The well-known debate between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas about whether the fundamental gesture of philosophy is hermeneutical or critical in nature illustrates this duality nicely. For a clear overview and thoughtful adjudication of this debate see Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and Critique of Ideology," in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 63-100.


Solomon, "What is Philosophy?: The Status of World Philosophy in the Profession," p. 100.

Daya Krishna, "Comparative Philosophy: What is and What it Ought to be," p. 83.


This strategy was inspired by William Ernest Hocking’s preliminary discussion of “What Philosophy Is” in Types of Philosophy (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1929), pp. 3-23.

Using Lucretius as a representative Greek thinker may seem somewhat odd, insofar as he was a Roman of the first century B.C.E. However, his philosophical poem De Rerum Natura is arguably the clearest and most forceful articulation of Epicureanism, an influential Greek naturalistic school of philosophy.

Introduction

This past spring, buoyed by the positive results of reshaping an Introduction to Philosophy course along comparative lines (Ess, 2001), I attempted to likewise reshape an upper-level philosophy of religion class using a comparative format. Unlike introductory courses—however, for a range of important historical and cultural reasons, philosophy of religion is more distinctively Western in its basic orientation, assumptions, and defining questions. Consequently, it is much more difficult to approach such a course comparatively: indeed, I had to modify the course considerably so as to completely drop some elements that had defined a traditional philosophy of religion course. Nonetheless, I’m happy to report that both student comments and final evaluations indicate that the course was successful.

In the following, I first review my rationale for attempting to teach philosophy of religion in a comparative way, followed by a brief description of the course structure and texts. I then offer a central exercise designed to highlight the value of approaching philosophy of religion from a comparative perspective redefined so as to revise its traditional Western starting points—namely, a critical analysis of the Analects of Confucius. I share here student comments...
on this exercise as a way of demonstrating the extent to which the exercise “worked” or didn’t!

I very much hope these experiences will be of use to others interested in taking up comparative approaches in philosophy of religion.

Why Comparative Approaches in Philosophy?

A first reason for a comparative approach in teaching philosophy is its pedagogical effectiveness. One of the central goals of philosophy, in my view, is to help students make articulate the otherwise tacit assumptions that underlie their worldview. I roughly define this as their basic beliefs about reality, identity (i.e., who they are as human beings, including gendered beings), values, and a “logic” that broadly determines whether diverse elements of their reality [e.g., male/female, humanity/nature, humanity/divinity relationships] are structured in primarily a dualistic and oppositional fashion and/or a complementary, non-dualistic fashion. The point of doing so is to not only help students become more self-aware of what they assume and believe—but thereby, to also make these basic assumptions, as now explicit rather than implicit, “available” to be critically considered, perhaps reshaped, even rejected, in the further, life-long process of taking responsibility for and constructing their own worldviews. In the traditions of Western liberal arts, this process is central to becoming fully human—in particular, of becoming a “virtuous” or excellent human being. Briefly, such critical reflection and construction are part of the “growing up” process as imaged in Plato’s allegory of the cave: but this same process can be seen as endorsed in (at least some readings of) religious story (such as the 2nd Genesis creation story which, for Jews and early Christians, represents precisely an intended process of moving from child-like dependence to adult autonomy), epic poetry (beginning with the Gilgamesh epic and, later, the Odyssey), and so forth. At the same time, of course, this process, is at work in non-Western traditions as well—including Confucian thought (Ess, 2003).

Since the time of the PreSocratics, if not the era of Gilgamesh, we have known in the West that this process of making inarticulate assumptions articulate is dramatically helped along by first-hand encounters with 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. In anthropological terms, such encounters (usually) force us to recognize our ethnocentrism—and, ideally, move to a new position of epistemological humility, in which we acknowledge that our worldview is just that, a limited set of beliefs and “how we do things,” one that is not universally shared by others. Finally, precisely such encounters with “the Other” force us to make articulate how we differ in basic beliefs, practices, worldview, etc., and thereby bring to the surface a whole range of assumptions defining our worldview that otherwise lay tacit, because they are unchallenged within the familiar lifeworld of our own culture.

Hence, by taking up a comparative approach in teaching philosophy, we provide our students with such encounters with “the Other,” and thereby, it is hoped, occasions for redefining their cultural and ontological perspectives to help them make explicit their otherwise tacit assumptions, and thereby to move them along in the process of critical examination and (re)construction of their own worldview.

