

Does Decolonizing Philosophy Entail Teaching Philosophy as World Literature?

J. Edward Hackett

Southern University and A&M College

This essay is about my lived experiences as a philosophy teacher at two different Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU): three years at Savannah State University, and now as a newly hired professor at Southern University and A&M College.

In this essay, I reflect upon what it is like to teaching philosophy in a decolonizing fashion. I argue that the decolonizing of philosophy might mean changing both the way we teach philosophy as well as our assumptions of what the subject matter of philosophy entails.

I am schooled in the traditions of Continental and American philosophy. I have also read for an analytic philosophical MA. From this experience, I can say that all these traditions are philosophically insulated in their own right. Indeed, you can make a career out of teaching and researching in any one of them—though to be honest, you'll teach more than you ever specialized in. (I say this for the youngsters who might be reading this.)

Now while I prefer Continental and American philosophy precisely because there's something about paying attention to lived experience that's at the heart of how I choose to philosophize in these traditions, there's still a dearth of women and people of color represented in the typical canon of all these traditions.

There are a few exceptions, to be sure. Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir in the

Continental tradition; and W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mary Whiton Calkins might make the secondary reading lists in American philosophy surveys. But these thinkers are still not part of the "core." And about a dozen more examples are possible. Be that as it may, Continental, Anglophone-Analytic, and American philosophers all have to take stock of both the questions they're asking and the canon of thinkers that make it on their reading lists.

Central to my teaching, I am a firm believer in students finding their own concerns mirrored in the reading lists of classes. My thoughts here are pedagogical, but they are also offered and motivated by connecting to the larger world within which we philosophers find ourselves existing. As it stands, philosophy departments often generate research scholars limited to a set of questions irrelevant to changing landscapes in American higher education. Having paid little attention to teaching, many early-career philosophers find upon graduation that their inattentiveness to pedagogy and teaching get them passed over—to others that pay attention to teaching.

In this essay, I defend the thesis that *we should teach philosophy as a type of world literature, with as much width and breadth as we find in other humanities disciplines.*

Let me be clear. This change isn't a call for emulation.

Let literature departments be literature departments. Instead, we, philosophers, should consider that philosophy is truly the appreciation of wisdom in ways similar to literature departments who appreciate works of literature.

There are prudent reasons for adopting a strategy of appreciating wisdom and truth-seeking. During my career, the United States will be more diverse by the time I end my career. The questions persons of color are asking of themselves reflect the injustices in the ways in which society is organized politically, socially, and economically. Given that these realities also

infuse philosophy, not only must we appreciate the wisdom sources in these cultures' pasts—we must also pay attention to the questions they pose in the present.

We cannot control or anticipate what these questions will be. Philosophical questioning can be spontaneous in whatever cultural formations we happen to be existing in. But we can make inroads in our ability to ask them by fostering a horizon of engagement with multiple sources of wisdom in our classes.

Many questions will be existential ones these communities posit internally. Moreover, whatever these questions will be, they should be given a fair hearing. Some questions can be anticipated. In this climate of ever-growing population complexity, questions about pluralism and liberation have been dominant themes in my thinking given that I am invested in the futures of my past HBCU students. These concerns are internal to the identities of many persons of color, including the Black and African philosophers I've come to know over the course of the last three years.¹

They've been saying these same things for years for good reasons. Since philosophy can be overwhelmingly White and, therefore, quite naïve at times (despite well-meaning intentions), it can be argued that some questions, philosophers, and texts get missed in the traditional philosophical canon.²

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In order to talk about decolonization, I should define how I understand the term. By decolonization, I mean the process by which schools become inclusive of all persons who attend them. Given that schools were first integrated in the 1970s, the added dimensions of White flight from the cities as well as the continued legacies of discrimination and economic impoverishment, public schools in the United States are not made for all who attend them.

That's a descriptive statement—one which then supports a normative corollary: *public schools and universities should work for all persons*. Public schools reinforce financial status. Public schools in the United States are funded by local tax revenue of property taxes at the state level. The spirit of inquiry must

include resources to help and serve all who attend. Within this context, HBCUs serve to advance all who attend with a spirit of inclusiveness often missing in public research universities.

