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TEACHING COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Introducing the World: Making Time for Islamic and Chinese Material alongside the Western Canon

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In this essay I consider the challenges faced by non-specialists in comparative philosophy. I address several familiar objections to incorporating non-Western material into standing philosophy courses (i.e., the view that the material is, indeed, not included in the category philosophy, or the worry that there simply is not enough time to cover such material). In answering these objections, I emphasize that what we today call the "Western" canon has historically been shaped by a plurality of cultures. I then conclude with several sample course modules, designed to help non-specialists incorporate sessions on Islamic and Chinese philosophy into introductory classes.

Keywords: Comparative Philosophy; Introduction to Philosophy; China; Islam; Bloom's Taxonomy

Introduction to Philosophy courses are staple courses for universities, departments, and faculty alike. It is by far my most frequently taught course, a statistic I am sure many instructors in Philosophy programs share. With this in mind, I am aware that there are limits to my arguments, but the arguments I am about to make here about canonicity are important beyond a single discipline. My argument in brief is this: adding selections from non-Western sources in humanities classes compliments the purpose of Western-centric canonical material at the introductory level.

Introductions and the Importance of Canon

Not all introductory philosophy courses are the same. Despite this, they do share a set of common features. Often, they are the workhorse courses for departments because of their role in general education requirements or as writing intensive courses. It may or may not be a requirement for a major or minor, but it is often a student's first experience of philosophy, and thereby a gateway into the program. Regardless of whether or not students become majors, the course is often touted as fulfilling two objectives—surveying important problems or thinkers, and training in a particular set of skills—both of which contribute to the general undergraduate curriculum as well as the program curriculum.

The survey component of an introductory philosophy course, whether a survey of thinkers or problems, serves the general curriculum by being a sample of material that should concern educated persons. This can take the shape of historically significant thinkers, such as Plato, Descartes, Nietzsche, or Camus, or it can take the shape of sample problems, such as the problem of other minds, the problem of grounding knowledge and justification, or the problem of ethical relativism. Either direction the survey takes provides some sort of content that is valuable for a broad education while still providing a sampling of important figures or ideas from the discipline.

A survey is not just valuable for its content, however; it is also valuable to the students for the skills they acquire through engaging that content. Bloom's Taxonomy and the revisions it has undergone are one way in which education curricula at the

primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels has created a focused conversation about how to assess and integrate skills across disciplines. For example, the original taxonomy was intended to nest a course within a program, the latter being nested itself within a university curriculum, while at the same time allowing all of these levels to be contrasted against the background of possible assignments and learning objectives (Krathwohl 2002, 212). The requirement for syllabi to contain "learning objectives" or "course outcomes" hinges not just on statements about content, but also on what students will do *with* that content. In revising the taxonomy after forty-five years, the content and process division was conceptually captured by splitting knowledge from conceptual processes, or *what* students will know from *how* they will think through, with, or about that content. This two-dimensionality enhances the revised taxonomy's ability to display a course's assignments (and the outcomes at which they are directed) through the construction of a simple table (Krathwohl 2002, 215–17). "Knowledge" under the new taxonomy includes categories such as Factual, Conceptual, Procedural, and Metacognitive, each consecutive type more complex than, yet reliant on, the former. The "Cognitive Processes" under the new taxonomy include Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating, all of which require some content if they are to be practiced and evaluated in a course. Thus, students may be required to remember procedural knowledge through practicing safe lab techniques, or to analyze metacognitive knowledge as part of developing explicit self-study habits as foreign language learners. This table visually represents thinking skills students are engaged in regardless of the content, allowing for a curriculum that develops both skill and content robustly. Thus, through Bloom's categories, or general education requirements such as critical thinking or writing intensive designations, philosophy at the introductory level is often deemed useful *despite* the possible non-relevance of its content.

