

THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: *Early proponents of comparative philosophy believed that the dissemination of comparative methods would lead to step forward in human consciousness and contribute to a more peaceful world. Can comparative philosophy today still aspire to such goals? On the one hand, the aims of the field have narrowed, so that comparative philosophy is seen as a method of interpreting particular thinkers and texts or as a tool for addressing specific philosophical problems. On the other hand, critics argue that comparative philosophy is an outmoded enterprise that should give way to more pluralistic forms of inquiry. In this paper, I examine three contemporary views about the social relevance of comparative philosophy. The first sees comparative philosophy as a means of cultivating liberal citizenship; the second as an ally in decolonial struggle; the third as offering resources to promote human flourishing in the modern world. These approaches offer comparative philosophers a wide range of options for thinking about the social relevance of their field.*

Keywords: *teaching comparative philosophy, Confucius, decolonization, flourishing, liberal education, methodology*

In an earlier era of comparative philosophy, advocates believed that the dissemination of comparative methods would have a gradual yet socially transformative impact on the global order. As one scholar wrote in Volume 1, Issue 1, of *Philosophy East and West*, published in 1951:

Comparative philosophy is a never-ending approach, tried again and again from various angles, ever correcting itself, ever revealing new and fascinating aspects. The results of such a conscious, methodic evaluation will, through the usual channels of modern education, slowly pervade the life and thought of the people and become a powerful reuniting and reintegrating force among nations. (Kwee 1951, 12)

Without the rigorous methodology that comparative philosophy uses to approach the world's philosophical traditions, the author claims, attempts to engage these traditions

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will be “more a product of fantasy than of genuine understanding” (ibid.). Training in comparative methods thus was seen as a necessary precondition of building a global community.

Other contributors to the issue shared the view that comparative philosophy would lead to a global societal transformation. Paul Masson-Oursel, whose pioneering volume on comparative philosophy was published in 1926, contended that comparative philosophy would be a vital means for people to learn to live together:

Henceforth, societies, on a planet rendered very small by the progress of aviation, will exist elbow to elbow and will even intermingle. Each mind is, as Leibniz said of his monads, a ‘total part’ of humanity. No one is himself; everyone includes others and even his adversary. Thus, comparative philosophy is a necessary condition not only of peace, but of human existence itself. (Masson-Oursel 1951, 8)

Sarvepelli Radhakrishnan, who in the 1930s held the H.N. Spalding Chair of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford University and later went on to serve as President of India, wrote that the intellectual upheaval caused by the encounter between East and West was “a prelude to a world-wide spiritual renaissance, when human consciousness will take a great stride forward” (Radhakrishnan 1951, 4).

Scholars encountering these perspectives today may be struck by two features of comparative philosophy in the early 21st century. The first is that, as comparative philosophy has struggled to find a place within contemporary academic philosophy, the aims of the field have narrowed. Rather than focusing on the broad social goals mentioned above, today’s practitioners use comparison either as a means of understanding particular thinkers and texts from different cultural traditions, or to expand our range of resources for addressing specific philosophical problems (Angle 2010; Li 2022). These aims are continuous with the historical and problem-solving dimensions of philosophy proper, while at the same time expanding the range of mainstream philosophy to make it more in touch with a global world.¹

The second feature is that there is much less optimism about the state of the field than was found among its earliest practitioners. Critics present comparative philosophy as at best a preliminary stage in the transition to a more open and pluralistic era of philosophy: global philosophy, fusion philosophy, re-emergent philosophy, etc. At worst, they depict it as a morally dubious enterprise rooted in Western imperialism and colonialism, with an asymmetric bias in favor of Anglo-European intellectual categories that continues to plague the field. In light of these criticisms, the statements of comparative philosophy’s earliest adherents seem overly optimistic.

