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 inquiries 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


Teaching Comparative Philosophy:
David Shaner, Chair, Furman University
Peter Groff, Bucknell University
Charles Ess, Drury University

Teaching "Introduction to Philosophy: A Comparative Approach"
Peter Groff
Bucknell University

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
familiarity with some of the most important and influential philosophical systems—systems that are, whether they realize it or not, already at least partially constitutive of their own world-views. The point, as I conceive it, is to get them to recognize the extent to which they are already Platonists, Augustinians, Cartesians, etc., whether they know it or not. In doing so, they will be in a better position to understand the origin of their own worldview and who its architects are, and thus to see, not so much the arbitrariness, but the contingency or optionality of that worldview.¹

But my primary underlying goal has always been to get the students to be more philosophical, to do philosophy. I aim to cultivate in students a disposition towards critical analysis and careful reflection, but also to awaken in them (or perhaps, help to recuperate) a sense of awe, perplexity and concern for the world and their place in it—that is to say, a desire for understanding. And I want them to see that, as interesting as all the claims and systems that they are studying may be, it is the questions that take precedence: e.g., What is the self? What is good? What is knowledge? What is real? And so forth. By fore-grounding the questions to which various thinkers or schools or traditions are responding, the history of philosophy emerges, not as a jumble of arbitrary, perverse, and seemingly unrelated claims, but as a living, ongoing dialogue in which students can participate, from which they can profit, and even perhaps to which they can contribute. When the answers that various philosophers have proffered fall short and seem inadequate, the questions still remain and demand a thoughtful response.

Not surprisingly, broadening the standard "Intro Phil" class to include non-Western traditions opens the door to additional aims and considerations. Last year's panel on teaching comparative philosophy dealt with a number of these goals, which I will not attempt to canvass here.² Instead, I will touch upon three rather modest aims that are particularly important to me. The first is relatively straightforward. On the most basic level, I want students to realize that philosophical thought is not the exclusive province of Western civilization, and hopefully to develop an interest in, and appreciation for, non-Western philosophical traditions.

Second, I aim to disabuse them of the idea that the entirety of world-historical philosophy is essentially homogeneous. The most rudimentary form of this pernicious assumption is the belief that all philosophers East and West are basically saying the same thing, or at least agree on the most important, fundamental questions. Of course it is not unusual, when engaged in the hermeneutic project of trying to understand another intellectual tradition, initially to foreground the apparent commonalities or parallels while overlooking the less obvious differences. The problem here, however, is not just that substantive differences get swept under the carpet in favor of similarities, but that the apparent similarities often turn out, upon more careful reflection, to be not so similar after all. As has often been pointed out, when we take a claim that is imbedded in one tradition, with its own particular language, history and set of concerns, and restate it within a new context, it can function in a strikingly different way and take on new meanings.³ This can admittedly be a productive process: the history of world philosophy is rife with interesting examples of creative crosspollination between different traditions.⁴ But when the aim is to understand a tradition on its own terms, emphasizing the primacy of apparent commonalities can all too often result in distortion and misrepresentation.

One thing I have noticed over the last few years is that when the myth of homogeneity is rooted out, it tends to reinscribe itself in more subtle and less conspicuous forms. Here one finds the bètè noire of Orientalism: the temptation to see Eastern thought itself as something monolithic or generic, as though there is some philosophical reason why, for example, Indian and Chinese philosophy ought to be lumped into one category and set over against European thought.⁵ Indeed, intellectual traditions within geographical boundaries are far from homogeneous: one finds an astonishing range and diversity of viewpoints within the Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions.⁶ Consequently, it seems to me crucial that students of world philosophy see them first and foremost as traditions of disputation. That is to say, one should expect to find substantive differences and reasoned disagreement and argumentation within the Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions, even if such disputation necessarily presupposes some underlying agreement about basic assumptions and concerns.⁷ Needless to say, this goes for the so-called "Western tradition" as well, which in spite of its own rich heterogeneity and diversity is all too often caricatured as some great univocal, monolithic entity.

