Eidos 1 (7) 2019

A JOURNAL FOR
PHILOSOPHY
OF CULTURE

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0010

Douglas Berger
Institute for Philosophy
Leiden University

Eli Kramer
Institute of Philosophy
University of Warsaw

Lessons from Intercultural Philosophy: Getting Over Reductive Comparisons and Attending to Others

Douglas Berger interviewed by Eli Kramer

EK: What are the most important tools for doing cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture in a responsible, thoughtful, and impactful way?

DB: I would say at this point that the three most important tools for doing intercultural philosophy responsibly and thoughtfully – impact can never be guaranteed by oneself – are:

1) an openness to learn the ideas, concepts, frameworks and assumptions of the tradition with which one is trying to engage;

2) either a solid comprehension of the language(s) of the tradition with which one is trying to engage or at least good translations of their source texts or narrative traditions and discourse and;

3) a community of mutually interested engagement.

The first tool is vital because, as the last four centuries or so of European colonial history have amply and tragically demonstrated, one all-too-easy but all-too-flawed way of approaching cross-cultural philosophy is to take the entire or partial European history of philosophy, with its stock of ideas, vocabulary and assumptions about the world, persons, ethics, and even of philosophy itself, as normative and judge other philosophical positions on those bases. This approach has led to a variety of more or less unfortunate consequences. The consequences range from merely distorting the ideas of a philosopher or tradition of thought, or in some cases

an entire cultural heritage, by claiming they are pursuing the same ideals and ends as one's own, to claiming that other cultural traditions are incapable of attaining the supposedly truly philosophical status of European cultures, to using one's knowledge and assessments of another cultural tradition in order to politically rule it or control it. Leibniz or Schopenhauer, for instance, are examples of the first possibility, arguing as they did respectively that Chinese philosophy gives us the tools of deciphering the universal characteristic and foundations of ethics possible for natural theology, and that Indian thought was the originally purveyor of idealism and pessimistic metaphysics. The second possibility is found in many of the nineteenth and twentieth century histories of philosophy, following Hegelian sensibilities, as well as in a number of Western philosophers today, who claim that philosophy is a uniquely and exclusively Western phenomenon. The third can be found in much, though not all, of eighteenth to early twentieth century Orientalist scholars, who argued against the Anglicists that a proper appreciation and understanding of another culture was the only reliable means of governing it. Of course, it is to an extent natural that an initial human response to understanding the unfamiliar is to reach for it through the familiar, and it would also be unreasonable to expect any interpreter to simply cast aside their own cultural heritage in engaging with another tradition. However, we should quickly strive to move beyond the familiar and resist the temptation to reduce the ideas and ideals of other cultural traditions to our own. The openness to learning other frameworks of assumptions and ideas about what persons are, how the world is constituted, the ideal relationships between human beings, and even what philosophy and its proper methods or modes of reflection are, must be maintained. And in fact, even if we were only to consider the European or Western philosophical heritage in its entirety, we would find very different perspectives, an "internal multiplicity," on all these issues as well.

The second tool, either linguistic competence or access to good translations, or both, rather obviously goes hand-in-hand with the first tool. One cannot be expected to understand the ideas, frameworks and assumptions of another philosophical heritage unless it is possible to gain at least an appreciable, if never perfect, understanding of them. And that understanding is derived precisely from how those ideas and assumptions are articulated, described, or argued for. Ideally, the intercultural philosopher has undergone a fairly extensive course of training in how to read and/or speak the language(s) of the tradition with which he or she is engaging. Now, mere linguistic competence as such does not get one far enough. As anyone knows who has studied any philosophical heritage, again even if it were only the European one, philosophical vocabulary is debated among thinkers in these traditions, reinterpreted and recontextualized in centuries of development and debate, and transformed by historical, political and cultural circumstances. So, it is not the mere language we are talking about here, but the contested history of interpretation of important vocabulary and ideas that have taken place in the continuity of a tradition. But I think it is quite important not to make linguistic competency of the kind discussed here a boundary condition for engaging in intercultural philosophy. In the first place, that level of linguistic competency is quite demanding, and philosophers spend their time not just on philological matters but on thematic reflection that itself requires enormous time and effort. Secondly, one does not have to do all the linguistic heavy lifting by oneself, since, after all, there is a very great deal of such expertise out there and available to us through translation work. If the interested philosopher who wishes to engage with another cultural heritage is intent on entering into dialogue and debate, but either cannot or does not have the time for such intense language study, they would do well to consult a few experts in the field regarding which translations are most reliable, and work with those.

