

⁴ Graham Parkes, "Rising Sun over Black Forest," *Heidegger's Hidden Sources*, Reinhard May, trans. Graham Parkes (London: Routledge, 1996) 108.

⁵ Inspiration for this project comes from Laura Rediehs at St. Lawrence University and her 'Philosophical Worldview' project.

⁶ In addition to the introductory course, I have also taught, with enthusiastic student response, an upper level course called "Comparative Existential Philosophy" and will be teaching a Comparative Ethics course this fall. I am happy to share syllabi with anyone who is interested and can be contacted at emccarthy@stlawu.edu .

Initial Comments on Teaching Comparative Philosophy

Charles Ess
Drury University

Part I: General arguments for the importance of comparative approaches in philosophy.

Pedagogical effectiveness

Philosophy is, among other things, about helping students make articulate their implicit, underlying assumptions so that these basic assumptions may then be critically considered, perhaps reshaped, even rejected, in the process of constructing our own worldviews (where such construction is part of the "growing up" process as imaged in Plato's allegory of the cave, in some readings of religious stories [2nd Genesis creation story], epic poetry [Gilgamesh, Odyssey], etc.).

As anyone who has traveled outside the boundaries of his/her own culture knows, this process of making articulate what has always been inarticulately assumed is dramatically helped along by encountering peoples, languages, and ways of life resting on a worldview different from one's own. In this "culture shock" is "ontological shock"—the recognition that what one has believed and assumed all one's life is not necessarily shared by all other human beings.

Philosophers within the Western tradition have consistently struggled with the project of uncovering and critically assessing the arguments and worldviews of their predecessors (i.e., within a shared cultural tradition). But there are also notable instances of Western philosophers using an awareness of "other" cultures to dramatically amplify

their ability to uncover and examine foundational assumptions. Just among the ancient Greeks: many of the PreSocratics were credited with trips to Egypt, Persia, even India; Plato was conversant with both diverse Greek practices and those of "barbarians"—likewise for Aristotle; and Stoicism and the other post-Aristotelian philosophies emerge in part precisely in the struggle to develop a coherent worldview out of the cultural melange of the Macedonian Empire.

Pedagogically, then, having students explicitly follow this historical model, so that they likewise encounter both Western and non-Western philosophies, should help them recognize more quickly and more radically their own underlying assumptions. That is, these assumptions are challenged not only by earlier Western philosophers but also—more radically—by Eastern philosophies and religious philosophies.

Issues of content

Ethical/cultural relativism

One of the central issues for philosophy and especially introductory students is the question of cultural relativism (precisely this diversity among cultural worldviews and practices) as it leads to ethical relativism (the view that, because worldviews and practices vary so widely from time to time and culture to culture, there are no universally-valid ethical standards upon which to base and judge individual and collective action).

A comparative approach allows the instructor and students to confront these issues more completely (and, in an important sense, honestly) than were they to remain within the boundaries of Western thought. At the same time, without wanting to oversimplify, blur or ignore irreducible differences, etc.—a comparative approach further allows students to see more completely the important commonalities that appear to be shared among diverse world cultures. These commonalities include shared elements of moral ideals. This more complete approach, from my perspective, thus adds considerable depth to the Platonic/Aristotelian resolution to the problem, i.e., universals as formal ideals that are understood/interpreted/applied in different ways in different times in different contexts. Similar resolutions are found in the Talmud and Christian practices of interpretation, in such moderns as Kant and Habermas, as well as others.

In short, a comparative approach helps students and instructor confront the complexity of the cultural/ethical relativism problem much more completely and honestly, and in ways, I believe, that are likely to more persuasively argue against ethical relativism (because a more complete survey of views has been undertaken).