I want to mention one more consideration when teaching a comparative introduction to philosophy course—perhaps more of a caveat than an explicit aim—and that is not to be patronizing in the way we deal with non-Western philosophical traditions. There are, of course, more or less obvious ways in which one could be patronizing. One might, for instance, adopt an explicitly condescending attitude towards non-Western philosophical traditions, which is still sometimes unfortunately found outside the field, although (happily but not surprisingly) rarely within the field. But there are more common and subtle forms of patronization. One is to valorize and celebrate a non-Western tradition as providing the corrective to all of Western philosophy's blunders and a priorities. Another is always to defend the thinker or text one is teaching against any possible criticism—to come to its rescue, as it were, to make sure it triumphs at all costs. It is important, of course, to make sure that a particular claim or system or tradition is being understood fairly, accurately, and on its own terms. The hermeneutic task of charitable understanding is essential to doing philosophy. But so is critique.⁸ If one wants students to take Indian and Chinese philosophy seriously as philosophy, one must take its truth claims seriously—seriously enough to engage with them critically, ask hard questions and expect serious, resourceful answers. If we encourage students to "play hardball" with Plato or Descartes once they have an adequate, charitable
understanding of their claims, but then protect Sankara or Xunzi from the same kind of engagement, we are hardly doing them any favors.

Of course, one might argue that I myself am reinscribing the myth of homogeneity when I make any such normative claims about what philosophy demands of us. For everything I've said so far throws us back upon the question of what philosophy is in the first place, of how it should be defined, and who should define it. As Robert Solomon has pointed out, this is "one of the most virtually self-effacing and one of the most obnoxious [questions] that philosophers tend to ask." It is virtuously self-effacing "insofar as it questions, with some misgivings, its own behavior, the worth of the questions it asks, and the significance of the enterprise itself," but it is obnoxious "when it refuses to question its own behavior as the exclusive standard to delegitimize any other activity that dares to call itself 'philosophy'." The challenge here, it seems to me, is to chart a middle course between what I will call the 'Scylla' and 'Charybdis' of cross-cultural philosophy. Let us think of our Charybdis as the Western provincialism that arrogates to itself a kind of monopolizing "neutrality" or universalism, a phenomenon Daya Krishna has aptly characterized as "the imposition of the standards of one dominant culture over all the others and the evaluation of their philosophical achievements in terms of them." When we take this route, philosophical traditions such as those of India and China will at best seem to offer us what Carine Defoort has described as "primitive or naïve forms of familiar Western concepts, insights and discussions that are themselves never called into question." But the Scylla that threatens us on the other side is the impulse to dissolve the boundaries between philosophy, religion, myth, and traditional received worldviews altogether, by redefining philosophy so broadly and nebulously that it becomes a kind of vague place-holder for all belief systems and practices.

The question is how one negotiates these dangers in a comparative introductory philosophy class. I begin the first day of class by asking the students in my World Philosophy course what philosophy is, and teasing out of their responses at least three distinct senses of the term. I typically get several students who initially define philosophy as a kind of "worldview," or set of beliefs and values, that an individual or collective body might hold. This ordinary language usage of 'philosophy' as a way of looking at the world I designate as $\Phi_1$.

Usually at least one or two students will also emphasize the more processive sense of philosophy, as something one does rather than something one has, and I designate this as $\Phi_2$. This is the more specific, technical sense of philosophy, as an activity of critical reflection and analysis. I emphasize the continuity and difference between $\Phi_1$ and $\Phi_2$: what we all come into the class with is $\Phi_1$; what we'll be doing over the course of the semester is $\Phi_2$—that is, asking basic, fundamental questions about things we typically take for granted, finding the points at which our received worldviews fall short or break down, and recalibrating them so that they will give us a more adequate account of the world.

The raw material upon which $\Phi_2$ works is thus the inherited, ostensibly unexamined worldview of $\Phi_1$.

