

Diversity in Philosophy: Vignettes on Comparative Philosophy

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There are two ways of looking at the strategy for “diversity” in philosophy in a higher institutional setting.

The first one entails changing the colour and gender of the faculty by appointing scholars of colour and ethnically-divergent background, but – and here is the rub – expect, indeed demand, of them that they continue to be compliant with the status quo, and therefore in heavily analytic departments do just that and not stray outside of the Anglophone perimeters or be lured into divergences. Female and non-binary appointees are not expected nor encouraged to stray into feminist and deconstructive fads current and perpetrated by what are seen as mostly French feminist philosophers and a few Australian and North American female philosophers.

The second approach takes as its objective to diversify in the curriculum content so that there is increasingly a recognition of the diversity of the contemporary world we live in and this moves away from what in politics might be called “partisan lines”. Here, the philosophical academy recognizes that systems of thinking and reasoning, in short, philosophising, is not the one confined to the alleged roots of Greece and developed in Europe and the West.

There might be a third position which combines both approaches and diversifies in terms of both colour, ethnicity, gender as well as the subject matter (drawn from across several globally representative traditions). This is how the journal *Sophia* has diversified (as will be show-cased later). Although this case only impacts on the diversification of philosophy journals – still a vital instrument for dissemination of knowledge and for shaping particular disciplines – an exemplary model has been carved out which the world of philosophy might just wish to take note of. And to consider as a possible response in the face of various threats from without that face philosophy departments in these trying times when questions of application as well as of global relevance are asked.

Comparative Philosophy

The objective to diversify philosophy in terms of content is frequently supported by the thesis that philosophising is not an intellectual practice confined to the alleged roots of ‘ancient’ philosophy of the Greeks. This is subsequently developed in Europe and the West over the last two millennia - which as Heidegger ([1959] 1982: 15) implied - is linked to the gradual thrust towards ‘the complete Europeanization of the earth and of man’. Many departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences recognize that our human world presents a much larger tapestry with diverse and varied histories and socio-political systems; the same, one could argue, ought to apply to the systems of thinking and knowledge-making. In philosophy, this diversifying objective was (and continuously is) for nearly 100 years promoted under the umbrella of an enterprise known as comparative philosophy, or recently,

cross-cultural (and sometimes ‘intercultural’ or ‘fusion’) philosophy, as we will see below.

The label “comparative philosophy” is frequently used in two ways. First, in a broader sense, it stands for an attempt to make the discipline of philosophy a more universal, and cosmopolitan intellectual inquiry. Ronnie Littlejohn (2005) characterizes this appeal as both aspiration and challenge “to include all the philosophies of global humanity in its vision of what is constituted by philosophy”. Probably the first influential scholar to use the term “comparative philosophy” was Paul Masson-Oursel (1926: 31):

We only plan to extend our knowledge in order that the more we know, the better we may understand; we only peer more distantly in order that we may see more plainly and more clear[ly] (sic). Both ends are secured when we discern fundamental likeness beneath apparent dissimilitude. All judgement is comparison: every comparison an interpretation of diversity by way of identity. (...)

Masson-Oursel evokes ‘comparative philosophy’ in the opening words of the first volume of the journal *Philosophy East-West* (1951: 8):

Comparative philosophy can furnish to each nation or people resources that others conceived, the knowledge of which can be humanizing.

The Methods of Comparative Philosophy

One may wonder, how is ‘comparative philosophy’ done? And what distinguishes its method from the regular ones applied to the standard philosophical canon? Mark Siderits (2017: 76) characterises comparative philosophy as interrelation of two distinct traditions or cultures:

(...) there is another sort of scholarship, one that proceeds from the assumption that a given Indian text or author is sufficiently well understood that we can bring it into dialogue with something from Western philosophy. In the past much of this was done under the banner of something called “comparative philosophy.”

Siderits (ibid.) coins the term “fusion philosophy” understood as a form of a dialogue (related to the terms “engagement” and “confluence”) not restricted to only comparison and contrast of the two distant cultures, but rather stands for deliberate cross-cultural philosophising:

(...) when we set out to solve some philosophical problem we should look at how others have approached the issue, regardless of whether they belong to “our” philosophical lineage or not.

