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## Decanonized Reading: Intellectual Humility and Mindfulness in Reading Canonical Philosophical Writings

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### ABSTRACT

A serious concern faced by many scholars and readers of philosophy is how to proceed after reading the canonical texts; this may include the question – “*why are they canons, anyway?*” Of course, developing a passing knowledge of the works of mainstream philosophers remains an inevitable burden for students of philosophy. However, any specific written work is a product of particular vantage points and contexts, and thus cannot escape from showing partiality towards some perspectives. This work revisits the taken-for-granted assumptions involved in the selection of canonical texts and argues for a critical readership and re-imagination of their canonical status and pre-eminence. The necessity of a de-canonized reading of canonical texts is asserted; that is, a repositioning of these texts vis-à-vis the wide availability of non-canonical philosophical works, which permits a nuanced account of their reading and interpretation. Here, the goal is to examine the potential of an approach that prompts readers of philosophical texts to navigate the richness of different contexts and perspectives without being dependent on the Western agenda as the central frame of inquiry. It is hoped that this mode of rethinking may, at the very least, promote epistemic modesty.

### KEYWORDS

Canon, philosophy, philosophical traditions, Western philosophers, non-Western philosophy

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## Introduction

The canonization of philosophical thinkers along with their ideologies is a pertinent factor in the dynamics of current political affairs. Philosophical thinkers that gained a position in the spectrum of political ideologies play a vital role in sustaining this tradition. Undeniably, the citation and use of *keywords* of dominant philosophers has become an assumed responsibility in the community of scholars and students of philosophy.

This comes at the expense of understanding the canonical texts not so much as a collection of required reading materials as non-negotiable duties in studying philosophy. Their overrated and underrated paradigms lead to the loss of potential discourses that could have participated in the dominant platform and likewise be *politicized* in their own rights. Through an *a priori* classification of philosophers into a spectrum of canonic-to-non-canonic, accounts of exploring their paradigms are limited. The inclination to focus the spotlight on the spectrum of political ideologies where political thinkers are thought to “belong” is consequential to how the thoughts of these thinkers are processed.

In this paper, a red flag is raised concerning the dangers of *careless reading* of the work of dominant political thinkers. By “careless”, it meant a type of reading that is already tainted with assumptions and floodlit by the (in)famous image(s) of the thinker under investigation. However, this article does not imply an approach such as that of Strauss (1952) in detailing “how to read” the materials of political thinkers. Rather, this work takes the approach of a humble recognition of the symptoms that a reader might face when too much swayed by what is popular about the material and/or the thinker. At the same time, it explores the idea of *critically playing* with thoughts by situating them in the multidimensional context of the political construction of knowledge rather than reading the materials as canonized scripts that must be mandatorily recognized by scholars and students of political philosophy.

This raises the question as to how the canons (fail to) account for the enduring categorizations and labels that seem inappropriate and insensitive to various individual identities and sensibilities. Further, given that they were written mostly by Western European males, how should readers from different backgrounds renegotiate and locate their own identities relative to those of the canonical texts? This paper presents alternative perspectives regarding this issue with identity. It proposes a *de-canonized reading approach*, with an attitude of multiple reservations proposed as one way to immediately address this concern.

## The Canonical Texts

By canonical texts, this work refers to Western philosophical writings (Leiter, 2013). A canon has a status of automatic reverence as a set of texts “whose interpretation and reinterpretation defines a field” (Connell, 1997, p. 1512). Canonical philosophical writings obtain substantial status through taught philosophy simply on account of their being labeled as “canons”. It is routine for philosophy degree programs to have a required subject that focuses on the writings of canonical thinkers. In the

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presentation of such a series of courses, it is assumed that a historical introductory course is a foundational necessity to higher political and philosophical knowledge. The canonical philosophical texts pass on to their successors some jargon and frames of analyses (Lyotard, 1984) such as rights, freedom and governance. These ways of thinking have not only become a common ground for discussion and writing, but have also served as the benchmarks for critique and further theorizing that have triggered developments in successive philosophical thoughts. For example, the thoughts concerning rights of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, as developed in terms of their own social contract theories, have been a theme of analysis by later generations of political philosophers, with some applying them to questions of e.g. constitutional law, taxation, geopolitics and health rights. Thus, by providing the language for investigating freedom, equality and governance, they have become the subject of theoretical and empirical research.

The canons have also served to establish the mode of thinking of philosophical exploration. While contemporary theorists have provided rejoinders to unaddressed questions in the canons, overall lines of continuity derived from the canons remain undisturbed. The commonly used term “happiness”, for instance, can be seen as a continuation of the relentless expansion of discussions of Plato’s idea of a perfect society. Students of philosophy are easily able to embrace the canons due to the fact that, for the most part, their ideas continue to linger in the world.

### ***The Impossible Identities***

The Western canonical texts have been the subject of a massive quantity of interpretative effort on the part of their readers for over many years now. For this reason, the danger of a simplified reading of versions of the canonical texts may lead to an uncritical readership, which could have missed an opportunity to participate in some groundbreaking discussions. That the readers of philosophical texts might be centering their approaches around the “canonical” tag is not to be taken lightly. There may be uncharted spaces for instruction and critical analysis involving humans and nature that may be more provocative, comprehensive and nuanced. In relation to the issue of careless reading, this work calls for a consideration as to whether readers and scholars have to be skeptical about and/or radical in their approach towards the canonical texts. This paper settles with a restructured and repurposed approach to reading as, at the very least, a sound critical response.

