Keynote Address: Comparative Philosophy: Past, Present and Future

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In the kind letter of invitation I received to present this keynote address, I was told that it would be ideal if: "you could review the role played by the Hawaii program, the journal Philosophy East and West, the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, the various East-West Philosophers' Conferences, and other activities you have been involved in with an eye toward what should be done in the future. This could be a kind of professional autobiography... It would be wonderful if you [could also] include issues of substance, such as central philosophical themes that you have dealt with over the years."

Well this is a very tall order indeed. I will, though, attempt first to report on the various activities of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, including a brief history of the East-West Philosophers' Conferences and the journal Philosophy East and West. I will also remark on a special project that is currently underway in my department. Second, I will address the general theme of what comparative philosophy is and what I think it ought primarily to be and, in this context, discuss in outline form a major theme that has occupied my attention in recent years, namely that of cross-cultural rationality, focusing here on the topic of the purported universality of human reason.

Let me begin with the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy, seeing as several of you here have been active members for some time. In the opening remarks I made at the First International Research Conference in Asian and Comparative Philosophy sponsored by our Society and held in Hawaii in August 1984, I sketched very briefly something of the history of the Society. I noted that the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy was organized in the Spring of 1968, some thirty-five years ago, at a breakfast meeting held in Philadelphia with approximately thirty founding members attending. In my initial announcement of and invitation to this organizing meeting I stated that "The purpose of the proposed Society will be to serve the professional interests and needs of scholars and teachers who are involved in Asian and comparative philosophy and to encourage the development of these disciplines in the academic world."

This statement of purpose was nicely elaborated upon by Karl Potter, the first president of the Society, who proposed that a long-range goal of the Society was "that Asian philosophy should eventually be treated without apology and without distinction within philosophy curricula in American university and college departments. The parochialism of American philosophers is still deplorable, although small beginnings have been made. But few American philosophy teachers are trained in Asian philosophy, and too many of them consider Asian philosophy as unchallenging, or even non-existent."

To this end, the Society has sponsored approximately 125 panels at meetings held in conjunction with the Association for Asian Studies, the American Philosophical Association and the American Academy of Religion. The topics of the panels ranged across the entire spectrum of philosophical issues and problems. In 1984, under the leadership of Gerry Larson, the Society held its first major research conference on the theme "Interpreting Across Boundaries." Some 175 scholars from 14 countries
participated in that conference, the selected proceedings of which were edited by Gerry and me and published by Princeton University Press. Subsequent research conferences were held in New York, in India, in Missouri, again in Hawaii, and next month one will be held in California.

The journal *Philosophy East and West*, of which I had the honor to be editor between 1967 and 1987 and which is informally affiliated with the Society, has grown nicely over the years with subscriptions now over 1500 and with orders from libraries all over the world. As some of you know, it is now ably edited by my colleague Roger Ames. Incidentally, when Roger and I were in China in 1985 we were pleased to learn how important the journal was regarded there, for it was one of the first to be banned and burned during the Cultural Revolution!

The Society has also sponsored a monograph series published by the University of Hawaii Press which has proven to be very successful. Several of the monographs have required four or more printings. I edited the series for the first years, Henry Rosemont for a couple of decades, and now T.C. Kine III and John Schroeder of St. Mary’s College of Maryland. Several of our members have also published introductory texts in philosophy that have incorporated and integrated non-Western materials. In addition to the panels, conferences, and monograph series sponsored by the Society, a newsletter, the *Forum*, has been published under the initial editorship of Carl Becker and David Shaner, and most recently by Jeffrey Timm and currently by Michael Barnhart. It has developed into an important clearinghouse of information for our field.

Our Society has also cooperated with colleagues in England, Japan, Israel, Germany and Australia in the formation of Associations for Comparative Philosophy in these countries and with the East-West Philosophers’ Conference program sponsored by the University of Hawaii.

