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Doing Philosophy Comparatively by Tim Connolly (review)

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of Hippo, to show how subsequent generations of thinkers, forced to work within boundaries established through social opposition, arrive at authentically new philosophical insights. “As paradoxical as it seems,” he writes, “creativity and constraint do not stand in an inverse relationship. Constraint incites or stimulates the imagination as much as it limits it” (p. 188). This new “model of theological creativity,” in Nicholson’s view, qualifies the work as a contribution not only to historical genealogy but also to comparative theology (p. xiv).

Nicholson is less than fully convincing on this score. The book is heavily theory-driven, by design. This is key to its originality, but it inevitably positions the sources he studies as exemplifications of the theory, rather than as vital philosophical and theological traditions in their own right. Moreover, there is a significant asymmetry between his treatments of the two traditions. Partly, as Nicholson readily acknowledges, this has to do with the sources themselves: with no *pudgalavāda* works still extant, and the Buddhist argument spanning over a millennium, Nicholson’s claims on this side of the comparative ledger are inevitably “highly speculative” (p. 136). The structure of the book further exacerbates this asymmetry, as the principle of “one-upmanship” that drives the comparison is developed as much from the Christian historiography and even Christian theology of chapter 2 as from the social identity theory of chapter 1. The “external history” of Christian evolutionary development thus provides the template for redescribing the Buddhist developments. As a result, the argument is far more convincing in the Christian case, but far more interesting, with more significant consequences, in the Buddhist case. The work’s persuasiveness as an interpretation of early Buddhism will largely depend upon its readers’ willingness to follow Nicholson the full length of this interpretive journey.

This criticism notwithstanding, *The Spirit of Contradiction* attempts more than some works twice its length, and its original—and counterintuitive—claims merit serious consideration. It well models the kind of modest, chastened objectivity opened to comparative study by new advances in cognitive science. It thus recommends itself not merely to scholars of Christianity and Buddhism, but also to the syllabi of graduate and advanced undergraduate courses in comparative method.

Doing Philosophy Comparatively. By Tim Connolly. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. Pp. x + 232. ISBN 978-1-7809-3839-4.



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In *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* Tim Connolly has accomplished an admirable feat: the first comprehensive and systematic introduction to comparative philosophy, written in a lucid and accessible style. Although it is designed to be used as a text-

book for an introduction to a comparative philosophy course, this excellent volume will prove extremely helpful to anyone who is interested in this area of philosophic pursuit. As a practitioner of comparative philosophy, I benefited from reading this book because it gives a panoramic view of the field, provides answers to some of my questions, and piques my interest. I have been informed and enlightened.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the nature of comparative philosophy and its central concepts—comparison, tradition, and culture (p. 7). In the second part, Connolly discusses three major problems of comparative philosophy—incommensurability, one-sidedness, and generalization—as well as their solutions or remedies. The last part introduces four main approaches to comparative philosophy: universalism, pluralism, consensus, and global philosophy.

The central question of the opening chapter of part 1 is whether there is such a thing as comparative philosophy. Connolly begins his discussion of the nature of comparative philosophy by critically examining several definitions of philosophy without settling on any of them, and he then proceeds to give a definition of the discipline. Is there such a thing as non-Western philosophy? This question is no less significant than the title question because if the answer to the former were negative, could there be comparative philosophy? So the fate of comparative philosophy seems to hinge on the answers to these two questions. A discussion of the question as to whether there is such a thing as comparative philosophy may strike the reader as a bit unusual, even for a philosophy textbook, because an introduction to philosophy rarely, if at all, discusses the question whether there is such a thing as philosophy, although it may address the question whether “philosophy is dead.” We are told that there are two main objections calling the very existence of comparative philosophy into question, both of which seem to involve the charge of redundancy. One objection claims that the word “Western” in “Western philosophy” is redundant because philosophy is inherently Western; non-Western cultures therefore do not have philosophy (p. 12). To this challenge, the author gives a lengthy and thorough rebuttal, fulfilling his promise to confront the objections head-on (p. 11). Then he turns to the second objection, that the adjective “comparative” in “comparative philosophy” is redundant because one cannot philosophize without comparison. The author responds to this objection by pointing out that what distinguishes comparative philosophy from philosophy proper is not whether or not the former makes comparisons, but what it compares. The uniqueness of comparative philosophy, the author argues, manifests itself in making comparisons “across culturally distinct philosophical traditions” (p. 24).

The focus of chapter 2 is the concept of comparison. According to Connolly, there are two dimensions to the idea of comparison: the interpretive dimension and the constructive dimension. The reader will learn that the aim of comparative philosophy is twofold: (1) to understand particular philosophers and texts or the traditions of which they are part (the interpretive dimension), and (2) to make constructive progress on specific philosophical problems or issues (the constructive dimension) (p. 28). If comparative philosophy is that part of philosophy engaging in comparing “culturally distinct philosophical traditions,” a clarification of the concepts of culture,

tradition, and how they are related to comparative philosophy seems to be in order, which is what the author does in chapter 3. In this chapter, the reader learns that there are two principles that can help comparative philosophers decide which cultural traditions to engage. The first principle, “developmental isolation,” tells us to engage traditions that have formed as independently of our own as possible (p. 60). This principle provides an answer to my question as to why Chinese philosophy in the pre-Qin period has been endlessly compared with Western philosophy in any period from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary analytic or continental philosophy. According to the author, however, developmental isolation is not the only deciding factor in choosing a target philosophy to engage. In order to make a philosophically productive comparison, the tradition must be able to make contributions to the discussion in areas in which we are lacking. The author calls this second principle “moral tradition respect” (pp. 60–61).