### ***The Transgression: Losing Fluid Identities***

The canons face the reproach of being Eurocentric and androcentric, with an objectifying attention from the West coming at the expense of the Non-European “others” (Said, 1978). Since marginalized philosophical traditions (i.e. Africa and Asia) have been excluded from the philosophical canon (Park, 2013), the Western canons continue to enjoy a substantive attention. Even the major debates between the analytical tradition of the English-speaking sphere, guided by science, logic and mathematics, and the more synthetic philosophical tradition of Continental Europe, continue to be centered on the West. However, it is precisely in terms of this

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centralizing attention that they are most vulnerable to be criticized. In recent times, increasing criticism has been aimed at the universalizing tendencies of the thoughts of “white”, heterosexual male scholars (Duchesne, 2011).

This non-Western point of view could be taken further in Butler’s concept of citationality (1993), which refers to the reproduction of the current status quo: canonical undertakings involve a repetition and a ritual that reproduces their privileged status. Hence, referring to the canonical texts all the more yields to “this process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity” (ibid., p. 9). This reproduction of the Western paradigm also involves the reproduction of the canonical biases and consequent non-reproduction of a range of identities that remain unrepresented. Additionally, with the gesturing towards internationalization in the academic community, the grand narratives of the canons encounter another phase of scrutiny in their ability to account for a diversity of emerging social and political issues, which were non-concerns during their times (i.e. advances in technology, environment, health etc.). This leads to the rise of pluralistic perspectives that underscore the shift that the discipline of philosophy experienced over centuries.

### ***The Inescapable Tendencies: Identities Seen as Impossibilities***

To a greater extent than with the rest of philosophical texts, the canonical writings struggle with a crucial pressure within their very label. The non-negotiability of studying the canonical works fosters conceptual limitations by drawing lines of demarcation (classical versus modern versus postmodern; Western versus Non-Western) rather than seeing their interconnections as mutually constitutive “specie” of philosophy or as equal members of the community of philosophy readers (Omotsho, 2014, p. 1). This puts the canons into forced categories, which are for the most part limiting in the sense that there are already various expectations together with the labels and image attached to them.

This attitude is, however, far from merely taking offense at canonical intellectual elitism since elites are also prey to historical contingencies. Merely questioning their privileged status is not sufficient to make any useful point. The issue concerns the neglect of the subjects whose identities were ignored in history, whose characteristics are fluid or irreducible (Žižek, 1996). Hence, while ignoring non-Western perspectives will not necessarily destroy the internal logic of canonical texts, the question remains why they hold the privileged status of being canonized as foundations of philosophical thought in the context of discussions of sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability and colonial peripheries, which are thus consigned as annexes of philosophical inquiry. Below is a list for examination of those assumptions that are taken for granted as part of our lifeworld, but which are highly in need of reexamination at this time in our history.

### *On Virtues*

The virtues in philosophy are the virtues of the canon, which established hegemonic “othering” and social hierarchies. First, the history of philosophy is the canonical history in which philosophical binaries are also derived from the

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canonical binaries. Happiness and just societies were thought of as being the highest of virtues, but the question remains as to how long the values of the canonical thinkers will remain as virtues, given the multiplicity of competing ideologies and emerging belief systems such as moral relativism and postmodernism. Nevertheless, the continuing prominence of canon-derived assumptions of “white superiority” results in the effective “silencing” of non-Caucasians (Park, 2013). While there is an incentive towards categorization, the risk of arriving at false binaries is dangerous. For instance, the concept of “primitive”, which remains salient, can be used to justify colonialism and slavery. Plato’s pioneering classification of people into the “enlightened” ones, who are able to get out of his metaphorical cave and those that remain, only capable of seeing shadows, informed (Western) Enlightenment notions of rationality. Aristotle straightforwardly stated that human beings are by no means “naturally” born equal, but that some are born for slavery and others for dominion. Locke even deemed it a duty to colonize and enslave, since there are populations that cannot arrive to maturity. Machiavelli’s view is more than telling when he claimed that it is the Prince’s glory and greatness to which everyone is subject. The “common good” is the canonical “common good”; consequently, offenders against the law are seen as uni-dimensional transgressors, without any reference being made to restorative justice.

#### *On Space and Culture*

Cultural and geographical diversity is taken lightly, if not entirely absent. The Eurocentric legacy continues due to the canonical philosophers imagining their respective perfect societies with Europe as the center of social and political affairs. For instance, when Machiavelli describes the necessity of being both a “fox” and a “lion”, his choice of animal is very Western-centric. There is no sensitivity to the possibility that these animals may not thrive in other lands or may symbolize different characters for various cultures. Aristotle privileges the land-locked *polis* or city-state as a conceptual category, while ignoring other topographies. In the canon based on his thought, therefore, there is no imaginative effort to consider other geographies that may have struggles in maintaining central power such as the small Pacific islands or the population in the mountainous lands and icy areas. When Kant envisions global citizenship at the end of history, he was not grasping the difficulty in grasping the concept of cosmopolitanism among very collective societies such as tribes and clans. Kant even states that he detests Chinese philosophy (Park, 2013). The canons only cite one another, excluding the rest and unable to gaze at a diversity of ideologies outside their sphere.