But what about the historical texts we study over the course of the semester? These constitute philosophy in a third sense ($\Phi_3$): the great philosophical stances and systems that we study are the provisional products of $\Phi_2$'s critical inquiry. One can see the continuity between $\Phi_1$ and $\Phi_3$ (they both involve worldviews of some sort), but also their distinctness, inasmuch as $\Phi_3$ encompasses considered answers to fundamental questions that were never explicitly posed by $\Phi_1$. This is how Plato or Sankara or Xunzi's philosophy can be seen as an extension of, and yet importantly different from, students' garden-variety 'philosophies of life,' not to mention traditional, received worldviews.

One idea that emerges from these preliminary considerations on the first day of class is that philosophy never happens in a vacuum. It is always parasitic upon some received worldview, which is always imbedded within a particular cultural and historical context. Thus the raw material upon which $\Phi_2$ works can differ dramatically, giving rise to radically different claims, different methods, different canons of intelligibility—even different questions. The twenty-four thousand dollar question is: is all philosophical activity (not only the "answers," but the "questions" themselves) determined by the cultural and historical context within which it emerges? Or can it, to some extent, extricate itself from this situatedness, rise above and go beyond it? Obviously, I have my own views on this (I probably wouldn't be doing philosophy if I didn't subscribe to the possibility of at least a weak form of transcendence), but I try to pose this as a genuinely open-ended question that we will return to throughout the semester. This, in short, is how I try to frame the subject matter so that our comparative examination of cross-cultural philosophies doesn't fall prey to the 'Scylla' and 'Charybdis' I mentioned earlier.

### Practical Considerations

The biggest challenge an introductory World Philosophy course faces is: how does one responsibly cover such a broad topic, without having the course ultimately lapse into superficiality and incoherence? Clearly, it is impossible—or at least inadvisable—to attempt to cover all the myriad philosophical traditions. Geographically and historically, the range is simply too great. From the beginning, I decided that I would impose certain constraints on the range of traditions I would attempt to cover.

In my first version of World Philosophy, I may have over-reacted to this problem somewhat. I chose to look at only two traditions—European and Chinese philosophy—and even there, restricted my focus to what is sometimes called the "Axial" period. In effect, my first version of World Philosophy was a comparative introductory course that restricted itself to classical Greek and Chinese philosophy. I chose only two figures within each tradition, each of whom mapped out radically distinct philosophical positions. For the Greek component, we read Plato's *Republic* in its entirety...
and Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*. For the Chinese component, we read Confucius’ *Analects* and the *Zhuangzi*. The advantages of this approach were that the students got a fairly in-depth, substantial introduction to a few major figures in two different traditions and were able to set them up in a sustained dialogue with one another. The major drawback was that it lacked sufficient breadth, both within and between traditions. At most, it hinted at the remarkable diversity and heterogeneity of world philosophical thought.

For my second version of World Philosophy, I took a somewhat different tack. I decided to branch out to three traditions—European, Indian and Chinese—and to take a more inclusive historical approach as well (no longer limiting my focus to the Axial period). I chose an anthology this time as the main text. In spite of the fact that World Philosophy is a relatively new niche, a number of good anthologies are already on the market. I opted for Elliot Deutsch’s collection, because the historical selections seemed well chosen (considering the inevitable limitations of such an enterprise) and were supplemented by some helpful explications by contemporary specialists (e.g. Deutsch, Halbfass, Datta and Potter, Wing-Tsit Chan, Herbert Fingarette, Roger Ames, and Mary Tiles).16

Employing the anthology turned out to be a useful learning process for me, because it gave me a good provisional sense of which figures and traditions would work well in such a course, and which wouldn’t. The inclusion of various Indian *darsanas* also convinced me that it’s not enough to focus on foundational texts like the *Rg Veda*, the *Upanisads*, and the *Bhagavad-gita*, but that students ought to have a sense of the kind of rational disputation and system-building that goes on in the various schools. Based on the feedback I got via class participation and course evaluations, the students seemed to like the arrangement of this particular course, perhaps because of the variety, diversity and fast pace (the fact that we covered a different figure almost every day of class held their attention fairly well). My own feeling, however, is that it was just too much too fast. I wanted to slow down a bit and recapture some of the depth and careful reflection of the earlier class.

