How To Unground Academic Philosophy

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1. Introduction

One of the most pressing debates within academic philosophy over the last few years concerns the disciplinary identity of philosophy. This debate has been ignited quite intensely by an Op-Ed in *The New York Times* entitled, *If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What it Really Is*, written by the philosophers Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden (2016). They called out Western philosophy departments for perpetuating a prejudiced ethnocentric Anglo-Eurocentric tradition, in both research and curricula, while systemically neglecting Non-Western philosophies.[1] The call to diversify within these departments has existed for some years already, but with many failing to do so. In response, Garfield and Van Norden controversially proposed that "any department that regularly offers courses only on Western philosophy should rename itself 'Department of European and American Philosophy." This would make it clear that these departments only cover a certain cultural tradition within philosophy – their true "intellectual commitments." Their article instigated a fiery debate on the disciplinary identity of academic philosophy.[2] The disciplinary identity of a philosophy department expresses some conception about what philosophy is, and what the canon, research and curricula should look like. Disciplinary identity delineates the philosophical domain and which practices can be considered philosophy and which not. In other words, disciplinary identity provides a principle of discrimination; it clarifies what should be included and excluded in their teaching and research.

What is at stake in this issue is some answer to the question, "What is philosophy?" I believe it is possible to discern two camps that have mustered to battle over its disciplinary identity. Although each camp is a hodgepodge of dispersed conceptions, they can clearly be grouped by the magnitude of the contested philosophical domain. One camp advocates a narrow conception of philosophy, the other a broad conception.

In this paper I attempt to evaluate a proper way of approaching the disciplinary identity of philosophy. I give a concise outline of the two adversary positions and their suitability for formulating a disciplinary identity of philosophy. I then argue that both positions are deficient and inadequate. Instead, a – surprising – 'middle way' will be presented. This approach, that overhauls and evades the whole problem, is to my best understanding a better point of departure for academic philosophy.

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1 The terms *Anglo-European* and *Western* can be used somewhat interchangeably. I use *Anglo-European* because it refers to a geographical region that dominantly practises philosophy stemming from the same regions, i.e., Australia, Europe and North America. In my opinion the term better suits this area than the term *Western*. The latter may encompass other regions such as South America or Japan. Yet, philosophy departments mostly do not engage with philosophical traditions deriving from these areas.

2 For a list of replies, see e.g., *The Doc* 2016, May 16.

2. Two conceptions

This section explores the two conceptions of philosophy. It should be noted that every conception attempts to articulate a certain idea of the nature or essence of philosophy itself.

2.1. A narrow and exclusive conception of philosophy

The narrow and exclusive conception of philosophy holds on various overlapping or coincident grounds that what it deems the essence of philosophy is demarcated either by historical, geographical, stylistic or secular conceptions of philosophy.[3] I will try to summarise these various positions.

First, there are some who argue that philosophy is an Anglo-European tradition that originated in ancient Greece. Nicholas Tampio (2016) states that Plato's *Republic* was the real starting point of philosophy, to which he adds that academic philosophy only has consistency because it builds upon the Socratic-Platonic tradition. The fact that many traditions engage with fundamental questions does not make them philosophy, "Philosophy, at its best, aims to be a dialogue between people of different viewpoints, but, again, it is a love of wisdom, rather than the possession of wisdom. […] Philosophy can certainly enter into dialogue with differing traditions, but it cannot conceive of them as philosophy." In Tampio's view, inflating philosophy to accommodate other traditions can only fuel the accusation that academic philosophy seeks to colonise other fields of thought.

Others argue on etymological grounds that philosophy belongs to the Anglo-European cultural lineage. Philosophy derives from the Greek *Philosophia* [φιλοσοφία] and is therefore originally, at least, a Western tradition. Traditions that do not use this term but share these roots can therefore not be seen as philosophical practices. This has for instance been the opinion of Derrida and Heidegger (Van Norden 25). Certainly, they do not base their thought on the etymology of philosophy, but they consider its etymology to be a marker of its seemingly geographical and historical ties.

Second, there is a group of philosophers who hold the view that philosophy has nothing to do with religion (Charlesworth 1972). Philosophy can only be practised in a secular manner. Garfield (2002, 102) explains how this separation came about. During the European Enlightenment, to distance itself from 'dogmatic' religion philosophy chose to side with the 'rationality' of science.