#### *On Gender and Sexuality*

The canons settle by default on a *heteronormative* society thereby naturalizing the family as composed of a husband, wife and children. Queer identities remain unimagined. Even when Locke attacked patriarchy as less absolute than God-man relationship, he still categorized the differentiation of human relationships into

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husband–wife, father–child, master–slave. The binary of husband-wife is still present rather than a more nuanced example of coupledness. Moreover, rulers are assumed males, with Machiavelli entitling his work *The Prince* and Plato advancing the notion of “philosopher kings”. Not only does this perpetuate gender binaries, but also it simultaneously excludes queer identities involving various intersectionalities of gender and sexuality that are left behind like the ambi-gender, transgender, asexual, demi-sexual etc.

#### *On Age Diversity*

At equal issue is an ostensive ageism in terms of how the canons disremember the young and old subpopulation. It is as if every human being capable of being a good member of society is always at his or her prime age. This liquefies the identity of both children and the elderly as participants in social and political affairs. There is a potential insensitivity to the rights of the unborn and children in general. Children are generally seen as “mini-adults”, not yet equipped as members of society (Aries, 1962). For instance, while Hobbes clarifies that being equal means being able to destroy one another, by virtue of opportunity, not of capacity, there is little qualification in Hobbes that human beings have different age-specific capacities.

#### *On Intellectual Prowess*

They address the *able-minded*. To be a good member of society and participate in civil life, the canons assume many similar capabilities among people. The canonical texts are for the literate and educated. Obviously, philosophers write to be read—with the possible exception of Machiavelli, who is clear in his particular purpose. As such, the canonical texts were written in scholarly manner, which could be challenging to the general masses such as laborers and farmers. Aristotle’s scholarly background led him to acquire the academic know-how to qualify him to train powerful personalities such as Alexander the Great. The spread of the scholarship of the canonical philosophers is thus limited to the limited group of people having access to their manuscripts.

#### *On Disabilities*

They also address the *able-bodied*. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) are largely absent from the canonical discussions. Locke was clearly being insensitive to disabilities when he talks about incorporating labor to acquire private property. Plato, by emphasizing his “world of ideas”, was insensitive towards the pragmatic struggles of those who cannot see, hear or walk. When Machiavelli mentions that a ruler must have charisma, he is not mindful that having physical defects may beget little charm for a ruler. While it can be argued that disability can be used to foster charisma, the peril is that of a charisma derived from pity, which produces a different affection in terms of power relations. Aristotle is guilty of contemporary political incorrectness when treating people with mental disabilities as incomplete human beings. Kant’s discussion on cosmopolitan citizenship assumes the “normality” of individuals participating in social and political affairs.

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### *On Ecology*

Finally, the canonical texts hold an *anthropocentric view* of the world, which places humans at the middle of history and the source of meaning. This view assumes that “human consciousness is the original subject of all historical development and all action” (Foucault, 1969). Even though Kant devotes effort to discussing the central importance of nature in the life of human beings, he still takes an apparently anthropocentric approach towards his discussions of a cosmopolitan world. His discussions on territoriality involve ownership by people of the things that will anyway outlive mankind. Even the concept of citizenship is anthropocentric such that is an invention of modernity that does not exist prior to bureaucratic societies. Locke is extractive in his view of dominating natural resources. Hobbes claims that in the state of nature each keeps guard over his or her own property.

### ***The Consequences***

While there is no text that can represent every sub-population, the devotion to categorization validates a deprivation and objectification of a large portion of individuals. An uncritical reading of canonical texts and the system used to reproduce them in schoolbooks, scholarly journals and lectures may facilitate the propagation of hegemonic epistemological hierarchies. With these, a concern arises that the readers fall prey to a barren romanticism and generalization along with “vindicating [the] conclusions which the philosophers already find morally attractive” (Leiter, 2013, p. 4). For these reasons, the canons may be reduced as at best partial, as archeological exhibits in their examinations of the world, rather than seeing their dynamic position vis-à-vis the global interconnections. Moreover, the desire to be more critical in analyzing philosophical texts raises several practical difficulties.

### *Scholars' Skills*

The demand of having adequate language skills in dealing with the non-Western philosophy may hamper a focus on non-Western texts. While a legitimate reason for dropping non-Western philosophical texts from the course requirements is not provided, the effective result of the canon is the need to walk an extra mile to study non-canonic philosophy, since one has to first understand the discourses that gave birth to thoughts and words/terms of the non-Western texts (e.g. the meaning of “existence” in the Upanishads or Confucian texts). One practical difficulty here is that translations may be limited. For instance, while Wang Yangming’s (1472–1529 BCE) teachings were introduced and partially translated in the English vernacular during late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a complete English translation of his work remains unavailable. Finally, in studying philosophy apart from the Western canon, the student must become acquainted with some less familiar key philosophical concepts to grasp the meaning of untranslatable terms within a semantic discourse much larger than that of its English [or Latin, or Greek] counterparts.

