

Crossing Philosophical Borders

Lea Cantor and Justin Holder present the work of *Philiminality* and other initiatives at Oxford to broaden the scope of academic philosophy.

Among academic disciplines, philosophy has a uniquely broad and timeless domain. Many of its characteristic preoccupations (*what is there? what can we be certain of? how should we treat others?* etc.) are equally pertinent to all human beings, regardless of time or place. One might think, then, that a serious philosophical community would study important contributions to these issues from people all over the world. However, virtually all of the canonical philosophers studied in European universities and throughout the Anglophone

world are Europeans or part of the European diaspora. This may give the impression that the rest of the world has had nothing particularly significant to contribute to the interrogation of philosophy's perennial questions. Is this the case? Not at all: major philosophical achievements have been, and continue to be, made across the world. The problem lies with the insularity of 'Western Philosophy' – and this is what needs to be made visible and addressed. At *Philiminality Oxford*, we are doing what we can to tackle this problem at the University of Oxford.

Philiminality ('philosophy' + 'liminality') is a student-run platform for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary philosophy. We organize events featuring philosophy that is typically ignored in Anglo-American and 'continental' academic circles; this includes philosophy from traditions outside of Europe as well as from marginalized groups and approaches within the so-called 'West'. We also welcome critical and alternative perspectives on the nature of philosophy.

Philiminality was originally founded in 2016 in Cambridge by Lea Cantor, who was then studying for the BA in Philosophy at Cambridge, and who, after taking the MSt in Ancient Philosophy, is currently finishing her DPhil at Oxford. In February 2018, Lea launched *Philiminality Oxford* with a group of Oxford graduate students from a range of faculties, including Philosophy, Theology and Religion, Oriental Studies, Politics and International Relations, Mathematics, and the School of Geography and the Environment.

Over the last four years, the group's committee has hosted a wide range of events covering numerous topics and schools of thought in the global history of philosophy, and honing cross-cultural perspectives on questions in metaphysics and epistemology, political and social philosophy, aesthetics, and environmental ethics. Our events have been generously supported by the Oxford Faculties of Philosophy and Oriental Studies, the Aristotelian Society, the Mind Association, the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the British Society for the History of Philosophy, the Marc Sanders Foundation, Worcester College, Balliol College, and All Souls College.

Our major event this academic year (2021-2022) was the conference 'In Search of Zera Yacob', organized in collaboration with Jonathan Egid, who graduated from Oxford in 2018 with a BPhil in Philosophy. This was the first international conference on two remarkable philosophical texts from early modern Ethiopia: the *Ḥatāta Zār'a Ya'ṣqob* and the *Ḥatāta Walda Heywat*. One of the guiding threads of the conference was the century-long controversy over the



authorship of the texts: do they have a genuine 17th century Ethiopian authorship, as asserted in the texts, or was the supposed discoverer of the texts, the Capuchin monk Giusto d'Urbino, in fact their secret author? The conference offered fresh perspectives on the intellectual context within which the texts may have been written, considering possible influences from Ethiopian Oriental Orthodoxy, Islamic philosophy, Christian philosophy written in Syriac and Arabic, Latin Scholastic philosophy, and more. It was also an opportunity to interrogate the fraught undertones of the authorship dispute, especially relating to European colonialism, racism, and Eurocentrism in the process of canon-formation. An edited volume gathering conference proceedings is due to appear in 2024.

In Trinity Term 2021, *Philiminality* organized a major online conference, 'Queerness Beyond Borders', which explored normative and conceptual issues surrounding queerness and its intersection with academic, political, and geographical borders. It sought to bring philosophical reflection to bear on issues traditionally marginalized within the mainstream canon, such as intersex and trans rights across countries, the conceptual boundaries of the 'gender binary', racial equity, moral justifications for queerness as grounds for refugee status, and practical and theoretical considerations for how to translate academic ideas into policy outcomes.



Over the last academic year, *Philiminality* has also endeavoured to bring into view the marginalization of women in the history of philosophy. Particularly close to home is the neglect and underappreciation of members of the ‘wartime quartet’—namely, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgely, and Iris Murdoch. This was the subject of a Michaelmas 2021 talk organized in conjunction with the Philosophy Faculty’s Equality and Diversity Student Representative, Sebastián Sánchez-Schilling. And in collaboration with the Philosophy Faculty’s Women’s Student Representative, Lara Scheibli, we also hosted a talk in November 2021 on the topic of ancient women philosophers, which questioned the commonplace that ancient philosophy was exclusively the domain of male thinkers.

Since *Philiminality*’s inception, we have worked to foster an inclusive and global approach to the study of ancient philosophy in several other projects. For instance, in June 2019, we organized an international conference, ‘Curing through Questioning’, gathering perspectives on philosophy as therapy from Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Graeco-Roman philosophy. In the academic year 2020-2021, we ran a

reading group and seminar on the Chinese Daoist tradition as well as a series of talks by world-leading scholars on Confucius’ *Analects* (now publicly available as podcasts [here](#); in Michaelmas 2021, we co-hosted a graduate workshop titled ‘One-Many Relations in Chinese Philosophy’ with Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST); and in Hilary Term 2021, we ran a discussion group and series of talks on Mesopotamian and Egyptian cosmogonies in collaboration with Early Text Cultures (ETC).

We have also collaborated with several other Oxford groups to promote cross-disciplinary dialogue and offer students resources to pursue research in less commonly taught areas of philosophy. An informal mentorship scheme organized with *people for womxn** **in philosophy (pwip)** aims to support undergraduate and graduate students in navigating the world of academic philosophy, and creating longer-term systemic change therein. Together with *oxford public philosophy (opp)*, we have organized several information sessions about studying ‘non-Western’ or ‘world’ philosophies at Oxford and beyond. At the height of the pandemic,

Philiminality’s Martina Bani—who graduated from Oxford with an MSt in Film Aesthetics in 2020—convened an online ‘Philosophy-Film Week’ co-hosted with *opp*, exploring how films can do philosophy through the screen and help us practice radical openness to our philosophical and cultural assumptions in challenging times. A symposium co-organized with *Minorities and Philosophy (MAP)* in 2019, ‘Pluralising Philosophy: Learning from the Case of Chinese Thought’, explored the tensions within ‘canonical’ philosophy regarding the status of ‘non-Western’ philosophies, drawing on critical theory of ‘race’ and Chinese philosophy.

In a similar vein, we are now planning a more ambitious international conference titled ‘Questioning ‘Western Philosophy’: Philosophical, Historical, and Historiographical Challenges’ in collaboration with Josh Platzky Miller (KwaZulu-Natal/Cambridge), scheduled for Spring 2023. The conference will critically challenge ‘Western Philosophy’ as an idea to which our understanding of philosophy and its history must correspond, and to which so-called ‘non-Western’ traditions must supposedly conform. In so doing, we aim for the conference’s debates to lay the groundwork for new visions of a global, entwined, connected history of philosophy: one which neither makes ‘Western Philosophy’ the singular measuring stick for philosophy globally, nor uses the idea of ‘Western Philosophy’ to hermetically seal off parts of Europe from exchange with the rest of the world, either retrospectively or for generations to come.

Many of us at *Philiminality* have had our most rigorous and rewarding philosophical engagement with sources which are conspicuously absent from the canon taught



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in universities like Oxford. There is still a long way to go before these damaging omissions are redressed, but there are reasons for hope. Especially in the last decade, there has been a notable increase in awareness of, and opportunities to pursue, philosophy that has historically been absent from academia. We hope that *Philiminality* might lend some small lift to that rising tide.

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