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TEACHING COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Should Introductory Comparative Philosophy Courses Be Structured Around Topics or Traditions?

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Should introductory courses in comparative philosophy be organized around traditions or around topics? Will students be better served by considering Indian, Chinese, African, and Native American philosophies in depth and in sequence, or by exploring differing philosophical approaches to such topics as beauty, moral responsibility, and human nature? Each approach has reasons that recommend it, but each also brings with it serious limitations. In this essay I rehearse what I take to be the most salient arguments both for and against each approach. In the end, I conclude that, for introductory courses in comparative philosophy, an approach organized around traditions is preferable to one organized around topics.

Keywords: Comparative Philosophy; World Philosophy; Pedagogy

The question that motivates this essay is one that I struggle with every year as I decide how to structure my introductory World Philosophy course: should the course be organized around traditions or around topics? A topic-centered course would seem uniquely situated to help my students see the ubiquity of some philosophical problems, thereby potentially undermining the Western bias in philosophy. At the same time, by focusing on topics that are central to one particular tradition, such an approach can inadvertently ignore or marginalize issues that are central to other traditions. A tradition-centered course may avoid this concern by enabling students more easily to approach each tradition on its own terms, thus encouraging a greater depth of engagement. However, doing so risks hindering the cross-cultural dialogue that is central to comparative philosophy. Ultimately, though, I do advocate the traditions approach: I think the concerns that a traditions approach entails can be more readily overcome by an instructor who is aware of those concerns than is the case with the topics approach.

Before I continue, I want to highlight two limitations to the scope of my claims. The first is that, while I believe my arguments hold regarding comparative philosophy courses, I have no idea whether or how well they extend to other fields, such as comparative religion or world literature. The second is that, given my current teaching responsibilities, I am most interested in how to structure World Philosophy courses, and the examples I use will reflect that concern. It may be the case that more narrowly focused comparative philosophy courses will be subject to different considerations that would lead to a different conclusion. For upper-division courses, this seems to be obviously true: a comparative philosophy course on the nature of truth is likely to find greater success if the traditions represented are put into dialogue with one another than if they are treated serially. It may also be true for sufficiently narrowly-focused lower-level courses. An introductory course on East Asian philosophy, for example, could follow the topics approach effectively due to the significant influence Chinese, Korean, and Japanese philosophies have historically exerted on one another. They have spent much of their history as philosophical conversation partners, borrowing, sharing, and innovating with one another's ideas. But one finds much less of this mutual influence once Indian philosophy is brought into the mix.

Even considering the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, the south Asian and east Asian traditions have not often been in conversation with one another to any great extent. I am thus inclined to think my arguments hold as well for a pan-Asian comparative philosophy course as they do for World Philosophy: it seems to me that there are simply too many philosophical issues that each geographically-defined tradition found important, but which the others didn't consider, for a topic-based approach to do justice to all representatives. For this reason, among the others I discuss here, I advocate for a traditions-based approach.

The Topics Approach

A cursory survey of introductory philosophy textbooks that include non-Western material reveals a marked leaning toward the topics approach. No doubt there are pragmatic reasons for this. If the goal of these texts is to encourage those who lack training in non-Western philosophy to include non-Western material in their introductory courses, surely this can be best achieved by making it easy to incorporate such material into a familiar philosophical framework. Someone with no training in non-Western philosophy may understandably be loath to write a unit on Buddhist philosophy into their syllabus, but one need not consider oneself an expert on Buddhism to include a selection from *The Questions of King Milinda* within a unit on the nature of the self. Similarly, someone well trained in comparative philosophy but teaching in a department with a strong Western bias may want to include non-Western materials in a basic Introduction to Philosophy course without incurring the ire of skeptical colleagues. The topic-based approach may be useful for achieving that goal.