Intellectual history

Part of what a first course in philosophy attempts to do is introduce students to the intellectual history of the Western philosophical tradition, in part because philosophy in the West has developed through a conscious dialogue with the arguments and viewpoints of "the ancestors," e.g.,

in Aristotle's overview of his predecessors, in Descartes' (almost) complete rejection of everything he learned "in the schools," in Kantian and Hegelian efforts at complete systems, in postmodern debates over the limitations of modernity, etc. At the same time, however, this dialogue has often been—and sometimes, crucially so—a cross-cultural dialogue, i.e., one that consciously shapes itself vis-a-vis the views of non-Western thinkers. Pythagorean and Platonic conceptions of the soul are in part "Western" responses to apparently Indian beliefs regarding reincarnation. What becomes modern natural science is based on an extraordinary cultural flow in the Middle Ages that included not only Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers, but also the contributions of Chinese science and technology. Montaigne, Descartes, Leibniz, Goethe, and Hegel consciously address Chinese philosophy. The American transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau) are deeply influenced by the Upanishads and the Vedas. Martin Luther King, Jr., draws heavily on Gandhi's notion of satyagraha and his strategies of nonviolent civil disobedience.

In some measure, then, "comparative" philosophy is not simply a late 20th century innovation, but rather part and parcel of the Western philosophical tradition since the PreSocratics. Moreover, this dialogue is not one-way. It is for me one of the most stunning facts of the 20th century that Martin Luther King, Jr., read Gandhi—who read the Sermon on the Mount, as well as Emerson and Thoreau—and Emerson and Thoreau read the Upanishads and the Vedas. The upshot of this cross-cultural dialogue was a dramatic impact on the material and political lives of millions in both East and West. A comparative approach helps bring out these threads of cross-cultural interaction as not an occasional accident of Western intellectual and philosophical history, but as an important thematic.

The world citizen argument, redux.

Twenty or thirty years ago, the argument for Asian studies and comparative approaches would have included the point that "the world is shrinking." Where liberal arts education takes as part of its mission the goal of preparing students to participate meaningfully in a democratic society, a natural extension of this goal is to prepare students to participate meaningfully in a global society (especially as this emerging global society seems generally meandering in a democratic direction—the Taliban destruction of Buddhist statues and breathtakingly vicious repression of women notwithstanding).¹

If anything, this argument is all the more compelling in an age of increasing globalization of economy and information, as the Internet and the Web make possible "cultural flows" between peoples at a scale and speed that are at once the fulfillment of utopian hopes for a peaceful human family and dystopian fears of information overloads and cybernetic Big Brothers.

But the argument is further ramified by the rapid "Easternization" of the United States itself, as immigration and demographic shifts have made Buddhism and Islam our fastest-growing religions (in percentage terms). A

comparative approach is necessary, in short, not simply to meet the global extension of the "preparation for democratic citizenry" goal; the comparative approach is increasingly necessary to meet the goal in its original form, i.e., to prepare students to participate in their own society and culture, as these become increasingly multicultural in ways profoundly shaped by Eastern thought and religio-philosophies.

Such preparation, finally, is not just a matter of becoming familiar with "other" views for the sake of understanding the philosophical and religious foundations out of which individuals and communities act, choose, and live. In addition, out of the ontological shock and epistemological shock (see Erin McCarthy, this issue) that come from encountering radically different worldviews—students (and their professors) should develop a kind of epistemological humility, i.e., the recognition that elements of our own basic worldview beliefs may have only a culturally-limited validity, rather than the ostensibly universal legitimacy we all naively attribute to our worldviews when they are unchallenged by different perspectives. As we recognize that our most basic beliefs enjoy only limited certainty and universality—we may become more empathic, understanding, and receptive towards the "others" of different identities and cultures. Such humility seems to be a necessary condition for mutual understanding and, correlatively, a genuinely respectful dialogue with the many peoples of diverse cultures and nations with whom we share an increasingly smaller and ever-more interconnected globe. In contrast with naive ethnocentrism and its frequent expression in colonialism and imperialism, a culturally-informed world citizen who approaches dialogue with people of diverse beliefs and traditions out of a posture of epistemological humility is much more likely to develop connections with "others" in ways that respect, preserve and enhance the dignity and integrity of distinctive cultural identities.²

Part II. Some specific examples drawn from my teaching experience, Spring, 2001.