Consequently, for World Philosophy ‘Mach 3’, which I taught this last year, I used a mix of complete works, along with two source books of Indian and Chinese philosophy: Radhakrishnan and Moore’s seminal collection of classic Indian texts, and Ivanhoe and Van Norden’s more recent anthology of classical Chinese philosophy.18 The former still does the trick, although the translations are somewhat dated. I was particularly happy with the latter, though, since all the translations have been standardized into pinyin there, minimizing the linguistic confusion typically generated by having to switch back and forth between the Wade-Giles and pinyin romanization systems. This way, we had the opportunity to work through considerably larger chunks of representative texts in a more sustained manner, some of them in their entirety. Instead of reading short excerpts from a different thinker for each class meeting, we read several Platonic dialogues (the *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Phaedo*), Descartes’ *Meditations*, sizable selections from the *Rg Veda*, the *Upanisads*, the *Law of Manu*, and the *Bhagavad-gita* (in its entirety), key Carvaka, Buddhist, and Vedanta texts, and finally, substantive portions from Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Han Feizi. Luckily, I had the opportunity this last year to supplement our study of European, Indian and Chinese philosophical traditions with a series of lectures that I organized on the Islamic philosophical tradition. Over the course of the academic year, five specialists in the field of Islamic philosophy gave talks on campus. I assigned short extra-credit response papers to the students in my classes, and we discussed the content of the talks a bit in class. This at least gave students a taste of the sort of questions and claims one finds in that tradition.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, I am happy with my current model of the introductory World Philosophy class. The only major change I’m making next year is to replace Descartes’ *Meditations* with Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, so as to get a greater representative diversity in the section on European philosophy (while still giving them some preparation for our major’s required 200 level course in Modern Philosophy). But some aspects of the class still need tinkering with. One problem is making the shift from European to Indian philosophy, which has become something of a ‘crisis moment’ in the class. What makes this transition particularly jarring is that I end the European section with an epistemologically uncompromising modern text—in this case, Descartes’ *Meditations* (a two-week tour through all six of them, with some material from the “Objections and Replies” worked in as well)—and begin the Indian section with excerpts from foundational *sruti*. The inevitable culture shock students will experience here is exacerbated by a profound shift in the form and content of the material we’re looking at: we move abruptly from Descartes’ methodological skepticism—his insistence on certainty as an essential criterion for knowledge and his demand for airtight arguments rooted in first-person authority—to the mytho-poetic expression of philosophical ideas in the *Rg Veda* and *Upanisads* (presented in the form of a kind of “revelation” or authoritative testimony). This has the unfortunate effect of reinforcing traditional stereotypes about the “mystical,” non-rational East, and students sooner or later raise the question of why we are reading this material in a philosophy class—how can this count as philosophy? Even when we move beyond foundational texts to the various *darsanas*, many students remain troubled by key aspects of Indian philosophy that seem not to fit the European mold: its soteriologic-religious dimensions, the centrality of testimony as a source of knowledge, the concepts of *samsara*, *karma* and *moksa* as ‘non-negotiables’, and so forth.

I initially tried to anticipate this challenge with a preliminary spiel (which in retrospect seems perhaps too defensive); now I just wait for the question to emerge naturally out of our readings and discussions. Apart from drawing
attention to the ways in which Indian philosophy is indeed philosophical, I have found there are several ways to address students' doubts. One tactic is to point out the ways in which philosophy and religion are not always so easily separable in Western thought. Two of the Western texts we read—Plato's Phaedo and Descartes' Meditations—demonstrate this fairly clearly (and Hellenistic and Medieval philosophy certainly wouldn't provide us with many exceptions), but I think a case could even be made that this pertains to the vast majority of modern Western thought as well, despite our protestations to the contrary.

Another strategy is to raise the question whether knowledge has in fact always been viewed as an end in itself in Western thought. Again, there are myriad examples where this is obviously not the case, and many others where the apparent sovereignty of theoria can be at least problematized upon closer examination. But whatever our answer to this question turns out to be, one still faces the more fundamental question whether knowledge should in fact be considered an end in itself.