While such pragmatic considerations are worth keeping in mind when considering how to increase the exposure to non-Western philosophy that undergraduate students receive, they are at best tangential to my question, namely: given that one is teaching an explicitly comparative course, how should one structure that course? But there are reasons beyond textbook organization for thinking that a topics approach has some advantages over a traditions approach. Perhaps the most important benefit is the potential such an approach has to undermine any doubt about

the legitimacy of non-Western philosophy. When faced with Mozi's arguments for the importance of impartial care (*jianai*) to effective statecraft, Mengzi's debate with Gaozi on human nature (*renxing*) and Xunzi's later interpolation, or the Buddhist critiques of the Brahminical belief in an essential self (*ātman*)—and how clearly each of these fits into well-established paradigms within Western philosophy—one can rely only on blatant cultural prejudice to claim that philosophy is a uniquely Western discipline. In a course focused on traditions, however, especially if that course attempts to treat non-Western traditions in their entirety, the familiar parts of such traditions risk being swamped by the unfamiliar. The *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Zhuangzi* belie the idea that the essay is the standard mode of writing philosophy; the oral traditions of indigenous African philosophy challenge those who think philosophy must be written; the religious invocations in so many Indian philosophical texts are at odds with the idea that philosophy and religion are fundamentally different activities. These pronounced differences, if not dealt with carefully, are likely to reinforce the orientalist idea that the non-Western is foreign, mystical, and not concerned with objective truth—and that whatever appears to be genuinely philosophical within such traditions is unrepresentative. The topics approach, by showing clearly how these unfamiliar texts and philosophical modalities can participate in canonical philosophical questions, may do much to undermine the Western bias in philosophy.

A closely related benefit of the topics approach is the ease with which it can foster cross-cultural dialogue within a course. In a course that treats various traditions separately, it can prove difficult to foster the sort of inter-tradition dialogue that is central to the project of comparative philosophy. After taking an exam or writing an essay on Chinese philosophy, students—especially those in an introductory course—may be quite content to leave China in the rear-view mirror as they move on to the unit on ancient Greek philosophy. When working through a unit on ethics that includes several traditions, however, it can be much easier to get students to think about the similarities and differences between Aristotelian and Confucian approaches to virtue, or between the conceptions of duty found in Kant's philosophy and those in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. This sort of engagement can help students move

from merely reporting what various philosophers have said to the more substantial task of advocating for a particular philosophical position. This is a point that Elizabeth Schiltz makes effectively in her recent article “How to Teach Comparative Philosophy.” Making use of a distinction made by John Rudisill (2011), Schiltz points out that a topics approach (which she calls a “problems” approach) can “help our students make the transition from simply studying philosophy to truly doing philosophy” (Schiltz 2014, 218).

Despite these promising features, however, the topics approach brings with it significant concerns as well. To me the most important concern with structuring a course around topics is that it necessarily begs the question of who is to decide what counts as a legitimate topic. It is worth noting that the examples just given of useful comparisons—Aristotle and Confucius, Kant and the *Bhagavad Gītā*—both begin with Western thinkers and ideas. In mainstream philosophy, the so-called “canonical” questions are *Western* questions. But this very fact impedes our ability to understand non-Western traditions. As Daya Krishna points out, interpreting non-Western traditions “in terms of western concepts and categories, which are treated not as culture-bound but as universal in character . . .” has the effect of “reducing all others to the status of objects” (Krishna 1988, 78).

As long as you start from Western ideas when seeking fruitful comparisons, some of the central ideas of other traditions are going to get short shrift while tangential ones will be presented as more important to the tradition than they actually are. It is important to remember that just because we can find an apparent analogue in one tradition for an idea that exercised thinkers in another, it does not necessarily follow that the thinkers are actually addressing the same question. The apparent similarities between Berkeleyan idealism and Yogācāra Buddhism, for instance, may or may not indicate that Berkeley was concerned with the same questions as was Vasubandhu. It is only through familiarity with British empiricism and Buddhism more generally—a familiarity that is not likely to be achieved in a topics course—that one can assess the extent to which a comparison of their projects can be either illuminating or misleading.

