

Institutional Change through “Diversity Initiatives”

The case of philosophy in the USA

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ABSTRACT | This paper is a summary of the history of the various “diversity initiatives” of the American Philosophical Association over the last 20 years. These initiatives, created by various committees created by the APA, helped to reshape the overall contents of curricula and policies of hiring in philosophy in the USA. It also helped academic departments to rethink the parameters of the meaning of the term “philosophy” as currently used.

KEYWORDS | Diversity; Diversity Initiatives; Institutional Change; Demography; American Philosophical Association

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1 Demographic Background

For more than 20 years, the issue of “diversity” has been explicitly on the agenda at meetings of the American Philosophical Association (APA), the largest professional organization for scholars working in the academic field of philosophy in the USA. Because all hiring, assessment of departments and other professional issues are centrally organized through the APA, it is not a trivial matter that the association is invested in the development of various diversity initiatives. In this paper, the initial establishment of various diversity committees as well as the development and current status of the APA and philosophy departments in the USA are reviewed.¹

The implementation of diversity initiatives by the APA has partially been in response to an overall population shift in the USA. While the demographic makeup of the country has always been diverse, the post-World War II population of new immigrants increased, and the demographic makeup has been changing steadily for the past 50 years. As the student body became more and more diverse, it became unfeasible and unacceptable for universities to continue ignoring this shift. By 2000, California had become the second “majority-minority state” after Hawaii – that is, a state in which whites are in the minority as a result of unprecedented growth in the Hispanic, Asian and immigrant populations. By 2014, all nine campuses of the University of California, the main public research university in California, had become majority-minority among its undergraduates, with Asian students representing the largest “minority.” By 2019, an additional four states had become “majority-minority” states: Nevada, New Mexico, Texas and Maryland. As of 2020, the most recent census year, nonwhite children constitute a majority of the country’s population² while the U.S. Government Census Bureau projects that by the mid-2040s, the entire USA will have become “majority-minority.” The shift is experienced, not only on university campuses, but by all citizens and on a daily basis – in public schools, the workplace and the living environment, especially in metropolitan areas.³

¹ The author served as initiating member of the APA Diversity Initiative; the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies (2001–2003); Diversity Committee for the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (2000–2003); Program Committee for the APA Pacific Division (1999–2001), and the Diversity Curriculum Committee of the University of San Francisco (1998–2001).

² The census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. Demographic information collected by the Census Bureau is available at <https://www.census.gov/>. For a summary description of “majority-minority” states, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majority_minority_in_the_United_States.

³ In this essay my focus will be the philosophical profession in the U.S. against the background of this demographic shift, but similar shifts are also occurring in Europe. For example, according to the

2 Diversity and Philosophy

Beginning as far back as the 1980s, many US departments in the humanities responded to this socio-political reality by changing their curricula to reflect this shift in demographics and to promote a more diverse and possibly more global self-understanding of their own profession. However, philosophy has always been quite resistant to acknowledging diversity, and although there have been efforts to change the curriculum, by the 1990s, the majority of philosophy programs still paid little, if any, attention to philosophical traditions outside the Western, particularly analytic, tradition. This was largely a result of the self-understanding of philosophy as a “science” (in analytic philosophy) with a self-evident Western heritage which equated “philosophy” with “Western philosophy” and the “history of philosophy” with the “history of Western philosophy.” Diversity, it was argued, made as little sense as “non-Western physics.” It was assumed that there is basically no such thing.

However, by the late 1990s and largely in response to criticisms raised by various university-wide diversity initiatives, which had become increasingly commonplace everywhere, a number of philosophers started to challenge these assumptions and began to engage in diversity dialogues. The question that was immediately raised was, how is “philosophy” defined? Many of us in the profession had no problem accepting non-Western philosophies (nearly exclusively Chinese or Indian philosophies at the time) as “philosophy,” while others, if not the majority, excluded these traditions from the definition – as a result of which, these traditions mostly ended up finding a home in Religious Studies programs. Whether such non-Western philosophies can be taught in philosophy departments is no uncontroversial matter when it comes to curriculum changes, negotiations for new positions, and hiring.