This last point is a nice lead-in to the final tool enumerated here, namely a community of mutually interested dialogue partners. Of course, there is something silly about calling a "community" a "tool" for understanding, and I would not want to speak of communities in such a restricted way. Nonetheless, intercultural philosophy – and I would argue philosophy in general – is not and should never be attempted as something one

pursues alone. An ongoing conversation with people who are living members of the cultural heritage in which other philosophical traditions have flourished, and which they have affected, is necessary to understand how philosophies have interacted and continue to interact in contemporary times with people today. It is almost always the case that how ideas and ideals are articulated in ancient books or stories are not the only ways, maybe not even the definitive ways in themselves, in which philosophies have taken shape and worked through the lives of people. It is crucial to be aware also of the living reception, and appropriation to or reaction to, philosophical ideas in the political institutions, social structures, gender dynamics, and boundary situations of these cultures. If one does not, it is ever-so-easy to deceive oneself about how influential, or in what ways influence has been worked by a culture's philosophical traditions. Now, this is also sometimes a tricky matter. Modern people belonging to a particular cultural heritage are not transparent, nor are they perfect pure vessels of ancient cultures either. In many respects, no contemporary Chinese person can be expected to perfectly understand or embody the ideas found in the first compilations of Laozi in around 300 BCE, no contemporary Indian person could do the same for seventh century commentators on Nagarjuna, and no contemporary Greek person could do so on behalf of the students who compiled Aristotle's lectures. We cannot reduce ancient ideas to contemporary receptions. But, on an even more fundamental level, we cannot fully measure the legacy of ancient ideas without consideration of what has been made of them, what they have become, in the ongoing transformations of the cultures in which they matured. For the latter, we need intercultural philosophical communities.

EK: If and what methodological lessons are there to be learned from Classical Chinese and Indian philosophy, for cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture?

DB: Individual scholars of Indian and Chinese traditions will surely give different answers to this question, most of which will be helpful and insightful in ways that I cannot capture. Speaking for myself, apart from quite specific and technical methodological resources from these traditions I find valuable and could spend much time discussing, I will answer this question here by identifying two quite general and overlapping approaches in these traditions. In different ways, I would argue, in both ancient and medieval India and China, we see at once a willingness to vigorously debate ideas and identify erroneous arguments and ways of living, along with varieties of eclecticism that attempt to capture, maintain, and help flourish the truths that might be salvaged from opposing views. A great deal of effort is usually put into both approaches in Asian traditions. Basic to practically all literary composition of philosophical texts in classical India was the phenomenon of the *purvapaksa*, which was not only a statement of an opponent's position, but also a thorough explanation for why the opponent held that position, the arguments in support of it, and the goods that ought to flow from holding it, before one stated one's own scholastic views. Brahmanical logicians in India construct a systematic theory of knowledge, valid argument, and fallacious reasoning that is used to refute what they believed to be the false worldview of Buddhists. But they also critiqued their own earlier formulations of their system, sometimes in a thoroughgoing manner, and they proffered the view that, just like the Buddhists, they were seeking the relief of human suffering. Indian Jaina thinkers invented an entire modal approach to judgment, called *syadvada* or the "doctrine of possibilities," in which the errors or limitations in an opponent's "incomplete" perspective on things could be clearly identified, but which at the same time defended the validity of the opponent's judgments within the limitations wherein that view resided. The Han Dynasty Chinese philosophers often, though not always, made practically a literary/philosophical art form of articulating which principles and practices from Confucian, Legalist, Daoist and Mohist schools were appropriate for which specific set of life and political circumstances. Chinese Buddhists invented the hermeneutic method of *ban jiao* or "discerning the teachings," in which earlier phases of Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist and even Hindu ideas could be critiqued for their insufficiency in explaining the human condition, but at the same time could be honored for the virtues that