In this paper, I want to examine several approaches that present comparative philosophy as a socially relevant endeavor. Can the field today still aspire to serve as a “powerful reuniting and reintegrating force among nations”? How so? The first approach contends that training in comparative methods creates globally aware citizens

¹ In my own presentation of the aims of comparative philosophy (Connolly 2015/2023), I have focused on its *interpretive* and *constructive* dimensions. The present paper can be seen as an addendum to Chapter 2 of that work.

who reject the forces of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and prejudice. The second enlists comparative philosophy in the struggle to revive marginalized cultural traditions in the face of a philosophical environment shaped by colonialism. The third and final one sees comparative philosophy as preserving and defending ideas from ancient philosophical traditions that contribute to flourishing in the modern world. While each of these approaches has different implications for studying non-Western texts and traditions, together they show that the social relevance of comparative philosophy envisioned by its earliest proponents is alive and well.

1. COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

On the first approach we shall consider, the comparative study of non-Western traditions serves to develop global citizens who think about cultures and conflicts between them in a sophisticated way. The most vigorous defender of this argument has been Martha Nussbaum, in her 1997 book, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, and more recently, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, published in 2016. In Nussbaum's view, the study of non-Western traditions is a means of teaching a kind of critical thinking about culture which serves the needs of citizens living in modern democracies. As she writes in the latter book, "The ability to think well about a wide range of cultures, groups, and nations in the grasp of the global economy and of the history of many national and group interactions is crucial in order to enable democracies to deal responsibly with the problems we currently face as members of an interdependent world" (2016, 10).

Nussbaum's claims about teaching non-Western traditions are situated within a broader argument about the purpose of contemporary education on American college campuses. In her view, this purpose is to produce "citizens of the world"—a goal which she sees as integral to the liberal arts curriculum. The ideal of world citizen is one in which "we recognize the worth of human life wherever it occurs and see ourselves as bound by common human abilities and problems to people who lie at a great distance from us" (1997, 9). This ideal requires three abilities: first, the critical examination of one's traditions; secondly, the capacity to see oneself not just as a member of a particular group, but as "bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern"; and thirdly, a "narrative imagination" that allows us to understand the stories of those who are different from us (*ibid.*, 10-11).

While the world has become much more interconnected since the time of the ancient Greek, the inspiration for liberal education remains Socrates. The primary aim of teaching non-Western traditions, on Nussbaum's view, is "to produce students who have a Socratic knowledge of their own ignorance—both of other world cultures and, to a great extent, of our own" (1997, 147). Encounters with different ways of life help us to examine our own received views about how to live. This intellectual humility is manifest in rejecting simple contrasts—for example, the belief that "human rights" is a product purely of Western culture and that other cultures lack this concept.

In a course on Comparative Political Philosophy that Nussbaum describes in *Cultivating Humanity*, Confucius is presented as a kind of methodological counterpart

to Socrates. The professors who taught this course, Stephen Salkever and Michael Nylan, write in their own paper on “Comparative Political Philosophy and Liberal Education” that Socrates and Confucius both share a focus on the question of how to live. Denying any special wisdom of their own about this issue, Socrates and Confucius encourage their students to question received ideas and practices. Rather than focusing on the different teachings of these two thinkers, Salkever and Nylan highlight their similar ways of doing philosophy: “we treat Confucius and Socrates not as authors of doctrines to compare, nor as representative thinkers of their respective “cultures,” but as figures who use analogous modes of unsettling, critical self-inquiry” (Salkever and Nylan 1994, 239). The syllabus for this style of course begins from an overarching problem that is shared across traditions, with assignments challenging students to “move from very particular moments in the text to broader questions” (*ibid.*, 242). The professors emphasize that cultural boundaries are important but also that we can find ways to navigate these boundaries.

On this approach, the study of comparative philosophy leads to social transformation by producing citizens who are better equipped to respond to cultural difference. A typical feature of cross-cultural discourse in the public sphere is an “us vs. them” rhetoric that enables certain figures to posture as tough-minded defenders of our ways against theirs. Liberally educated citizens of the world will see through this kind of rhetoric, recognizing that cultures are complex and evolving. Nussbaum says in the conclusion of *Cultivating Humanity* that our investment in the kind of education at stake in her book determines whether or not the people who govern us see difference as a threat to be resisted or as an opportunity for understanding.