Third, the philosophical tradition has a unique argumentative and logical style, unfamiliar to other traditions of thought. Kyle Peone boldly states that "Non-Western wisdom traditions *are not* philosophy" because they are less "logical" than philosophy (Peone 2016). As Pigliucci (2006, May 23) points out "Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and so forth [are not] philosophical in nature because they do not attempt to argue for a position by using logic and evidence" (Pigliucci 2006). Peone considers philosophy to be a clearly delineated practice with its own rules, distinct from *wisdom traditions* with their own set of

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3 In addition, Locke and Peña-Guzmán (2021, 149-150) present a list of various tendencies that result from a Anglo-Eurocentric disciplinary identity of philosophy.

rules. Therefore, it would be a category mistake to subsume wisdom traditions under philosophy. In Peone's eyes, if philosophy departments wish to expand their domain of interest, they should ask themselves which traditions they really belong to.

It is clear that proponents of a narrow conception think that philosophy has a unique quality that separates it from other traditions. The highlighted characteristics reinforce each other within a disciplinary identity that propagates a clearly defined conception of philosophy.

2.2. A broad and inclusive conception of philosophy

The broad camp conceives a wider, and multicultural, conception of philosophy (Van Norden 2017). Generally, proponents take a very critical stance towards narrow conceptions of philosophy. They formulate a conception of philosophy that incorporates a variety of traditions and schools of thought.

Philosophers within this camp perceive philosophy as a global or multicultural endeavour that does not belong solely to the West. They point to the various intellectual practices around the globe which resemble each other in their questions, inquiries, and answers. Even a closer look at the so-called *Western* or *European* tradition of philosophy reveals that almost through its entire history it covers a region from northern Africa to India, making the terms rather ill-suited (Thijssen 2022, 65; Van Norden 2017, 19).

The view that Western philosophy is European and started from the cradle in Greece is a misconception that stems from a turn in the 18th century within historiographies of philosophy. Based on extensive research, Park (2014, 70-71) emphasises that historians of the Early Modern Era pinpoint the birthplace of philosophy somewhere ranging from the Middle East to India. In 1786, however, Christoph Meiner, who was the first to develop a pseudoscientific hierarchy of human races, construed the origins of philosophy as dominantly Greek, White, and European. Immanuel Kant picked up Meiner's racial-anthropological account of philosophy and popularised it. This Meiner-Kantian narrative greatly influenced historiographies of later date: "after [Meiner and Kant], it became particularly difficult to see the history of philosophy through non-Eurocentric eyes because their racial-anthropological framework became *the* lens through which philosophers retroactively constructed their own past" (Locke and Peña-Guzmán 2021, 148).

Adherents of a broad conception think the term *philosophy* can be applied to practices that resemble ways of thinking they count as philosophising. They say the term does not belong solely to those who use the term explicitly but can be applied to practices that bear certain resemblances, as shown by the two following cases. First, Plato constructed the name *philosophia* and retro-jected it onto a past that is usually called *presocratic* (Thijssen 2022, 85). Second, when European philosophers encountered Chinese thought, they immediately recognized it as *philosophy* (Van Norden, 19). The first major translation of Confucius' *Analects* in 1687 the Jesuit translator titled *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* [*Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher*]. Apparently, practises that do not employ the term philosophy can be considered

philosophy if there are sufficient similarities with practices that already carry the predicate. There is no specific threshold for being sufficiently similar. A good model is Wittgenstein's concept of *family resemblances* (Wittgenstein, 2009, 36-41 [§66-77]) where, in his example, games are not grouped together by some common denominator of *gamehood* but by sharing some – not all – features; there is no unique set of attributes that qualify poker, basketball, tennis and seduction say as *games*. Similarly for scholarly work that counts as *philosophy*. In addition, also like games, features can shift – redefining boundaries – as need arises, natural philosophy becomes the physical sciences and philosophy of mind merges to an extent with neuroscience.