Second, there are important reasons supporting a comparative approach from within the framework of philosophy of religion itself. That is, a central issue in traditional Western philosophy of religion is the question of religious pluralism, especially as the Western Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) each claim a single, universal God, how do we respond philosophically to the recognition of religious traditions such as Hinduism with its claim of “330 million gods” (Hinduism, 1978) and early forms of Buddhism that deny the reality of any Divinity whatsoever?

These differences, of course, run much deeper. In particular, I wanted us to explore in this course at least two specific case studies that highlight both differences and possible commonalities between Western and Eastern worldviews. The first is the contrast developed by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., in their introductory essay to the Analects (1998). Ames and Rosemont make the case that Western Indo-European languages are characterized as substantive and thus categorical languages. These linguistic characteristics can then shape the thematic concerns of Western philosophy (a) to determine what stable material or causal principles (the unchanging stuff or, in Greek, hyle) underlie the constantly changing world of our experience as an appearance resting on such substrates, and, corollatively, (b) to determine our human identity as an ostensibly unchanging, stable self likewise underlying the changing surface of our plural appearances.

In contrast, Ames and Rosemont characterize the classical Chinese of the Analects as “eventful,” “processional,” and 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” (1998, 23).

Hence, they argue, in the worldview of the Analects, 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) (1998, 29).

These sharp contrasts—not only at the philosophical level but, indeed, at the linguistic level—present a major challenge to any philosophical effort to subsume Confucian thought
under the same category of “religion” as it might contain the Western Abrahamic traditions. Indeed, the very effort to categorize in this fashion, Ames and Rosemont argue, is itself an artifact of Western Indo-European linguistic features!

On the other hand, John Cobb, in an excerpt included in our main text (see below), argues for the coherence between Christianity and Buddhism—despite their sharp and well-known contrasts.

Finally, in addition to these particular case studies, several other articles included in our text helped, through such a comparative approach, to move us to a most radical challenge for philosophy of religion. Namely, how far can traditional Western philosophy of religion, especially as rooted in Indo-European languages and the distinctive monotheisms of the Abrahamic traditions, adequately approach and understand Eastern traditions?

Third, such a comparative approach commends itself for directly practical and applied—i.e., ethical and political—reasons. To begin with, it is a commonplace that we inhabit—and our students will inhabit—an increasingly interdependent “global village.” It is ever more obvious that whatever advantages such a global village might offer, it is also leading to more frequent cultural, religious, and political conflicts. The disastrous events of September 11, 2001, and the consequent wars launched by the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq are, unfortunately, only the most dramatic face of these conflicts. And, contrary to the utopian hopes of the 1990s, such conflicts will not be eliminated by increasing use of such technologies as the Internet and the web. On the contrary, there is now extensive documentation of the multiple ways in which Western computer-mediated communication technologies embed specifically Western cultural and communicative preferences (Ess and Sudweeks 2003).

Such a world, especially if it is to realize our hopes for peace, prosperity, and greater individual and communal freedom, will require a specific sort of cosmopolitan (citizen of the world), namely cultural hybrids or polybreds who have become sufficiently familiar (“familial”) with the languages, cultures, and practices of “others” to be able to live, engage in dialogue, “negotiate,” etc., in more than their own culture (Ess 2003). To help our students become such global citizens requires precisely that we help them move from ethnocentrism to a humility, respect, and pluralism that preserve and enhance diverse cultural identities and traditions. I hope that comparative approaches in teaching, precisely as they foster such a move from ethnocentrism to epistemological humility and pluralism, will help our students become such global citizens.

If anything, such abilities are needed especially for a generation increasingly immersed in the technologies of the Net, as these provide our students with an access to diverse cultures on a scale and at a speed unimaginable in previous generations. So Beverly Bickel, a close observer of how women in Afghanistan have used the web to develop their own distinctive voice and presence on the web, comments, “The democratic potential of the Net for promoting ‘civic pluralism’ will partly rely on its being constructed by those capable of negotiating global differences, creating multiple, complex meanings and crossing boundaries” (2003).