But diversity was not merely an issue of professional politics, for it touched on the very question of the nature and role of university educators. Our world has never been a collection of isolated nations and peoples, but a dynamic arena of communication and conflict. Given present technology and the constant flow of people, information, and capital, our students will have to learn that provincial attitudes, willful ignorance about the rest of the world and intellectual ethnocentrism are no longer adequate for effective participation in a global culture. The

Datenreport 2018 from the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, as of 2017, 39% of German children under the age of 3 have *Migrationshintergrund* (See <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/datenreport-2018/bevoelkerung-und-demografie/>). Germany will become even more diverse in the near future. Schools and universities will have to grapple with the issues of diversity at all levels since they are embedded in these dynamic societal shifts. The field of philosophy is no exception.

narrow self-definition of philosophy may have been adequate for the past 100 years, but this says nothing about what we, as philosophers and educators, will have to do in order to move forward in a radically different and rapidly changing world. Unwillingness to engage in this conversation would be an oversight that could undermine our very role as philosophical educators, if not a sabotage our students' future. Studying one's own tradition is certainly essential, as is teaching good methods of argumentation and the power of abstraction. But teaching Western philosophy does not absolve one from having to learn about the rich philosophical traditions of other cultures, past and present.

Moreover, the history of Western philosophy has been far from an innocent development. After all, it was complicit in European colonialism and racism, as well as the long history of excluding women. In fact, these various complicities are still at work, justifying the exclusion of non-Western philosophies and/or women philosophers. If philosophy is to become the truly critical enterprise it has always claimed to be, then all these historical facts and subtle practices of exclusion which still influence our understanding of the subject should be taught explicitly, the epistemological blind-spots and unexplored areas examined, and analyzed. As educators, especially of philosophy, we are responsible for teaching, not only critical modes of thinking, but also for making explicit and transmitting the broader implications of having practiced our discipline in a certain way. Why should we be exempt from such an obligation?

3 Diversity Initiatives Created by the American Philosophical Association

The questions and considerations regarding its own narrowness has led the American Philosophical Association to establish various diversity committees in 1998. These committees were created in order to address, on the one hand, the practices of unfair marginalization in the profession and, on the other hand, in order to better serve the profession, not only in the present but especially in the future, by gradually altering the status quo. The first of these committees were dedicated to Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies; Black Philosophers; Hispanics (the term "Latinx" was introduced in 2018); LGBT Philosophers; Native American and Indigenous Philosophers, and the Status of Women. A Committee on the Status of Disabled People in the Profession was added in 2019. A Committee on Inclusiveness in the Profession, created in 2007, communicates with these Diversity Committees. Committees meet once or twice a year and report back at

the relevant division’s annual APA meeting.⁴ Each committee also produces an annual newsletter which contains several essays on the committee’s charter. The call for papers to contribute to a committee newsletter goes out to all members of the APA and is not limited to members of any one committee. The publication of these newsletters started in 2001 – with the exception of The Newsletter on Hispanics, which started publication in 2003.⁵

The committee whose work I am most familiar with is The Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies whose founding chair was Xin-jang Jiang. Initial discussions concerned the question of who should be allowed to join the committee given that the initial and explicit purpose of all the diversity committees was to address issues raised by philosophers who had personally experienced exclusion in the profession. However, it soon became clear that exclusion was not limited to philosophers from Asian countries, but that Asian American philosophers also experienced marginalization. At that point the name of the committee changed to reflect this understanding. Soon after, however, we discovered that not only those with Asian backgrounds, but also non-Asian philosophers who taught Asian philosophies, were marginalized (more so than Asian philosophers who taught, say, logic). As a result, the name of the committee was changed for a second time to also include those who taught Asian philosophies, regardless of their personal background. At present, this committee is known as The Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies (AAMPP).

