

The Reason Why Canon Expansion is Crucial for Studying Early Modern Philosophy

In this paper, I argue that canon expansion is crucial for the study of early modern philosophy because it allows to improve the epistemic performance of groups – e.g. people engaged in a specific debate in contemporary philosophy – willing to draw from its results. Yet in order to unlock this potential of canon expansion, it is necessary, or so I argue, to replace what I call a ‘political’ approach to canon expansion in early modern philosophy with a ‘cognitive’ one. Doing so, moreover, will also avoid methodological issues like the ‘Handmaiden’ problem as well as the ‘New Amnesia’. I will argue for these contentions in three steps.

First, I clarify the ‘political’ and ‘cognitive’ approaches to canon expansion. On the ‘political’ approach, the goal is to enhance social diversity in philosophy, considered a prerequisite for social justice within the canon and the discipline. By ‘social diversity,’ I refer to demographic variations such as age, gender, or race. This contrasts with ‘cognitive diversity,’ which refers to “variations in background knowledge, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches” (Longino 1990, 76ff). Cognitive diversity, the central focus of the cognitive approach, is closely linked to the social diversity within a group and its epistemic performance. This performance, in turn, is crucial for the ‘Diversity-Performance Hypothesis’ (DPH), which is discussed in philosophy of science since the mid-1990’. The DPH posits that (i) cognitive diversity enhances epistemic performance, (ii) social diversity fosters cognitive diversity, and (iii) social diversity thus improves epistemic performance (e.g., Sikimić, Damnjanović, and Perović 2023). This will become important by the end of the paper.

Second, I show that the political approach – adopted by many proponents of canon expansion to date – has resulted in I will focus on two particularly prominent one’s to illustrate this point. The first problem is the ‘Handmaiden’ issue, highlighted by Charlotte Witt (2006) and reaffirmed by Mary Ellen Whaite (2015), which involves treating non-canonical figures as secondary to canonical ones. For instance, analysing Descartes’ correspondence with Elisabeth of Bohemia primarily to better understand Descartes increases social diversity but reduces Elisabeth to a secondary role. The second problem is the ‘New Amnesia’, which arises when non-canonical thinkers like women philosophers are integrated without acknowledging the distinct challenges they faced. As Hutton (2021) notes, Margaret Cavendish lacked the formal training of her male peers, which affected her use of technical terms. Failing to recognize this risks unfairly comparing her work to Locke’s, portraying her as less rigorous for instance when her circumstances were simply different.

Third, I argue that the cognitive approach addresses these methodological problems and helps to strengthen the relevance of canon expansion (and by extension early modern philosophy) from a contemporary point of view. Consider that the 'Handmaiden' issue arises from a focus on canonical figures, which, while legitimate under the political approach, undermines the unique perspectives of non-canonical thinkers. But from on the cognitive approach, which values the cognitive diversity of the thinker in question, the unique perspective this thinker can offer is the main focus. The 'New Amnesia' issue similarly disappears when cognitive diversity is prioritized, because this entails recognizing variations in background knowledge, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches.

More broadly, the cognitive approach makes canon expansion (and so early modern philosophy) valuable for contemporary debates, provided these debates engage with the history of philosophy. For given the DPH canon expansion on the cognitive approach increases the cognitive diversity of the historical material in terms of figures, issues, ideas, background knowledge, conceptual frameworks, and methodological approaches that one can draw from and thus, ultimately, promises to also increase the epistemic performance of the group willing to draw from these examples.

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