

The philosophical canon and the truth: Challenges from the no-progress view of philosophy by
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The canon is often shaped by factors irrelevant to the virtues of the practice. However, the dominant canon certainly does not seem to be completely useless; and even within this canon of “white privileged males”, it is unclear what the criteria of inclusion and exclusion is. (Examples: The unclear status of Schiller, Camus; the absence of reaction to Hume’s first book.) In any case, this kind of thing is not limited to philosophy (the literary canon, for example). Who gets in and on what basis?

In the literary tradition, the notion of the canon has a *theological* origin (SH Olsen). So, a work which is to be included in the canon must be *authentic* (translating in philosophy to an “original contribution” made by the author in the text) and have a certain *authority*, i.e., it had to be something which ‘inspired’ believers to make their own faith stronger (translating in philosophy to being something “worthy of consideration” and seriousness). (In philosophy, implicit in all this is the assumption that philosophy will guide us to a certain definite goal.)

In literary tradition, the Church or the Pope decided what was to be included in the canon. But in philosophy’s “secular” canon, who gets to decide?

The notion of a canon goes back to Alexandrian philologists, who wanted a selection of earlier literature for the use of grammarians in their schools. The idea of something known as the “classics” which teach you something valuable. In this understanding, the canon is a catalogue of works and authors prescribed to a younger generation by people who believe themselves to be in a position of authority.

If the canon is supposed to be a body of “related” works, how exactly are they related? This goes back to the problem of the definition of philosophy. Put another way: *What are we trying to define by grouping these works together?*

One way to relate them are by invoking the idea of methodology: What makes philosophy distinct from other writings is its methodology (J. Gibson). Poetry and philosophy deal with the same issues and may even offer the same insights, but they differ in their methodology. Maybe this is why Camus isn’t on the canon.

Well, now the problem is that it’s pretty hard to specify philosophical methodology itself: It ranges from phenomenology to naturalism; both with substantial exclusive but (as such) mutually exclusive.

Alternatively, maybe we can explain the internal relation of the canon by specifying some topics unique to philosophy: “The big questions”. Of course, there is no precise consensus on the totality of these questions either. But a bigger problem is that there seems to always be an obvious overlap with other domains.

Let us go back to those people in the position of authority in forming the canon. The selection depends often not on “internal qualities” of the work but external factors unrelated to it.

But are there intrinsic criteria at all? As such, it would pick out those texts which contribute best to the “goal” of philosophy. But what *is* the goal of philosophy? (And why do philosophy?)

It seems fairly evident that one of the goals of philosophy was the betterment of human life (in a fairly practical sense). (The Sceptics, the Stoics, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Spinoza all spoke on this.) And in general, this cannot seem to be separated from the proper metaphysical understanding and explanation of the world; this makes philosophy an intellectual endeavor (the search for truth).

So, one candidate for intrinsic criteria could be the discovery of truth and accumulation of knowledge. The canon would be those works which contribute to the truth best. Russell: "Philosophy arises from an unusually obstinate attempt to arrive at real knowledge." In Plato: The world of ideas is the "true" world; the use of reason and the intellect becomes its locus; everything else harshly discarded. In early modern philosophy, truth as the guiding principle to improve our living conditions. Seeing how Plato, Aristotle all got many things wrong, the early moderns became obsessive about never being wrong and not repeating the mistakes of the past. (See: Descartes, Bacon. Locke was more pessimistic, but while he gave up absolute truth, he had the "We did the best we could" attitude. Every philosopher seems to start off with a "A couple of people before me addressed this issue but they were all wrong" sort of bickering.)

But it's not very easy to see how the members of this canon relate to this so-called "truth", given the canon's own inconsistency, much of it not even considered "true" anymore (long-discarded theories and ideas in it: Plato's ideas, Aristotle on slavery, Descartes' dualism, Kantian ethics & his theory of genius), etc. In a nutshell, truth has a by no means straightforward relationship with the canon.

Eric Dietrich and David Chalmers: Two advocates for a sort of no-progress view in philosophy. There was always a pressure to account for the value of philosophy, but it is only now that philosophers are turning against themselves in this manner.

Dietrich says: "Philosophy is exactly the same now as it ever was. We...wrestle with the exact same problems the pre-Socratics wrestled with." Dietrich thinks of the canon as a set of footnotes to Plato. (Even modern "big questions"—animal rights, for example—can be approached by deploying Plato's methods.) Dietrich continues: Philosophy has no practical benefits (it's always "catching up" rather than "initiating changes"), because and it has no agreement on issues. (But, the speaker argues, the people who initiate the changes always have a good philosophical background.)

What is the cause of disagreements? "No real knowledge." Problems become totally fragmentary and diminished by the constant revaluation.

Maybe philosophy progresses only by aiding other subjects—but must there not be a progress internal to philosophy? Yes, but it can be hard to explain this *only* in terms of [static] truth. It can be measured in a more humanistic manner by giving us the tools and the means to *describe* our situation ("make it intelligible", perhaps?). Understanding has precedence over truth. We praise dancers for what they do with their body, and artists for what they do with their canvas and hands; why not philosophers for what they do with their mind?