Furthermore, some philosophers such as Garfield (2002) argue that the dichotomy between philosophy and religion is nonsensical because the fact that philosophy disentangled itself from religion in *Europe* does not mean that philosophy must be secular. The separation is rather strange to Non-Western traditions as they never felt the need to separate the two, "There was never a cataclysmic rift between religion and science, and so philosophy never had to take sides" (Garfield 2002, 104). Buddhism for example does not claim epistemic authority over matters of truth and reality, unlike Western Monotheistic religions whose epistemic claims science had to reject. Buddhists agree on following the teachings of the Buddha. This makes Buddhism more a practical matter rather than a system of beliefs. In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism is more about *orthopraxy* rather than *orthodoxy*. Thus, it never posited an epistemology that conflicted scientific endeavours. The same goes more or less for other Non-Western traditions. There was never an issue that drove them to discriminate between religion and philosophy.[4] The disentanglement in the West is thus more the exception than the rule. This raises the question whether the two need to be separated at all (Baggini 2018; Garfield 2002).[5]

Furthermore, even the acclaimed secularisation of philosophy in the West is contradicted by the history of philosophy itself. Most of philosophy prior to the Renaissance deals with religious matters. Also, after the alleged divorce of philosophy and religion, many philosophers, for example, Spinoza or Kierkegaard, kept reverting to religious subjects (see also Van Norden, 2017, 147). Even a philosopher maintaining that philosophy should be secular cannot simply ignore highly 'religious' works such as the *Upanishads*, Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* or Laozi's *Daode Jing*.

The argument that philosophy is more logical and argumentative than other traditions also falls apart under closer scrutiny. We could for example compare the syllogistic style of ancient Chinese ethics with Plato's discursive style, upon which we find out that Chinese ethics is more in line with this analytical

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4   There are, of course, Non-Western practices, such as voodoo, that reject scientific insights. Nevertheless, such occurrences never lead to a separation of religion and philosophy.

5   A separation leads to all kind of peculiar situations, such as the case of Jan Westerhoff, a leading expert in Buddhist philosophy, but housed within the Oxford Faculty of Theology and Religion rather than the Faculty of Philosophy (see https://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-jan-westerhoff). One can wonder why he belongs more to the former than to the latter. We can even question why these faculties are separate. For example, my own university, the Radboud University in the Netherlands, melds the two domains into the one Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies.

argument than Plato's dialogues (Van Norden, 145).

Things can get even more worse. Other philosophers claim that the highly esteemed Western tradition of philosophy is actually a withered domain. Throughout time, it has been reduced to abstract theorizing, and en route it has lost many of its rich dimensions such as practical philosophy, mythology, wisdom, and literary forms (MacIntyre 2022, 2-3; Davis 2019, 601). Supporters of a broad conception think that this so-called specialisation of philosophy is rather an impoverishment of philosophy's potential. Raud (2006, 624) asserts that any essentialist definition of philosophy limits its scope and its potential to evolve. Therefore, he believes that a conception should be picked that would include both Western and Non-Western traditions.

The general argument seems to be that a narrow conception confines too much. But what suggestions are there for a broad view? Garfield (2002, 108) suggests that, rather than focusing on all the dissimilarities between traditions, attention should be paid to the homologies so that dialogue and new endeavours become possible. Philosophy should be regarded as a "synoptic discipline providing the interpretive context for the full range of epistemic, artistic and moral activities" (Garfield 2002, 105-106). Likewise, Van Norden (2017, 142) proposes that "philosophy is dialogue about important *un*solved problems." Nonetheless, do these conceptions overcome the diversity problems?

3. Shortcomings of the two conceptions

At first sight, a resolution to the question of a disciplinary identity seems to reside somewhere on the spectrum between a narrow and a wide conception of philosophy. Baggini (2018, xxxix-xxx) points to the trade-off involved in this decision, "[S]tart with too narrow a definition and you end up excluding much or even most thinking from other traditions and 'philosophy' becomes nothing more than your own culture's version of it. […]. Too loose a definition, however, and there is nothing that isn't let in."