they did defend and embody. Now each of these approaches had their flaws, and ways in which they could be employed shallowly, in order simply to vindicate oneself. However, they have their individual virtues, and even a few common virtues as well. These various methods, along with others like them, manifested a basic philosophical inclination to both critique the general falsity of opposing views, but at the same time to search for the core of limited truth in those very same views, and identify the possible moral virtues that could be hoped for by one who held them. It seems to me that in contemporary academic philosophy one finds a quite truncated one-sidedness on the part of those who participate, obsessed not only with refuting all views except one's own – an inclination that is much shaped by professionalistic pressures of survival – but also with denying entirely that anyone who does not adopt one's preferred methodological approach is really even doing "philosophy" at all. The latter kind of enmity seems to have grown out of the competition for institutional turf largely between Analytic and Continental philosophers. But I would still submit that the effort in uncovering both the limited truth, and possible virtues, of a philosophical position with which I may not entirely agree is a discipline that makes us not only better philosophers, but much better human beings and better societies. And we have much to learn about how to conduct such efforts from Indian and Chinese philosophers. Should we wish to find truth and goodness in the past, and in others who may be very different from us, Hegelianism is not our only option.

EK: In what ways can cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture impact daily life practice?

DB: Philosophies and their attendant practices can of course affect our daily lives in many ways. But this is specifically a question about "philosophy of culture." I am not sure there exists yet an identifiable field that can be called comparative philosophy of culture. There have been some large-scale attempts in the last century or so to construct broad-based comparative typologies of cultures that offer those who are interested contrastive frameworks through which to view entire traditions. Watsuji Tetsurō's work *Climate and Culture*[1] of the 1930s come to mind, in which he distinguishes between three basic types of climates, pastoral, desert and monsoon, and extrapolates from these climactic conditions basic forms of religious, political and social institutions. There are also the early twentieth century works of Sri Aurobindo,[2] which attempt to see cultural traditions through a kind of evolutionary and "involutionary" lens that places them on a kind of scale of scientific, economic and spiritual insight. There is the fascinating 1960s work of the primarily Indian Buddhism scholar Hajime Nakamura entitled *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*[3], in which he surveys classical Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan religious traditions in terms of the unique features of the classical languages of each of these civilizations, and comes to general conclusions about patterns in each distinctive culture. There has been more recent work in the field as well, and I will reference one of these studies in response to the following question. But in general, at least in the areas of intercultural philosophy that I specialize in that deal with Indian, Chinese and Western traditions, I must admit that I am quite trepidatious about attempts at philosophy of culture that reach for great overarching generalities, whether they are after contrasts or resonances. Many of these efforts are at least intellectual, if not political, descendants of early Orientalist scholarship that came to exert influence on Western philosophers from the seventeenth – twentieth centuries, and this scholarship often sought to identify points of fundamental cultural difference between "the West and the rest" that in either subtle or overt ways elevated the former over the latter. In response, a number of South and East Asian thinkers invented their own

1) Watsuji Tetsurō, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, Ministry of Education, 1961).

2) For example, see Sri Aurobindo, *The Essential Aurobind: Writings of Sri Aurobindo*, ed. Robert McDermott, Second Edition (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2001).

3) Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples India, China, Tibet, Japan*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, revised English translation (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981).

cultural typologies that elevated their own traditions above Western ones in ways that appealed once again to large-scale generalizations. I, on the other hand, tend to see even continuous historical traditions as incredibly internally heterogeneous and complex, even on the relatively shortest of historical timeframes, not to mention in the long run of civilizational development. And so, attempts to accentuate generalities of whatever type runs the risk of marginalizing quite important aspects of cultures, and worse, sub-traditions and sub-populations of those cultures. When we then turn around and compare two traditions or more, the risks for distortion and marginalization and cultural chauvinism only increase. The more specifically focused a comparative study is, with respect to definite thinkers, texts, timeframes, themes, and so forth, the more informative and illuminating I tend to believe a comparative study will be. If we are not cautious with it, comparative philosophy of culture can prompt us to wreak undue harm or at least difficulties on one another.

EK: What do you think is some of the most exciting current work being done in cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture?

DB: Again, if we are speaking specifically about comparative philosophy of culture rather than more specialized intercultural philosophical work, I would say one exciting example has recently been published by Rein Raud of the University of Tallinn in Estonia. He brings together his own considerable backgrounds in Japanese philosophy and Japanese Studies, cultural semiotics, anthropology and sociology in his 2016 work *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture*.[4] In this work, Raud resists coming to general conclusions about individual cultures; indeed, he acknowledges that what we refer to as cultures are loose and internally contradictory, as well as have both "high" and "popular" aspects and are always transforming in history. Instead, he tries to develop a methodological approach which helps the inquirer focus on the discursive and textual ways through which cultures try to create meaning and practices that are applicable to the challenges facing a culture's institutions and people. Given Raud's own incredible philosophical, literary and cultural backgrounds, as well as the subtlety and sophistication of his analysis, I consider this contribution to be among the most exciting and noteworthy in the field that is the subject of these questions.