Returning to content, a canon provides a consistent background for disciplinary categorization in much the same way that Bloom's Taxonomy provides a matrix of possibilities for assignments and learning outcomes associated with skills. Although it is extremely dangerous to assume that disciplinary boundaries

are rigid and impenetrable, they are useful for categorizing areas of inquiry that are closely related or share a family resemblance. Even though there may be an overlap between an Introduction to Psychology course and an Introduction to Philosophy course when discussing consciousness, the content of these courses is approached with different subsidiary concerns. In these instances, a disciplinary canon exposes students to historically and culturally significant work, work that has shaped the discipline and the area of inquiry in significant ways. In the case of majors, this is preparation for higher-level courses within a discipline, where the authors or problems considered are more closely investigated. For minors or even students taking the course as an elective, canonical material provides cultural fluency of a sort, such as understanding the *philosophical* dimensions of mind and thought, which differs in important ways from understanding them in their *psychological* dimensions.

The philosophical canon is often used to teach a variety of skills associated with its content—argument analysis and critical thinking usually top the list. The canon is also used for more mundane purposes as well. Texts and topics involve complex ideas, prompting students to work with new or specialized vocabulary while at the same time synthesizing perspectives into a robust account of philosophy. Engaging in this activity further involves recognizing which claims are compatible and which are mutually exclusive, as well as weighing accounts when they compete with one another. Writing prompts or in-class debates are drawn from canonical materials to provide students with concrete exercises to practice these skills. Thus, the integration of these two purposes, survey of canon and expansion of skillsets, are what make the introductory course and its canon so important.

The Impossible Survey

This neat and tidy picture of the introductory course does face a problem, however. Such courses cannot introduce students to *everything* in the discipline; the academic term, and arguably the length of an undergraduate program, is never long enough. At best, introductory courses provide a survey of material and skills. The problem then becomes deciding what and how much to include.

One solution to this problem is to only cover key figures, concepts, or problems selected from the canon. This might be reading selections from Plato's *Republic*, Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"; or discussing the meaning of key concepts such as "the Good," "personal identity," and "beauty"; or analyzing problems such as free will versus determinism, famous thought experiments like the Trolley Problem, and classical concerns such as the existence and nature of God.

On the other hand, a second solution might be in-depth coverage of one text, set of concepts, or problem area, opting to spend time covering as many nuances as possible in a given area within the limited time-frame of the semester. These two options represent ideal ends of a spectrum. Various integrations of these approaches are, however, directed at achieving the same two goals: to familiarize students with a survey of content and to develop basic skills. In the first solution, this is achieved by favoring breadth. Students gain familiarity with the family resemblance of activities called "philosophy" by practicing them in a variety of circumstances. The second solution represents a survey of depth within content, similar to the structure of a seminar but without the required background often leveraged by instructors in upper-level courses. Students are able to practice rehearsing arguments in much more detail because of this increased depth. Either way, canon provides the contours of the content across the spectrum.

Arguments Against Non-Western Material

Given the impossibility of fitting all canonical material into an introductory humanities course, then, non-Western material, for instance work from classical Chinese sources, or from the Islamic Golden Age, should be used to broaden the scope of philosophical discourse. Before considering the benefits of including such material, I will first consider a few immediate arguments against its inclusion.

Problem 1: [Tradition X] Is Not Philosophy

One argument against including non-Western sources in introductory philosophy courses is that they are *not* philosophy and thus do not belong in such a class. One classic version of this argument is the double bind, articulated by Robert Bernasconi. Discussing African philosophy, Bernasconi states that

> Western philosophy traps African philosophy in a double bind: Either African philosophy is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt. (Bernasconi 1997, 188)

Arguments such as these may appear to apply to something like Islamic thought, where the arguments are either indistinct because they are imitations of earlier debates in Christian or Jewish Philosophy, or they do not count as philosophy because they are actually theological debates. Including them in an introductory course is thus seen as either redundant or deviating from philosophy altogether.

This argument is problematic for two major reasons. First, complete dismissal of an historical period or a cultural tradition as "not philosophical" seems to require intimate familiarity with the subject matter, often something that would require a specialization. Without such specialization, any dismissal seems overly hasty.[1] Second, philosophy as a profession is continuing to recognize the philosophical significance of previously marginalized zones of thought, such as African or Latin American philosophy. Among experts, then, there is a trend towards understanding cross-cultural comparison as being categorically philosophical.