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### *Academe's Structure*

The structure of the philosophy departments in the academe may be unfriendly to individuals specializing in non-Western philosophies. Beyond ritual claims of being diversity-embracing and politically correct in appreciating non-Western philosophical texts, many still automatically dismiss Asian and African philosophy (Park, 2013) as comprising materials of inferior philosophical interest. With no intention to generalize, the composition of faculty members and graduate students in philosophy departments suggests that such a minority (if not absence) of specialists in non-Western philosophy is to be anticipated. It certainly cannot be claimed that there is an absence of specialists in philosophy developed from the Western or Anglophone traditions.

### *Economic Value*

The market demand outside the academe conflates with student interests. There is a high post-graduate research interest in Western philosophical specialist topics. Any attempt to increase the weighting given to non-Western philosophy in the overall rankings therefore constitutes a challenge. Even though there is interest in non-Western texts, it is not surprising that there is hesitancy involved in considering this path of specialization. Few, if any, graduate students in top programs develop interests in neglected areas because of a perceived unpromising career. This then continues the vicious cycle. It may also be the case that ignoring some philosophical texts is expressed in terms of being "already interested" in some more popular texts rather than about being "uninterested" in marginalized materials.

### ***Search for the Reasonable "Why"***

If there is a lack of insight behind the urgency to address the non-representation of non-Western philosophical texts, misguided diagnoses may be made. In the absence of a clear and accurate handle of why it is a problem in the first place, the situation may be exacerbated by unreflexively attempting to resolve the issue by simply adding more texts. Conversely, however, another tendency is to ignore the problem and continue assuming that there is no need to articulate the cultural diversity of philosophical accounts within the ideological and material legacies of various cultural pasts.

Thus, as much as it is a question of *what* is to be done, it is also a question as to *why* it must be done. More than a pressure to create an impression of being unbiased, a clear vision of why there is such an urgency to be inclusive requires thorough reflection. These sentiments on representation might be affected by the notion about the unacceptability of bias. However, Western bias alone may be a necessary but not sufficient reason to rethink the canonical privilege and prestige. All mainstream cultures have biases to begin with. Bias is a given; nevertheless, it can be countered by sensitivity.

In the quest to find a balance when introducing philosophical texts, adding philosophical works considered to be marginalized simply based on the intention to include non-Western philosophy may be a weak approach. The inclusion of

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non-Western philosophical texts may be a valuable first step to more nuanced philosophical discussions; however, it does not solve the dilemmas involved in providing balanced reading, nor does this action taken in isolation automatically make mainstream philosophy unbiased. It may even turn out to be a hasty solution to a complex issue. These considerations lead to the emergence of several paradoxes.

*Unnecessary dichotomies*

The danger is that the discussions also end up involving a new binary of Western versus non-Western texts. Whilst there is an effort to be critical, the tendency to fall into restrictive dichotomies may be so ingrained that there is no room to question this approach towards categorization. This divide might imply setting aside alternative approaches for more democratic discussions of philosophical texts. These dichotomies can distort the complexities and diversity of philosophical thoughts (Ryan and Louie, 2007).

*Assumptions of Mutual Exclusivity: The most common tendency here is to pigeonhole a rigid East-West binary.* A drawback of this approach is that forcing strict classifications highlights the differences over the similarities. While there are differences, the similarities are stark. One example is how the Confucian thought balances two key democratic ideals—liberty and community. This approach may seem to resemble Rousseau’s version of the Social Contract, in which he showed that liberty is compatible with social regulation. The Confucian notion of *li* (ritual) served as an anchoring element used to achieve harmony “without sacrificing reflective experience and personal fulfillment”; thus making *li* a pillar to the “moral empowerment of free individuals in community” (Tan, 2004). This overlaps with Rousseau’s notion of the *General Will*, which serves as the social glue that binds the community.

This East-West dichotomy also places philosophical thoughts in an *either-or* situation, leaving a diversity of teachings (e.g., African and Islamic philosophy, even Theravada Buddhism) at the periphery. This is evident especially that the popular culture envisages growing attempts to engage the wider public into philosophical studies. Since the East-West dichotomy is contentious, it marginalizes other philosophical thoughts through seeming intersections with popular traditions. For instance, Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-Burhān* illustrates that knowledge of causes ensures necessary, eternal certainty (Marmura, 1975). This overlaps with Western thinkers’ search for true knowledge and its cause. However, it is the African philosophy that suffers the most from this dichotomy due to the lack of African writings considered as “philosophical”. African philosophical texts are rather embodied in proverbs, aphorisms and pithy sayings in that “in his [African thinker] use of natural resources, he demonstrates his own epistemology” (Busia, 1963, p. 148).

*Comparing Apples and Oranges: Dichotomies imply a futile competition, which views different philosophical thoughts as counterparts fit for comparison.* This

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assumes that there is a benchmark upon which philosophical thoughts are weighed and compared. Consequently, it ignores the different yet equal set of inquiries that occupy thinkers. Philosophical schools of thought set up different, sometimes opposing but equally valuable core questions, which set their writings into their respective directions.