EK: What work still needs to be done in cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture?

DB: Though I cannot say that I have undertaken any such efforts yet, there is one area of cross-cultural philosophy that I believe would have some fascinating and possibly fruitful effects on "philosophy of culture." In my early work, and specifically when I was working on what became my first book on Schopenhauer's familiarity with and appropriation of ideas from very early, pre-scholastic Indian thought, "*The Veil of Maya:" Schopenhauer's System and Early Indian Thought*[5], contributions from Western hermeneutic theory, for instance from Gadamer, Riceour, Habermas and others, were quite valuable to me in sorting out puzzles regarding "influence," and cultural presuppositions that were central to Schopenhauer's own encounter with the Indian tradition, as well as such encounters generally considered. However, as mentioned above, the West is *far* from the only tradition that has developed sophisticated approaches to textual hermeneutics. The vast and millennia-spanning commentarial traditions of philosophical and religious works of other cultures have developed quite profound methods of textual interpretation themselves. I have often wondered what, for example, Western thinkers and important works might look like under the hermeneutic lenses of, in the case of my own work, classical Asian traditions. How would the works of Plato look were they subjected to the influential Chinese textual approach of

4) Rein Raud, *Meaning in Action: Outline of an Integral Theory of Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2016).

5) Douglas Berger, *"The Veil of Maya:" Schopenhauer's System and Early Indian Thought* (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic Publishing, 2004).

the third-century Daoist commentator Wang Bi, who disseminates a method known as "Distinguishing Names" (Key Philosophical Terms) and "Analyzing Reasons" (Justifying the Use of these Terms)? How would Aristotle's analysis of logical and causal arguments look when examined through the second-century BCE Chinese Mohist articulation of "extending" and "pulling" arguments? How would Kant's Transcendental Idealism be affected were it drawn through the rigorous definitional examinations of the thirteenth century Indian New Logician Gangesa? What would contemporary logic look like were it required by classical Brahmanical and Buddhist requirements that all logical arguments demonstrating invariant connection produce non-controversial examples to justify their application? Now, obviously, this curiosity on my part, and pursuing any of these enumerated investigations or others like them, would pose risks of distortion and misfit, just as do any intercultural philosophical studies. But I see no reasons to adjudge them anymore a priori inviable than inquiries that try to figure out, for example, whether Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* captures Daoist attitudes toward life, or whether Nagarjuna's "four-cornered" causal critiques (*catuskoti*) in any way resemble F.H. Bradley's arguments about relation, both of which have been undertaken seriously and with some benefit. This kind of inverse, if you will, analysis of Western ideas in terms of Asian ones, can often be found in the essays published by the long-established journal of intercultural religious studies, *Sophia*. If one of the things in cross-cultural philosophy that is crucial to do is to make Western thought a dialogue-partner, and not the focus and gravity of all comparative attention, then opening up its ideas to the critical tools of other traditions must be one component of that effort.

EK: If and how do you engage with cross-cultural/comparative philosophy of culture in your own life and work?

DB: Certainly, the personal relationships I have developed with people of other cultures are most enriching to my life, and I unfailingly learn more from those relationships than I could possibly learn from any book. But one thing that I have been trying to accomplish both through my own scholarship and my own professional work in academic associations in recent years is precisely what I have just mentioned, namely to make intercultural philosophy a truly multi-polar activity. Intercultural philosophy should not place the West at the center of its concerns and "compare" or "contrast" other cultural traditions to its heritage one by one. As a matter of fact, just as an aside, I must say I intensely dislike the expression "comparative philosophy." It makes philosophy sound like grocery shopping, or picking out the best mobile phone; we compare products and choose the ones that most suit our fancy and our "needs." We must perform such kinds of comparisons and make such kinds of choices in life, but that kind of activity is not really philosophical in any respectable sense. Two examples that I can give of this multi-polar intercultural philosophy in recent scholarship and professional association work follow.