In the second part of the book, the author discusses the problems of comparative philosophy of which comparative philosophers need to be cognizant. These problems include (1) incommensurability (of which there are three kinds—linguistic, foundational, and evaluative), (2) the problem of one-sidedness, and (3) the issue of generalization. Chapter 4 focuses on linguistic incommensurability, which is the claim that philosophical traditions from different cultures depend on distinctive languages that cannot be translated into one another (p. 72). Connolly devotes an entire chapter to an in-depth and balanced discussion of the arguments for and against the thesis of linguistic incommensurability. I am a bit puzzled by the problem of linguistic incommensurability as defined by the author. No distinctive languages are more distinctive than Chinese and English, but can they be translated into each other? The fact that many Chinese classics have been translated into English seems to be living proof that the incommensurability thesis as presented in this chapter may be mistaken. But how do we know that the translations are accurate? That seems to be the real issue, but it is not merely confined to intercultural comparisons; it also arises in intracultural studies. For instance, when Chinese classics are translated into modern Chinese, how do we determine whether they are faithful to the original?

In the next chapter, the author turns to the claims of foundational and evaluative incommensurability and the arguments both in favor of and against them. Foundational incommensurability refers to the inability of members of different traditions to understand one another because they hold different foundational beliefs, that is, the absolute presuppositions they take for granted and use to make sense of the world around them (pp. 88–89). Evaluative incommensurability differs from the other types of incommensurability in that while the latter are of a cognitive nature, the proponents of evaluative incommensurability claim that there are no rational grounds for deciding whether a view from one tradition is superior to a view from another (p. 72). To introduce the problem of incommensurability on the foundational and evaluative levels the author cites the hypothetical case known as “the Magistrate and the Mob” and the diverging responses to it from two groups of subjects—European Americans and Chinese (pp. 87–88). It seems to me that it is a bit hasty to attribute their different reactions to their deeply held foundational presuppositions, which looks suspiciously like a case of confirmation bias. There is an obvious flaw in the design of the

survey—given that racial riots are exceedingly rare in China, the Chinese respondents were given a scenario that seemed to them outlandish. The perniciousness of racial riots in the imagination of the Chinese subjects might have loomed much larger than in the minds of their American counterparts because of the “fear of the unknown,” which might better explain why the Chinese responders were more likely to blame the rioters rather than the police chief and the judge.

Chapter 6 deals with a different kind of problem—that of one-sidedness, which arises when one party in the conversation forces its language and standards on the other (p. 106). The problem, according to Connolly, takes two forms: projection and asymmetry. The author explains that projection takes place when, out of ignorance, we understand the philosophy from a different culture solely in conceptual schemes already familiar to us (p. 106). Asymmetry, in the words of Kwong-loi Shun, refers to the phenomenon in which a Chinese philosophical framework (or that of another non-Western tradition) is rarely deployed in the study of Western thought. The difference between projection and asymmetry is that the former is generally considered an individual interpretive vice, whereas the latter is a collective phenomenon (p. 108). I would argue, however, that projection is not necessarily a vice as far as novice comparative philosophers are concerned. If they attempt to understand non-Western thinkers and texts in categories familiar to them, that’s because they can hardly do otherwise. It seems unfair to ask them to interpret non-Western philosophies in categories with which they are unfamiliar. The usual, old-fashioned way in which we learn a foreign language is instructive here. When an adult tries to learn a second language, she initially learns the meaning of foreign words by their correspondence to words in her mother tongue. Thus, she basically tries to understand a foreign language via her native linguistic framework. Gradually, as her familiarity with the language grows, her reliance on that linguistic framework diminishes. Of course, for a veteran comparative philosopher who continues to rely on the crutches of a Western philosophical framework to understand non-Western philosophies, we would hesitate to say that he has made much progress.

But what is wrong with one-sidedness in comparative philosophy? The author explains that one-sidedness harms both parties. On the one hand, as Kwasi Wiredu, a renowned African philosopher, points out, those who accept outside categories to understand themselves have become intellectually colonized. The antidote, according to Wiredu, is not more interaction with outsiders, but rather a process of de-colonization (pp. 112–113). On the other hand, one-sidedness also harms the dominant tradition—“[w]hen comparative philosophers only uncover in other cultures’ texts what they knew beforehand, they deprive contemporary discussions of the full wealth or resources at hand” (p. 113).

