

it is *good for* addressing the preoccupations of “mainstream” philosophers. However, I want here to attend to an even more troubling aspect of professional generosity, an aspect Schliesser invokes but does not explicitly address in his response: the struggle among deviant outliers in the profession with servility. The blog post about this that Schliesser references—his “On Servility in Professional Philosophy”—details a phenomenon I find at once uncomfortably familiar and uncomfortably at work in my own often ambivalent or conflicted reactions to more generous conversational gestures.

The phenomenon that Schliesser describes as servility concerns how members of outlier intellectual territories may seek entry points into the “mainstream” or “core” by commending the utility of their work to those resident and working in the more prominent and prestigious areas.¹ Inhabitants of deviant areas of philosophy may in effect promote responses such as Chalmers’, articulating for “mainstream” peers how deviant work can profit conversations happening within the “core.” That this is a servile posture is evidenced by the absence of mutuality and reciprocity: Such conversations about utility rarely extend into addressing how the “mainstream” might assist the deviant. So the risk here is that outliers working in deviant areas are positioned—indeed *position themselves*—akin to “research assistants” aiding others in the “grand project” of philosophy, a project presumably well under way without them. This self-subordination, then, is what Schliesser characterizes as servility, and it, too, is one of the patterns structuring professional discourse about inclusivity: insofar as deviants participate in discourse about inclusivity, it is quite commonplace to find us doing so by attempting to sell others on our usefulness in helping sort out the “grand project.” For my own part, I own that anxieties about servility play an outsized role in my reactions to the more generous conversational gestures. Let me address this, then, by simply describing my own reactions to the generous gestures, the worries about servility that render me ambivalent and often conflicted.

First, while I am often mildly pleased that Chinese philosophy has been useful in consideration of some philosophical issue perceived as pressing by contemporary Western-trained philosophers, I internally balk where this is all the notice it receives. For such does not merely encode a hierarchy in which Chinese philosophy serves projects devised external to it; more deeply it represents an unwarranted confidence that the discipline has already well identified what philosophical problems and challenges—whatever we include in invoking the “core” or the “mainstream”—demand our greatest attention. I am not ready to concede this. Nor do I think any in the profession should concede this, not least because the overwhelming majority of philosophers working in English-language philosophy have been exposed to so vanishingly little of the world’s philosophy.

That my own research area, Chinese philosophy, may operate as occasional handmaiden in sorting out existing “mainstream” problems is of far less interest to me than the myriad “new” problems, perspectives, and priorities it might introduce. For whatever it might mean to sort out what philosophically matters most, we have not yet begun *this* project. What we have instead largely consists of problems developed in a parochial, limited, and contingent historical context. Consequently, conversations that “sell” Chinese philosophy because it might help with this or that

preoccupation presently holding contemporary Western-trained philosophers in thrall largely dismay me, even as I myself participate in them. What small gains such salesmanship might achieve are offset by too many concessions to the status quo. Worse still, by participating in this way, I feel, as Schliesser so ably describes, obliged to *perform* my own servility, assenting to boundary-marking conclusions about philosophical importance and philosophical priorities I would prefer to dispute.

Second, commentary on Asian philosophies that lauds its promise and interest for those in the “mainstream” may tempt a troubling gratitude from us deviant sorts. Praise of one’s work is of course pleasant; praise that highlights its power to address problems bedeviling others is perhaps especially pleasant. But the hierarchies structuring praise delivered from inside the “core” to the outliers on the margins strike me as psychologically perilous in their power to transform supplicants into *happy* or *compliant* supplicants. Supplication can sometimes work, but it exacts a high tax that ought make us wary even where it succeeds, not least because it may entail abdicating autonomy in how specialists, responsive first to their materials and their own judgments, steer inquiry. The allure of winning praise or enjoying conferred legitimacy may skew research paradigms, inclining us to volunteer as “research assistants,” directed most by what will win approval and secure legitimacy in the existing order. Taking pleasure in this form of success, feeling grateful for attention from the “mainstream,” seems but to celebrate a pyrrhic victory. This is most evident if we acknowledge the sorts of professional activity that are superficially most conducive to this sort of “success,” if we acknowledge the extraordinarily prominent place outreach efforts play in many of our professional lives.

