

Notes on our Conversation about Dialogue between Indigenous and academic philosophy

Sylvia: The following is an email dialogue arising from a summary of my notes, from a presentation on March 8th 2018 to the Kwantlen Student Association Aboriginal Club (with Professor Alison Wylie). Bruce took my notes and interspersed his own comments, highlighting and underlining some of the expressions I'd used. (I've tidied up the formatting a little for clarity.) Although this document comes from an informal exchange, it preserved some important insights into Bruce's thinking, as well as presenting a vivid record of his bright and thoughtful style of engagement.

Bruce: I think that it is central to our common projects or work to adhere to a non-assumption mind-set when it comes to conversation between mainstream or western philosophy and indigenous thought systems. I would of, for example, not thought about the potential relationship and contribution of both ancient and scholastic philosophy without your thinking and knowledge, so I hope that we do not try and map out boundaries under the guise of assuming whether there can be relationships or not. Your points are awesome.

Sylvia: I began from Bruce Ferguson's 2016 question posed to Canadian academic philosophers: whether we engaged with Indigenous philosophies in our academic teaching, and what were the obstacles to doing so. Ferguson found that many of those interested in doing so raised concerns about cultural appropriation, as well as confessing their own ignorance, leading to a chicken-and-egg cycle. I noted that academic philosophy has made some efforts to include other academic traditions—from ancient China and ancient India—but has been less successful in engaging with other non-academic traditions. *As a scholar of the early tradition of Greek philosophy, beginning before the founding of formal schools of philosophy, I wondered whether a useful bridge might be formed, drawing on the non-academic philosophies of ancient Greece. Looking at the early formation of the western self-conception of philosophy helps highlight how certain decisions and assumptions shaped the prevailing picture of the boundaries of philosophy within academic analytic philosophy.*

Bruce: Agreed. In the above text that I highlighted, "the founding of formal schools of philosophy" kind of indicates to me a proper way to arrive at doing philosophy. I know that is not your intent, but I think it is an exciting point. We assume that the way things evolved in one part of the globe is somehow connected to the right way of doing things, I know that was not your intention in selecting those words. I think it is fair to say that the "formal schools" as they were founded was somewhat of a non-planned and organic process of finding ways to think that made time and place for a certain group within the human species. I think that we need to think more about allowing the rest of the population on earth think about how they arrive at and "systemize" their thinking schools or processes. (Something like that).

To your point though YES, looking at the early formation of western self-conception of philosophy can identify the dynamics that western thinkers allowed for themselves in developing philosophy, ideas or dynamics that can be allowed for the rest of the world's peoples. I think that those dynamics can be already seen in ancient Chinese or Indian

philosophy. Yes, those decision and assumptions are key to thinking our way through on allowing indigenous philosophy to self-define in a ethno-metaphysical or "network of philosophical traditions".

Sylvia: Socrates is often looked to as the great teacher of philosophical method by western academic philosophers. *I noted that he lived at a time when travelling teachers (Sophists) were undermining traditional authority and values, and that his practice of careful examination only made sense against the background of his belief that everybody deep down shares the same aspiration to the good, and his conviction that we can all individually come to see the truth once our mistakes are clear to us.*

Bruce: What an interesting point! There were in Socrates' time the Sophist whom tried to undermine traditional authority, and while I don't pretend to understand the dynamics of this undermining activity, there is value in thinking how aboriginal (and/or political ally) academics are trying to frame our discussions through activism. I don't think philosophy should be comfortable as we need to delve into the nature of everything and that means speaking against what group-think or political correctness taken to the extreme claims, and while the conversation may not be comfortable it can remain respectful. You have seen my article on my history with the aboriginal struggle and my disillusion at old age, and the half-baked thoughts on what I feel about the hypocrisy we find in so many areas of our socio-political struggle as indigenous people. Yet within a context of many remarkable native and non-native thinkers in thinking communities and grass roots group thought.

Sylvia: What Bruce calls the 'question and frustration methodology' is quite problematic without that belief. In response to Melinda Hogan's [observation](#) that the practice of giving reasons is a valuable one, I clarified that I don't want to forfeit this, but believe it can be done in a non-disputatious mode, and one that avoids some of the pathologies of academic practice.

