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## Teaching Comparative Philosophy

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## TEACHING COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

# Teaching Ancient Greek Philosophy as a Non-Western Tradition

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Comparative philosophers are well aware of the interpretive difficulties that arise when using the methodological tools of one tradition to understand another. Such difficulties, however, also arise when looking back through traditions. This is especially the case with ancient Greek philosophy understood as the foundation of the Western philosophical tradition. Unreflective application to ancient Greek thought of methodologies that developed later in the tradition can introduce ways of thinking as foreign to it as to a non-Western tradition. This essay demonstrates how certain strategies developed by comparativists can and should be employed in interpreting ancient Greek philosophy.

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**Keywords:** Comparative Philosophy; Ancient Greek Philosophy; the West

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It is commonplace to consider ancient Greek philosophy a part of the West. Often a reference to a claim made in the Platonic or Aristotelian corpus, given without context or nuance, is used to represent some supposed feature of the West that was there in its essence from or close to the beginning. Such use of the term “West” as a noun or adjective distinguishing the cultural outlook of Europe from that of the rest of the Eurasian continent is, however, a relatively late development and certainly was not in currency in the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>1</sup> The view that Plato, Aristotle, or some other figure from the ancient Greek intellectual tradition can stand as a typical representative of the West is an assumption as potentially damaging to understanding both the West and the ancient Greeks as it is historically unsupported. In teaching about the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, then, it is important to be attentive to the differences between the ancient Greeks and the later Western tradition. Many of the discoveries made and methods developed in comparative philosophy can be used to make these necessary distinctions. In what follows, I argue that the same care shown in distinguishing non-Western cultures from the West should be used when representing the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. After this I offer an extended discussion of the portrayal of Socrates in Plato’s *Meno* in order to illustrate how differently the activity of the most influential philosopher from the ancient Greek world appears when biases from the later tradition are kept in check. I hope this argument and illustration will help point to a more responsible way of teaching ancient Greek philosophy and also reinforce the idea that great care that needs to be taken when representing any philosophical tradition.

### Comparative Contextualizing

In cautioning against importing into and imposing on classical Chinese philosophy nonindigenous views and ways of thinking, Roger T. Ames draws a distinction between analysis and narrative understanding (2002, 96).<sup>2</sup> Analysis is a familiar methodology for Western thinkers, but it depends upon a metaphysical apparatus

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<sup>1</sup> A. Raghuramaraju reports that the current use of the term ‘West’ became widespread only during WWI, though the origins of the term so used remain obscure (2005, 595).

<sup>2</sup> Ames is recapitulating here the view of Richards (1932).

that includes assumptions concerning universals and particulars, abstracts and concretes, qualities, relations, and properties—all structures not found in classical Chinese philosophy. By using analysis, then, the interpreter risks contaminating the culture she is investigating with categories of understanding not already present, and thus risks occluding or distorting what is present. In contrast, narrative understanding minimalizes initial assumptions and instead attempts to produce understanding “by drawing relevant correlations among specific historical figures and events” (Ames 2002, 97). Narrative understanding, then, attempts to allow the culture to speak for itself, drawing connections between figures and events within the tradition without imposing from the outside any particular categorical schemata. It is only by letting a culture have its own voice that genuine dialogue between traditions can be achieved; anything short of such autonomy is just monologue masquerading as dialogue.

The divide between analysis and narrative understanding is most easily seen in the challenges presented in the translation of key vocabulary. Formally stipulating the philosophical meaning of such terms as *ren* 仁, *li* 禮, *tian* 天, and *dao* 道, for example, is precisely the kind of forced translation that is most likely to lead to distortion. Such distortion, however, results not just from the importation of concepts foreign to the Chinese tradition, but from the very process of analysis itself. In other words, to read the *Analects* as a work that attempts to articulate well-formed formulae that can then be used to evaluate conduct imposes upon it a task foreign to it. The *Analects* makes use of many philosophical terms, but these are resistant to the very clarity that analysis demands. As Ames puts it:

Certainly notions such as *tian* 天 and *dao* 道 are profoundly recondite in the Chinese classics [. . .]. This is because the project in a text such as the *Analects* is not to speculate on what the ultimate source of value in the world might be, but to recount how one sensitive man—Confucius—made his way in the world as a possible model for others. (Ames 2002, 99)

For Ames the *Analects* does not attempt to articulate the results of speculations about how to live, but instead demonstrates how one person did live. For the study

of Confucianism, the tradition with which Ames is here concerned, narrative understanding preserves the original context of a work like the *Analects*, which is not speculative but demonstrative, presenting as it does not an investigation of value but the demonstration of a valuable life.