During the past decades, the East-West Philosophers’ Conference program-supported incidentally entirely by the local Honolulu business community—has maintained its tradition going back to the 1930s and has developed and expanded into many new directions. After the demise of its founder Charles E. Moore in 1967, major conferences were held in 1969 on the theme “The Alienation of Modern Man,” directed by visiting professor Abraham Kaplan, and in 1989 I had the honor of directing the Sixth East-West Philosophers’ Conference on the theme “Culture and Modernity: The Authority of the Past.” The invited participants came from many countries, including for the first time Russia, and countries in Africa and Latin America. Invitations were also accepted from a large number of leading philosophers from the U.S. and Europe (e.g., Richard Rorty, Arthur Danto, Richard Bernstein, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hilary Putnam, Richard Wollheim, Agnes Heller, Karl-Otto Apel).

A number of smaller conferences on themes such as “The Development of Logic East and West,” “Law and Morality,” and “Aesthetics East and West,” and a medium-sized one on Wang Yang Ming and a rather large one on Chu Hsi, which was organized by the late Wing-tsit Chan, were also held during the ‘70s and the ‘80s. As a spin-off from the 1989 conference, regional conferences on themes related to culture and modernity were held in Russia, India and Australia.

As some of you may know first-hand, a Seventh East-West Philosophers’ Conference was also held in Hawaii in January 1995 on the theme “Justice and Democracy.” In a rather novel and important development, we brought Professor Marietta Stephanites of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences to Hawaii to direct this conference, which turned out to be very exciting and rewarding. An Eighth East-West Conference, co-directed by Marietta and Roger Ames, was also held on the theme “Technology and Human Values” in January, 2000: a fitting topic for the new millennium. Approximately 150 renowned philosophers and experts in other areas of culture and technology from over thirty-five countries participated in the meeting. The proceedings of these conferences going back to the 1930s have been published by the University of Hawaii Press and have commanded a great deal of attention. I am pleased at this time to announce that a Ninth East-West Philosophers’ Conference, to be directed by Roger Ames, will be held in Hawaii in the summer of 2005 on the general theme “Education and Its Goals in a Global Context.”

As far as other projects currently being undertaken by our department, I would call attention especially to one of these. As a departmental project, a group of us (Arindam Chakrabarti, Vrinda Dalmiya, Roger Ames, Graham Parkes, Steve Odin, Tamara Albertini and myself) have contracted with Blackwell Publishers (Oxford) to prepare a series of new source books in Asian philosophy. The major ones still in use today go back to the ‘60s. The initial volumes will be on Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Islamic philosophy. Taking into account the distinctive features of the individual traditions, the volumes will work within a problem-oriented framework, which is to say, the primary source materials will be organized with respect to specific issues that are addressed in the respective traditions rather than simply chronologically by schools. As something of a first for philosophy departments in the world, the various faculty involved have agreed to put all royalties received into a special account to support our graduate students.

Well, the time has come now to address the question: What, then, is comparative philosophy?

Comparative philosophy—or what we might today better call “cross-cultural,” “trans-cultural,” or simply “global” philosophy—has throughout its history and development exhibited a rich diversity of aims, methods and styles. Let me briefly sum up a few of the most enduring of these and then set forth some features of what I take to be its most vital intentionality, namely to contribute to creative philosophical thinking.

One of the enduring aims of comparative or cross-cultural philosophy has been to make evident the basic cognitive and evaluative presuppositions of traditions other than one’s own (historically, mainly Asian), with the expectation that one can then attain greater clarity and
understanding about the presuppositions that inform one's own tradition. We come to know ourselves better philosophically, it is believed, in and through the recognition of other alternative conceptual schemes, values and ways of organizing and making sense out of our human experience. The major Asian (and today as well many other non-Western) traditions are studied, then, as they reveal distinctive "ways of thinking" and as they may be contrasted with each other and with various Western forms. This has been comparative philosophy in its broadest cultural modality. In its earliest phases, a deeper agenda was also at play, which many comparativists today regard as a rather naive one, which was to bring about a general synthesis of what was thought to be the best in different traditions and attain a certain universal accord among philosophers wherever they are found. This approach occupied the attention of many of the philosophical pioneers in the field during the early to middle decades of the last century.