Problem 2: Familiarity and Time Crunch

A second argument against including non-Western materials in introductory level courses is the lack of familiarity students have with non-Western traditions and the limited amount of time in a given semester or quarter to familiarize them with a foreign culture. If a student does not know the linguistic or historical context of the Spring and Autumn or Warring States periods of China, for instance, how will she know what is significant about the *Mozi* or the *Lunyu*? Thus, adding additional time for introducing students to context takes away from the breadth or depth of

[1] It is important to note that one could simply not include something within one's introductory course because it seems irrelevant and not because it does not lie within the scope of philosophy. This argument is discounting any use of these traditions, not choosing to avoid them because of an individual non-specialist status.

coverage of the canon and the entailing skills gained from working with canonical texts, concepts, or problems.

However, this argument is also a bit self-defeating. Students very rarely have familiarity with the historical and cultural contexts of the Western canon, either. Take, for example, the Early Modern period. Often, the religious context of Europe and the historical context of scholastic methods are just as foreign to students as the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on Islamic thought. Additionally, given the problems of surveying all the material mentioned above, it is already impossible to cover the Western canon with exhaustive depth or breadth. If non-Western materials can provide any synergistic benefits, then, it is better to include than exclude them. I will consider a few such synergies shortly.

Problem 3: Our Tradition Is Western

The third argument against including non-Western materials arises out of a concern for familiarity and perpetuation of the history and culture of one's own tradition within one's own community. Just as students are expected to have a familiarity with Western Civilization in the general curriculum, Philosophy Departments in Western nation states want to continue to teach the ideas of their great and important thinkers. In its most direct form, this argument insists on only teaching the Western canon. A softer form, however, only argues that the choice to not include non-Western materials is legitimate.

My major concern here is the stronger form of the argument. Similar to the white-washing of television or film, or the erasure of important female figures in the Modern period, this argument rests on the assumption that the canonical account of Western philosophy is accurate and complete. Such assumptions are problematic because they misrepresent the actual diversity within the history of Western philosophy, while at the same time exacerbating the pipe-line problems of underrepresented groups in philosophy by representing philosophy as a (even if accidentally) white, male, European enterprise.[2] The "our" in this case does not account for

[2] Women, people of color, etc., especially as experts in fields of research that are not also similarly marginalized, such as feminism, philosophy of race.

the diversity of Americans and Europeans in the contemporary West. Additionally, "Western" philosophy is not as distinct as it is made out to be; Raphael's *The School of Athens* includes Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, also known by the Latinized name Averroes, which is evidence of the influence he has had on European reception and interpretation of Aristotle. Indeed, Islamic philosophers represent an important blind spot in Western philosophy because of the relationship between the two.

The weaker version of this argument is not problematic because it starts from the same basic premise as all other impossible surveys. It is impossible to cover all of philosophy, so this argument favors any selection that creates a responsible exposure to the Western canon. Rather than categorically excluding non-Western material, it prefers as robust an exposure to Western materials as possible. This is a complicated goal, however, especially if the history of Western philosophy is as complicated and fractured as hinted at above. Similar to the argument about limited time, however, it may actually prove *more* efficient to include highly synergistic non-Western materials.

Non-Western Supplements

There are some direct benefits to including non-Western supplementary material in predominantly Western-focused introductory courses. One example is the immediate possibilities doing so provides for high contrast comparisons. In his book *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, Chad Hansen has this to say about classical Chinese philosophy:

> Philosophers construct thought experiments when exploring theoretical frameworks. We test philosophical positions by detailing how they would spin out. We test our intuitions or considered judgments by imagining alternative theories.
>
> In one sense, the philosopher's urge is to start from scratch—the view from nowhere. We can't, of course. But classical Chinese philosophy gave me a chance to do the next best thing. What would it be like to do philosophy with a radically different set of assumptions? The assumptions I trace are

> constrained, but not by the limits on my imagination or current theoretical purposes. Chinese philosophy allowed me to perform a thought experiment removed from the immediate task of solving some outstanding philosophical problem. At the same time, it allowed me to start over in a sense—but not from nowhere. The new starting point is a real place that is just very different. I imagine myself retracing the rise of philosophy in the one place in the actual world most removed from our own in spatial, temporal, linguistic, cultural, and conceptual terms. (Hansen 1992, 2)

Hansen's approach to China reveals a few important ways different historical and cultural periods can be synergistically compared. Temporal context, linguistic and conceptual context, as well as cultural context all highlight different components that are important to any philosophical approach, whether broad and shallow or narrow and deep.