**Overall Structure: Texts and Core Concepts**

A comparative approach requires considerable modification of the traditional philosophy of religion courses I have previously taught—even with the use of a text intended to support such an approach, namely, Gary E. Kessler’s *Philosophy of Religion: Toward a Global Perspective* (1999). Kessler does a fine job of bringing together classical Western texts with appropriate texts from Eastern perspectives. So, for example, in his opening chapter, “What is Religion?” Kessler includes a useful reading by Nishitani from a Japanese Buddhist perspective. In the same way, his second chapter on “Ultimate Reality” includes selections from *The Tao-te Ching* and Shankara. And so on in chapters three (“Proofs for Ultimate Reality”), four (“Religious Experience”), nine (“Faith and Reason”) and eleven (“Religious Pluralism”). Kessler also provides an excellent introduction that highlights how traditional Western philosophy of religion presupposes specifically Western views on reality, identity, divinity, etc.

To complement the anthologized pieces, I further included Ames and Rosemont’s *The Anecdote of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (1998). The goal here is to give students a more in-depth experience with a complete text from outside their own tradition—as well as to have students read the introductory essays on language and metaphysics discussed above.

Finally, in addition to having students read general essays on issues in religious pluralism, I want them to see how individual thinkers and believers have wrestled with these issues in particular ways, i.e., with a view toward the concrete details and practical concerns that define our local, day-to-day existence. Here again I sought a balance between East and West, between non-theist and theist, by juxtaposing Henry Rosemont, Jr.’s *Rationality and Religious Experience: The Continuing Relevance of the World’s Spiritual Traditions* (2001) with Barbara Brown Taylor’s *The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion* (2000). Briefly, Henry’s book seeks to develop a synthesis from a purely rational perspective of the ethical imperatives and sensibilities of the major world traditions, one that, because of its rationality, is further consistent with scientific understandings of the world. In a similar way, but from the perspective of a Western believer, noted Episcopalian preacher Barbara Brown Taylor develops a synthesis between elements of Christian traditions—most notably, the doctrine of *incarnation*, and contemporary sciences, including relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and chaos theory. (The Brown Taylor text is further to be recommended because, unlike many texts from both Eastern and Western starting points, hers is sophisticated enough to both get the science right and not make unwarranted claims of the sort that mar other efforts, specifically, that resonances and analogies between the
claims of science and the claims of faith thereby somehow “prove” the truth of the latter. Rather, she is careful to avoid the various fallacies and missteps involved in such moves and develops instead a much more sophisticated understanding of the irreducible differences and complementarities between science and religion.

Anyone who has taught a traditional philosophy of religion course will immediately recognize that these additions meant that something had to go—at least, if the course were to be completed within the scheduled semester! Indeed: and so I cut out several themes and issues that would be standard in a traditional course, beginning with those questions focused on (Western) monotheistic conceptions of God including rationalist efforts to prove the existence of God, the nature and attributes of God (Does God necessarily exist? What kind of knowledge might God have? etc.). Another major lacuna in this course was the omission of the problem of evil (“theodicy”). While Kessler has a good collection of essays on this issue (his chapter 5), there simply was no time to address this crucial topic.

I should point out that some of these choices were made by the students, i.e., after reviewing the contents of a standard course for them on the first day, I asked them to consider what topics we could drop in order to make room for comparative readings and the additional texts I had chosen for the focus on religious pluralism.

Teaching example: Testing our frameworks (the way is made in the walking of the way...) (Zhuangzi 4/2/33, quoted in Ames & Rosemont, 29).

I also wanted to give the students considerable freedom to explore the topics and issues involved from their own perspectives, rather than primarily rehearse the insights and responses of the recognized authorities. This is in part because comparative approaches to philosophy of religion are relatively new—and hence there are comparatively fewer such recognized authorities to turn to!

One main exercise began by having students develop their own definitions of “religion” in response to reading the selections in Kessler’s ch. 1, supplemented with the Ames and Rosemont essay on language and metaphysics, as this helped them understand contemporary critiques of the notion of “religion” as itself a category that emerges primarily in the Enlightenment. I then asked the students to test their definitions against a specific case—The Analects, Bks. 1-10.

I was persuaded that Ames and Rosemont are correct to argue that Western-oriented categories—especially as these traditionally make a sharp contrast between divinity/ultimate reality and “ordinary” experience/appearances, philosophy (as a rational activity), and religion (as involving elements of faith, etc.)—are indeed rooted in Indo-European languages. I anticipated that my students would discover that these categories, at work in their various definitions of religion, would prove inadequate for understanding The Analects. Was I ever wrong...at least, according to my students!