Among comparative philosophers of late, the most vigorous defender of the global citizenship approach has been Bryan W. Van Norden in his *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (2017). Pushing back against American conservative politicians who reject philosophy as irrelevant, Van Norden defends a general view of philosophy as promoting engaged citizenship. Quoting Nussbaum with approval, he writes that “Studying philosophy makes people more informed and more thoughtful citizens, more comfortable with the fact that others disagree with them, less vulnerable to manipulation and deception, and more willing to resort to discussion rather than violence” (Van Norden 2017, 128). In the most polemical chapter of the book, entitled “Trump’s Philosophers,” he argues that the rejection of the study of non-Western philosophy in particular is an unwitting manifestation of an “us vs. them” politics built on nationalism, ethnocentrism, and cultural chauvinism. In forging an alliance of different philosophical traditions against various forces of close-mindedness, Van Norden similarly highlights the methodological similarities between Socrates and Confucius: “For both Socrates and Confucius, philosophy is conducted through dialogue. For both Socrates and Confucius, dialogue begins in shared beliefs and values, but is unafraid to use our most deeply held beliefs to challenge the conventional opinions of society” (*ibid.*, 158).

For the global citizenship approach to studying comparative philosophy, then, the skills learned through cross-cultural philosophy are not substantially different from the skills cultivated by a general philosophical training. When we teach comparative

philosophy, we are attempting to instill in students the same critical attitude and habits of questioning, only in this case through cross-cultural dialogue. As Van Norden writes, “We find the same values in the best philosophy of every era and every culture. Contemporary philosophy needs to recover these ideals” (*ibid.*, 159). How we teach comparative philosophy does not involve any radical revision of the philosophy curriculum, but rather a reengagement with its best practices. And these practices, if successfully taught, can build students ready to combat dogmatism in all its forms they will encounter as citizens of the world.

2. COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND DECOLONIZATION

Based on Van Norden’s arguments, we might see comparative philosophy as concerned with forging an alliance of the best philosophical views from around the world against the forces of ethnocentrism and nationalism. However, the second approach we shall consider argues that these destructive forces are rooted within Western philosophy itself. On this view, comparative philosophy offers the means by which students may interrogate a host of Eurocentric philosophical assumptions that have led to an unjust world in the past and continue to affect the present.

Since ethnocentrism is embedded in the curriculum at Western universities, higher education is an important site of struggle for better representation. Academic philosophy itself has an acknowledged problem with diversity, both in terms of the composition of its professorate and the narrowness of its non-Western course offerings. Whereas scholars like Van Norden also attempt to confront this lack of diversity, what distinguishes the second approach is its diagnosis of the problem’s source. As Jonardon Ganeri writes, “I believe that the single primary cause of philosophy’s diversity problem is that the profession remains deeply implicated in a legacy of colonial patterns of thought and organization, institutional models that really only took root in the nineteenth century” (Ganeri 2022, 139). He points out that comparative philosophers such as Radhakrishnan, who drew attention to these structural problems with philosophy in the mid-20th century, would find the same issues today (*ibid.*, 149). As the authors of *A Practical Guide to World Philosophies* write, the word philosophy itself remains “deeply saturated with Europeanness, whiteness, and maleness” (Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson 2021, 32).

The role of comparative philosophy lies in resisting this legacy. As Ganeri writes, “The urgent need of philosophy now is to decolonize, and that means to globalize, to embrace and incorporate a diverse plurality of philosophical traditions and practices...” (Ganeri 2022, 139) Philosophizing cross-culturally means being skeptical of Eurocentric philosophical norms and attempting to think about philosophy from new perspectives, with the ultimate goal that mainstream academic philosophy will eventually give way to a new form of philosophy. This philosophy will be more responsive to global issues, as well as more inclusive and just.