1. Most recently, I attempted to teach Introduction to Philosophy, now redesigned as a comparative course—in part, with the gracious and most valuable assistance of Erin McCarthy (see her essay in this issue). The syllabus, including required readings and a provisional schedule, is available online: www.drury.edu/ess/intro_comparative/syllabus.html.

As a first example: the students read Parmenides' argument, beginning with the premises "what-is, is; what-is-not, is not"—and concluding with the dualistic consequence that Being/what-is is unitary/unmoving/unchanging, in sharp difference with the world of experience/sense (the Way of Seeming, i.e., the world of multiple things that change and move through time, that become (emerge from non-being and then return to non-being) is illusory. Because of their difficulties and questions, we ended up, in fact, reading the whole *Proem* in the version provided by Kirk and Raven (1966). This had the unexpected benefit of exposing them to the multiple scholarly difficulties of interpreting specific terms,

partly in light of fragments from other commentators, etc. I hope this gave them the clear lesson that an English translation is at once an interpretation, and an interpretation that in some cases may be highly questionable or at least controversial. I tried to make this point by using some of Descartes in French and Latin, but it's more powerful when they are seeing a text whose alphabet they cannot read—i.e., the Chinese ideographs in the Ames & Rosemont translation of the Analects (1998), also a required text in the course.

We then compared the Parmenidean argument and conclusions with a very similar argument in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, ch. 2;

What is Non-Being is never known to have been, and what is Being is never known not to have been. Of both these the secret has been seen by the seers of the Truth. (Gandhi's translation [2000]; we also used the Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood translation [1946]).

While Parmenides and the *Gita* thus begin with more or less identical premises—in contrast with Parmenidean dualism, the *Gita* develops famously non-dual consequences, including the doctrine of non-attachment. To emphasize this, I prepared a handout that included some excerpts from Gandhi's translation and commentary, as well as important parallels from the Gospel of Matthew (including the Sermon on the Mount) and Acts 2-5 (including the "communism" of the early Christian community). In the lecture/discussion, I then compared the doctrine of non-attachment (including its apparent severity—a point several students objected to, including the comment that it wasn't possible to act in an unattached way) with:

a) the "Job solution" to the problem of Deuteronomistic theology (raised by Satan, one of my favorite theologians); that a reward/punishment structure, even if intended to reward love of neighbor and God, runs the risk of only reinforcing self-interest and occluding attention to relationship with God "for God's sake," i.e., without regard for reward/punishment;

b) some of Jesus' more radical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 (love your enemy; looking at a woman "with lust" is as bad as actual adultery), the encounter with the rich man who kept all the commandments but could not give away all his possessions (leading the disciples to observe that salvation is impossible, with Jesus' reply to the effect that it is impossible for human beings, but not for God—Matt. 19.16-30), all of this coupled with the description of the "Christian socialists" of Acts 2-5 (with reference to the property/family communism of the Guardians in Plato's Republic, Book V, including no "I/you"/ "mine/thine" language, which directly parallels the *Gita*'s description of the man of non-attachment); [Here I reminded them of Gandhi's memorization of the *Gita*, including his recitation of it every year on the anniversary of his wife's death, as well as his reading of the Sermon on the Mount; the point being that

there is a historically documented and politically powerful connection here in recent times, not just interesting parallels in the texts themselves];

c) the Muslim (female!) saint Rabi'ya, who is pictured with a torch in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other, so that she can burn down the curtains of heaven and extinguish the flames of hell, so that people will love God for God's sake, not for reward/punishment motives; and

d) with reference to the *Gita* text, the Buddhist story of the master and novice whose order forbids them to touch women: but while on a journey they come to a river where a beautiful woman wants to cross, but can't. The elder monk picks her up, carries her across, and then sets her down. They go on their way; the younger monk is boiling with confusion and puzzlement, and finally blurts out that doesn't he (the older monk) know they are not supposed to touch women? To which the elder monk replies, "I put her down at the river; you're still carrying her."