The first panel sponsored by the AAMPP committee took place at the Pacific APA meeting in 2000 (Albuquerque) under the title, “What is Philosophy? The Status of Non-Western Philosophy in the Profession.” Participating in the panel were Joseph Prabhu, Eric Schwitzgebel, Robert Solomon, Kwasi Wiredu and Xianglong Zhang. Martha Nussbaum, who had originally accepted an invitation to participate in the panel discussion, unfortunately cancelled at the last minute. Participants were selected on the basis that they all conduct research and teach in a university department with offerings in one of the many so-called “non-Western” philosophical traditions and that they are therefore particularly sensitive to issues involved in researching and teaching these traditions of thought. The committee’s first newsletter, which appeared in 2001, was based on this panel and contained a commentary by Schwitzgebel and articles by Solomon, Prabhu and Arisaka.⁶

By 2000, there were still relatively few women philosophers and philosophers

⁴ The APA has three divisions: Eastern, Central and Pacific, and each division holds an annual meeting.

⁵ For more information on these committees, their newsletters and the relevant statistics, see the Diversity submenu on the APA website at <https://www.apaonline.org/page/divmenu>.

⁶ <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/2EAF6689-4B0D-4CCB-9DC6-FB926D8FF530/v01n1Asian.pdf>

of color whose philosophical interests include non-Western traditions of thought. At that point, Asian philosophies were the only recognized branch of non-Western philosophies and although there were philosophers whose specializations included Latin-American, African-American/African, Arabic and other indigenous philosophies and who were in contact with each other, they were not organized around this interest before the diversity committees came into existence. Further, although feminist and LGBTQ philosophers and philosophies had been actively organized, these areas did not primarily address non-Western philosophies or issues of race. Very few graduate programs offered a Ph.D. in non-Western or diversity-related philosophies. In fact, the University of Hawaii, the flagship of Asian and Comparative philosophy, had been the only true exception.

Since 2000, the APA has become even more actively involved in developing its diversity initiative and presently oversees its effectiveness directly from the national office. Official statements on diversity are issued, distributed and approved every few years. For example, the 2018 statement read:

The APA divisions are committed to the goal that the divisional programs and the membership of their committees achieve broad diversity. This diversity includes (but is not limited to) race, color, religion, political conviction, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identification, ethnicity, and age. Where representation on the divisional programs is concerned, we also include diversity of rank and institutional affiliation.

Further, the APA divisions are committed to the goal that the membership of their committees and the divisional programs reflect the broad diversity of philosophical traditions, orientations, and approaches in the profession. To encourage this diversity, the divisional executive committees, in cooperation with the national office, will undertake the following initiatives and welcome suggestions from the membership for continued improvement in achieving these policy goals.

- a. Gathering, analyzing, and publishing data on the diversity represented in the divisional programs.
- b. Active encouragement of the membership to support these efforts by volunteering to chair and comment at sessions, suggesting invited sessions, submitting papers and posters, and identifying other ways to ensure that the divisional programs are based on the broadest possible pool of submissions.

In 2013, a task force on diversity and inclusiveness was created in the national office which oversees the operations of the various diversity initiatives. It reports directly to the APA board of officers.

Moreover, in order to keep track of the demographic information relevant to the promotion of inclusiveness, the APA began in 2016 to collect data on diversity and inclusiveness through its large-scale survey, conducted every few years, on diversity-related issues in departments and among philosophy graduate students. Questions in these surveys are not limited to race, ethnicity or LGBTQ status, but also include questions about disability, whether students come from first-generation households (in which the student is the first person from a household to attend college) and whether or not they have a military background.⁷ The survey contained in the 2019 report also asked graduate students questions to determine whether they felt respected and included in the department; whether they experienced any discriminatory practices, and whether they thought the program could become more diverse. At the time, information collected was intended to serve as the basis for further recommendations.

In addition, the APA began active undergraduate recruitment and outreach among underrepresented groups. For example, with ongoing assistance from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the association supports university efforts to create undergraduate summer diversity institutes and workshops, taught by philosophers from diversity groups, who recruit students from underrepresented groups to study philosophy. Currently there are eight such summer institutes. Until 2017, there was also the Philosophy in an Inclusive Key Summer Institute (PIKSI) Ambassador Program, which appointed student “ambassadors” from underrepresented groups who visited undergraduate students from underrepresented groups to encouraged them to either consider studying or continue studying philosophy.