In particular, one student pointed out—correctly—that “Cobb’s account of ‘ultimate reality’ includes ‘principles of rightness’; The Analects provide us with such principles, and thus are an account of ultimate reality.” Another student likewise cited Cobb to argue that The Analects counted as religion; first of all, as it teaches that “You can get yourself in line with the rightness of the world without being able to comprehend it or speculate about it.”

Whatever their instructor might think, for my students, Confucian thought counts as “religion,” i.e., a framework that includes an account of ultimate reality, even though Confucian thought does not (a) emphasize developing or understanding a cosmology, nor does it (b) focus on a (monotheistic) conception of divinity as central to its concerns (neither Tian nor the Tao are “God” in a Western sense, etc.).

I was in for a still greater surprise as we turned to the Tao. For one of my students—an accomplished musician and singer—the Tao turned out to be not as inescrutable as Lao-Tzu might have us think! Rather, this student pointed to an analogy between the Tao as described in Being and non-being produce each other; difficult and easy complete each other; long and short contrast each other; sound and voice harmonize each other (2, in Kessler, pp. 47f.) and harmonic overtone singing. In such singing, familiar to most of us as part of Tibetan Buddhist practice, a single human singer produces both a basic tone and an ethereal, “otherworldly” harmonic overtone. So that we could hear, and not simply read and intellectually understand, the point, this student brought to class a recording of Paula Hopkins’ “Past Life Melodies” (1992), which concludes with extended overtone singing. Especially for students who had not heard such singing before, the pedagogical impact of hearing these resonances was indeed stunning.

Concluding Remarks

These positive experiences continued as we further explored post-Cartesian conceptions of “reason” as developed in essays by William James, Radhakrishnan, and Marilyn Piety, each of whom in their own way rejects a Cartesian understanding of reason as radically divorced from and thus opposed to emotion, feeling, intuition, sense, body, etc. In doing so, they develop instead a nondual conception of self in which reason and emotion play complementary roles. On the one hand, these recent concepts help us recover pre-Cartesian understandings of reason, most notably Plato’s notion of “erotic” reason as developed especially in The Symposium but also in The Republic. At the same time, however, as the inclusion of Radhakrishnan makes clear, this (re)turn further represents a convergence towards Eastern views as more characteristically nondualistic, e.g., specific Hindu notions of intuition, as well as Confucian notions of xin (“heart-and-mind”), etc. Indeed, by the end of the course, my students were able to see that, alongside the multiple intractable differences between Western modernity and Eastern views, there are certainly great coherences and resonances between non-dual Western conceptions (e.g., in
Plato, Kierkegaard, and feminism) and Eastern religions/philosophies.

These experiences suggest that the course thus succeeded in its primary intention of helping students come to recognize both the strength and limits of their own worldviews—even if not always in ways that I would have anticipated. Even better, it helped them learn to think and feel just this sort of complex synthesis, i.e., one that holds together irreducible differences alongside connections in the form of resonances and coherencies. Such a complex synthesis, in my view, is crucial to understanding and living in the world in such a way that allows us—and “others”—to remain firmly rooted in a local tradition, one whose integrity and value is firmly respected and upheld, while at the same time recognizing both the limits of our own worldview and the important ways in which the worldviews and lifeworlds of “others” complement and complete our own.

It should also be clear that such a synthetic way of thinking/feeling sharply contrasts with the unfortunately much more “normal” ethnocentrism that dogmatically holds a single tradition and worldview as the only one legitimate for human beings, and seeks to impose it—by force, if need be—upon “others” seen as somehow lost in an ostensibly inferior worldview and way of doing things. In my view, such ethnocentrism and their accompanying impulses towards “conversion,” colonialism, and imperialism are among the most significant threats to the possibility of our becoming a more peaceful, genuinely multicultural “global village.” By contrast, I hope that comparative approaches to teaching philosophy, of the sort I have outlined above, will not only help our students achieve both Western (Socratic) and Eastern (Confucian) ideals of excellence as human beings, but thereby help them become the sorts of cosmopolitans who can counter the otherwise ineluctable slide from ethnocentrism into war.

References


Notes

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2Concerning his “principle of rightness,” Cobb writes:

The rightness in question expresses itself in diverse ways. There is a rightness of style or form, propriety, appropriateness, good judgement, wisdom. Only in special circumstances is it expressed in clear-cut moral dualities of ‘ought’ and ‘ought not.’ (1977, in Kessler, p. 74)