I think the students saw both the striking parallels between the arguments of the *Gita* and Parmenides, as well as between the *Gita* and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teachings, and the clear difference between the dualistic consequences from this argument drawn by Parmenides vis-a-vis the non-dualistic consequences drawn in the *Gita*.

2. In the Footsteps of Leibniz?: The Analects—or: "The way (dao) is made in the walking of it." (Zhuangzi 4/2/33, quoted in Ames & Rosemont, 29).

We began our study of the Analects with lessons in Chinese pronunciation, kindly provided by my colleague Dr. Hue-Ping Chin. My intention here was to emphasize the significance of language as a vehicle for philosophical thought—and to provide an initial sort of culture shock, in the form of their inability to read Chinese characters and to pronounce the Chinese terms correctly, as preparation for what I anticipated would be the more fundamental sorts of cultural, ontological, and epistemological shocks issuing from our encounter with the Analects.

We then turned to a discussion of the role of language in shaping basic philosophical beliefs, including emphasis on contrast between Indo-European languages as "substantive" and thus correlative with Western philosophical interests in identifying:

a) the unchanging stuff (Greek, *hyle*) underlying a changing surface of plural appearances, and

b) an unchanging self/identity likewise underlying a changing surface of plural appearances: cf. Plato

Even while each living thing is said to be alive and to be the same – as a person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man – even then he never consists of the same things, though he is called the same, but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing away, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And

it's not just in his body, but in his soul too, for none of his manner, customs, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remains the same, but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away. (Diotima, Symposium 207D-E, Nehemas/Woodruff trans.)

in contrast with:

classical Chinese as "eventful," "processional," relational in character, so as to be marked with . . . not a concern to describe how things are in themselves, but how they stand in relation to something else at particular times. (Ames & Rosemont, 23)

such that

Persons are not perceived as superordinated individuals—as agents who stand independent of their actions—but are rather ongoing "events" defined functionally by constitutive roles and relationships as they are performed within the context of their specific families and communities, that is, through the observance of ritual propriety (li). (Ames & Rosemont, 29)

The students then undertook the following assignment:

a) Review/note the meaning of at least four key terms (e.g., Dao, Tian, Ren, Yi, De, Xin, He, etc.) as discussed in "The Chinese Lexicon," (Ames & Rosemont, 45-65) – attending especially to how the "eventful," "processional," relational character of Chinese shapes the meaning of these terms.

b) "The way (dao) is made in the walking of it." Read at least Books 1, 2, and 15 (student suggestion) off the Analects, plus one more of your choice. Note—and write out verbatim—at least three analects per book that you especially like, agree with, strongly disagree with, etc.

This was followed by small group discussion in class, structured as follows:

a) Compare the analects you chose—especially in light of the questions: In the case of the analects with which you agree—can you determine whether your agreement arises from a specific principle, personal characteristic, etc., that you already endorse, believe, practice, etc.?

In the case of the analects with which you disagree—can you determine whether your disagreement arises because the analect conflicts with a specific principle, personal characteristic, etc., that you already endorse, believe, practice, etc.?

b) Taken together, how do your responses help trace out both apparent commonalities between your (Western) ethical/epistemological/ontological/religious principles, practices, etc., and those ostensibly at work in the Analects and apparent differences between these?

The results of this exercise were encouraging. Here are representative student responses.

A) Similarities.

Students agreed with the following analects as comparable to Western texts and ideas:

2.17: The Master said: "Zilu, shall I teach you what wisdom (zhi) means? To know (zhi) what you know and know what you do not know—this then is wisdom."