I believe that both positions are inadequate. The shortcomings of the narrow camp are, in my opinion, already exposed by the other camp. First, the supposed ethnocentric history of philosophy turns out to be an inaccurate construct. Second, the secular argument is difficult to maintain and excludes many important philosophers. And third, the characterization of philosophy as a highly abstract analytical discipline could also be regarded as a very specific niche that neglects a great deal of the philosophical domain. The broad camp wishes to avoid the errors of the narrow camp. Yet, every time it constructs a new identity, it stumbles over similar problems (Drabinski 2016). No matter how much effort we put into making the disciplinary identity totally inclusive, it will always exclude some things. Identity implies difference, since we can only identify two things with another if there is something else that these do not identify with. This quest for inclusivity may thus work against the desire to diversify philosophy. Diversity means that things differ, whereas inclusivity seeks. Therefore, If we seek to diversify philosophy, a new disciplinary identity is more or. It could very well be that   Santana (2018, 97) urges we drop the canon

altogether instead of revising it once more.

Along these lines, some figures within the broad camp advocate incorporating Non-Western philosophy into philosophy. They tend to forget that the Western/Non-Western distinction is a product of a conception that privileges Western philosophy (Hall 2019, 141-184). Using the term *philosophy* for Non-Western traditions can therefore be seen as an attempt to colonise or assimilate it into a Western conceptual framework. Some Non-Western authors abhor the term *philosophy* for this reason and prefer to use other terms to identify their heritage (Min 2012, 209).

Despite all efforts, it seems to be that every possible definition is deficient, a conclusion also reached by Thijssen (2022, 81). Thijssen suggests employing Sellars's description of philosophy: "[T]o understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (Sellars 1963, 1). I can see how this description invites the philosopher to give unfamiliar philosophies the benefit of the doubt, but I am skeptical about how such a description can lead to a formulation of a disciplinary identity of philosophy. A line should be drawn somewhere, right? However, Thijssen and Sellars may point us in a very different direction. Their suggestion is more a guideline for *doing* philosophy than an attempt to grasp *conceptually* the *inherent nature* or *essence* of philosophy. It could very well be that the problem of its disciplinary identity is not so much an issue of a wide or a broad conception or definition, but rather of our approach to the formulation of a disciplinary identity for philosophy. In the next section I suggest a radical approach that overhauls the whole problem at hand.

4. The middle way for a conception of philosophy

My employment of the term "middle way" is an allusion to the *Middle Way* suggested by the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism and its pivotal thinker, the 6th century Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna (see Garfield 1996). It argues for a very peculiar way of understanding phenomena. Phenomena should be encountered along a middle path that runs between the two extremes of reification – phenomena exist because of their eternal essence – and nihilism – phenomena do not exist because they are essenceless (see also Hayes 2021; Westerhoff 2009). That phenomena exist but are empty of some sort of essence or inherent nature seems quite paradoxical, or even outright contradictory. How can a cow exist if it lacks the very thing that makes a cow a cow? The proponents of Mādhyamika urge that, even without some underlying nature, phenomena exist because they are conditioned and caused by other phenomena. Everything thus arises interdependently instead of relying on some inherent nature. Cows do not exist because of their essential cowhood, rather they exist because of their environment, evolutionary lineage, type of food, physiology, the form of their body, and many other things.

Locke and Peña-Guzmán (2021) apply this approach to phenomena to grasping the identity of philosophy. They maintain that this approach extirpates its disciplinary identity altogether. Getting rid of

all the constraints, errors and problems of a disciplinary identity requires an undoing of this identity altogether "by embracing the groundlessness of philosophy itself" (Locke and Peña-Guzmán, 152). They insist on this point because they think that the essence of philosophy is ultimately indeterminate and indeterminable. In other words, there is no ground for an essence of philosophy. Hence, no stable identity can be formulated. The authors think we can do philosophy without knowing what it *essentially* is.

So how do Locke and Peña-Guzmán understand this idea of groundlessness? The authors propose we should use the Buddhist doctrine of "non-self" as a heuristic for understanding the disciplinary character of philosophy (Locke and Peña-Guzmán, 153). The doctrine of *anātman*, expounded by the Buddha in the *Anātmalakṣaṇa Sūtra,* is originally aimed at the idea we exist as a self and that this self enables us to experience the world. Rather than being a coherent and autonomous entity, the self is made up of five so-called aggregates: form, sensation, perception, disposition, and consciousness. What we think of as our self merely depends upon the various interactions and transmutations among these aggregates which are constantly shifting, becoming, and disappearing. Or in the words of Locke and Peña-Guzmán, "[T]he self is only an amalgamation of various facets of our transactions with the world – facets that are always in a state of transformation." The self does not cause these aggregates; it is rather their product. Our conception of the self is therefore like a mirage or an illusion.[6] The doctrine is therefore used as a heuristic arguably to get rid of this illusion.