Additionally, the APA began the online “Diversity and Inclusiveness Syllabus Collection.”⁸ Philosophers who teach diversity-related courses can share their syllabi or develop one to post in order to assist others who were equally interested in incorporating elements of diversity in their courses. Currently, there are 26 categories listed of which some are specific diversity-oriented courses such as Africana Philosophy, Indigenous Philosophy, Islamic Philosophy, and Multicultural and World Philosophies, while yet others are more traditional courses, such as History of Philosophy, Social and Political Philosophy and Philosophy of Language,

⁷ The 2019 report is available at https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/data_on_profession/apda_final_report_2019.pdf.

⁸ See https://www.apaonline.org/members/group_content_view.asp?group=110430&id=380970 for an extensive list of these syllabi. Authors of these syllabi retain copyright and receive a citation when their syllabus is shared.

which incorporate elements of diversity and inclusiveness. Examples of the latter would be a Philosophy of Language course that includes readings in sexist and/or racist speech-acts, or a course in epistemology that addresses questions of epistemic injustice or feminist epistemology.

4 Diversity among the Philosophy Departments

Beyond these efforts of the APA, diversity initiatives at departmental level also increased exponentially over the last 20 years. In 2000, the University of Hawaii, with its focus on Asian and Comparative philosophy, had been practically the only department with a notable diversity profile. Although there were other departments in which one could earn a Ph.D. in a non-Western philosophical tradition such as Africana philosophy, they were few and far between and usually not particularly diverse, either in terms of teaching staff or student body. In stark contrast, by 2020, the graduate programs in which one could earn a Ph.D. in a diversity-oriented field had risen to 48.⁹ Many departments gradually re-invented themselves over the past 20 years to become more diverse in their offerings. In this regard, the seven most notable departments and their diversity offerings are:

1. Binghamton University (NY): Asian, Africana, Asian-American, Feminism, Gender, Postcolonial, Diasporic, Trans;
2. Emory University (GA): Africana, Puerto Rico, Feminism, Gender, Race, Decolonial, Multiculturalism, Holocaust, Migration;
3. Pennsylvania State University (PA): Feminism, Gender, Race, Africana, Indigenous, Latin-American;
4. Stony Brook University (NY): Asian, Asian-American, Indian-Analytic, Comparative, Race, Feminism;
5. The University of Hawaii (HI): Comparative, Asian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Buddhist, Islamic, Feminism, Children;
6. The University of Memphis (TN): Feminism, Gender, Race, Comparative, African;
7. The University of Oregon (OR): Feminism, Gender, Race, Latin-American, Indigenous, Decolonial.

⁹The list with the link to the departments can be found at <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/en/histories-of-philosophy/curricula-and-research-worldwide/us-diversity-oriented-departments/>.

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There has been a fast and steady increase in the number of departments that offer philosophy of race and Africana philosophy, and representation in areas such as decolonial and indigenous philosophy, while relatively new, are expected to increase. Below is a list of the area of specialization in which one can now earn a Ph.D., followed by the number of representative departments in each category:

1. African-American and Africana philosophy: 14
2. Arabic and Islamic philosophy: 8
3. Asian philosophy (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, other): 22
4. Comparative philosophy: 12
5. Feminist philosophy: 36
6. Philosophy of gender: 19
7. Indigenous philosophy: 2
8. Latin-American philosophy: 9
9. Multiculturalism: 1
10. Philosophy of race: 23
11. Postcolonial and/or Decolonial philosophy: 3

As this list indicates, the number of doctorates in diversity fields have increased significantly and every year the number of new posts created and appointments made in them, increases. Among the undergraduate programs in state and liberal arts colleges, the issue of diversity has been embraced much more readily. Given demographics and continuing efforts by the APA, this tendency is likely to increase.