Even if the method of analysis is abandoned, however, the choice of words in translation can smuggle distorting connotations over the borders of cross-cultural comparisons. Henry Rosemont's reflections concerning the translation of the Chinese word *zhi* 智/知 illustrate how easily indigenous ways of thinking can be so perverted. In the *Analects* the word *zhi* occurs more than any other philosophically significant word (2009, 17).<sup>3</sup> *Zhi* is most commonly translated as the English "knowledge," a translation that seems to work in some contexts but which carries with it meanings that are foreign to the *Analects* and which misses some meanings that are carried by the original Chinese. The problem is that the English word "knowledge" often connotes factual or scientific knowledge, knowledge that something is the case. This meaning is absent from the use of the word *zhi* in the *Analects* because there, argues Rosemont, Confucius is "not so much describing the world for his students as he is giving them guidance on how best to live in it" (2009, 18). Rosemont recommends "realize" and "realization" as words that better capture how *zhi* functions in Confucius's pronouncements; he is not passing on information but urging his students to realize—literally make real—his teachings. Translating *zhi* as "knowledge," then, brings about a cross-cultural distortion by reading into Confucianism a concern for factual, scientific knowledge that is not present in the original.

The focus for Rosemont is possible misinterpretation brought about by unreflective translation of the *Analects* into English, but native speakers of Chinese are susceptible to a similar misinterpretation. In modern Mandarin *zhi* means something like "wisdom," "intelligence," or "resourcefulness" and is used in such compounds as *zhidao* (知道) to mean "to know" or "to become aware of." Thus for a contemporary speaker of Mandarin *zhi* has a meaning much closer to the English word "knowledge"

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<sup>3</sup> According to Rosemont, *zhi* occurs 113 times, nearly twice as often as either of its closest contenders, *junzi* 君子 and *li* 禮.

than it does to the Confucian meaning of *zhi* that Rosemont suggests. This discrepancy illustrates how looking back, to the past of a culture, can be just as perilous to our understanding as looking across, from one culture to another. Indeed, the peril can be greater, given the seeming familiarity earlier aspects of a culture can have for one brought up in a later manifestation that claims the former as a genealogical ancestor. This raises the difficult question of how to decide when a culture has changed so much that it should be considered distinct. Whatever the answer to that question may be, it seems certain that we should guard against treating cultural traditions monolithically, as if all the various temporal manifestations must have an essential set of features in common. The familial metaphor does important work here, as it reminds us that though the various historical manifestations of a culture must draw some critical mass of features from a single cultural gene pool, there is no determined set of features that must be possessed by all. It is even possible for two manifestations of the same cultural tradition, separated by a significant amount of time, to possess none of the same features.

This problem of the occlusion of difference is compounded when earlier and later manifestations of a culture are viewed from the vantage point of another culture due to the tendency to overlook the difference in difference, that is, the tendency to gloss over distinctions within a tradition seen as other. This glossing over by the West of traditions in the rest of Eurasia and the rest of the world has been well documented ever since Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979). What has not been as readily recognized is that this same phenomenon often occurs when looking at the West. For example, A. Raghuramaraju observes that all the Western thinkers used by Akeel Bilgrami (2006) to contrast the importance of the moral exemplar in the Indian tradition with the moral principle-obsessed West are from the modern period; though modern Western philosophy has given moral principle a prime place of importance, it is not at all clear that such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, or Augustine would do the same, and figures such as Socrates and Jesus seem clear counterexamples to the claim that moral exemplars are not found in the West (2013, 17–23). Raghuramaraju also points out that this tendency to speak of the West as a whole yet limit specific references to modern period thinkers and cultural movements is seen even in Said

himself, who first placed the West under critical scrutiny. The monolithic West is a construction, then, that obscures real differences between the modern and pre-modern manifestations of the cultural traditions of western Eurasia.