On this way of thinking, cross-cultural philosophy can be construed as a form of social activism, giving us the tools to address various kinds of inequality, beginning with philosophy itself and then moving outwards. As Grant Silva explains in a recent

paper, colonialism has contributed to epistemic injustice by replacing the categories by which colonized peoples understand themselves with those imposed from the outside. Without paying sufficient attention to this injustice, we may find ourselves unwittingly replicating it. As Silva writes, “Philosophy decolonized would allow individuals and communities to be themselves when engaged in philosophical reflection, that is to say, nonalienated philosophical practice” (Silva 2019, 127).

Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson cite the case of “Indigenous philosophy.” On the one hand, this label appears to lump together various traditions that have not yet reached the status of a *world* religion or philosophy, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. On the other, the category can mark out a place of “philosophical intervention.” As the authors write, “As a site of reclaimed power, the field of Indigenous philosophy forges sociopolitical solidarity across diverse groups of people brought together via the contingent historical conditions of the European colonial period” (Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson 2021, 81). Within Indigenous studies, this means resisting Eurocentric discourse and working towards philosophical categories that are more reflective of indigenous concerns, such as the environment and human interconnectedness.

If cross-cultural philosophy means the critique of philosophical practices that had led to inequality in the past and leave a legacy of inequality in the present, it also means reforming our philosophy teaching practices to be more inclusive. In one course Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson describe, co-taught with an Indigenous philosopher, the students spent three quarters of the course reading critical theory texts centered on decolonization, and then the remaining quarter devoted to Indigenous philosophy. The co-teacher drew attention to the challenges of presenting Indigenous philosophy on its own terms within the academy rather than through received categories. Course feedback suggested that the students not only learned new philosophical topics, but also came to understand that Euro-centric categories are unable to capture all areas of inquiry, which in turn helped them grasp the significance of decolonization. More directly, learning from an Indigenous philosopher, as the authors recount, “served to disrupt students’ standard understanding of who a philosopher is, and should be” (*ibid.*, 82).

As this example suggests, the decolonizing approach to cross-cultural philosophy will involve a radical revision of what takes place in the average philosophy classroom. According to Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson, “the use of eurocentric methodologies, even while teaching diverse content, can still give the impression that all philosophy is, ultimately, cast from the European or Euro-American model” (*ibid.*, 55). If we use only one set of methodological tools in the classroom, we assume that world philosophies do not have unique contributions of their own.

When teaching Confucianism, for instance, Kirloskar-Steinbach and Kalmanson suggest the use of techniques such as memorization, recitation, and quiet sitting that depart from entrenched philosophical practices. The neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi says, for instance, that we understand texts most of all by reciting them. In one Chinese philosophy classroom that the authors describe, the professor asks students to memorize the opening of the *Great Learning (Da Xue)*, around 300 words in English.

The students accomplish this one line at a time over the course of the semester, and are quizzed on it as they go. They also read commentaries and write their own commentaries over the course of the semester. The commentarial form of writing, in contrast to the essay form that focuses on developing one's own independent views about some issue, focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of an authoritative text (Connolly 2012). The goal of such courses is to give students a richer understanding of what Chinese philosophy is all about.

There is an implicit critique of the first approach here. One problem with comparative philosophy as global citizenship education is that while it broadens the scope of texts and traditions included within the philosophical curriculum, the methodology is still largely centered in the Western tradition of Socratic dialogue. If comparative philosophy is just an extension of Socratic methods, and these methods themselves are never challenged or open to expansion, then we are left with a relatively one-sided picture of philosophy. The received way of doing philosophy needs to be expanded to include methods from non-Western traditions. When it comes to teaching cross-cultural philosophy, professors need to incorporate ways of doing philosophy that enrich students' understanding of the different possibilities for the discipline while at the same time showing how these possibilities have been constrained by the dominant tradition.

3. COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND FLOURISHING IN THE MODERN WORLD

Now we turn to a third conception of the social goal of comparative philosophy. Like the first two approaches, this one uses comparison as a means to question received assumptions and conventional ways of thinking. Yet in this case, it challenges assumptions that prevent contemporary humans from living flourishing lives. Whereas the first approach enlists comparative philosophy in a battle against forces of illiberalism, and the second in a battle against Eurocentrism, the third approach uses comparative philosophy as a means of guidance in the modern age.

On the most forceful version of this approach, the modern world has gone astray, and cross-cultural philosophy offers a set of possibilities, drawn from the world's ancient traditions, that might set it on the right course. In their Epilogue to *Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century*, Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., write that in spite of the extraordinary advances of the last few centuries, "we are living in a moment of increasing urgency. The darkness of a perfect storm of global proportions is gathering on the horizon that will immanently threaten our familiar ways of living if not ultimately the very survival of humanity as a species" (Rosemont, Jr. and Ames 2016, 171). Confucianism, in their presentation, offers a perspective that can counteract the destructive individualism that forms the ideological core of modern Western societies.

In their introduction to "The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us about the Good Life," Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh give a similar litany of problems besetting the modern world: environmental crisis; the widening gap between

rich and poor; narcissism and anxiety. They suggest that the 21st century is the “Age of Complacency”: a period in which unhappy and unfulfilled people stand idly by in the face of looming crisis. At the ideological level, we are beset by certain myths: that we live in an age of unprecedented freedom, where we can shape our own destinies and live out our own truth. They write that

all of us have assumptions about who we are, how our society operates, and our place in world history. . . . [M]any of these assumptions are flat-out wrong—not only empirically wrong but also dangerously wrong, for if we live according to these assumptions, we limit our experience and our potentially dramatically. (Puett and Gross-Loh 183)

Classical Chinese philosophical texts offer an alternative point of view that can help us break away from these limiting assumptions. With the benefit of these texts, they argue, the Age of Complacency will give way to an Age of Possibility.

The relevant dimension of comparison in this approach is perhaps not so much “Western vs. non-Western” as it is “ancient vs. modern.” My own teacher, Jiyuan Yu, maintained that philosophers such as Aristotle in Confucius had more in common with each other than either had with contemporary philosophy. “One reason for . . . comparative works to stress differences,” he writes, “is that the comparison often occurs between ancient China and the modern West. Numerous so-called contrasts between East and West are indeed the contrasts between the ancient world (including the ancient West and ancient China) and the modern West” (Yu 2011, 379). Ancient philosophers, for instance, shared a focus on philosophy as a way of life that is left out in contemporary academic discourse. Turning to ancient philosophy does not mean hearkening back to a perfect era, but learning from their best ideas.

In its “Statement on the Role of Philosophy in Higher Education,” the American Philosophical Association includes among the goals of philosophy the preservation of intellectual heritage:

More so than any other academic discipline, philosophy studies the history of ideas and texts that have profoundly shaped Western thought about basic ethical values, political systems and ideals, human rights, the human good, the nature of knowledge and science, and the fundamental structure of reality. The history of philosophy is virtually the history of our intellectual heritage.

However, as the wording of this statement makes clear, the preservation is limited to “Western” thought, which the authors label “our” intellectual heritage. We might conceive of cross-cultural philosophy as involved in the preservation of global ideas – a storehouse of cultural resources for thinking about the perennial problems that shape human life (Vargas 2010).

As Puett and Gross-Loh state at the end of the book, the kinds of self-cultivation techniques that we learn from ancient Chinese philosophy can help us to improve both ourselves and our relationships. In their experience, students have an appetite for the counter-cultural wisdom they find in Chinese philosophy. As the blurb for *The Path* reads: “Why is a course on ancient Chinese philosophers one of the most popular at

Harvard? Because it challenges all our modern assumptions about what it takes to flourish.”