Bruce: What you say about Socrates' methodology is intriguing cause my sense is that there is something there that can be brought into service of today's discussions, that is Socrates' belief noted above in italics, that there are commonalities among all peoples based on our human experience and our efforts to survive and make meaning of our existence, this to me is the glue that can nail down inter-traditional systemized thinking between groups of people and networks of philosophical thoughts.

Sylvia: I stressed that philosophers have long seen engaging with other points of view—whether historically or culturally distinct—as a key tool to exposing our own assumptions, and noted the reluctance of scholars to do comparative work without genuine knowledge of different languages and cultures. Nonetheless, engaging meaningfully with very different traditions is our best lens to think more deeply about what we assume.

Bruce: Nice statement! I agree!

Sylvia: Bruce [drew a distinction in the discussion afterwards between](#) the critique of academic philosophy, [and](#) the project of articulating Indigenous philosophies on their own terms. *One question for me is how a synthetic project of articulating an Indigenous worldview* (examples would be Thomas Norton-Smith, *The Dance of Person and Place*,

Betty Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, Richard Atleo, *Tsawalk*) *differs in spirit and approach from the kind of critical project more at home in academic philosophy*. Even the kinds of synthetic projects of Greek philosophers like Empedocles or Epicurus were framed in the context of cultural breakdown and perplexity, a context that left the individual philosopher to try to formulate a response to their quandaries and to express it in a way that was meant to persuade others to adopt a new vision. Does this individualism or the persuasive aim impose limitations on what is said? I'm thinking of the kind of comparison made by Brian Yazzie Burkhart in 'What Coyote and Thales can Teach Us,' that looks at the epistemological differences between two approaches.

Bruce: Synthetic - (of a proposition) having truth or falsity determinable by recourse to experience. (I hope that is the meaning in which you used the word, as I had to look the word up! I see the process on non-indigenous writers taking on critical projects are writers that are arguing something within their own traditions. Indigenous writers (and I haven't read these sources) make use of our people's experience generally and specifically to speak to a non-native fabrication of the world, of "reality" and how things work here on earth. *Indigenous writing is not critical of itself* but may be critical of "sell out" ideas being promoted in the aboriginal academic and political community. Non-indigenous writing is critical of older mainstream thoughts, and they kind of join forces with indigenous writers writing against western paradigms, thinking and so forth.

Sylvia: Bruce notes that a number of academic philosophers he surveyed made reference to the idea of a method of inquiry in delimiting the scope of philosophy, and suggests that we can read practices of retelling protocols and stories as a form of systematizing knowledge. Recently I was struck by Richard Atleo's reading (in *Tsawalk*) of the story of Son of Mucus and Pitch Woman as an argument that everybody deep down shares the same aspiration to the good - this is a more subtle way than Plato's of conveying philosophical truths, and requires a different style of listening. I think academic philosophers might also want to know how practices of challenge and revision occur in Indigenous practice. Perhaps your third chapter might consider how there are styles of conversation and dialogue that allow for people to change their minds/reach consensus or greater clarity without the confrontational approach we identify as 'argument'?

Bruce: I think that in indigenous ways generally, we do not have authority figures similar to authority figures, wise ones or teachers as is found in the western tradition or academia in general. I think we acknowledge as indigenous people that we all have been given a piece of the puzzle called life and what we are engaged in as thinkers. Our story telling is not about saying what is right and wrong, nor judging the choices of other in their lives; our stories are simply stories that outline facts and consequences of choices and lets the listener - listen and - respond in his or her way in a manner that makes sense for him and her. Elders can be thought of as people with an expertise in certain areas, we have elders in terms of hunting, we have elders in terms of understanding human relations, we have elders in terms of spiritual and cultural understanding, the term elders is not necessarily the same as age. So, I am interested in what you are talking about - the requirement to listen in a different style. Styles of conversation would make an awesome third chapter...wanna help me in writing that? So, those are just some of my thoughts to your thoughts and I look forward to the evolution of our thinking. Take care for now.

Bruce Ferguson

Sylvia Berryman