A practical consequence of this framework would be to incorporate cognate 'non-Western' philosophical theories and problems into university curricula, still dominated by the 'Western' thought (Garfield and Van Norden 2016).¹

The endeavour of 'comparative philosophy' consists in executing a particular comparative methodology in philosophical studies. An original depiction of this approach using a metaphor of "removing borders" was made by Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber (2015: 1-2):

A border, literally, is a line, often conventional, seldom natural, that separates two regions of space. Borders connect what is separated and separate what is connected. In principle, borders can be crossed (...) Comparative philosophy is all about the erecting, detecting, smudging, and tearing down of borders, borders between philosophical traditions coming from different parts of the world, different time periods, different disciplinary affiliations, and even within a single period and pedigree, between opposite or at least distinguishable persuasions. Philosophical comparisons, more often than not, separate and connect at the same time what are very likely or unlikely pairs of, or entire sets of comparanda (that which is set out to compare).

Another and more recent model developed is the *Samvāda* project attributed to Daya Krishna (1991) calling to go beyond mere platitudinal dialogue among contemporary Indian philosophers and modern philosophers, and instead return to the classical texts (Sanskrit: *śāstra*), albeit as living traditions, and engage in intense discursive dialogue and debates (Sanskrit: *vāda*) with (*sam-*) traditional pandits versed in the ancient and classical texts. In this encounter the parties may have to concede to what might be called "counter-positions", i.e., confrontational cavil with a view to defeating the opponent's standpoint and arriving at the truth of the problem at hand. *Samvāda* is further propelled by K. C. Bhattacharyya's ([1928] 2011) manifesto of 'Svarāj in ideas' (echoing Gandhi's idea of *swarāj*, self-determination, in national politics to disrupt colonial domination), advocating freedom in the spaces of thinking with a preparedness to accept a synthesized outcome or a "reasoned rejection" of the other's or one's own position as the case may be. However, this exercise should at the same time lead to expanding the horizons beyond the limited purview of the traditions in dialogue so that the work of *conceptual* retooling for the benefit of global *borderless* philosophy –crossing borders, visiting the other as curious stranger ('strangification')– would be advanced a step further.

There is yet one other intervention in this attempt to find the best possible model for engaging the diverse traditions of philosophy Panikkar in the quote below suggests in this regard that we forego the *comparative* project for the *imparative* one (from the nonverb *in* + *parare*, to prepare, furnish, provide). *Imparative* philosophy (1988: 127) proposes that "we may learn by being ready to undergo the different philosophical

¹ The exemplary cases of such intercultural programs are: "Global and Comparative Perspectives" (BA, MA) and "Philosophy in World Traditions" (MA) offered at Leiden University, The Netherlands.

experiences of other people” (1988: 127-8), even strangers to us. He also calls this diatopical hermeneutics (1988: 130):

Diatopical hermeneutics is the required method of interpretation when the distance to overcome, needed for any understanding, is not just a distance within one single culture (morphological hermeneutics), or a temporal one (diachronic hermeneutics), but rather the distance between two (or more) cultures, which have independently developed in different spaces (topoi) their own methods of philosophizing and ways of reaching intelligibility along with their proper categories.

Here diatopical hermeneutics has a functional role of forging a common universe of discourse in the dialogical form taking place in the very encounter. Panikkar does seem to echo the methods from 'fusion philosophy' but argues for recognition of the distinctiveness of the tradition as well.

After this brief description of what comparative philosophy's endeavour amounts to, we now turn to the staple examples of pursuing comparative philosophy which incorporate Western philosophy with Indian philosophy as its counterpart. The important influence on the recent engagements of comparative philosophers specializing in Indian and Indian Buddhist philosophy with the analytical philosophical tradition were the numerous publications of Bimal Krishna Matilal – especially his widely read masterpiece *Perception. An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (1986) – and with the continental philosophy the works of Jitendra Nath Mohanty, especially his widely read *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought* (1992). Comparative philosophy with Indian and analytical philosophy as its focus developed mostly through academic publications. Likewise, and in a parallel pursuit, modern scholars of Chinese philosophy have had similar training within their own contexts and have made sterling strides in reconstructive cross-traditional engagement with modern philosophy (see: Bo Mou 2020, Ames and Rosemont. 1999, Ames and Hall 2003, Chung-Ying Cheng 2020, among others).