To let the inquiries that have informed Western philosophy dictate the limits of what counts as philosophy is quite literally to beg the question. And to then demand that non-Western traditions address precisely and only these inquiries is to stack the deck against them. It courts misinterpretation of that which is unfamiliar and ultimately invites questions about the very legitimacy of studying non-Western philosophy at all. A unit on the nature of the self, for instance, can easily include materials from Western, Indian, and Yoruba philosophy. But things become trickier if one wants to include material from the classical Chinese period. The debate between Mengzi and Xunzi on human nature could perhaps be included here, but it is more than a bit of a stretch to suggest that they are addressing the same sort of issue as that between Buddhists and Naiyāyikas regarding the existence of a soul. Until Buddhism found its way into China, metaphysical questions about the self were just not of central importance to Chinese thinkers. Mengzi and Xunzi were interested in human nature for its social and political ramifications; they weren't terribly concerned with whether the self is fundamentally material or immaterial, or whether there is some substance that constitutes the essence of the person. And, as Eliot Deutsch points out, the apparent similarities between Western and Indian discussions about selfhood disguise important underlying differences:

When Western philosophers today worry about the nature of the self, say in terms of the problem of other minds, they occupy a quite different philosophical space than did the classical Chinese, who understood personhood as socially grounded, or the Indian philosophers in their speculations concerning the nature of human consciousness. (Deutsch 1997, xiv)

Deutsch goes on to say that "it is precisely these complexities that make the comparative philosophical enterprise exciting" (*ibid.*). And these complexities may prove to be much more successfully conveyed in a course that takes the traditions approach than one that focuses on topics.

The flip side of this concern about a topics-based approach is the fact that there are compelling philosophical questions in non-Western traditions that have never

achieved the status of “Big Question” in Western philosophy. To take just one example, consider the case of testimony-based knowledge. Only a handful of Western thinkers have even considered the topic, and the vast majority of them are alive today. In the Indian tradition, by contrast, the status of testimony has long been a question fundamental to the field of epistemology. A topically-arranged course that devotes an entire unit to testimony is going to seem downright odd to someone steeped only in the Western tradition, and anyone trying to put together such a unit will quickly find that several traditions have little or nothing to say on the matter. However, anything short of a full unit on testimony is bound to undersell the topic’s importance to Indian philosophers.

Of course, it does not follow from these examples that classical Chinese thinkers were somehow less philosophical than those in India, Europe, or Africa, or that Indian epistemologists were misguided in being interested in testimony. But the absence of Chinese thinkers in a unit on the self could seem to convey such a message, as could shoehorning Indian epistemology into a unit based on the traditional Western approach. And this highlights the second major concern with the topics approach: it may not be as successful at alleviating the concerns of those who question the legitimacy of non-Western philosophy as it at first appears. I indicated above that under the traditions approach the unfamiliar aspects of a non-Western tradition can swamp the familiar, thereby reinforcing the doubts of one who is already skeptical. But this can happen even within a topic-centered course. Including a Yoruba discussion on the nature of the self within a unit on personal identity may serve merely to highlight the differences of the Yoruba approach from what has come to be familiar, and thus expected, in Western philosophy. These differences are precisely what a skeptic can seize on to confirm any preexisting doubts about another tradition’s legitimacy. That is to say, the topics approach to comparative philosophy can actually reinforce the views of those who want to see differences as evidence of inferiority. Skeptics can then identify what Kwasi Wiredu calls Sage Philosophy, and what Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as Folk Philosophy, not merely as *alternative*, but as *inferior*, ways of doing philosophy—that is, if they deign to acknowledge such approaches as being philosophy at all.