In my most recent book of 2015, *Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought*[6], I set out to identify what has stuck me as the key to philosophically understanding the most basic transformation that took place in Buddhist thinking as it moved from its Indian to its Chinese renditions. I found that key to lie in how each tradition ended up representing what in Buddhist vocabulary is referred to as the "luminosity" or "clarity" of the "mind" (Sanskrit, *prabhasvaram cittam*; Chinese, q*ing jing xin or ming xin).* In Indian Buddhist thought, such luminosity or clarity was an achievement of practice, a state of awareness produced by a perfected program of cultivation. In Chinese Buddhist thought, this luminosity is thought of as the basic causal condition that must exist at the basis of all awareness that makes it possible for concrete unawakened consciousness to be unfettered by the purity that lies at its root. Now, carrying out this study was challenging for me in a number of respects. One of these challenges was that my own rather naturalistic, even

6) Douglas Berger, *Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought*, Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

physicalist view of awareness, an outgrowth of a long heritage of Western debates about consciousness, doesn't really have philosophical space for at least the Chinese Buddhist conception of luminosity or clarity as a kind of base-level feature of awareness as such, since, with some minor qualifications, it is fairly difficult to see the connection of such luminosity itself with anything sheerly physical or physically causal. Some Chinese Buddhist texts even forthrightly deny that the luminosity of awareness itself can be identified with physical organs of sense or cognition, even though it affects these and sometimes controls them. In the course of my study, then, I did not pretend that my own convictions about awareness did not hold – on the contrary, I had to expressly acknowledge them and admit them. But, having done this, I decided to, as it were, "bracket" them, set them aside for the time being, so I could take up the relevant Indian and Chinese ideas, texts, and arguments. Once that work was done, I could then return to reflect on whether what the various Indian and Chinese theories of luminosity could contribute to my own understanding of awareness. I am not finished thinking through these latter implications. However, I think this must be a part of good intercultural philosophical work; not merely treating the texts like a historian or philologist, who may not necessarily care about the truth-value of the beliefs articulated in the works they are dealing with, nor treating them like an imperious, naive philosopher who might be unable to see the immediate relevance of ancient thought to contemporary reflection and then just rejects the ancients out of hand. Instead, the intercultural philosopher, perhaps more than any other philosopher (who I also think should bear the responsibility of this requirement), needs to understand before they adjudicate. And in order to do that, one's own present convictions need, during the process of gaining understanding, to be significantly, though not totally, marginalized.

But perhaps far more important in this regard has been my work in professional associations in the field in recent years. I had the privilege of first being vice-president and then president of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy from the years 2012–2015. The SACP holds panels at various Philosophy and Religious Studies regional and national meetings during the year, as well as an annual meeting, usually every June, that has more and more been drawn to international venues in Asia and Europe. When I first joined the governing Board of SACP in 2009, I joined in the work of organizing the panels of the annual meetings. Prior to becoming vice-president, and in the many years before that, panels of the SACP were largely organized according to tradition and theme. If there were three papers that dealt with similar topics in the *Dao De Jing* or on Sankara's thought, or if special panels were submitted by a group proposing to compare Husserl and Indian Buddhist philosophers, for example, then such papers would go onto one panel. That sort of organization would leave scholars of one text or tradition talking with one another on largely mutually familiar terms, or would mostly engage in a dialogue about selected Western and Asian philosophers. When I became the vice-president and then president of the Society, and put myself largely in charge of constructing the annual meeting program, I decided to take a purely thematic approach. Unless special unified panels were proposed, I would, as much as I could, organize the conference into sheerly thematic panels, with, for instance, an Indian, Chinese and Islamic scholar talking about philosophy of language, or a Korean, Japanese and Continental philosopher talking about consciousness, or a Sri Lankan, Jain, and Chinese scholar discussing some area of ethics. I wanted our meetings to be occasions of genuinely intercultural philosophy, with discussions being sparked among philosophers of all the traditions being represented. Certainly, many of the scholars who participate in these meetings are partly trained in or even specialize in some area or areas of Western thought, and we wanted, and continue to want, all of their expertise and perspectives to be a vital part of the discussion, but not the central focus and gravity of the discussion. The traditions of the world should be in broad-ranging dialogue with one another in order for philosophy to be truly intercultural, and that is what I hope to have achieved during my tenure at the SACP, and which I believe continues to happen there. This sort of approach is also being undertaken in the brilliant new journal edited by Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach and published by Indiana University, the *Journal of World Philosophies*.