How does this apply to philosophy? In teaching philosophy, then, decolonization refers to becoming inclusive of philosophical traditions that includes all who attend the philosophy classroom. I take this inspiration from the opening chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. "This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture."³

¹ Anthony Neal has been a central influence in discussing HBCU-centered pedagogy as well as postcolonial perspectives with Walter Isaac.

² Let me provide you with two leading books that can give emphasis to this point internal to philosophy. First, Bryan W. Van Norden has authored a wonderful manifesto to decolonize philosophy: *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). Second, both Stephen Ferguson

and John McClendon have made this point with respect to African American male philosophers being obfuscated internal to anthologies in Black thought and in a predominantly White anthologies popular in philosophy textbooks. See their *African American Philosophers and Philosophy* (Bloomsbury Press, 2019).

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 3.

Philosophy as world literature puts all cultures on equal footing—in which they are all contributing to the kingdom of culture.⁴

The professionalization of Western philosophy often tries to avoid asking these questions. It sometimes does not even take up the lived experiences of everyday life and their relevant strivings (including the students in the philosophy classroom). For this reason, philosophers should be reading widely and outside of their own cultural frame of reference. In short, the discipline of philosophy comes across as not seriously taking up the experience of others.

In fact, I honestly feel that one could read the Anglophone analytic tradition as taking up every philosophical problem through the lens of the epistemic subject—an abstraction that never truly obtains in the concrete experience of our lives. It's therefore understandable why both pragmatism and phenomenology interrogated the views coming out of the Vienna circle. Still, neither of these traditions has moved the needle—seemingly unwilling to take seriously either Africana philosophy or African American philosophy. W.E.B. Du Bois and Martin Luther King, Jr. are still read as outliers.⁵

To suggest that philosophy takes its cue from world literature is a way to be more inclusive for the needs of the future. It also means that our students will need a more global, more multicultural understanding of the world than permitted by the range of questions that currently exist. If the world they live in becomes fundamentally different than our own, then the

philosophical problems will change in relation to those differences. These differences will have an effect on us today.

How many philosophy departments do not require any history of philosophy courses and simply take up the same old questions of their predecessors and doctoral supervisors? Ask yourself: are you just another meta-ethicist, another political philosopher interested in game theory, another naturalist philosopher of mind, another formal epistemologist, or another philosophy of science scholar? In another vain, are you another Dewey or Heidegger scholar?

It's easy to pick on the insularity of analytics. What's more, how many in American philosophy read beyond their primary dissertation figure? The same problem can well persist in non-analytic philosophy. How many young Continental PhDs are minted from the Heidegger factory? Or write on Derrida and Deleuze, but never lift a finger to think outside the internal Western-ness of the Continental tradition?

Yes, you can take pride that some have taken their methodological cues from the Continentals and the Pragmatists. In these traditions, we have a place for the experience of others. It's easier, but it doesn't follow that simply because you are aware of some other voices or took a French feminism seminar that you've read in these traditions enough to push others to be moved in appreciating other sources of wisdom. In these

⁴ Du Bois's efforts are speaking about the position of Black men in relation to what it means for Black persons to live fulfilling free lives. In that spirit, a decolonized conception of philosophy establishes the preconditions for working toward encountering the strife in life and discovering meaning and purpose in our lives with philosophy.

⁵ The new Tommy Shelby and Brandon Terry collection, *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of*

Martin Luther King, Jr. (London: Belknap Press, 2018) is the first recent attempt to convince philosophers at large. However, Shelby and Terry were not the first to claim this about King. Nobody in that collection cites and treats *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Hanes Walton, Jr. (New York: Praeger, 1971) nor treats extensively the essays in Robert Birt's *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Essays on the Philosopher King* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

schools, it's all too easy to think that you've done enough or applied some thinker to think through some social problem, even when such

rarely ever finds a home in reviews of graduate committees and comprehensive exams procedures. The way we are taught philosophy in

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Oftentimes, it's just programmatic that some work gets repeated ad nauseam. I can't tell you how many times I've read the program to SPEP to find some graduate student who has written the Levinas + gender/sexuality, or Levinas + race paper.

