**Are our curricula making us closed-minded?**

*PESGB, Liverpool Hope, 27/6/22*

**Closedmindedness.**

CM is an *intellectual vice* – a character trait that tends to make us a *bad thinker* (eg arrogance, dogmatism, intellectual laziness, intellectual dishonesty etc.)

Definition:

*CM is an unwillingness or inability to engage with relevant intellectual possibilities*.

1. **Intellectual possibilities** – possible beliefs, ideas, ways of looking at things, etc.
2. **Inability and unwillingness** – ignoring possibilities, dismissing possibilities, refusing to respond to people who float possibilities, failing to realise there actually are other possibilities, denying or ridiculing possibilities, etc.

CM can be *narrow* or *broad*, *conscious* or *unconscious*, *gentle* or *aggressive*, and it has lots of specific forms (eg dogmatism is being CM about beliefs).

CM is an intellectual vice but many people are comfortable with it, or only see it in others.

Some examples:

1. **The question about Meghan and Harry’s baby**.
2. **The Government focus group on ‘Covid passes’** ([web](https://thecritic.co.uk/papers-please/)).

Graphical user interface

Description automatically generatedA person and person holding a baby

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Questions:

1. What does CM look like in practice?
2. What might make a person CM?
3. Why might people enjoy being CM?

**Closedmindedness and the curriculum (1): closed horizons.**

CM is an unwillingness or inability to engage with relevant intellectual possibilities.

Imagine a radically limited philosophy curriculum – no phenomenology, no existentialism, no social philosophy, no feminist philosophy, no medieval philosophy, no Indian philosophy, no Chinese philosophy, no Japanese philosophy, no Renaissance philosophy, no comparative philosophy.

How could this sort of curriculum encourage CM in students?

1. **A bad answer**: it makes it harder for students to engage relevant possibilities or makes it harder for them to identify alternative intellectual possibilities.

Problem: this does not mean they are CM – the students could be extremely willing and able to engage with relevant intellectual possibilities, even if they are prevented from doing so.

1. **A better answer**: the curriculum prevents students from developing a proper sense of the whole space of intellectual possibilities.

Curricula can shape a student’s sense of what is ‘out there’, thereby encouragingthem to internalise a narrower vision of the intellectual world.

Problem: this does not get us all the way to CM – students have other sources of knowledge about the historical and intellectual diversity of world philosophies.

I think (B) is half-right – if a student internalises a narrow picture of philosophy built into their curriculum, they acquire ‘narrow horizons’, which limit their sense of what is ‘out there’ to be open to.

BUT two other things have to happen:

1. **Bad intellectual habits** – dismissive attitudes towards certain philosophical traditions, sneering contempt towards certain figures – and being rewarded for being dismissive and contemptuous.
2. **A narrow sense of relevance** – a narrow definition of ‘relevant’ – eg philosophy is only relevant if it is … *science-based*, *part of the canon*, *allied to radical social critique*, *very abstract*, *supportive of my religious faith*, *‘provocative’*, *‘traditional’*, etc.

In each case, what is eroded is our ability to comprehend and explore the diversity of alternative intellectual possibilities found across different cultures, times, and traditions.

Question: does a narrow curriculum + teaching bad intellectual habits + instilling a narrow sense of relevance get us to CM?

**Closedmindedness and the curriculum (2): presentism.**

Here is a specific intellectual attitude I see a lot: **presentism** (sometimes called [neophilia](https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/239-reloading-the-canon)).

*A presentist takes the values, attitudes, and needs of the present world which they endorse and use them as the standard of relevance when confronted with historical philosophies.*

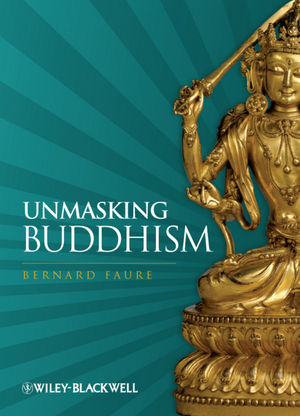
Some symptoms of presentism:

1. An indifference to whatever is historical, traditional, ‘old’.
2. A sense that knowing the history of philosophy is pointless, ‘useless’.
3. A scorn for ‘old dead Greeks’, or calls to ‘dump Descartes’, or desires to empty the curriculum of content that diverges from, or offers alternatives to, modern sensibilities.
4. An insistence that historical figures, texts, and traditions are only relevant if they endorse present values or causes.
5. A willingness to bend and twist historical philosophies to make them fit into the modern moral tastes.

The consequence is a radical hostility to genuine alternatives to one’s own, current ways of thinking. “Everything that came before must affirm us or lead to us.”

Example of presentism in philosophy: **teaching Buddhism**.

A person sitting on a ledge

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Questions:

1. Do you recognise this kind of presentism? Is it actually a thing? How common is it?
2. Is the presentist being closed-minded?
3. If presentism is closed-minded, is this a bad thing?
4. If presentism isn’t closed-minded, why not?