

# Teaching Comparative Philosophy: Reflections

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As I began preparing this talk, I asked my students why they thought we should do comparative philosophy. Answers ranged from the inevitable “Because I needed the credit,” to their recognition of the need to look at ways of non-Western thinking in “the global village.” When asked about the benefits of comparative philosophy, students commented on the importance and usefulness of seeing problems and questions from other perspectives. Other comments were that they found it interesting to recognize both the similarities and differences that exist across traditions. More than one student commented, thinking that this was a complaint, that comparative philosophy forced them to think hard! A complaint from the student’s point of view perhaps, but a triumph in the classroom as far as I was concerned!

My approach to comparative philosophy is not simply descriptive comparative philosophy. Rather it is best described as constructive comparative philosophy or constructive cross-cultural philosophy. As explained by Ninian Smart, constructive comparative philosophy “involves the creative synthesis of ideas out of two or more traditions and the development of ideas out of such synthesis.”<sup>1</sup> Too often, when introduced to philosophy, students are introduced only to Western philosophy. Students may go through their philosophical education without ever having the opportunity of encountering Eastern thought. I strongly believe that teaching comparative philosophy is absolutely necessary in today’s world, for many of the reasons that are mentioned in Charles Ess’s paper, especially given the goal of creating democratic world citizens. As technological advances progress, and the world becomes increasingly smaller, it sometimes feels as if we run the risk of “Westernizing” everything; of diluting all the differences in the world to Western ideas.

In my Introduction to Philosophy course at St. Lawrence University (Philosophy East and West: A Comparative Introduction), I aim to address this tendency and teach six texts comparatively. Over the course of the semester we read Plato’s *Republic*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, *The Analects* of Confucius, Descartes’ *Meditations* and a Zen Buddhist text.<sup>2</sup>

In the first section of the course I compare the *Bhagavad Gita* with Plato’s *Republic*—specifically around the ideas of living a good life, and being a good citizen. In

moving from Plato’s *Republic* to the *Gita*, students experience what Charles Ess refers to as “ontological shock.”<sup>3</sup> The *Gita* requires students to begin to think in a “non-Western” fashion. Their first reaction was to find similarities between the two texts as their way of understanding the *Gita*—they tried to make the text “Western.” In itself, this is not harmful, but if this remained their only way of approaching the *Gita* we would have remained in “descriptive” comparative philosophy and not moved to the constructive stage. As we spent time talking about the ideas and reading the text very closely and the students began to understand some of the ideas in the *Gita*, they were able to grasp the differences as well. Our discussions progressed to taking the best of both ideal communities to create a new ideal city. One method for avoiding the immediate “Westernization” of the *Gita* might be to start with the *Gita* rather than the *Republic*. It would be interesting to see if the students tried then to “Easternize” the *Republic*. Constructive comparative philosophy encourages the amalgamation of the best of both or several philosophies; the creation of new frameworks; and the search for new solutions to problems, or at least new ways of looking at them. Exposing students to non-Western traditions allows them to see yet another perspective on perennial philosophical concerns and furthermore see that there are some questions common to all human beings no matter what their cultural origin. Some of these concerns that I address in my introductory course include “How does one live a good life?” “What is right and wrong and how does one decide?” “How do we know things? What does knowing something (anything) mean?” and “What is the self?” A comparative approach enables students to see the resonance of these perennial concerns—whether, as Graham Parkes puts it, speaking specifically about the relationship between Heidegger and East Asian thought, it is a case of a “pre-established harmony” of ideas, or “one of those remarkable coincidences in the history of ideas, where similar patterns of thinking are developed simultaneously by different thinkers in the absence of any influence.”<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this approach helps students understand how a specific philosophical framework creates certain questions and avoids others. For example, one of the most popular parts in the course is when we compare Descartes’ *Meditations* with some Zen Buddhism. The concept of nondualism comes up throughout the course, but this is where we really focus on it. Students realize that with Zen this classical Western problem of mind-body dualism falls away. Here they also experience what we might call “epistemological shock” as they try to grasp the Zen way of knowing.

My aim in teaching comparatively, then, is not simply descriptive—although there is value in this project as well, and this is certainly how I first thought about comparative philosophy in my undergraduate days. I found it a useful tool to use something garnered from one philosophical tradition to shed light on another. However I think that limiting one’s approach to the descriptive is, well, limiting! Moving beyond description to construction is one of the most exciting, and challenging aspects of teaching philosophy

comparatively.