Now, I know that many will not heed this call. Many have decided that philosophy is about something else than the lived experience of others—true beliefs, thinking through the implications of a current scientific findings, proposing a naturalist ontology for thought's representational content, or whatever it may be. I really don't have a response to those with a different meta-philosophy—except to reiterate that caring about the lived experiences of others means appreciating other wisdom traditions, learning from other civilizations, and reading as widely as we can about them—all to the effect of making us more capable of connecting to the populations we teach. Discussions of teaching

graduate school oftentimes reflects what we are in turn comfortable to teach.

The takeaway from discussing these things is simply that there's wisdom in being conversant in *Tao Te Ching*, Wiredu, Ortega y Gasset, or Al Farabi. It makes one better. The argument for reading more widely is that it enhances our ability to be transformed. Some great works have guided other theaters of civilization. Who could really understand the United States without reading John Locke's *Second Treatise on Civil Government*?⁶ The same is true of China and Confucius's *Analects*.

I anticipate the objection that someone might claim that they just don't have time. They must continue the research they began in their dissertation and teach, striving ever more to unlock the secrets of their overspecialization in professionalized philosophy. Yes, you were trained on the meta-ethical problem of the twin moral Earth problem or Arendt and political pluralism, but that doesn't mean you can't pick up a copy of the *Dhammapada*. Given that we are

⁶ Attempting to avoid colonialist attitudes does not mean abandoning reading those texts that inform a whitewashed version of the United States or abandoning the "Great Books" tradition that so many Conservatives in America regard as foundational. Indeed, I haven't detailed in this essay what it might mean to read philosophy as world literature except to allude to the openness required for appreciating wisdom. For example, I can think of many colleagues with whom I have had discussions. They teach the standard John Locke-Thomas Jefferson connection, demonstrating Locke's influence on Jefferson's authorship of *The Declaration of*

Independence. Yet they do not ever mention that Locke published *The Fundamental Constitution of the Carolinas* in 1670. In it, Locke wrote, "§110. Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his Negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever." This passage is from David Wootton's edited collection, *The Political Writings of John Locke* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 230. One doesn't need to cite the work of Carol Pateman or Charles Mills to see who is not included in the revered foundations of the United States. One needs to honestly engage with wider breadth the stories we tell from only reading slivers of the philosophical canon.

more interconnected than ever before, the duties incumbent to understand each other as scholars are a duty I'd argue we all possess. By extension, the same holds true not only for our professional lives as scholars, but also as teachers of philosophy.

When world leaders are vying for economic supremacy—say, supremacy between the US and China—scholars are meeting across borders, and irrespective of their home country's politics. Scholars have unique minds that yearn to understand the world, and we are more fit to demonstrate this understanding to the public than others. If we read another culture's sources of wisdom, we may even improve the impressions of our brothers and sisters in far off countries. Through our scholarly actions, understanding floats between borders because of a disposition to appreciate wisdom, not to produce the most accurate account of what is true. In effect, appreciating another culture's sources of wisdom makes us (and our students) more cosmopolitan.

There will be pushback against the idea that we should read widely or read texts in languages other than English. The American geopolitical position is one of extreme privilege and hegemony. English has become the *lingua franca* of academia. With that position and privilege comes the fact that other people learn our language before we are called to do the same.

Where else can you find young people—American citizens—majoring in international business who cannot speak another language? Many Anglophone philosophy departments allow for logic or scientific methods to substitute for requirement to study another language. In effect, these philosophy departments in the United States are awarding doctorate degrees without an eye to reading wider than our own language, let alone just reading just ourselves. This breeds an insularity that gets habituated to the point that we philosophers don't want to read any wider than the comfort of what we find

acceptable—out of habit, from being taught a certain way. Acceptable often means comfortable, but not necessarily better. Western philosophers can do better.

So next time you are organizing your class, think about the reading list.

If you are teaching a lot of Chinese students, then perhaps you should not have Descartes and Hume on the reading list. Perhaps, there is some groundbreaking novel or civilization-specific classic that everyone reads. By selecting such a text, the students see themselves within what philosophy is trying to cultivate. The study of philosophy attempts to cultivate the intellectual imagination to solve problems that science, common sense, faith, or art cannot solve on their own. If we study what other cultures have to say about a problem or even to understand why a problem for us was never a problem for another civilization, then we cultivate wisdom to be between us.

Within the cracks of contrast, there is illumination.

So far, I have been outlining some key assumptions about the nature of philosophy. In what follows, I meditate now on some objections that come from the teaching of philosophy.