Raghuramaraju argues that many postcolonial thinkers have not recognized the variegated nature of the West because well before carrying it to the rest of the world the West applied the project of modernity to its own tradition. Since the scientific revolution took hold in Europe, to be modern one had to abandon the premodern world. The acceptance of the atomized self, the decontextualized Cartesian cogito, was the initiation rite into modernity—before the colonizers set sail for other lands they colonized themselves. So, looking back at the earlier Western philosophical tradition is done through the lens of modernity, and what will count as philosophy will be whatever comports best with the modern outlook, that is, whatever looks most like a scientific investigation is going to be taken as indicative of Western thought. Those aspects of ancient Greek philosophy, then, that feature rigorous argumentation will be highlighted as representatives of the Western philosophical tradition, while anything other than such argumentation will tend to be deemphasized, discounted, or ignored.

Raghuramaraju is correct to identify the advent of the modern as a reason for the relative invisibility of the earlier Western tradition as a separate tradition, but considering the situation of ancient Greek philosophy in isolation it becomes clear that there are two filters through which its tradition is viewed—one modern, the other medieval. Pierre Hadot identifies medieval Christianity as the prime culprit in distorting our view of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. He draws a distinction between philosophy as discourse—whether theoretical, systematic, or critical—and philosophy as a way of life. Ancient Greek philosophy was primarily a collection of different ways of living, each of which gave rise to different kinds of philosophical discourse, but the discourse of philosophy was not meant to stand alone. Christianity also understood itself as philosophy in the ancient sense of a way of life. As such it absorbed many of the practices of the ancient Greeks, yet it also needed the discourse of the ancients to examine and explain its many theological issues. The result is that ancient Greek philosophy's contribution to Christianity as a way of life becomes obscured behind

Christian dogma, while its discourse is retained as a mere theological tool (Hadot 2004, 254). Thus, the philosophy inherited from the Greeks, particularly that of Plato and Aristotle, was limited to the role of slave. Whereas the discourse of philosophy was previously an integral part of a way of life, it later became an entirely separate discipline that could not contradict Christian dogma.

Held under the double lens of medieval Christianity and modern science, the nonanalytical, nondiscursive aspects of ancient Greek philosophy are burned away, and what remains is logical argumentation and metaphysical speculation, a proto-Christian, protoscientific worldview that awaits the teleological fulfillment of the later tradition. Those arguments and speculations are most certainly present in some form, but there is much more besides, and this remainder changes not only the quantity of ancient Greek philosophy, but also the context in which the argumentation and speculation is to be understood. In what follows I offer a discussion of Plato's *Meno* as an illustration of how contextualization can affect the import of ancient Greek argumentation and speculation.

### **Contextualizing Socrates<sup>4</sup>**

Plato's *Meno* is often regarded as an important step in the history of Western philosophy primarily for its epistemological content: it contains Socrates's characterization of learning as recollection and is often cited as the first instance in which knowledge is identified as justified true belief. Considering the latter point first, it is understandable that, taken out of context, Socrates's comments about knowledge and correct opinion seem to endorse a justificatory understanding of knowledge. The immediate context, however, shows that the supposed justification is of a very particular kind:

[Correct opinions] are not worth much until one secures them by reckoning the explanation. And this, Meno, my friend, is recollection as we agreed

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<sup>4</sup> The interpretation that follows is meant to illustrate for those not specializing in Plato how distorting it can be to take a supposedly representational quotation from a dialogue without considering both the argumentative and dramatic context supplied by the dialogue as a whole. Scholars of Plato will likely be familiar with the debates surrounding "doctrinal" versus "literary" approaches to Plato. For nonspecialists who are interested, Byrd 2007 offers an excellent overview of these controversies.

before. Whenever they are secured, first they become knowledge, then they stay in one place. For these reasons knowledge is valued more than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being secured. (98a)<sup>5</sup>

First, Socrates described the supposed justification of belief as involving “reckoning the explanation.” Since elsewhere Socrates characterizes explanation as being able to say why something is one way rather than another, explanation is far narrower than justification, which only requires that one have good reasons for holding beliefs. Second, Socrates ties the “reckoning of the explanation” specifically to recollection. So, even if this particular passage was the inspiration for later philosophers who understand knowledge to be justified true belief, this is not an obvious fit for Socrates.