The versions of comparative philosophy discussed so far are problematic for the reasons Bo Mou identifies in the introductory theme to the journal *Comparative Philosophy*. In his explanation (2010: 3, 16) of 'the constructive-engagement goal and methodological strategy' he elaborates that the constructive-engagement:

[...] is to inquire into how, via reflective criticism and self-criticism, distinct modes of thinking, methodological approaches, visions, insights, substantial points of view, or conceptual and explanatory resources from different philosophical traditions and/or different styles/orientations of doing philosophy (within one tradition or from different traditions) can learn from each other and jointly contribute to our understanding and treatment of a series of issue, themes or topics of philosophical significance, which can be jointly concerned through appropriate philosophical interpretation and/or from a broader philosophical vantage point [...] rather than focus on providing a historical or descriptive account (or on interpreting some

ideas historically developed in a certain tradition or account) merely for the sake of being aware of them.

Mou's aim stands in line with Siderits' purpose of 'deliberate cross-cultural philosophising', as both encourage conversations between various philosophical orientations. However, with the view to forging a novel hybrid vista, as endeavoured by fusion philosophers, here the challenge is to embrace multiple viewpoints, while acknowledging their distinctive approaches to common philosophical issues. In other words, Siderits wants to advance philosophy, whereas Mou only wants to know many perspectives but does not want to propose a new concept or build a new framework, but to clarify existing positions. Comparison and contrast are employed not as sole ends in themselves, but rather used explicitly to widen the perspective, improve clarity about philosophical matters and as yet unresolved issues. Engaging more substantively with different traditions, while maintaining the acknowledgement of their differences, may not only improve one's understanding of philosophical problems but also prove useful toward critical examination of the definitions, analysis of philosophical notions and the evaluation of the validity of arguments.

As Comparative Philosophy developed in the later 20th century, the focus shifted towards the removal of misconceptions, overgeneralisations, and false stereotyping (e.g. "Hegelian echoes" that the "focus of philosophical attention" for the West is *concepts*, for the Indian *intuition*, for the Chinese *action*) and, by the same token, the general ignorance persistent among narrowly-specialized researchers and scholars (Chakrabarti and Weber: 8). Consequently, in response to this problem of exclusion they proposed inclusiveness, i.e., when investigating a particular philosophical problem, e.g. a focus on knowledge, belief, and our capacities to track these states in ourselves and others – one ought to examine the theories from the history of epistemology broadly understood: both in the Western traditions, dating back to the ancient Greeks, and the non-Western – departing from the Classical Indian, Chinese, African, etc.

Journals, Book Series and Associations Dedicated to Comparative Philosophy

For the establishment of comparative philosophy as a field, or subdiscipline, the vital role has played the thematic and general conferences, research journals, associations, and publishing series. The *East-West Philosophers' Conferences* (since 1939) has been bringing together comparative philosophers from around the world to present times (Shaner 1986). The conference resulted in the founding of the journal *Philosophy East and West* in 1951, which still remains active today. Other top research journals that ensure the continuous development of the comparative enterprise include: *Sophia. International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions* (since 1962), *Asian Philosophy. An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* (from 1991), *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (since 2001), *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* (since 2009),² *Comparative Philosophy. An*

² Launched by *The Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle* (since 1995).

International Journal of Constructive Engagement of Distinct Approaches towards World Philosophy (from 2010) and *Journal of World Philosophies* (since 2016, earlier: *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies*).

An active role in the promotion of comparative thought is played by the *Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy* (SACP) established in 1967 and annually gathering philosophers³ specializing in 'Non-Western' and comparative philosophy. The SACP has collaborated with its counterpart in Oceania-Asia, the *Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy* (ASACP)⁴, in co-hosting conferences with both the *East-West Philosophers' Conference* and *Australasian Association of Philosophy* (AAP). This has included contributions on Indigenous Aboriginal, Māori, Pacific Islander or 'Rainbow Philosophy'. Additionally, SACP has The Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (SACP) Monograph Series with University of Hawaii Press (launched 1974) publishing books in the Asia-Comparative field. Books on 'Non-Western' philosophy that include Indian, Chinese, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist, Japanese, Korean, African, Persian, Arabic, Native American Philosophy and Latin American philosophy, are published more and more frequently by reputable academic publishers, including Springer, Lexington Books, Routledge, Bloomsbury, De Gruyter, Brill, Blackwell, and recognized university presses: Oxford University Press, State University of New York Press, Princeton University Press.