The assumption that two distinct traditions that seem to be talking about the same thing are actually answering the same question invites an important objection to the entire project of comparative philosophy: if the non-Western traditions just pursue the same questions as we find in Western philosophy, then there seems to be no compelling reason to venture beyond the Western canon. If two traditions are that similar, study only one; and faced with a choice between the two, the default position is almost certain to be to start with the thinkers from one's own tradition—for, while it may be commendable to be familiar with other traditions, it is incumbent upon us to be familiar with our own tradition, and to do our best to make sure our students are as well. “Besides,” the skeptic may say, “Kant does such a great job of articulating a morality grounded on duty; why read the *Bhagavad Gītā* for a less philosophically rigorous defense of deontology when we could just read Kant?”

So the topic-based approach, despite its apparent benefits, is beset from two sides: to the extent that it presents other traditions as being “the same,” it undermines any claim they have to being worthy of study; and to the extent that it presents them as being different, it risks undermining any claim they have to being philosophy. I think the traditions approach can help us avoid this problem. However, it does invite concerns of its own.

The Traditions Approach

I see three primary reasons to think that a first exposure to comparative philosophy may be more beneficial if oriented around traditions. First, such an approach affords students a more sophisticated understanding of each tradition. Second, it helps students gain an understanding of the development within a given tradition. Third, it provides the opportunity to read texts on their own terms.

For me, perhaps the most important benefit of the traditions approach is that it increases the likelihood that students will gain a sophisticated understanding of the philosophical traditions studied. I cringe whenever I hear people refer to “Eastern Philosophy” as if it were one single, monolithic entity. But thinking that “African Philosophy” has a single referent is no less problematic. In a World Philosophy course oriented around philosophical topics, it is difficult to find the space in the syllabus

to afford African traditions more than a single representative within a given topic. But this will lead—in, say, a unit on the self—to students having an exceedingly limited view both of the self and of African Philosophy. While it's great for students to recognize that there is, in fact, philosophy in Africa, the benefit of this recognition is tempered every time someone says, “Well, according to African Philosophy . . .” Dedicating the time to a full unit on African Philosophy can correct this limitation by giving students the opportunity to study both the similarities and the differences among Yoruba, Mbuti, and Akan conceptions of selfhood, for instance, or among their theories of what constitutes social justice.

For those philosophical traditions that are more unified than what we find in Africa, in which competing schools of thought engaged with one another as sustained philosophical conversation partners, the tradition-based approach has the additional advantage of better conveying to students the development that occurs within a given tradition. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to understand either Daoism or Mohism without an awareness of the Confucian worldview to which both were responding. It is even more futile to attempt to understand neo-Confucianism without considering both the earlier debates surrounding Confucianism and the metaphysical issues Buddhist philosophers used to challenge the Confucian tradition they encountered in China. It is difficult, though, to see how inserting selections from one or two Chinese texts into a unit on metaphysical issues in a World Philosophy course would manage to surmount this difficulty.

The third benefit of the traditions approach is closely related to the importance of understanding intra-tradition development, and was already raised in the objections to a topics approach. One concern about reading an unfamiliar text within the context of a predefined philosophical issue is that doing so encourages students to read only through the lens of that issue. This is not necessarily a problem when the text is a part of the philosophical tradition in which the issue developed, having been written either implicitly or explicitly in response to that issue. But asking a text to speak specifically to the philosophical issues of a wholly different tradition risks being a procrustean enterprise. Should the *Daodejing* be included in a section on ethics or on metaphysics? Both? The thought that you can just include some parts in one location and others

elsewhere—mining the text for arguments and then treating them as if they can stand on their own when taken out of context—is predicated on the idea that the essay is *the* mode of writing philosophy. But this idea doesn't even hold true throughout Western philosophy, much less in non-Western philosophical traditions.