The problem is compounded once we turn to recollection itself. The so-called theory of recollection is taken as evidence of Plato’s rationalism since it seems to characterize knowledge as somehow innate, and therefore aligns Plato with later Cartesian developments. Such a reading, again, ignores the context in which Socrates’s claim is made, stressing the very element that Socrates himself takes pains to *deemphasize*. Immediately after finishing the demonstration of recollection in which he elicits from a slave boy who has no training in geometry the way to double a square merely by asking him yes or no questions, Socrates concludes:

I do not entirely affirm the other things in my account [that learning is literally the recollection of what the soul has learned before birth], but that we would be better, more courageous and less idle thinking that one needs to search for things one does not know than if we thought that the things we do not know cannot be found and that there is no need to search for them, this I would maintain, as much as I am able, by both word and deed. (86b–c)

The occasion for Socrates’s demonstration was the claim, which has come to be known as “Meno’s Paradox,” that learning is impossible, since we either already know

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from Plato are my own.

what we seek to learn and so do not need to learn it, or we do not know what we seek to learn and so would not know whether we had learned it or not. We see from the above caveat that Socrates offers the recollection demonstration as a pragmatic solution to Meno's Paradox about the possibility of learning, under which Meno attempts to take umbrage only after repeatedly failing to satisfy Socrates's demands for a definition of virtue. Taking Socrates's account literally, then, as a claim about the metaphysical foundations of our epistemological situation is uncharitable for at least two reasons: first, because Socrates explicitly declares his agnosticism about such matters; and second, because such a reading claims that learning takes place before birth and so begs the question against the paradox. Taken as a demonstration not of a metaphysical position but of an instance of learning, however, Socrates's interaction with the slave boy is successful, since it *shows* that learning is possible, whatever the status of Meno's objection might be. Socrates characterizes learning as recollection in order to overcome Meno's eristic resistance to continuing the search for human excellence, and this characterization as such works since Meno, albeit imperfectly, resumes the search.

This interpretation of the role recollection plays in the *Meno* reveals something that is often not appreciated in Plato's dialogues, that what is shown is at least as important as what is said. This becomes even clearer when the *Meno* is considered as a whole. The dialogue opens with Meno asking if excellence can be taught and it ends with Socrates claiming that if they have "inquired and spoken correctly" then excellence is in fact not teachable. But Socrates's final words are telling: "Try to persuade your guest-friend Anytus about the things of which you've been persuaded, so that he'll become gentler; if you manage to persuade him you'll benefit the Athenians as well" (100b). Besides being a guest-friend of Meno, Anytus will go on to become one of Socrates's primary accusers, so it is natural to take these last words as a prescient nod to Socrates's future trial and execution; presumably, if Meno succeeds in making Anytus a gentler person he would avert Socrates's unjust death. But why would this be a benefit to the Athenians as a whole? Earlier in the dialogue Socrates and Meno agree that excellence is the only thing that is truly beneficial, so if the Athenians are

to be benefitted by Socrates remaining alive and active among them, Socrates would have to somehow be involved in making them excellent, or in other words, Socrates would have to have the ability to produce excellence in them, would have to be a teacher of human excellence. Although the characters conclude that excellence is not teachable, the dialogue itself serves as a demonstration of a teacher of excellence in action.

The dramatic structure of the dialogue, the personalities of the individuals involved, and the choices made by those individuals all point us in a very different direction than the stated conclusion of the investigation. This is not to say that other individual elements are not philosophically interesting in their own right. Whether knowledge is innate, as the theory of recollection seems to imply, or whether it is belief secured by an explanation, are in themselves philosophically significant questions. Taken in isolation, however, these elements take on a greater importance than they would otherwise have, since they represent only a fraction of what Plato seems to be up to in the *Meno*. By focusing on these “philosophical” elements and ignoring or downplaying the dramatic ones we treat the dialogue as if it were an essay, and thus overturn whatever reason Plato had for presenting his (and/or Socrates’s) philosophy in dramatic form.<sup>6</sup>