Diversity of Journals and the Example of Sophia

In October 2018, the American Philosophical Association (APA) working group on *Diversity and Philosophy Journals: Practices for Improving Diversity in Philosophy Journal Publishing*, made key recommendations for Philosophy Journals. Perhaps not uncoincidentally, *Sophia*, under the inspiration of similar mandates towards diversity in Philosophy entertained in Australasia and supported by AAP and ASACP, has been a pioneer of this trend. In the *Diversity and Philosophy Journals: Practices for Improving* blog article on 'Sophia's History of Encouraging Diversity', Bilimoria (2018) reports:

This modest-sized journal that began Downunder in 1962 in a cyclostyle format as a discussion point for small group of philosophers interested in the dialogue between philosophy and religion/theology, has become a prominent and poignant platform for philosophers and budding scholars, graduates, and students to engage more intensely in sophisticated areas of the discipline that cross a few borders and boundaries which are of relevance in the current critical age. [Moreover] The success of *Sophia* in taking this bold direction and blazing a trail is testified by the dramatic growth-rate of submissions, concomitant with the high rejection rate, the exponential increase of global readership and calibrated matrix (e.g. 12,500 articles are downloaded in this year to-date alone).

³ The 50th SACP Annual Conference in 2018 in Cracow gathered over 150 participants.

⁴ Other regional associations are: *Iranian Society of Intercultural Philosophy*, *Society for Intercultural Philosophy* (GIP) in Germany, and *Vienna Society for Intercultural Philosophy* (WiGIP) in Austria.

Sophia also sees itself moving towards engagement with issues in 'mainstream' Anglo-American philosophy, albeit from the critical perspectives of Cross-cultural, Continental, Feminist, Post-secular Political, Postcolonial and Indigenous traditions of thinking. There is no looking back.

We have drawn for our commentary from a range of approaches: in main, classical comparative, or cross-cultural philosophy, philosophy east and west, imperative hermeneutics, fusion philosophy, crossing boundaries and borders. The range speaks to the diversity within the comparative platform itself: it is not a monolithic (in the words of an Australian analytic philosopher) 'eastie-westie' thinking. Without dismissing any one approach, we have been disposed to highlight how as each one undergirds certain insights and makes significant contribution to the unfolding prospectus for what the great cross-culturalist, Ninian Smart (2008), had dubbed World Philosophy.

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Questions:

1. After a brief outline of the history and aspirations of comparative philosophy, describe in your own words how comparative philosophy is understood and practiced.
2. What do you understand by 'fusion philosophy'? Who proposed it and what are its objectives? Do you agree that it is a valuable approach to philosophising across global traditions of thinking?
3. What is 'constructive engagement' in cross-cultural philosophising: who has pioneered this method?
4. What is the outcome of mixing 'samvāda' with 'imparative philosophy': what does it achieve and what are its limitations?
5. If you become a comparative philosopher, which journals would you consider publishing your articles and research papers in and why?

Further reading suggestions:

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Glossary and Index

comparative philosophy – (i) narrow sense: exploring similarities and dissimilarities between philosophical systems from different traditions; (ii) broad sense: opening up philosophy to be inclusive of different systems of rational and creative thinking.

constructive engagement – engaging more substantively with different traditions through critical-constructive interpretations of philosophical problems drawn from a wide range of traditions.

fusion philosophy – a form of a dialogical engagement not restricted solely to comparing and contrasting distant cultures; it rather makes for cross-cultural philosophising to result in solutions to a concrete question.

imparative hermeneutic – involves contrasting everything through dialogue while radically criticising the enterprise during genuine encounters between differing traditions. Allowing to reappraise one's own convictions.

saṃvāda – engages in intense dialogue and debates with traditional exponents of ancient or classical texts so as to expand the horizons beyond the limited purview, and permitting *conceptual* re-tooling for *borderless* philosophy.

diversity