To compare them as if they are essentially the same is to neglect a multiplicity of framings of thoughts. One peril inherent in comparison manifests when there is an assumption that philosophies are compatible for comparison. For instance, while the African tribe Yoruba philosophical thought sense of *mo*, may roughly mean to “know”; however, this form of “knowing” requires having an eyewitness acquaintance (Hallen & Sodipo, 1997). Hence, it has implications for how such knowledge would be interpreted and how this relates to the inner workings of the mind. Moreover, the various ways to view the concept of “fate”—the Greek term *moira*, the South Asian *karma*, and the Chinese *ming* in the ancient world to the modern concept of “destiny” (Solomon, 2003)—may involve different assumptions that are not attuned for comparison. Thus, although these terms may involve tangential similarities, they may at the same refer to quite different levels of knowing, and, while they may be discussed in terms of “counterparts”, they also stand alone as concepts that are intricately intertwined with the philosophical thoughts associated with their origins.

#### *Mainstreaming without being inclusive*

Simply tacking on non-Western philosophical texts to the mainstream tradition may be more about outwardly conforming to the humanitarian agenda than a genuine response to the popular call to embrace diversity and inclusivity. Such a bandwagon comprises, at best, a band-aid solution to this long-standing crisis. If unchecked, it may just consist in actions that shift attention away from the misrecognition issue of the untapped richness of non-Western discourses. This may even result in awkward placement of non-Western texts in the absence of departmental competency to recognize them.

To begin with, the word “philosophy” is itself a Western construct. Even the very use of the term “non-Western” implies the tendency to analyze these texts in reference to an origin deemed “foreign” or else still with a Western frame. This leads to an over-simplification of non-Western cultures and perpetuation of the inherent bias favoring Western culture. Here, the peculiarities of each non-Western philosophy may be uncritically reduced into one category characterized by merely being divergent from Western thinking. This does not reflect an inclusive theorizing but a sense of referencing the Western texts as a template. This may result in a deployment of non-Western texts as part of the agenda set by and within Western discourses, undermining the underlying conventions and tensions. Even the present paper may even be overlaid with Western internal logic.

*A universal mode of thinking: While there is ongoing effort to engage in a diversity of philosophical traditions, such traditions are still analyzed under the purview of the Western gaze.* However, the prominence of this Western frame is seen as

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undeserved in Arabic philosophical traditions given that the latter reached an advanced level of comprehensive philosophical and scientific work such as that of Avicenna's philosophy (Bäck, 1994). This becomes an issue when the true diversity of ontological and epistemological assumptions remains unexplored, limiting one's thinking to some existing ontologies and epistemic views. For instance, while the concept of time may be little discussed in classical European philosophy, it is a core element in Ancient Chinese philosophy, to which their logicians anchor most of their thoughts. As Yuan (2006) notes, "Chinese logic is structured in the time of the now", adding that Chinese logicians think in terms of more than one "possible world". As such, far from representing any universal truth, the aim is to arrive at the "harmony of relations among particulars in a particular field at a single moment". Therefore, Chinese philosophy may invalidate the lack of simultaneity of European thought. For example, the divide between Plato's world of ideas and physical world is viewed as flawed since it is possible to see harmony between the two worlds. Moreover, Kant's Cosmopolitanism involves a possibly invalid logical construct because of its view of history as linear, when, in actuality, the Cosmopolitan world may already be happening at present.

Another mode of thinking is that offered by ancient Egyptian philosophy. In the teachings during Pharaonic Egypt, thinkers taught through graphic and concrete symbolism because they think in terms of symbols (Gillings, 1972). Since Hieroglyphs comprised the complete knowledge of reality, it was impossible for the Egyptians to conceive the idea of "non-existence" in the sense of the absence of the "existent" because the Hieroglyphs present the complete knowledge of reality (ibid.). This has implications for how philosophical thought can proceed and be passed down to the next generations of thinkers. For instance, the hypothetical Hobbesian account of the Social Contract may be seen not as an imagined event but very real even in the absence of any historical and physical manifestation.

*The universal set of inquiries: Reading non-Western texts as part of a Western philosophical agenda assumes that there are "right" philosophical directions.* This leads to philosophical concerns being viewed in a hierarchical manner. To adopt this mindset is to rank philosophical thoughts, validate some and dismiss others, as if there is an innate inequality between philosophical claims. For instance, the very notion of an "inquiry" is already foreign to African thought, for whose thinkers it is not the primary concern due to the very idea of "African Philosophy" being a heritage of identity collapsing in the face of Western bias (Uduigwomen, 1995). As such, the development of African thought and African thinkers is tainted by its history of being deemed sub-human (ibid.), hence enquiring about a "virtuous life" is considered to be out of line. Indeed, as Jinadu (2014) emphasized, African philosophy "is not culture-bound as it is being studied in other continents of the world".