Locke and Peña-Guzmán think we can approach philosophy in a similar fashion. The notion of groundlessness conveys the idea that philosophy cannot be defined because, according to them, it has no essential identity (Locke and Peña-Guzmán, 154-156). Since philosophy presumably lacks an unshakeable transhistorical, logical or geographical essence, we cannot "admit a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that delimit it" in principle (Locke and Peña-Guzmán, 155). Instead of regarding philosophy as "a *thing* with firm and constant contours," we should conceive it "as a multiply realizable *process* without essence" (Locke and Peña-Guzmán, 158). Philosophy is a cluster concept enveloping an enormous variety of philosophical practices. It depends upon a variety of configurations of divergent features such as topics, methods, literary forms, writing styles and media of expression (Locke and Peña-Guzmán 2021, 155). Jointly, they are sufficient, but no set of features can serve as the necessary condition for counting as philosophy. I agree with the authors that this aligns more neatly with a global and multicultural approach to philosophy, which they describe as a "fluid and globally distributed activity that takes different forms at different times in in different places" (Locke and Peña-Guzmán 2021, 155). Philosophy is thus an interdependent cluster concept.

Still, one might be worried that this inflates philosophy to *whatever goes.* Since without a good and clear sense of the nature of philosophy, how do we know we are philosophising? Philosophy risks

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6   Garfield (2022) has written a thoroughgoing argument for the claim the self is an illusion and advocates we should rather stick with the notion of being a person. According to him, any argument that posits the self as a synchronic or diachronic identity is incoherent (Garfield, 13-36). Therefore, we should drop the self.

becoming totally arbitrary at the moment we take away the ground beneath it. This is certainly the case when we assert that no identity whatsoever can be formulated. Locke and Peña-Guzmán are at risk of asserting precisely this. They do, after all, clearly state that we should eradicate its disciplinary identity.

There are two ways to understand the groundlessness of the discipline:

[1] Groundlessness implies there is no such identity and thus philosophy can be anything because it is nothing. This is, I believe, the big risk of Locke and Peña-Guzmán's argument. If this interpretation is correct, it is a huge weakness of their case. It would make distinctions impossible. One could even question whether philosophy is a distinct and unique discipline in respect to other academic disciplines. Or more extremely, why should we not throw every disciplinary distinction out of the window and say that everything that happens in academia amounts to the very same thing? Such a claim seems absurd.

[2] Groundlessness does not imply the impossibility of formulating *a disciplinary identity*. The non-assertability of the essence of philosophy does not mean that an essence is nonexistent. Instead, it means that philosophy's essence is ineffable. We cannot even assert that an essence is nonexistent since this would equally be trying to determine an essence albeit in a negative form. Therefore, the groundlessness of philosophy does not make philosophy itself unreal or nonexistent.[7] It is thus very possible for a faculty of philosophy to discuss their sense(s) of philosophy and to formulate their accounts of disciplinary identity. Only this disciplinary identity cannot be exhaustive and definitive. So disciplinary identity is locally bounded. This clarifies how disciplinary identity is paradoxically both real and unreal. There is no essential identity but there is identity, or rather identities: The disciplinary identity of a philosophy department is one amongst many others.

The second option has the virtue of making sense, and it shows the notion of groundlessness is a useful heuristic for understanding philosophy as a discipline. Philosophy in particular must reflect on, and also to some extent reflect, not only its diverse self-understandings but sometimes their conflicts. It is the discipline for which what it is is a question, and a challenge. The heuristic of groundlessness makes us attentive to the dynamic of philosophy's identity.