Reading more texts from a given tradition and reading complete works (or at least longer selections) rather than short excerpts are both crucial practices for gaining a sophisticated understanding of a tradition. Reading Mozi as a “Chinese utilitarian,” the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gītā* as an “Indian Kantian,” or Nāgārjuna as a “Buddhist Sextus Empiricus” does a disservice both to the philosopher being read and to the student being given this stilted reading. Such facile comparisons are of course tempting for both student and instructor, as they are so easy to draw. But, as Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins point out, to make such simplistic comparisons is to lose much of what is valuable about cross-cultural philosophy:

[W]hile it might be desirable to be able to encompass all of the philosophies in the world under some single umbrella or to fit them all into a number of neat little categories, it is more valuable to appreciate the diversity and differences than to force foreign ideas into domestic pigeonholes. Within each tradition, it is important to take what has been called a “holistic” or “systems” approach, that is, to not pull this or that interesting idea out of context but to appreciate the shape and direction of a whole set of ideas together with the overall contours of the culture. (Solomon and Higgins 1995, xxviii)

It would be better, all things considered, to let students read a text in its own context, and then generate their own insights into the meaning, significance, and points of overlap and dissonance with what's familiar.

The importance of contextualizing texts from unfamiliar traditions is something that Jay Garfield and William Edelglass have stressed as well. They make the additional point that doing so can highlight those aspects of one's own tradition that otherwise pass unnoticed: “[T]o read cross-culturally requires one to read historically—not to read texts in isolation, but to work to understand their contexts

and intertextual relations, contexts and relations that are often obscured when one reads in one's own tradition as air disappears to us, and water to a fish" (Garfield and Edelglass 2011, 6). In making this point, Garfield and Edelglass identify a powerful response to one of the major objections the traditions approach faces, which was already mentioned in the discussion of the benefits of a topics approach: the tendency toward isolation that can occur when traditions are treated independently of one another. The concern is not merely that students may not compare the traditions with one another; the greater fear is that students won't genuinely engage with the traditions at all—that they will memorize what other traditions have thought without considering what they themselves believe in light of what they learn. To structure a comparative philosophy course in such a way that students' encounters with unfamiliar traditions can be limited to, "Oh, that's what they believe, that's what they do, and this is why they believe that and do that. Isn't that quaint?" is to deprive these students of the transformational potential of philosophy well done. In such a course it can be too easy for a student to remain a disinterested observer, never actually engaging with the traditions encountered, never allowing these traditions to challenge one's own worldview.

But by highlighting the broader context in which a given text was created, the traditions approach is actually better situated to address student nonengagement than is the topics approach. While it would be impossible to do justice to the whole of, say, the Chinese tradition in the three or so weeks that could be dedicated to the unit within a tradition-oriented World Philosophy course, much *can* be accomplished in that amount of time. Instead of simply having students read the passages in the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* that contain the famous debate about human nature, as one could expect in a topics course, the teacher in a traditions course can have students read from the *Analects* and explore Mozi's critique and Mengzi's replies, thereby contextualizing the debate on human nature between Mengzi and Gaozi in the *Mencius*. With this reading and discussion as preparation, students have the opportunity to really engage with Xunzi's arguments against Mengzi and to articulate their own position on the issue. While the topics approach tends to mine foreign texts for arguments or to read them as a foil for the Western tradition, the traditions approach can encourage

students to actually engage philosophically with the traditions it covers. Of course this won't necessarily happen spontaneously: such an accomplishment requires a concerted effort on the part of the instructor to foster this sort of engagement. But such effort is required for either approach to be successful, and I remain convinced that the traditions model makes student engagement more likely rather than less.

A more fundamental difficulty threatens the traditions approach, however: its assumption that we can unproblematically identify and differentiate traditions to begin with. As a straightforward, practical problem, this issue manifests as the tension between organizing units geographically or according to inheritance of cultural or philosophical frameworks. Should I include early Buddhism as part of the Indian tradition, and later developments as part of the Chinese and Japanese traditions, or would a distinct unit specifically on Buddhism be preferable? Should I create a separate unit on Islamic philosophy or partition it into African, Middle-Eastern, and Indian philosophies? Would it be misleading to include Islamic philosophy (even if only a part of it) in a unit on African philosophy, given that most of the contemporary debates about African philosophy focus on sub-Saharan, indigenous, preliterate cultures? Or would doing so serve as a useful corrective to a myopic approach to philosophy in Africa?