A student compared this with Diotima's speech to Socrates: Or haven't you found out yet that there's something in between wisdom and ignorance? . . . It's judging things correctly without being able to give a reason. Surely you see that this is not the same as knowing—for how could knowledge be unreasoning? And it's not ignorance either—for how could what hits the truth be ignorance? Correct judgment, of course, has this character: it is in between understanding and ignorance. (Symposium, 202A, Nehemas & Woodruff trans.)

4.5: The Master said, "Wealth and honor are what people want, but if they are the consequence of deviating from the way (dao), I would have no part in them. Poverty and disgrace are what people deplore, but if they are the consequence of staying on the way, I would not avoid them. [. . .]"

Another student compared this with Plato's teaching on arete ("virtue," excellence) in *The Republic*, Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, etc.

One student chose

4.11: The Master notes, "Exemplary people cherish their excellence; petty persons cherish their land. Exemplary persons cherish fairness; petty persons cherish the thought of gain."

as this not only connected with Western virtue ethics, but also as it provided a critique of contemporary consumerism.

Another student chose

4.15: [. . .] Master Zeng said, "The way of the Master is doing one's utmost (zhong) and putting oneself in the other's place (shu), nothing more." and compared this with the Judeo-Christian teaching of love of neighbor as self. (I added a comment that this further parallels the importance of perspective-taking stressed in both feminist and Habermasian theories.)

Finally, one student selected

15:13: The Master said, "I have yet to meet the person who is fonder of excellence (de) than of physical beauty, and I am afraid I never will."

She then commented, "An eighty-year-old man does not marry the Playboy model for her 'excellence' any more than the model marries him for anything other than money." (Shawna S., '04)

B) Dissimilarities, of course, were also noted.

Some students took to Confucius to be "judgmental":

15.8: The Master stated, "To fail to speak with someone who can be engaged is to let that person

go to waste; to speak to someone who cannot be engaged is to waste your words. The wise do not let that person go to waste, but they do not waste their words either.

So one commented:

Similarly, many parents stop lecturing their teenage children, because they believe that their teenagers will not listen anyway. I believe that no one is a lost cause and a person can never waste his or her words if the words are meant to do good. Even if a child has never listen to his parents, there is always the chance that someday he will. (Karen S., '04)

Another student selected:

15.29: It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person.

She commented:

... I think that while it's true the person does broaden the way, the way can also broaden the person. To choose to follow a belief or path, one must make it his or her own, but they must also open their mind to all aspects of it; thereby, it broadens the person. (Jody W., '04)

C) *Perhaps most significantly—students identified texts that they found to be both kinda different and kinda not.*

To begin with, the students noted the pattern of ethical emphasis in the Analects, e.g. as expressed in

1.4: Master Zeng said: "Daily I examine my person on three counts. In my undertakings on behalf of other people, have I failed to do my utmost (zhong).? In my interactions with colleagues and friends, have I failed to make good on my word (xin)? In what has been passed on to me, have I failed to carry it into practice?"

1.16: Don't worry about not being acknowledged by others; worry about failing to acknowledge them.

2.10: Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine wherein they dwell content; won't you know what kind of person they are? Won't you know what kind of person they are?

4.14: The Master said, "Do not worry over not having an official position; worry about what it takes to have one. Do not worry that no one acknowledges you; seek to do what will earn you acknowledgement."

15.15: To demand much from oneself personally, and not overmuch from others, will keep ill will at a distance.

15.19: The Master said, "Exemplary persons (junzi) are distressed by their own lack of ability, not by the failure of others to acknowledge them."

One student observed:

In my opinion, a person should not work hard so that he or she can do better than another or be recognized for an accomplishment. Instead, an individual should work to reach his or her potential

because it makes that person feel he or she has worked his or her hardest to become a more educated and knowledgeable person. *Many of my beliefs and values may have been shaped by American society. Yet, I have also strayed from some American concepts and adopted Confucian principles.*" (Karen S., '04; emphasis added, CE).