In the same vein, maximizing happiness (or pleasure) and minimizing (if not eradicating) pain are fundamental values that have framed Western philosophical modes of thinking. However, of no lesser value is how the Confucian school of thought (in the *Analects*) recognizes grief and vulnerability as virtues, i.e. ethically

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valuable experiences that are fundamental to life (Olberding, 2004). Further, while the pursuit of the Universal “Truth” is a main direction of discussion in Western philosophy, reproduced in public spaces and popular sources such as dictionaries, a brief glance at how philosophy is variously defined in well-known dictionaries can provide glimpses of the underlying Western agenda. For instance, the definitions of philosophy in the Merriam-Webster dictionary include “pursuit of wisdom [and] a search for a general understanding of values and reality”<sup>1</sup>. Contrastingly, for Britannica, it is “the rational, abstract, and methodical consideration of reality as a whole”<sup>2</sup>. However, an intersectional, more integrative set of considerations were evident in the ancient Chinese philosophical inquiries. For instance, when Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE) attempted to integrate *yin-yang* theory into *Confucianism*, the agenda was not to arrive at a universal “Truth” but to demonstrate that the *yin-yang* must not be seen as fixed categories such as gender, but rather as together forming a transformative dynamic harmony (Wang, 2005). Thus, Chinese philosophy may be seen as more process-oriented rather than aiming to arrive at a certain virtuous destination.

What is left is a lacuna, a void in the realm of understanding. For this reason, a new way of reading the canonical texts is required. This new approach implies a mindset that would connect our thinking to a broader perspective. A question that arises here is whether there is a need to completely overturn the existing canons. However, there is reason to believe otherwise. That the canons require to be read with contextual sensitivity is a very popular notion, pleading that “contextualization” be understood with caution. Galison (2008) noted: “[W]hen philosophers talk about the context of an argument... they often mean bringing into the argument not only the text in question but also the texts of surrounding philosophers... When historians speak about context, they often have in view the non-textual environment”. The standards of “contextualizing” also vary in meaning and interpretation. A different way of reading might see context as that which situates why such paradigms were created, not just a leeway for dismissing perceived canonical deficiencies. Thus, the weaknesses of the canons may be viewed as their very strengths, which resulted in their standing the test of time. Seeing the context does not necessarily imply finding an immediate justification for what are viewed as shortcomings. Rather, the point where the canons fall short may fuel further discussion, which may serve to vindicate the texts’ canonical status.

### **The Rejoinder: a De-Canonized Gaze for Epistemic Modesty**

In the view of this author, we cannot afford simply to unfollow the canonical texts. To begin with, the canons cannot be entirely decanonized because to do so would be to repeat the “error” that resulted in their canonization in the first place. We should recall that the canonical thinkers arrived at their status partly as a consequence

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/philosophy>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy>

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of the various controversies their works have spawned, which continued to gain in prominence over the centuries following their deaths. Moreover, the canonical thinkers were also part and parcel of the canonization of each other. For instance, Aristotle made Plato and Socrates even more celebrated than their already well-known status. By being compared with each other, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau were clustered as Social Contract Theorists. Also, the ones who canonized them were individuals already established in the field of philosophy. For instance, Whitehead is very much known to have been a prominent thinker of his time; thus, his devotion to Plato gained both criticism and applause, to the benefit of Plato's enduring status. Moreover, even those theorists who were critical of the canons, such as Nietzsche, in fact ended up achieving center stage in these canons based upon these very critiques. Therefore, any concerted effort to decanonize such texts and thinkers is likely to be in vain.

Seeing the biases of the canons is no reason to cut them out of one's reading collection. Rather, the issue here the danger of being insensitive to a whole range of philosophical texts at the expense of lost valuable discussions. The point is to establish a dialogue, to see the contradictions that become salient in the clashing of thoughts from different traditions (Park, 2013). Then, if what motivates a call for the inclusion of the neglected philosophical materials is an assertion of its relevance for richer discussion, the principal agenda would not be to antagonize Western philosophy but rather to routinely intersect these mainstream texts with those marginalized materials. As Gress notes, "[t]he West was not a single story, but several stories, most of which neither began with Plato nor ended with NATO" (1998, p. 16).

What is to be practiced instead, in this author's view, is a *decanonized gaze*. To have a decanonized gaze is not to antagonize the canons but to reflect back at their thoughts in a fragmented and decentered way. Neither is the aim to trivialize, but rather to differently frame one's view of the canons. These are not new suggestions but a synthesized "borrowing" of concepts from successors of the canonical philosophical thinkers as a means of coming up with a decanonized gaze and reinventing ways to read the canonical texts. It is an exercise that recognizes them as canons but at the same time consciously questions their canonized status, in the hope of arriving at alternative ways of reading that may have been currently overlooked. It continually engages and disengages the various intersectionalities among different groups and subgroups of people. It *contextualizes*, *indigenizes*, *sexualizes* and *orientalizes* any perspective away from the canonical gaze.

It de-naturalizes the canonical texts by always comparing and evaluating the place of the canonical texts particularly in non-Western contexts. This implies consciously and perpetually questioning the reasons for the texts' canonical status in philosophy. It also comprises an examination of the scholarly consensus, which rendered the canons as non-negotiable set of manuscripts, especially for new scholars of philosophy. It re-evaluates the standing of the canons within the comprehensive discipline of philosophy. Conversely, this reading may additionally argue that the

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meaning of canonical texts is a cultural construct and subject to change and various performances of different readers with their competing ideologies.