A comparative approach, however, is not without dangers. Questions and problems that I am still working out about what doing comparative philosophy means include: Is it possible to obtain a balanced view when one is raised and intellectually brought up in a given tradition? Are we being imperialistic or colonial in our examination of other cultures/philosophies? How can we guard against claiming superiority for one view over another? Should we? How can we be sure that we are not being Eurocentric? Clearly, I think that these are not insurmountable problems, and my instinct is that being aware of them as problems or questions is perhaps one of the most important steps to truly being able to be constructive. Engaging students in discussion of these potential pitfalls throughout the semester is a stimulating aspect of the course.

As for how one proceeds to do comparative philosophy, I have been asked about comparative philosophical methodology and have come to the conclusion that there is not any one definitive, exclusive methodology. In my own research and in class I use a variety of methods: analysis and disciplined interpretation of texts, comparison of different interpretations and commentaries, etymologies, detailed examination of the texts in question, and reflection on practical consequences of abstract philosophical discussion. The cohesive element linking all of these methods is the view toward establishing new frameworks of discourse, or at the very least, broadening the perspective on the questions and issues we address in class.

In my class, the students have an opportunity to do this for their final project. This is something I have had great success with.<sup>5</sup> The explanation on the syllabus reads:

This project is designed to give you an opportunity to begin to develop your own philosophical worldview and reflect on the development of your thought through the course. This project and the way it is graded aims to free you from excessive concern about grades and allow you to develop your thought in a way that you feel is most meaningful to you. The content of your thought will not be graded here, in other words there is no right or wrong answer. In this assignment I am interested in giving you an opportunity to show how your thought has developed over the course of the semester, what insights you may have gained from the course, and how you think philosophy figures in 'real' life.

Throughout the semester I have the students write, in class, reflective journal entries. Before we start a new theme, I ask them to write for five to ten minutes about what they know about that theme (for example: What does "ethics" mean?). After we have read the two texts (in the ethics section of the course, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* and Confucius' *Analects*) I ask them to again write the answer to the same question. They end up with six entries, and these form the basis or inspiration for their final projects. This project can take any form—it does not have to be a formal paper, but I do ask that if it is a work of art that they

also submit a written explanation of how it addresses the questions that are their guidelines for the project. Because they have to reflect on how their thought developed over the course of the semester, for most of them, a synthesis of different philosophical traditions and discourses does occur. This is not something that I explain specifically as a goal of the project, but it does emerge in almost all of their final projects—which is, at the end of the semester, quite exciting! As content is not graded, this project frees the students to really engage in the constructive aspect, about how the abstract ideas we have grappled with in class relate to their being-in-the-world as citizens. Moreover, students enjoy it, and so do I!

One preconception many students have when they enter my course is that Eastern philosophy and its practices are exotic. In order to help students shake this stereotype, I arrange for them to experience the philosophies bodily. So far, I have held two workshops, and I am trying to work out a third throughout the semester—it works best if this can be done in class. I have someone come in and do a yoga workshop while we are studying the *Gita* and a Zen meditation workshop when we get to that point in the semester. The workshops make the philosophies come alive for the students. They also provide an excellent practical jumping off point for discussions about the dualism of mind and body in Western philosophy, compared with their nondualism in the East. As abstract philosophical concepts these can be quite difficult for students to discuss. However, their experience of yoga and meditation in the workshops gives them something to which they can apply the concepts, and I have found the discussions following the workshops to be extremely fruitful.

While teaching a Comparative Philosophy course may seem overwhelming, I have found that by proceeding thematically and working with pairs of texts, students are given a solid introduction to some basic problems of philosophy. Discussion in class is lively and on the whole, students are excited by the different philosophical traditions to which they are exposed. Finally, a comparative approach to teaching philosophy promotes one of the central goals of a liberal arts education—that of creating engaged citizens of the world.<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ninian Smart, "Foreword" to *Becoming Bamboo*, Robert E. Carter (McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal, 1992) x.

<sup>2</sup> In teaching this course in the fall 2000 semester I used *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki* (Doubleday: Image Books, 1996). However, I did not have much success with this text. Students did not respond particularly well to the text. In the spring 2001 semester I used T.P. Kasulis' *Zen Action/Zen Person* (University of Hawaii Press, 1985) to which students responded enthusiastically.

<sup>3</sup> See Charles Ess's paper in this issue of the *ASIANetwork Exchange*.

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

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

<sup>6</sup> 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 .

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## Initial Comments on Teaching Comparative Philosophy

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**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.,