For me, *teaching philosophy and the nature of philosophy are one indissoluble whole*. For those of you who attended a PhD program that turned out researchers, there will automatically be an unreflective bias that we teach philosophy as though we are part of a guild. In such thinking, philosophy is for those who can do it, and such researchers may land jobs at major research institutions with either an impressive undergraduate major or graduate philosophy program. These folks, however, will be the last to change their assumptions about philosophy that I am advocating for in this essay.

In learning to become a researcher, one's own methodological assumptions about philosophy will be reinforced. Indeed, changing philosophy from something like trying to arrive at the best argument into something more akin to world literature requires us to regard the authors we teach as sources of wisdom—not that they solely are right or wrong about X. For instance, one might think J. L. Mackie wrong about how he defined the trilemma and the problem of evil, yet one teaches that paper in a standard philosophy of religion class because of its historical significance in the debate.⁷

Consider just how much our teaching practices inform our theorizing about philosophy itself. Think about the previous example. The reason one teaches the J. L. Mackie piece is not just because it is present in the anthology, but also that you share in his opinion about what it means to do philosophy. You may even consider Mackie wrong on many counts, yet its selection says something about what it means to do philosophy for you.

So let me be clear: The reason why I argue that King is a philosopher has to do with extra-philosophical motivations about having been transformed by reading him and the experience of teaching him. Let me give you the story.

After coming back from the Bonhoeffer and King Conference held at Western Carolina University with the Personalist Seminar in August 2014, I decided I wanted to teach King for the first time. The conference took place just days after Michael Brown had been shot in Ferguson, Missouri. Originally, my Introduction to Ethics class included *The Ethics of Ambiguity*,

The Genealogy of Morals, and Russell Schafer-Landau's *The Fundamentals of Ethics*.

I decided to put King at the end of the course. I decided to gain some distance between ethical theories and the heated embers of the Ferguson incident. Then, as we were reading King, Tamar Rice (2002-2014), a twelve-year-old boy, was shot in Cleveland, some thirty miles north of where we were located.

What's more, a young lady's mom in this class was friends with Tamar Rice's mom. Suddenly, the issues in King's text came alive, and this class became one of those classes you did not know how it would go. The subject matter became personal, but in keeping discussion grounded in the texts, philosophy never seemed so relevant in all my years of teaching.

It was also my first time teaching about race within such a renewed and heated context. I received emails thanking me for simply teaching King after the course was over. I had no idea that another slaying of an unarmed black male would happen, let alone someone having a personal connection with the family in my classroom. Apparently, some students felt like other instructors avoided honest discussions about race that semester. Yet for me, philosophy tackles difficult issues. What I teach reflects how I proceed in philosophy. Upon reflection, I'm betting the same is true for you, the reader, as well.

Of course, one could object that since one's understanding of a text is not complete, one is not competent to teach that text. I would deny the validity of this objection. Being mindful of the texts we select to teach also means we do not need to be scholars of them to teach them.

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⁷ See J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). In this instance, see Chapter 9 specifically.

Often, I encounter this fear in early-career philosophers to try something different. However, philosophers have spent numerous hours learning to read philosophical texts actively and quite differently from even our other colleagues in the humanities. Displaying those active reading skills for the first time in a class can be a powerful discussion tool, but also one that invites students to do the same.

The foreign and the strange can draw us in with equal allure just as much as Plato and his Allegory of the Cave. I have found this to be a remarkable tool. In teaching King, I have often had to de-program the assumption about King being a rhetorician or activist rather than a philosopher. In this way, coming to read his sermons or writings, we learn to read what appears to be non-philosophy as philosophy. Philosophical engagement with a text can occur in many different ways—certainly beyond the argumentatively-driven philosophy we get from the modern philosophers in Europe. Instead, maybe doing philosophy just means reading texts philosophically.

Perhaps, the most sincere worry might be that my suggestions become implemented in such a way that diversifying the syllabus becomes tokenist. Say that a teacher puts *Black Elks Speaks* on his syllabus to show that he is willing to consider alternative sources of wisdom. Moreover, on his syllabus, he has standard readings from Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, and Marx.