Other workers in the field have also taken a rather universalistic approach by way of seeking to uncover topologies of philosophical thinking that can reveal general patterns of thought in both the East and the West. Empiricists, rationalists, theists, idealists, and so on, can be seen to have developed similar positions in diverse traditions, with the differences noted between them also being instructive.

This approach was tied in some ways to the growing sophistication in the scholarly study of non-Western philosophical traditions where, with enhanced linguistic skills, many important technical texts were translated into English and other Western languages and widely disseminated.

Another approach to comparative philosophy that has been prominent in recent decades is somewhat more piecemeal and works against the background of twentieth-century Western analytic philosophy. Attention gets focused on issues in epistemology, philosophy of language and logic where, it is thought, a careful and sophisticated reading of non-Western texts can enrich Western treatments of these issues; in short, that contemporary Western philosophers can have much to learn from the styles of reasoning, the notions of truth, and analyses of the uses and functions of language from traditions different than their own.

This approach may be seen to be part of a larger comparative enterprise which we might call the "problem approach." Whether it be in ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics or any other branch or area of philosophy, the driving idea is that we can identify philosophical problems that cut across various traditions and employ the resources of those traditions to enable one to deepen and broaden one's own philosophical understanding and work. In a book on Indian philosophy published over thirty years ago, I stated what I still believe to be the most exciting and exciting approach to comparative philosophy. "We are aware now," I wrote then, "that there is much of intrinsic philosophical value and interest in Asian thought and that consequently this thought need not be cast merely in the mold of an historical (or exotic) curiosity. Students ought to be able to study Asian philosophy for the purpose of enriching their philosophical background and enabling them to deal better with the philosophical problems that interest them." I went on to say, and would now soften considerably the somewhat universalistic language employed, that "Without losing sight of the distinctive and sometimes unique characteristics of a tradition, one ought to be able to concentrate attention on the tradition as it is a response to a series of universal questions and problems, and with the express intention that these responses will influence one spontaneously in one's own thinking."

Today we have, it seems, become more circumspect in our understanding that philosophical problems, as well as the answers given to them, are highly contextualized and that one of the significant creative functions of comparative philosophy is to examine how one's initial formulation of a specific problem can itself be reformulated in the light of alternative possibilities proffered in other traditions. We have also come to realize that the very idea of philosophy may mean rather different things in different cultures and that we have much to learn from these other conceptions. This brings me directly to comparative philosophy as creative philosophy.

The creative comparativist faces a number of formidable tasks, the first of which is precisely that of understanding and interpreting the philosophical achievements of other traditions. This calls for a complex and subtle hermeneutic. To begin with, the question must be asked whether or not, just because certain similar-sounding terminology is being employed, the same philosophical problem is in fact being addressed in different cultural traditions. We are, I think, compelled to recognize that there are cultural-philosophic presuppositions that largely influence the formulation of specific philosophical problems in both substance and style, and that these problems in their specificity, are not universal.

We also have emerging in this context the interesting question: Do we have the same philosophical problem in two or more traditions when what counts as a solution to, or resolution of, the problem may differ radically? The answer, I think, is both "yes" and "no"—the two being applicable at different levels of analysis and experience. Let me explain. There must surely be a sense in which differences in presuppositions and differences in criteria of intelligibility and the rest make for a real difference in the very philosophical problems being addressed. Put simply, East Asians, South Asians, Westerners frequently are talking about different things in their various treatments of philosophical problems. And yet, at a deeper level, we do find, and philosophically we are compelled, as it were, to believe, that there is a common core of human experience, a range of possibilities that cuts across differences in cultures and indeed differences (by gender, class, education . . . ) between individuals in the same culture, a range that gets articulated in diverse ways but which nevertheless serves as a kind of "deep grammar" of experience—what my good friend Henry Rosemont calls "homaversal."