Outreach, to be sure, is crucial to the Asian philosophy subfields, but we must not lose sight of its costs. Scholars with finite time spend some part of it, and for some a great deal of it, providing basic instruction or engaging in advocacy and philosophical salesmanship. We want a more inclusive discipline, we want the value of our materials acknowledged, and we want full membership in the profession, but the most common and available mechanisms for seeking these entail that we who want these things do much of the heavy lifting, effectively tutoring others and engaging in pedagogy that may be, and often is, quite distinct from pursuing one’s own research and philosophical interests. The costs this entails are also sometimes, quite bluntly, a matter of throwing good money after bad. Sometimes excursions into salesmanship will do little more than expose us once again to the most noxious skeptical conversational patterns I canvassed in the original essay.² Sometimes these excursions are the worst sort of folly and affront: far too many conference sessions pitched at making Asian philosophies available to non-specialists are attended only by other Asian specialists. Or by no one at all.³ While voluntary adoption of the servile role may be strategically useful in some cases, far too often we may be left with little but the waste of our time and an optimism, already hard to maintain, once again betrayed.

Finally, generous “mainstream” gestures toward Asian philosophies concern me for their potential to inspire pernicious divisions within the subfield. Praise directed at that which aids in the “grand project” of contemporary Western-derived philosophy can enable fractures and ruptures within the small subfields of Asian philoso-

phy specialists or other deviant domains. Insofar as prestige, prominence, or even simple recognition as a *philosopher* can be achieved by convincing the “mainstream” that one can help, we must entertain what becomes of the unhelpful among us, of those unmotivated by the existing “grand project.” The risks here are, I expect, familiar. There can be stratification, factionalization, and much internal policing within subfields struggling to find their way into legitimacy too often withheld or only conditionally conferred. A subfield can divide against itself, sacrificing solidarity for division and status differentiation that but mirrors the system of prestige and legitimacy imposed upon it from without. It can police members whose work risks undermining efforts to win legitimacy—after all, where we are struggling for a place among our “betters,” peers who make us “look bad” before them will be worrisome. The effects of supplication and servility, then, can tempt us into willing sacrifices of solidarity and whatever power we may enjoy by maintaining community with each other.

After I presented my original essay at the East-West Philosophers’ Conference, several people asked me what I thought could be done about the kinds of conversational practices I was describing. The essay is, after all, largely silent about this, too. Schliesser’s observations regarding my silence about more generous conversational patterns has indirectly made me reconsider this silence as well. My own sense is that we too often capitulate to these patterns, for example gamely offering once again to engage in dialogue about whether what we do is *really* philosophy, *truly* useful in the “grand project,” or *necessary* to the discipline at large. We even sometimes concede that we need to *do more* to reach out, to make our work available, palatable, or relevant—never mind that our small numbers entail that doing more means ever postponing pursuit of our own interests in favor of schooling too often indolent and incurious others. Put plainly, patience, supplication, and gentle outreach have, in my judgment, so far failed us. I thus wonder if openly registering the patterns of servility worked into the profession’s norms and practices might be a more hopeful way forward. There is still ample room for work that strives to make felicitous and intellectually valuable connections between the deviant and the “mainstream,” but the field also needs, I believe, more open agitators, more vocal malcontents. The impulse to prove our *bona fides* as *philosophers* by aiding others in the “grand project” will often require suppressing righteous anger, impatience, and discontent. Yet releasing just these, making our alienation visible, may be more fruitful. I find in Schliesser’s response and the wider body of his work an indication that *this* may be where common cause really resides. For I suspect that it is not just we deviants who chafe under the constraints of the status quo, but many of its own “mainstream” participants, those who, like Schliesser, recognize that finer ideals about our practices are possible.

Notes

- 1 – To be clear, in itself this need not be worrisome. Happy alignments between interests across specialities are of course possible and frequent. What is more worrisome is, as Schliesser articulates, how these alignments are rarely presented

in bi-directional ways, with mutual, reciprocal contribution assumed. Because of this, regardless of the intent of individual interlocutors, conversational patterns tend to demonstrate how contribution can easily transmute into service.

- 2 – E.g., see the discussion generated by the interlocutor with the pseudonym “Confused” at <http://dailynous.com/2016/05/13/when-someone-suggests-expanding-the-canon/> (accessed December 19, 2016).
- 3 – See the image included here by Bryan Van Norden, at <http://theconversation.com/chinese-philosophy-is-missing-from-u-s-philosophy-departments-should-we-care-56550> (accessed December 19, 2016).