FOREWORD

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Definitions of philosophy are notoriously contested, but an investigation into the “big questions” must be one of the most frequent of them. Presumably, these are foundational questions about existence, reality, and human life that cannot help but obsess us—we who find ourselves, here in the first half of the twenty-first century, still uncertain about the nature of our own consciousness, the origins of our universe, or what happens after we inevitably die.

The present collection by Steven M. Emmanuel brings together a group of experts to guide readers through a series of the big questions via Buddhist and Western approaches. Buddhist philosophy dates back to the teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama in the sixth or fifth century BCE. Its rich history developed over the subsequent centuries in diverse stages and produced multiple schools and branches of inquiry. The scholarly practices and methods of Buddhist philosophy are perhaps exemplified by the famed monastic university of Nālandā, said to be founded in India as early as the fifth century BCE, flourishing from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries CE, and attracting students and patrons from Korea to Indonesia. Several of the important philosophers discussed in this volume—including Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250),

Dignāga (c. 480–540), and Dharmakīrti (c. 600–660)—are affiliated with it. To this day, its scholarly traditions persist at the Buddhist universities of Tibet, with the current Dalai Lama considering himself a member of the Nālandā lineage.¹

We might say that Nālandā is indeed a pivotal institution in the history of world philosophies, in that it trained several of the most influential translators of Sanskrit texts into Chinese, including Xuanzang (602–664) and Yijing (635–713). The reception of Sanskrit-language materials in China undoubtedly marks one of the most important cross-cultural exchanges in philosophy. Despite linguistic and grammatical barriers that render certain conventions of Sanskrit and literary Chinese simply incommensurable to each other, Buddhist philosophy made an indelible impact on China, both intellectually and culturally. Many of the texts and thinkers discussed in the present volume had a direct or indirect influence on the scholarly renaissance of the Song dynasty (960–1279), known in English as “neo-Confucianism,” another pivotal episode in the history of philosophy and a focal point in my own research.

All that said, this accounting of philosophical historiography is perhaps at odds with another common description of philosophy—that is, that it began in Greece, a special discovery of Socrates (d. 399 BCE), who from out of the mix of superstition and sophistry emerged with a unique vision for the “love of wisdom” and the disciplinary methods for practicing it. Is there not a fundamental tension between the idea that philosophy engages foundational (and presumably widespread) questions of shared human concern and the coincident claim that it is the unique discovery of a small group of ancient scholars in a single Greek city-state? I cannot help but see an uncomfortable evolutionary picture being painted here. Is the implication not that the Greeks were more advanced? That the emergence of philosophical

thought is evidence of the pace of a people advancing along some developmental trajectory? As one historian of philosophy says in 1865, in a comment that reflects widespread beliefs about the philosophical narrative that grew increasingly entrenched over the nineteenth century: “No Asian people . . . has lifted itself to the heights of free human contemplation from which philosophy issues; philosophy is the fruit of the Hellenic spirit.”²

We should pause here to note that the myth of Greek origins has been thoroughly debunked by philosophers and intellectual historians through careful and responsible research and argumentation. The previous quote is not unknown—it is taken from historian Peter K. J. Park’s 2013 book *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*, which is featured prominently in online platforms such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, discussed at length in various philosophy blogs, and reviewed by numerous academic journals.³ Before this, in the 1990s, Robert Bernasconi documented that the theory of Greek origins surfaced only in the early nineteenth century, and he charged philosophy with the “paradox of parochialism,” or the apparent conflict between the idea that philosophy is fundamentally about universal claims and the idea that it is culturally Greek by birth.⁴ In this same decade, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze was discussing the role of racial theories in shaping the understanding of reason and rationality during the Enlightenment.⁵

In support of such work, Park’s 2013 intellectual history presents a wealth of detailed evidence that the narrative of philosophy’s Greek origins emerged only around the same time that a newly minted pseudoscience of race in Europe first allowed the Greeks to be called “white” and first proposed that a capacity for reasoning might be race-based. Prior to the development of this particular racial classification schema, if we look at various histories of philosophy written in Europe between the 1500s and