In any event, we do need to recognize in strong hermeneutical and pluralistic terms that we inevitably bring
our own "prejudices" or predispositions to interpret and judge what is initially alien to us as these are informed by our cultural and personal experience. We need then to develop, through letting as far as we can the other tradition speak to us in its own terms, a negotiating process, as it were, between our prejudgmental forms and patterns and the content and conceptual structures of that tradition. We aim thus to alter our prejudices in the light of that negotiation or encounter. We thereby seek, and sometimes attain, understanding of another tradition in terms of what we share and what we find distinctive—for better or worse—in it, but always within the altered background framework of the integrity of our own philosophical being.

This requires, then, a kind of contextualized translation whereby we seek the meaning of key terms and concepts in the manner in which they initially function in the other tradition. Special attention may be given to the basic metaphors which inform particular ways of thinking, or to concepts which serve both as theories and as guides to a particular way of life—and from these inquires to uncover features of our own culturally-informed presuppositions which may be called into question. From this questioning, it is anticipated, we may attain an openness to develop new and better forms of philosophical understanding.

Notes


2 It has also become something of a commonplace now in comparative studies to note that one approaches another culture not only from within the general prejudices of one's own cultural background, but quite specifically from where one currently stands philosophically within that background: for example, it is quite apparent that German Indologists of the last century, such as Paul Deussen, read Indian thought through the lens of Idealistic metaphysics, and that in our own times Western readings of Asian traditions have often been highly analytic in character. And also from East to West: one has only to read several texts of the Kyoto School of Japan to see how their interpretations of Western thought were highly colored by various Buddhist values and concepts that deeply informed the thinkers of that school, such as Nishida and Nishitani. Every generation, it seems, writes anew the history of its own culture and inescapably that of others relative to the fashions and interests of its times.


Teaching Comparative Philosophy:

David Shaner, Chair, Furman University
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Teaching "Introduction to Philosophy: A Comparative Approach"

Peter Groff
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Let me begin with a full disclosure: I am a Nietzsche specialist rather than an expert in any particular area of Asian studies. I have, however, since my undergraduate studies, cultivated an interest in comparative philosophy, and over the last seven years have had the opportunity to teach a variety of courses in Eastern traditions. I currently teach in the Philosophy department of Bucknell University, a small liberal arts college in central Pennsylvania, where three years ago, I took over responsibility for covering the "non-Western" component of our curriculum. As part of these responsibilities, I periodically teach courses in Islamic, Indian, and comparative philosophy, but one of my regular courses is a cross-cultural introductory philosophy class called "World Philosophy," the aim of which is to introduce students to non-Western philosophical traditions, along with some key Western figures. Over the last few years, I have experimented quite a bit with this course, while maintaining an overall comparative approach. In what follows I will reflect on what I see as the basic aims of this kind of class, as well as some of the challenges it faces. In doing so, I will also talk a bit about the different models I've tried so far, what worked and didn't. So: first the pieties, then the nuts and bolts.

Theoretical Reflections

Like many "retooled" comparative philosophers, before I began teaching "World Philosophy," I had ample opportunity to teach a fair number of Western-oriented introductory Philosophy classes. Assuming that a comparative philosophy class is still ultimately a philosophy class, I'll begin by sketching out some of the aims that were basic to these more traditionally-conceived courses, since I would like to think that they remain pertinent to the East-West comparative approach as well. One of the more modest goals was simply to familiarize students with primary historical philosophical texts. Certainly, exposing students to great writings as well as great ideas can help inculcate in them a love of reading and learning. But an additional benefit of this approach is that students begin to acquire a first-hand