D) *Finally, students provided me with examples of "Aha" comments:*

I also found myself in particular favor of the Analects that corresponded to a current dilemma in my life that, more specifically those concerning "exemplary" persons and "petty" persons, and the paragraphs describing the differences between them. *There were even some that I agreed with that I never really thought of, and it was the first time the notions had dawned on me. I relate this experience of realizing my ideals through this different reference similar to the argument of our language shaping our reality – how if we don't know what something is because it doesn't have a name, we do not realize its existence until that thing is labeled with a title.* (Aaron S., '04; emphasis added, CE)

With regard to 2.10 "Watch their actions, observe their motives, examine where they dwell content..." another student wrote:

At first, I simply read this quote and did not get anything from it. *After rereading the passage, I discovered that I could better understand western thought through this Analect.* For instance, we are taught in the Western world that "it's the thought that counts." In reality, the actual action itself is guided by the thought behind it. So, it is the action that counts. Through this, Westerners, like myself, can better understand their teachings. (Amanda S. '04; emphasis added, CE)

Finally, with regard to 14.30, "Don't worry about not being recognized by others; worry about not having any reason for them to recognize you," a student wrote:

This is a great principle. I really believe that everyone should think that one over. Sadly, it doesn't apply to people's characters much. I don't think it occurs to most people, though, that recognition can be for anything. So, it's not necessarily a good thing that people recognize you. What people should be concerned about is what exactly are they being recognized for. *In all honesty, that thought had never occurred to me until I read that passage.* (Jody W., '04; emphasis added, CE)

As especially these last comments suggest, the comparative approach appears to have succeeded its goals, *at least in part*, of helping students achieve important levels of success in the philosophical enterprise of articulating, critically evaluating, and perhaps reshaping their *worldviews* – their basic beliefs about reality, identity (including gender),

values, and a “logic” that broadly determines whether diverse elements of one’s reality [e.g., male/female, humanity/nature, humanity/divinity relationships] are structured in more dualistic and oppositional fashion (as in Parmenides) and/or a more complementary, non-dualistic fashion (as in some Western and many Eastern traditions). I am convinced that the course—designed as a comparative approach that thereby more radically highlighted such broad contrasts and thereby occasioned more fundamental sorts of ontological shocks and correlative epistemological humility - succeeded in this better than my earlier, more traditional courses, as these focused more emphatically on Western thought.

REFERENCES

Ames, Roger T. and Henry Rosemont, Jr. 1998. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Ess, Charles (ed.). 2001. *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village*. With Fay Sudweeks, Foreword by Susan Herring. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. 2000. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*. Berkeley, California: Berkeley Hills Books.

Kirk, G.S. and J. E. Raven. 1966. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita. 1944. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda, Christopher Isherwood. New York: New American Library.

Plato. 1989. Symposium. Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett.

NOTES

¹ This was written before September 11, 2001. In my view, terrorism is an *additional* argument for the importance of our developing world citizens. Such world citizens would be aware of some of the root causes of terrorism, including important contrasts between Western notions of the role of religion vis-à-vis secular (i.e., economic and political) life and Islamic/traditional understandings of the primacy of religious belief (as this contrast feeds the general Islamic critique of the West as a secular society, one thus likely to fall into *shirk*, the idolatry of putting anything else—especially economic success—before God), and the realities of the global divide between rich and poor. None of this, of course, is suggested as a *justification* of mass murder. It is to argue that world citizens, through awareness of the roots of terrorism, are more likely to choose and act in ways that will work to eliminate at least some of its causes.

² For a more elaborate version of this argument, developed in regard to the extraordinary new levels of cultural flows made possible by the Internet and Web, see Ess, 2001.



**Did you know
that this year’s
ASIANetwork Conference
is the
10th Anniversary Conference?
Plan now to attend
this special event.**



**Have you seen
ASIANetwork’s
website?
You can find it at
www.asianetwork.org**