5. Ride upon the wind

The heuristic prevents making definitive but questionable claims about what philosophy is and what it is definitively not. And it preserves distinctions between disciplines although their boundaries are sometimes rather fluid and indefinite. Philosophy can intersect with other disciplines such as economics or

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7   This runs along the same lines of argumentation of the Mādhyamika critique on their intellectual contemporaries, the Abhidharma tradition. The followers of the Mādhyamaka school claim that the Buddha's teachings do not assert that the self is essentially nonexistent since this would amount to claiming nonexistence as its essence. Nāgārjuna thus radicalises the doctrine of selflessness by asserting that all phenomena are empty [*śūnya*] of intrinsic nature and, instead, co-arise dependently. This doctrine of emptiness [*Śūnyavāda*] implies that nothing exists ultimately (or essentially), whereas phenomena only exist conventionally (see The Cowherds, 2011; Garfield, 2014). For a further explanation of this and a showcase of the logic behind it, see Priest (2018).

religion. Yet whenever we try to divide elements of such intersections in a way that they fall either in the category of philosophy, or in the category of economics or religion, we run into numerous problems and counterarguments. That this strife is so often seen itself as a problem fails to appreciate the dynamics of groundlessness: ceaseless contention or conversation about what it is doing. Instead, this should be perceived as the norm. Worries about the inability to categorise only prevent us from pursuing interesting endeavours.

But the view also offers academic philosophers some benefits. Philosophers can stop clinging to some wobbly account of an essential identity. Groundless philosophy does not give us "a basic account of *what makes philosophy philosophy*" (Locke and Peña-Guzmán 2021, 156). It lacks a clear and fundamental principle of discrimination. It becomes possible for philosophers to look beyond any formulated disciplinary identity to discover a vast realm of philosophical potentialities. The idea of groundlessness steers us to receptivity to the unfamiliar. It opens the way for methodological diversification as well because it is not clear in advance how philosophy should be done (Burley, 2018, 82; Davis 2019, 601-607).

Certainly going beyond one's disciplinary identity can lead to a "discomfiting *aporeia*" (impasse/puzzlement) as Locke and Peña-Guzmán (2021, 157-158) note, since we abandon familiar territory and become decreasingly adept at knowing what we are doing. But this seeming disadvantage reconnects the academic philosopher to the philosophical spirit. It enables us to move away from the ignorant idea that the academic philosopher knows what he is doing because he acts in a well-defined domain. Instead, it favours the humble philosopher, adherent to Socrates' adage, "to know that one does not know," and who has a theoretically unlimited disposition to fruitful endeavours. This renewed philosophical spirit can equally go for collaborations, research programmes, or faculties as a whole. Collectives can strive for daring inquiries in *terra incognita*.

Above all, I would like to reemphasise that the groundless conception of philosophy is not our final destination. The notion of groundlessness only serves to us as a reminder that the ground on which philosophy subsists can change from time to time and place to place.[8] The notion of groundlessness is hence a heuristic that highlights the fact that the boundaries of philosophy's domain of operation are never set in stone.

6. Conclusion

As I hope I have demonstrated, both camps within academic philosophy provide an unsatisfactory answer to the issue of the disciplinary identity of philosophy. A narrow conception contains clear errors and rather leads to a huge dismantlement of philosophy, making it unsuitable to engage countless problems. A broad conception avoids many of these issues but still seeks to formulate an essential

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8   It may even be that the notion of groundlessness can be applied to other disciplines as well. This is something worthwhile to investigate in future research.

disciplinary identity only in a much wider form, ultimately even to the point that philosophy is so inflated that the concept itself evaporates. The error seems to be that we seek to build a disciplinary identity upon some essential ground. Philosophy's nature, however, cannot be pinpointed. We have to admit that a disciplinary identity will never cover the entire potential domain of philosophy. Yet, if academic philosophy wants to be versatile and receptive to its full potential, it should always consider their identity as ultimately ungrounded and contingent. This opens the field up to many existing and undiscovered practices of philosophy. What is particularly interesting about a groundless approach to philosophy is that *groundless* can say everything (because it can potentially be anything) but accepts nothing as its core (at least definitively). This makes it possible to call something philosophy without ultimately knowing what philosophy is. Rather than having an intrinsic nature, philosophy is epitomised by its multitude of practices. Rejecting an essence of philosophy should cause no surprise if we consider that the question, "what is philosophy?" is also a – possibly unanswerable – question (Priest 2006, 81). From there, we can start doing philosophy.

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