For me, such an objection would not follow from taking philosophy as world literature seriously. Emancipatory attempts at understanding diverse sources of wisdom can very much be sincere efforts at understanding the human condition. Sincerity can be packed into what we mean by world literature. Yet, such a teacher might be viewed as inauthentic. The tokenist worry is evident because this teacher's syllabus assumes the Eurocentric White philosophical canon as the center—and

everything else around it becomes a token of diversity.

In this way, our teacher is in danger of assuming a colonialist attitude to other cultures. In other words, this objection can only find purchase by denying the spirit by which I opened this piece, where I was concerned that by equating philosophy with a narrow set of philosophical texts that does not and cannot anticipate the existential demands of the future.

So let's think about how our philosophy teacher can do better. In teaching *Black Elk Speaks*, he might try to understand the cultural horizon from which Black Elk described some of his visions. He might think about what it means to be a *heyoka*, a holy man, in the Ogala Lakota. He might even pair the reading with selections from other Native American sources like Vine Deloria's *God Is Red* and perhaps Scott Pratt's *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy*.

Decisive pairing can open up discussions: challenges to Western theology in Deloria; Black Elk's later conversion to Catholicism; or the Native roots of American pragmatism. Even though Black Elk will eventually speak of his conversion to Catholicism, his lifespan (1863-1950) offers us a rare glimpse into a mind that both departs from and adapts to colonial power structures. His life provides a wonderful example of how to question the structures that pervade both his experience and our own. An authentic engagement with *Black Elk Speaks*, then, might look at both the sincerity and brashness of the rebel. The main insight to take away is that it is possible to engage another source text in its own terms, even though, as Gadamer showed, our biases will always be present.

I will end on an objection I find hard to ignore. Part of trying to reconfigure philosophy as world literature will be constrained by exactly how we understand the nature of philosophy as well as the extra-institutional factors that ground that same understanding. The typical

Introduction to Philosophy course must teach a sampling of epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. In fact, some courses are limited by their descriptions in the course catalogue. Professors are designing Introduction to Philosophy courses to match the expectations of regional accreditation agencies.

I agree that the immediate institutional realities may put up barriers at the departmental and institutional level, but those outcomes and metrics are still—for now—in faculty control. Institutional understandings about philosophy comes first from philosophers—so, yes, innovation may be called for to learn how to teach such a sampling in the Introduction to Philosophy course.

Granted, hermeneutic approaches to philosophy may square more easily with what I am suggesting in this essay. For example, Gadamer shows how productive understanding is by admitting that our pre-judgments—what we can also call prejudices—actually constitute our engagement with each other. In *Truth and Method*, he shows why understanding comes from the historical background and embodies the starting places of any discourse. It's at the point where two parties engaged in a discourse are honest about their starting places, their inherited histories, and still want to gain some level of understanding from each other and the texts they read.

In this essay, I have expounded upon the idea that we expand what we consider the philosophical canon. I have done this through pedagogical reflection—the assumption that *teaching* is somehow central to the *doing* of philosophy. I anticipate the pedagogical landscape shifting in the years to come. These changes should impact teaching, particularly the practices of text selection. I have suggested that reading widely can be an active response to the anticipated and unanticipated changes to higher education populations in the future.

By transforming philosophy into world literature, we can respond to the existential demands of those changes and reconfigure the power of philosophy to be more transformative than its current reality allows. I have given reasons internal to how we are trained as philosophers and explained what it means to teach philosophy as world literature.

I want to end on this fact: my essay is written as an experiment in true pragmatic fashion. While I have pushed forward a thesis, I invite readers to notice that the title ends in a question mark. As we work out exactly what the decolonization of philosophy looks like, I offer this possibility as a question to be explored.

J. Edward Hackett, Ph.D. researches pragmatism, phenomenology, and personalism and their application to value theory. His research may be considered at the intersection of American and Continental philosophical traditions in ethics and social and political philosophy. Currently, he is thinking through both religious experience and value experiences and what relational ontologies must be true to cohere with the facts of these experiences. Moreover, he has been researching several essays on Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He received his Ph.D. in 2013 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His books include Phenomenology for the 21st Century (2016), Persons and Values in Pragmatic Phenomenology (2018), and a new fantasy novel series entitled Flight of the Ravenhawk (2019). He is currently an Assistant Professor in the English and Philosophy Department at Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.