The presentation of Confucius in *The Path* emphasizes the Chinese thinker’s centeredness in everyday life. For Confucius, they contend, the question is how to live your life on daily basis – “a question about the tiniest things” (Puett and Gross-Loh 25), such as how to eat, sit, or interact with others *in the appropriate way*. They contrast these everyday concerns with the Big Questions approach that is at the center of most philosophy courses: do we have free will? Is there an objective morality? In their teaching of Confucius and other Chinese thinkers, they focus on simple scenarios and ask students to assess what is going on. Suppose you run into a friend at the grocery store—what is the meaning of the different types of greeting you might use in this situation?

On this third approach, social transformation takes place by working on one’s immediate surroundings. Puett’s students in the Harvard course say that “they have changed the way they look at their relationships, now recognizing that the smallest actions have a ripple effect on themselves and everyone around them” (*ibid.*, xiv). The focus on human flourishing, beginning with the small things in life, has a distinctively Confucian resonance.

While the first two approaches target contemporary philosophy primarily for its exclusion of non-Western traditions, in this third approach the target is its abstractionism. The main point of contrast the authors draw is with Kant and contemporary philosophy, where the emphasis on detached moral reasoning leaves us with little guidance about how to live our daily lives. Studying thinkers like Confucius thus helps us to broaden the scope of philosophy to include a socially transformative dimension.

4. CONCLUSION

Ganeri points out that thinkers such as Radhakrishnan had larger ambitions for the study of philosophy than those found in contemporary times:

Their view was that philosophy had the potential, if it expanded its horizons, to resolve the great clash of values—between cosmopolitanism and localism, between a commonwealth of nations and the forces of popularism. Contemporary academic philosophers have mostly surrendered any conception of themselves as playing such a role in global politics or even in public life, and that may or may not be a bad thing. But this shrinking in the ambitions the discipline has set for itself is surely correlated with the restriction of its horizons. (Ganeri 2022, 149)

Contemporary courses on ethics, Ganeri goes on to point out, will offer little that attempts to resolve these global value-conflicts.

Ganeri may be correct about when it comes to mainstream academic philosophy. Nonetheless, as the three approaches discussed in this paper illustrate, comparative philosophers are well situated to confront the challenges that he mentions. The first approach, as we have seen, uses comparative philosophy to foster goals of global

citizenship. Scholars such as Nussbaum and Van Norden argue that training in comparison helps to counteract the destructive forces of nationalism and ethnocentrism. The result of such training is citizens of the world who are able to recognize the shared humanity that binds them with members of distant cultures.

The second approach situates comparative philosophy directly within the broader political struggle of decolonization. From this approach, we can see how the very act of setting up a course in comparative philosophy can have social relevance. Exploring philosophy from non-Western traditions helps to build an intellectual world that is more inclusive and just and allows members from previously marginalized traditions to exist on their own terms. Even when one is already working within comparative philosophy, one can make choices that contribute to this overall project, such as emphasizing dimensions of those traditions that do not fit narrowly within categories derived from European philosophy.

The third approach also attempts to address the political and existential challenges of the modern age head-on. Scholars such as Roger Ames and Michael Puett argue that confronting these challenges means examining the assumptions upon which the modern world is built. They draw on traditions in classical Chinese philosophy to offer us an alternative perspective on what it means to lead a flourishing life. By focusing on our everyday relationships, they offer us novel and practical strategies for addressing these challenges.

In my view, critics are right to highlight the problems that have afflicted comparative philosophy. These include the one-sided use of Western concepts and categories to interpret non-Western traditions, the lack of sensitivity to the colonial contexts that have shaped cross-cultural philosophical encounters, and the tendency to exaggerate either the similarities or the differences between the traditions being compared. Attention to these problems is the only way to make our own comparisons better founded.

Nonetheless, the three approaches discussed above show that this criticism need not be the whole story. The socially transformative goal of comparative philosophy envisioned by its earliest practitioners continues to live on. While the aims the field today tend to be conceived much more narrowly, those who want to pursue comparative philosophy in a way that aims at social transformation have a range of options to choose from, along with a more developed set of methodological tools to avoid the biases that have afflicted the field in the past.

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