Highlighting similarities and differences in historical context helps students develop both a familiarity with world history and with contextual cues that deserve attention. For instance, paying attention to the importance of Descartes's *Letter of Dedication* as having been written for the Sacred Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne requires a bit of historical context regarding the connections between politics, religion, and philosophy (especially metaphysics) of that philosopher's time. Similarly, Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Ibn Yakzan* is written in a time and place where philosophy, religion, and politics required a literary approach rather than a purely argumentative, dialectic approach. The best interpretations of either of these texts require accessing the assumptions and arguments of the times, as well as the hindrances either author may have felt in regard to freely expressing his thoughts. To be sure, their contexts are different, but the analysis of historical context itself is valuable in both cases.

Concept association also varies across time, place, and language. For example, analysis of enduring philosophical problems provides insight into the concepts used in self-perception and self-definition. Angus Graham's differentiation between

the Western question of "What is the truth?" and the classical Chinese question of "Where is the Way?" is one instance of such a major difference, a difference that may explain many of the contrasts while still inviting students to attempt an explanation of the similarities (Graham 1989, 3). Making sense of these differences and similarities in conceptual mapping and language is also good practice for argument analysis. The variety of arguments and conceptual relations increases the field of contexts in which to find assumptions and conclusions. Such high contrast opportunities also allow for a better first approach, albeit a caricatured one, to major concepts or ideas. This allows for a tiered approach to practicing skills such as argument analysis, where students can begin with bold difference and similarity and work towards the nuances that come with increasingly accurate and detailed accounts.

Lastly, culturally diverse materials help students develop cultural fluency, or the ability to navigate the complicated interpretations of internal and external accounts of particular cultural traditions. Carefully picking supplementary material exposes students to the existence of significant philosophical traditions. Rather than experiencing the West as a free-floating culture isolated from all other cultures, diversity raises awareness of the global simultaneity of history and culture. All of these contributions together with the historical and conceptual contexts create a better background for a more nuanced, critical account of the Western canon, the "West," and even canonicity, thereby better preparing students to approach higher level course material in a more sophisticated way.

It is my hope that professional societies, such as the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy, can contribute to the field of philosophy, as well as the interdisciplinary fields of Asian Studies, International Studies, and so on, by developing more robust expectations for introductory courses. Although a canon is important, it is also constructed. Our interpretation of it is also an interpretation of our selves and our culture. Supplementing introductions to our own culture with comparisons to others provides a unique contrast through which to better understand our selves. Thus, to truly "know thyself" one must also attempt to know others.

Appendix: Sample Modules

On a final note, one way of integrating such material within Introduction to Philosophy courses is for specialists in non-Western materials to develop modules that can easily be included into non-specialist courses. These would include important textual selections, contextual background, and suggested reading or writing activities, but would be short enough to be included within a course as handouts rather than displacing other reading materials given the limited financial budget that students often face. In my own introductory classes, I currently discuss the importance of religious background and approaches to doubt in both Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* and al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*. These two texts share similar discussions about doubt and about knowledge, but take divergent autobiographical routes. I also make use of Thomas Nagel's "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" and a short selection from the *Zhuangzi* on the happiness of fish in the Autumn Floods chapter. Although both discuss the possibility and impossibility of knowing others, they provide incredibly divergent ways of doing so. These two example modules illustrate the possibility of supplementing an in-depth reading of a single text or author, such as Descartes, or a single topic, such as the problem of other minds, with non-Western works. Supplementing the Western canon need not occur only at the broadest of levels.

Sample Module A: Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* and al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*

Renee Descartes (d. 1650), the "father of Modern philosophy," represents both a landmark in Western civilization and a whipping boy of introductory students and professional philosophers alike. One of the great things about the *Meditations* is that they put arguments in first person format, presenting readers with the layers of the philosophical problem of doubt in the first meditation and attempting to resolve said doubt through the following five meditations.