A decanonized gaze does not assume that any text is equally valid and legitimate as philosophical material as the established ones; to do this would simply cheapen the discipline of philosophy itself. However, nor does a de-canonized reading assume that people who spend years working on specific subjects are automatically authorities on these subjects, to whom deference is necessarily owed. Moreover, a de-canonized reading does not demand that one leave his or her own philosophical biases to engage in a nuance reading. Indeed, a de-canonized reading can be practiced even if one subscribes to a particular philosophical school of thought. The point is just to keep one's own perspective regardless of his or her philosophical commitment and to prevent one's own ideological commitments from crowding out the ability to evaluate philosophical texts that may deepen and cultivate higher executive cognition.

### ***Counter-Bias Evidence from Selected Philosophy Course Syllabi***

It is indeed fortuitous to be able to identify strategic approaches for engaging in richer discussions of philosophical texts. Some examples of philosophy course syllabi downloadable online indicate how a decanonized reading can be practiced. For instance, the American Philosophical Association sets up a section in their website called "Diversity and Inclusiveness Syllabus Collection"<sup>3</sup>. This is a collection of a range of philosophy course syllabi, including those "completely devoted to an underrepresented area of philosophy". While this gives an impression of admitting and validating the superiority of the Western thought, it is an important step towards shaking the taken-for-granted assumptions.

#### *Inclusive and Intentional Syllabi*

The simplest and most direct way to emphasize the need for engaging with the non-canonical texts is to explicitly mention it in the syllabus. As such, Amherst College's Philosophy and Cultural Diversity<sup>4</sup> syllabus is very direct in stipulating that the canons of philosophy "all lived in what is today Europe, and they were all male" (Scheman, 2014, p. 1). This is followed by the aims of the course "to broaden the disciplined conversation by bringing into it voices that have been 'disciplined out'" (ibid). Moreover, the University of Wisconsin-Superior's course syllabus in Introduction to Philosophy<sup>5</sup> mentions that the class will "emphasize traditional canonical philosophy, non-canonical philosophy, including feminist and non-European philosophy" (Adams, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.apaonline.org/members/group\\_content\\_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970](http://www.apaonline.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970)

<sup>4</sup> Amherst College (Spring, 2014) PHIL 1006 Philosophy and Cultural Diversity. Amherst, Massachusetts. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/inclusiveness\\_syllabi/Introduction\\_to\\_Philosophy\\_&.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/inclusiveness_syllabi/Introduction_to_Philosophy_&.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> University of Wisconsin-Superior (Spring, 2014) PHIL 151: Introduction to Philosophy. Superior, Wisconsin. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness\\_Syllabi/introductiontophilosophy\\_lac.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness_Syllabi/introductiontophilosophy_lac.pdf)

### *Critical Engagement of Canons-Only Syllabi*

A critical reading is conceivable even if only dominant texts are outlined in the syllabus. For instance, while devoted to focus on Aristotle, the Tulane University specifically offers Aristotle in New Orleans course<sup>6</sup>, which syllabus “combines service-learning with philosophical reflection and rhetorical analysis” (McBride, n.d.). Here, learners will be critical of Aristotle’s views as they may see the discord between Aristotelian thought and their own lived experiences. Another reasonable approach than merely including non-Western texts in a syllabus is to have a comparative method. For instance, the syllabus for Medieval Philosophy<sup>7</sup> of Bucknell University (Pennsylvania, USA) is explicit in being “a comparative one, focusing on various intellectual crosspollinations that were then taking place between the three major philosophical traditions in the medieval period: Christian, Islamic and Jewish” (Groff, 2014 p. 1).

However, the content of course syllabi alone does not necessarily determine whether or not there will be a reflexive discussion of the philosophical texts. Different approaches to reading the materials may be what makes the difference. For instance, the Indiana University’s Introduction to Philosophy<sup>8</sup> syllabus, “reconstruct[s] the ancient philosophical system ... and then examine[s] in detail the ways that system was dismantled and the alternatives that were put in its place” (Woodward, 2013). In the same vein, while the course syllabus in the History of Political Philosophy at the Ural Federal University only includes mainstream philosophical texts, the course requirements include essays and a problematique that allow reflective spaces for students to critically revisit and assess the texts they discussed in class. This paves way for an introspective evaluation of philosophical texts.

### *Specialized Course Offerings*

Finally, another approach is for philosophy programs to devote a whole course in non-Western philosophical traditions. The Amherst College (Massachusetts) has a course on Black Existentialism<sup>9</sup> that “examines the critical transformation of European existentialist ideas through close readings of black existentialists ... [and] consider[s] the matter of how and why existentialism continues to function so centrally in contemporary Africana philosophy” (Drabinski, 2010). Similarly, the University of Massachusetts Lowell offers “Philosophy 373: Arabic and Islamic