There is at least one more strategy I use to address students' initial concerns about the philosophical quality of the Indian tradition. While they may see concepts like samsara, karma and moksa as inadequately examined dogmatic assumptions, I draw attention to the less obvious non-negotiables that the Western philosophical tradition has taken for granted. I can point out, for instance, that although the class wanted to question and dispute almost every claim Plato and Descartes made, they all bought Descartes' cogito intuition hook, line and sinker—along with his subsequent claim that he is a "thinking thing." Which is to say that they all bought into substance metaphysics implicitly. The section on Buddhism can be an epiphany at this juncture of the class. As we work through the doctrines of no-self and emptiness in particular, you can virtually see light bulbs go on.

Engaging in cross-cultural philosophy, students can begin to see the ways in which some of their own most fundamental assumptions are questionable—as I put it earlier, it gives them the leverage to recognize the contingency and optionality of their own worldview. If philosophy involves the attempt to reflect critically upon our most fundamental assumptions and recalibrate them so that they more effectively capture the phenomena of our developing experience, then the critical study of another tradition's most probing questions and carefully considered answers turns out to be more than just icing on the cake—it plays an essential role in the basic task of philosophy. In today's increasingly interconnected, multicultural global society, to do philosophy properly, one will have to do comparative philosophy.

Notes

1A complementary aim is to give students a sense of "portable" general philosophical positions: e.g., monism, dualism, pluralism, idealism, materialism, empiricism, rationalism, ethical theories that prioritize intention vs. those that focus on consequences vs. those that emphasize the cultivation of virtue or character, and so forth (while philosophy is not simply about a bunch of trans-historical, trans-cultural "ism", these categories can be provisionally useful all the same).

2See Timothy Check's, Erin McCarthy's and Charles Ess' articles in ASIANetwork Exchange, Winter 2001. All three contributors rightly emphasize the ways in which a comparative approach to teaching philosophy can contribute to the cultivation of democratic world citizens.


4For an examination of this phenomenon in the Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions, see Oliver Leaman's "Introduction" in History of Islamic Philosophy, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, pp. 5-8.

5One could make the argument that Indian philosophy actually has more in common with European philosophy than with Chinese. For a discussion of the philosophical commonalities between Indo-European philosophies, as opposed to classical Chinese philosophy, see Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr.'s introduction to their Anecdotes of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), particularly pp. 20-35 ("Metaphysics, With Reference to Language"). Ames and Rosemont offer what might be seen as a variation the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, arguing that Indo-European languages have imbedded in them, as it were, a certain ontology of "things" or "substances," as opposed to classical Chinese, which is bound up with an ontology of processes or events.

6In the Indian tradition, for example, one finds the classical distinction between āstika (orthodox or "yea-saying") and nāstika (heterodox or "nay-saying") dārsanas, which revolves around the question of the legitimacy and authority of the Vedas. But even within these distinctions one finds a remarkable diversity. Under the rubric of the nāstika dārsanas, for instance, one finds the fatalism of the Ajīvikas, the materialism-empiricism-hedonism of the Carīvakas, the perspectivism and spiritual-ethical titanism of the Jains, the rigorous anti-foundationalism of Madhyamika Buddhism, and the idealism of Yogacara Buddhism. Even under the rubric of the āstika dārsanas, where one might reasonably expect a greater degree of homogeneity, one finds a plethora of schools that focus primarily on different concerns: logic (Nyāya), ontology (Vaisēśika), spiritual discipline and liberation (Yoga), cosmology (Śāṁkhyā), hermeneutics (Mīmāṁsā), or some combination thereof (Vedānta), as well as a rich diversity of philosophical positions (e.g. pantheistic
monism, dualism, pluralism, etc.). The same is certainly true of Chinese philosophy. For an excellent overview that brings out the diversity of classical Chinese thought, see A. C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1989).


8The 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.


10Solomon, "'What is Philosophy'?: The Status of World Philosophy in the Profession," p. 100.


14This 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.

15Using 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.


18For a pithy defense of the philosophical quality of Indian darsanas, see Krishna, "Comparative Philosophy: What it is and What it Ought to Be," pp. 75-77.