A larger concern about traditions lurks beneath the surface of such questions, however. The very notion of a tradition—the idea that there is such a thing and that traditions can be more or less easily identified and delineated—is itself problematic. To address this problem sufficiently would require a full essay in its own right. At this point I merely want to point out that it is a concern that teachers of comparative philosophy need to be aware of. Not just how you set up your traditions, but the very fact that you seem to be endorsing a belief in the reality of such things *as* traditions, may be based on problematic assumptions.

Conclusion: Teaching the Traditions Approach Responsibly

Considering all the factors that have been raised in this essay, I currently find the traditions approach preferable to the topics approach for introductory comparative philosophy courses. The concern about how to define a tradition is a serious

one, and it deserves more thorough consideration than I can give it here. But taking the traditions approach actually situates the instructor quite well to address that very issue within the course. Ultimately, it is up to the instructor to decide whether to include Buddhism as a subset of Indian (and Chinese and Japanese) philosophy or as its own entity—each approach has its advantages and neither is, I suspect, inherently superior. But wherever Buddhism appears within a course, the traditions approach allows students to engage with Buddhist philosophers on their own terms rather than as exotic attempts to grapple with familiar philosophical problems.

Inevitably, in following the traditions approach, differences between the various traditions—many of them fundamental—will become readily apparent. It is up to the instructor to note these differences, to help students understand why they exist, and to point out what we can and cannot infer from them. A skillful instructor can use the insights gained from such an inquiry to highlight the assumptions that have been implicit in the various schools, movements, and time periods of what has come to be called Western philosophy. So much of what Aristotle said seems obvious to those in the Euro-American tradition today precisely because we have inherited a largely Aristotelian worldview. Learning this, and learning that there are indeed other coherent worldviews on offer—some of which, for instance, invert the Aristotelian priority of substance over attribute—can help students to question their own assumptions, and to view doing so as an immensely valuable activity.

Such questioning, in turn, can help students to see the radical contingency of any canon, and the arbitrariness of what comes to be taken as obvious or understood as common sense. To take just one example, consider that in C. D. Broad's *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, which was first published in 1930 and continued to be prominent into the 1950s, the five theories are those of Spinoza, Butler, Hume, Kant, and Sidgwick. Contrast this with Baron, Petit, and Slote's *Three Methods of Ethics*, published in 1997, in which the three methods are deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Three of Broad's fundamental ethical theories are deemed to warrant no mention less than 70 years after his book appears, replaced by a theory (with a

tradition dating back at least to Aristotle) that Broad didn't even consider. If one of the goals of a comparative philosophy course (and, I hope, any philosophy course) is to encourage students to think critically about their own beliefs, then raising questions about the nature of a canon is exactly what we should do. Nothing brings the strengths and limitations of one's own worldview into sharper focus than calling attention both to the assumptions that underlie that worldview and to the arbitrary nature of the source of those assumptions.

To be clear, I am not trying to say that comparative philosophy courses should *only* be taught on the traditions model. If somebody has an independent reason for structuring a course around topics, I still think students are better served if that course includes non-Western materials than if it does not. I just think that the objections to the topics model are more difficult to overcome than those of the traditions model. But given that any introduction to philosophy is bound to be incomplete at best, it is better for students to have an incomplete introduction to Western and non-Western philosophy than an incomplete introduction to Western philosophy only.

In closing, I want to point out that comparative philosophy is ill served if those of us engaged in the field spend too much energy attempting to respond to the concerns of those who doubt the legitimacy of the enterprise as a whole. This is one of the reasons I am uncomfortable with a topics approach if that approach is used to defend non-Western philosophy from the skeptics. Question-begging definitions of philosophy are immune to correction from without. Those who want to insist that there is no such thing as philosophy outside the tradition that stems from Plato and the pre-Socratics will always be able to find confirmation of their own biases. The first mistake is to let them dictate the terms of the debate. Better not to participate in a futile argument, and instead to engage in genuinely philosophical discussion with those who are more open-minded.¹

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Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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