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111), considered by many Muslim scholars to have been a reviver of the religion during his time, also writes in an autobiographical format on the topic of knowledge and doubt in *Deliverance from*

Error. The text considers the problem of uncritical acceptance of sources of authority when it comes to belief, especially religious belief. Unable to reverse the process of critical questioning, the text details al-Ghazali's investigation of four traditions that pursue knowledge, three of which (Islamic theology, Greek philosophy, and Ismaili thought) are insufficient for certainty. The last, Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, provides direct experience, which resolves al-Ghazali's skepticism about sensory experience and rationality. The text itself can be shortened to just the introduction plus the Sufism sections, with the selections on theology and philosophy added as desired. Particularly useful for comparison with Descartes is the section on skepticism and sophistry, where al-Ghazali considers arguments that undermine sensory experience as well as rationality, relying on God's use of "a light in his heart" to resolve the impasse in which he finds himself. This is extremely similar to Descartes's natural light and the God-given faculty of rationality, but instead of detailing an introspective rational method, al-Ghazali takes up mystical experience as the resolution of his doubt.

Sample Learning Objectives

1. Summarize the similarities and differences between al-Ghazali's and Descartes's accounts of knowledge.
2. Explain the influence society and culture (such as religion) have on intellectual concepts.
3. Find connections between autobiographical content and the justification of each of the authors' arguments.

Sample Module B: Thomas Nagel's "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?" and the "Knowing Fish" selection from the *Zhuangzi*

Nagel's classic article in philosophy of mind considers not only the problem of other minds in human-to-human interactions, but the problem (and possible solution) of knowing about *any* private conscious experience had by another being, such as the experience of a bat. Especially problematic for a metaphysics that reduces all mental events to physical events, the problem is accessible even without a complicated understanding of the multitude of metaphysical positions philosophers have created.

The clearest, most important point Nagel makes is that an account of bat physiology does not provide access to the first-person-ness of a bat's particular experience. Similarly, even a Kafka-esque transformation into a bat would still carry with it the interpretive baggage of human-experiences. Thus it seems that knowing what it is like to be a bat is impossible without actually being a bat.

As a text, the *Zhuangzi* (named after its attributed author) contains a variety of stories and ruminations on a number of topics, both philosophical and fantastical. This particular story, only a paragraph or so in length, details two friends strolling across a river via a bridge when one of the friends (Zhuangzi, the titular author) sees the fish swimming freely below and notes "That is fish happiness." His friend, a logician named Huishi, argues that he cannot possibly know fish happiness since he is not himself a fish. Zhuangzi retorts that Huishi is not Zhuangzi (a seemingly familiar appeal to the problem of other minds), which Huishi readily accepts as proof for his argument that nobody can know anything about anyone else. Zhuangzi seems to have the last laugh in the story; he argues that when Huishi asked him "from *whence* do you know the fish are happy" the phrasing of the question indicated that Zhuangzi knew the condition of the fish. This is an important point because a number of plays on words are happening in the passage. Zhuangzi is making a play on words similar to the way children do when they purposefully misinterpret the question "How do you know?" to mean "Please share your justification with me, because you do know" rather than as the rhetorical question meaning "You cannot possibly know that." Second, Zhuangzi responds to Huishi's use of the classical Chinese equivalent of "whence," a word that can mean either how or from where, by opting to answer the where rather than the how; Zhuangzi says, "I know from up here, over the Hao river." The last play on words that Zhuagzi is relying on is philosophically the most sophisticated, and the most interesting in comparison with Nagel's article. Zhuangzi's initial observation about the fish is that they swim about freely and easily, but the word used for the strolling of the pair of friends and the swimming of the fish is the same character. In other words, Huizi's participation in the free and easy walk with his friend Zhuangzi is itself a factual counter-example to the privateness of experience. Zhuangzi knows the fish are happy in the same way he knows that he

is out for a relaxing stroll with his friend, and by participating in the walk via playful philosophical banter, Huizi is admitting in participation what he is denying in argument.

Sample Learning Objectives

1. Organize two sets of classifications about the possibility of knowing other beings' experiences.
2. Critically approach both readings through explicit references to standards of argumentation.
3. In response to the texts, generate an argument about the possibility of knowing other minds.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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