1800s, we will find over twenty that either attribute the origins of philosophy to a non-Greek source (such as Egypt or India), or that survey multiple philosophical traditions originating in different areas, including (to name just a few) Persia, Ethiopia, China, and, in one case, Canada (by which the author meant the indigenous peoples of the Americas).⁶

I am confident that very few philosophers today actively subscribe to the explicit theory of racial essentialism that undergirds notions such as the “Hellenic spirit” cited previously. And, in increasing numbers, we philosophers are growing worried that our curriculum and our canon indeed implicitly transmit this outdated mode of essentialist thinking to students via the form and content of standard academic tracks in philosophy departments. For example, the curricular requirements for a philosophy major and minor most often include a “history of philosophy” series that recapitulates nineteenth-century historiography from ancient Greece to modern Europe. Our course catalogs, to give another example, reflect familiar categories that are the products of European philosophy’s disciplinary schema, such as metaphysics, ethics, logic, and epistemology. When we send students to graduate school, they learn to discuss their specializations in terms of this intellectual history and these disciplinary categories. When they enter the job market, they generally are answering ads seeking specialists similarly defined by this history and categorization.

Imagine for a moment an undergraduate philosophy department shaped by different terms and categories (here borrowed from my own areas of specialization). Instead of “ancient” and “modern” philosophy, students have taken classes in “Han-dynasty” and “Song-dynasty” philosophy—the appropriate historical markers for discussing important moments in Chinese intellectual history. Instead of analytic philosophy and continental philosophy, students have been exposed to the “teachings of awakened

ones” (*fofa* 佛法) and the “lineage of scholars” (*rujia* 儒家)—that is, “Buddhism” and “Confucianism”—reflecting two of the major competing approaches in China to the big questions that obsess us humans. Finally, instead of being taught the difference between “epistemology” and “ethics” (a line that is hard to draw in Chinese discourse), students have been taught to distinguish “*li*-studies” (*lixue* 理學) from “*xin*-studies” (*xinxue* 心學), two major disciplinary methodologies that emerged during the Song era. It goes without saying that any student trained in this way would be unrecognizable to the vast majority of philosophy graduate programs and hiring committees.

As this illustrates, the cultural homogeneity of mainstream philosophy is held in place at a structural level via the terminological choices that determine everything from our academic specializations, to the titles of our books and journals, to the curricular requirements for our majors and minors. Those with concerns about diversifying the canon (and there is an entire blog series at the website of the American Philosophical Association on this issue)⁷ must walk a line between the desire to intervene in hegemonic practices and the need to remain visible and understandable within the mainstream academic discipline. Our experiences at this often-fuzzy border require constant negotiations.

In a situation such as this, a book on philosophy’s big questions that skillfully negotiates Buddhist and Western approaches is indispensable. Books like this one give all of us the kinds of tools we need to approach content outside our areas of specialization and bring that content into our classrooms. Buddhist philosophy speaks to us and our students with existential urgency. This book manages the task of expressing Buddhism’s big questions in the tradition’s own terms, via its own methodologies, and in a way that communicates inclusively, inviting readers to make

connections to their immediate lives and experiences. Emmanuel and the impressive set of scholars gathered in this collection help us all appreciate the richness of a pluralistic philosophy where supposedly old questions still manage to surprise and inspire.

NOTES

1. Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), Khonton Peljor Lhundrub, and Jose Ignacio Cabezon, *Meditation on the Nature of Mind* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2011), 15–16.
2. Quoted in Peter K. J. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 4. Park quotes Friedrich Michelis.
3. Carlin Romano, “The Toxic History of Philosophy’s Racism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 8, 2014, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-toxic-history-of-philosophys-racism/>.
4. Robert Bernasconi, “Philosophy’s Paradoxical Parochialism: The Reinvention of Philosophy as Greek,” in *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 212–26.
5. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, “The Color of Reason: The Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology,” in *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 103–40.
6. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy*, 70–77.
7. The blog series is searchable by the tag “Diversifying the Canon.” See *Blog of the APA*, <https://blog.apaonline.org/tag/diversifying-the-canon/>.