<sup>6</sup> Tulane University (n.d.). Aristotle in New Orleans. New Orleans, Louisiana. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/inclusiveness\\_syllabi/Aristotle\\_in\\_New\\_Orleans\\_McB.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/inclusiveness_syllabi/Aristotle_in_New_Orleans_McB.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Bucknell University (Spring, 2014). Medieval Philosophy Course Guide: Pennsylvania, USA. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness\\_Syllabi/medievalphilosophy\\_groff.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness_Syllabi/medievalphilosophy_groff.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Indiana University (Spring, 2013). P100 Introduction to Philosophy. Bloomington, Indiana. Retrieved from <http://www.philwoodward.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Syllabus-Introduction-to-Philosophy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Amherst University (Fall, 2010). Black Existentialism. Amherst, Massachusetts. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness\\_Syllabi/blackexistentialism\\_drabinsk.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness_Syllabi/blackexistentialism_drabinsk.pdf)

Philosophy”<sup>10</sup> (Bassam, 2012). However, this may just be a seasonal course offering. a regular course offering of this would be supportive of the attempt to achieve a nuanced and critical understanding of philosophy.

### ***A Reinvented Reading***

After examining a pluralistic view of approaching the canonical thinkers, one may be able to re-read the canonical texts and challenge these texts from within. This is to use these views back on reading them for a more nuanced and contextualized reading. For instance, the canons’ cultural insensitivity can serve as a warning to readers. One can be more thoughtful on the changes in meanings of the concepts used to understand the emerging issues in different cultures and contexts (Chakrabarty, 2000). The linguistic platform of the canonical thinkers may be applied with sensitivity to other writings even if, initially, the canons’ terminologies may be suggestive of their apparent oblivion to the topics of gender distinctions, sexuality, cultural appropriation, moral relativism as well as disability and their relationship to social political affairs.

The canonical bias is a gentle reminder for the reader that these canonical thinkers did not produce a set of texts from only one period of their lives. These authors might have changes in perspectives from being young to becoming a more learned thinker. Immediately accusing the canonical authors of being unable to address current concerns may be futile. By looking beyond the canonical texts as “theories in themselves”, one may fail to see the flexibility the canonical texts can offer in the current world. The canons have been held suspect of universalizing too much since they assume, by and large, universal truths as applying to societies. However, without understanding the context of their writing, this is an empty allegation. Indeed, there is reason to maintain intellectual piety towards the canons. This does not mean however that they must be read as holy, infallible texts. Rather, it is important to practice sensitivity as to why the conventional benchmarks for intellectual development and progress are traced from the European model. So, what may constitute a popular attack against these thinkers, does not necessarily place these thinkers in a compromising position. Though the canonical texts are not invincible, they are canons as they have stood the test of time and offer answers to basic questions of human life.

### **Conclusion: a Reimagined Approach to Canonical Philosophical Texts**

Seeing the biases of any philosophical text fosters intellectual humility and maintains an independent perspective. While there is a danger in having too much epistemic attachment to a particular school of thought, this does not mean that the enterprise of committing to the canonical texts is futile and needs to be expressed as excessive antipathy. Rather, the promise of a decanonized reading is to ensure that we interact

<sup>10</sup> University of Massachusetts Lowell (Fall, 2012). Philosophy 373: Arabic and Islamic Philosophy. Massachusetts. Retrieved from [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness\\_Syllabi/arabicandislamicphilosophy\\_r.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Inclusiveness_Syllabi/arabicandislamicphilosophy_r.pdf)

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with texts that have both agreement and objections to our own assumptions, lest we decay into mere dogma. It reminds us of why we are inclined to one side over the other and stimulates our thinking. Embracing various ways of reading may diversify one's approach to reading canonical texts. On the one hand, a practical approach in reading the canonical texts is to look upon and acknowledge the texts as devices to help one make sense of political affairs and general philosophical concerns. On the other hand, it is also helpful to remain mindful of the context in which they were canonized in order to have a better way of interpreting them. The cumulative worship and criticism of these texts is a measure of their very substance. Things that seem common sense and obvious for us now would not be so obvious had the canonical political thinkers not raised these concerns centuries ago. Thus, the seeming confirmation of the obvious may indeed result in non-confirmation or confirmation of the unthinkable or not so obvious.

Texts are canonical due to both their own intellectual greatness and the historical contingencies that surround them. These texts may not be labeled as canonic by virtue of perfection but rather by virtue of influence or even controversy. Centering on either the most flawless or most erroneous idea as the axis of understanding the material might be dangerous. Also, while it is very important to look for the positive and negative highlights, this may also hinder one from appreciating the much less discussed ideas of the author. The best discussions may not necessarily arise upon reading the most famous idea of the thinker, though this may be the case for the majority. It is noteworthy to remember that philosophers come from a diversity of dispositions thereby their questions and philosophical concerns vary.

In the end, these texts matter because we can map out game-changing thoughts in a particular time, which shaped those thoughts we have at present. It remains important for a nuanced system of reading to give voice and visibility to marginalized philosophical texts written by a variety of thinkers that have been at the peripheries of philosophical discourse. This not only legitimizes their status as authors of ideas worthy of discussion but also builds the confidence and capacities of present scholars to invest more in studying these texts and bring richer discussions in the academic, as well as—hopefully—public spaces. It may be a disservice to both the thinkers and us, readers, if we reduce their writings to mere archeological thought exhibits through a sort of forensic historical analysis of matters of purely historical interest.

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