Chapter 7, the final chapter of part 2, examines the problem of generalization. Generalization in the context of comparative philosophy refers to broad-brush characterizations of a culture. Here is a typical example of generalization: (in general), Eastern philosophy is holistic while Western philosophy is dualistic (p. 136). Unlike one-sidedness, generalization can be useful. For instance, it can help us see the big picture beyond all the details (p. 125). The author warns, however, that if we are not careful, cultural generalization can easily slide into cultural essentialism, according

to which some quality or characteristic is possessed by every member of a culture, is unique to that culture, and exists independently of its particular instance (p. 126). The reader will learn that the difference between cultural essentialism and cultural generalization is that, tempered with phrases like “generally speaking,” general statements about a culture are less absolute or extreme than essentialist ones (p. 130).

Having discussed the nature of comparative philosophy, its central concepts and problems, Connolly uses the final part of the book to consider four major approaches to comparative philosophy, namely universalism, pluralism, consensus, and global philosophy. In the opening chapter of part 3, he gives a thorough and detailed discussion of universalism. Comparative universalism is the view that there are cross-cultural philosophical universals (or enduring themes) that are inherent in all cultures and apply to every human being (p. 157). Cross-cultural philosophical universals can take two general forms—a historical universalism and a synthetic one. While the former is the search for commonalities in past works of philosophy from different cultural traditions to arrive at philosophical universals, the latter involves attempts to combine universals from different traditions into new philosophies that would transcend the limitations of those bound to a single culture (p. 150). Here are some examples of universals: ideas of human dignity, equality, autonomy, and sympathetic impartiality. In chapter 9 the reader will learn a different approach to comparative philosophy—pluralism—and arguments in favor of and against it. According to Connolly, pluralism is the belief that there is more than one good and that different goods are incompatible with one another; there are no neutral standards to make a distinction between superior goods and inferior goods (p. 172).

It is clear that universalism emphasizes common denominators of different cultures while pluralism accentuates their differences. It is no less clear, however, that there are similarities and differences between people of different generations and cultures. So why not combine the insights of both approaches? That is precisely what the author discusses in chapter 10. The consensus approach combines elements of universalism and pluralism. The goal, according to Connolly, is to establish a set of norms shared by multiple traditions while at the same time allowing for diversity of acceptable philosophical foundations for those norms (p. 178). Drawing on John Rawls’ theory, the author illustrates the consensus approach as follows:

Consider a norm stating that a society should be set up so that all its citizens have an equal chance at advancing themselves. We can find different reasons for agreeing to this norm. . . . In establishing consensus, we remain neutral with regard to the underlying foundations, so that acceptance of the norm emphasizing equal opportunity does not imply adherence to any particular larger doctrine. (p. 180)

However, the consensus approach is not without its critics. The contemporary Confucian political philosopher Jiang Qing, for example, argues against Rawls’ view for not being neutral because it presupposes a liberal democratic moral doctrine that takes values like freedom and equality to be foundational (p. 186).

The final chapter 11, on global philosophy, is the longest of the four chapters in part 3—perhaps the author saves the best for last. Is global philosophy the most

promising approach to comparative philosophy? As a way of introducing the topic of global philosophy, the author imagines what would happen if philosophy departments were to offer all of their usual courses with a comparative dimension: “In the Ethics course, the professor might briefly describe a Confucian account of the virtues during the unit on virtue ethics. In Philosophy of Mind, you could learn Buddhist accounts of consciousness alongside Western ones” (p. 193). I remember back in the days when I was a visiting professor at a liberal arts college, and I incorporated a comparative dimension in my introduction to philosophy class by adding some excerpts from classical Chinese philosophy. I thought that introducing to my students relevant ideas from a different philosophical tradition would help expand their intellectual horizon, not knowing that what I did would fall under the rubric of global philosophy! Global philosophy emphasizes the need for constructive engagement between philosophers working within different traditions because the mutual exchange of criticism and argument can enrich the traditions themselves and contribute to the advancement of contemporary philosophy as a whole (p. 195).

Of the four approaches to comparative philosophy, global philosophy is less focused on the past and is the most forward looking. Not only may it strengthen our ability to defend our basic principles, but it also gives us access to a wider range of resources for approaching the issues that matter to us (p. 201). In this connection, I think that Immanuel Kant, commonly regarded as one of the greatest philosophers of all time, might have benefited from global philosophy because some exposure to Indian philosophy might have helped him realize that postulating God is not the only way to guarantee the highest good, that is, happiness commensurate with virtue—the concept of karma in Indian philosophy could play a similar role.

In conclusion, I must say that through *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, Tim Connolly has done a great service to comparative philosophy in particular and to philosophy in general. This volume should be on every philosopher’s shelf, regardless of their specialty. “Comparative philosophy is not a replacement for all the other types of philosophy, but an additional tool we may bring to the pursuit of wisdom” (p. 212). Can we have too much wisdom?

Returning to Zhu Xi: Emerging Patterns within the Supreme Polarity. Edited by David Jones and Jinli He. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 357. ISBN 978-1-4384-5837-3.



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Lest we take Zhu Xi merely as a grand synthesizer who, in the words of Wing-tsit Chan, made “Neo-Confucianism truly Confucian” by countering and assimilating