What the words of the characters fail to express the action of the dialogue demonstrates, and this is repeated again and again in Plato’s Socratic dialogues. The *Lysis* ends with Socrates declaring that neither he nor his two young interlocutors have been able to discover what a friend is, yet by the end of their discussion he has established a friendship with both the boys; in the *Euthyphro* the puzzles surrounding what piety is remain unsolved, but Euthyphro leaves the steps of the courthouse having apparently abandoned his plan to prosecute his father; in the *Laches*, Socrates discusses courage with two famous generals, and in spite of their failure to uncover a definition of courage, Socrates successfully

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<sup>6</sup> In the only piece of writing that most scholars agree may actually be in Plato’s own voice, the author claims “there is no writing of mine concerning the things I study, nor will there be; it is not at all possible to state these teachings as it is with other teachings . . .” (*Seventh Letter* 341c).

shows himself to be not only courageous in his willingness to follow an argument regardless of where it goes, but is also able to encourage the generals to boldly carry on in the discussion. As with the *Meno*, these dialogues include many interesting philosophical points that can be taken in isolation, but they also portray a Socrates who is a consummate friend, defender of filial piety, and exemplar of courage in the face of the unknown. One could offer a fair description of these portraits given by Plato of his older friend by paraphrasing Ames from above:

Certainly notions such as *arete* (ἀρετή) and *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία) are profoundly recondite in the Greek classics [. . .]. This is because the project in texts such as Plato's Socratic dialogues is not to speculate on what the ultimate source of value in the world might be, but to recount how one sensitive man—Socrates—made his way in the world as a possible model for others.

That Socrates is offered as an exemplar to the thoughtful reader must not be relegated to a footnote or a brief mention in an introduction, but should occupy a central place in the attempt to understand Plato's dialogues. The practical application of this understanding in the classroom calls for not taking bits and pieces of Plato's dialogues as typical representations of the Western tradition. Presenting not just the arguments of Socrates, but Socrates in action, with due attention paid to the characterization, setting, and drama of a dialogue as a whole is one responsible way to introduce Socrates *in situ*, whatever relation he may have to the long tradition that follows.

It is not only Plato's Socrates, however, who is in need of careful contextualizing. From Epicurus to Diogenes, from Pyrrho to Epictetus, ancient Greek philosophy is full of thinkers whose actions and ways of living are at least as important as their discourse. Even a figure like Aristotle, whose impersonal treatises come closest to contemporary Western philosophical writing, must be handled with care. For example, the syllogistic logic Aristotle is famous for

developing is hardly used in his philosophic writings—it is only in the later tradition that syllogism becomes the *sine non qua* of philosophical investigation and exposition. Also, though Aristotle does not offer a particular life as an exemplar in the ethical writings that have come down to us, the *phronimos* to whom the student of ethics is to look is a generalized placeholder for just such an individual. Finally, though none of his dialogues are extant due to the accidents of history, the fact that Aristotle wrote them indicates that he saw some worth in presenting his philosophy in the form of conversations between particular individuals. As with Plato's writings, it is not that what is usually attributed to Aristotle, Epictetus, or Diogenes is completely absent from the writings by or about them, but rather that these attributions are susceptible to the same distortions and misrepresentations as those of non-Western thinkers when taken out of their social/historical context.

## Conclusion

The same cautions that are necessary for responsibly representing non-Western philosophical traditions are also necessary for the responsible representation of ancient Greek philosophy. Indeed, an extra effort to observe these cautions regarding ancient Greek philosophy is called for given the deceptive familiarity this tradition tends to have among scholars in the West. Making a reference to Plato or Aristotle *sans* proper contextualization is an all too familiar rough and ready method for highlighting the difference between non-Western traditions and the West. Such treatment of the West helps to gird a constructed monolithic cultural tradition that has no historical analogue and thus hides the real differences that do exist between the earlier and later cultural manifestations of western Eurasia. The tools used in the comparative classroom can also do good work for the teaching of ancient Greek philosophy. Calling attention to and problematizing the process of translation, avoiding the facile pairing of aspects of the culture under study with those of more familiar cultures, letting the tradition itself determine philosophically important topics—all these practices can serve to bring ancient Greek philosophy out from

the shadows of the culturally hegemonic West and in the process shed light on the latter's birth and ascendancy.<sup>7</sup>

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

### Author Information

Paul Carelli received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Kentucky. He is Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida. His research interests include ancient Greek philosophy and comparative philosophy. He is a member of the Society for Teaching Comparative Philosophy.

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