Is Comparative Philosophy Based Upon a Mistake? A Reply to Ganeri's ›Re:emergent Philosophy‹

Comparative philosophy, as I understand it, is the study of philosophical problems in a cross-cultural setting: a comparative philosopher may, for example, study the nature of knowledge by comparing Western epistemology with the Confucian tradition's writings on the subject.

Comparative philosophy has been gaining in popularity. Western philosophy, and especially Western analytic philosophy, the dominant strain of philosophy in the Anglophone world for a century, used to be strikingly insular. It all but ignored philosophical work in non-Western traditions. To this day, one can easily earn a philosophy PhD in the very best graduate programs in the Anglophone world without being exposed to a single word of Chinese, Indian or Arabic philosophy.

Recently, though, this insularity has been giving way. There is a new openness to, and interest in, philosophical work in non-Western traditions. There is talk of appointments in comparative philosophy. The Berggruen Institute for Philosophy and Culture (Los Angeles, USA) is funding postdoctoral fellowships in Asian philosophy and major departments are eagerly lining up to host them. Faculty and graduate students are spontaneously forming reading groups to study major non-Western texts.

What's the point of comparative philosophy? Is it a good thing that it is gaining in popularity?

Viewed from where I am sitting, it certainly seems to be. I am interested in certain basic philosophical questions. What is value? Are there truths about value and if so on what do they depend? What is consciousness and how does it relate to the physical? In what does a person's identity consist and can it survive the demise of their physical body?

It stands to reason that ancient civilizations such as those of India, China and the Arab world, all of which attached a great deal of

importance to philosophy and all of which produced thinkers of the first distinction in a whole host of other areas, will have developed important insights into some of these very same fundamental questions. (It is left open, of course, whether these insights take the form of alternative answers to the very same questions, or the rejection of the original questions and their replacements by more fruitful alternatives.)

In any case, whether or not comparative philosophy yields insights into basic philosophical problems, the comparative exercise is important in its own right. Non-Western cultures are of intrinsic interest and one good way to interrogate and reveal their thought is to compare what they have to say about philosophical problems with alternative approaches to those problems.

In his rich and provocative essay, »Is Reason a Neutral Tool in Comparative Philosophy?« Jonardon Ganeri rejects this rosy picture of comparative philosophy (Ganeri 2016a: 134–135):

> […] comparative philosophy is not, I submit, a branch of philosophy nor it is a distinct philosophical method: it is an expedient heuristic introduced at a particular moment in world history as part of a global movement towards intellectual decolonisation. The ambition of comparative philosophy was not to generate new philosophical insights but to protect thinkers in colonised countries from the peculiar form of intellectual servitude colonialism sought to impose. Recognition and integration were its leading motifs: a first generation of philosophers, still colonised, seeking recognition for indigenous manners of understanding through the demonstration of their comparability with colonial insight; a second generation, in the years after the end of colonial rule, hoping for assimilation and integration in an internationalised philosophical academy. Philosophers writing bravely against the grain in colonised societies or in the ferment of postcolonial nation state formation made extraordinary progress in the rediscovery of lost philosophical inheritances and in the demonstration of their full entitlement to philosophical recognition. Yet coloniser philosophy remained in such endeavours a privileged mode of thought and point of reference, if only as a focus of resistance. These projects aimed either to incorporate indigenous thinking into an unchallenged colonial paradigm or else to reverse colonial asymmetries while leaving a fundamentally colonial structure intact.

Ganeri leaves it unclear whether he thinks that comparative philosophy *essentially* involves »intellectual servitude,« (*ibid.*) or whether it contingently involved it as it was practiced by the first and second generations of comparative philosophers. The fact that he dismisses it as a legitimate subfield of philosophy suggests the former. But his

other remarks make sense only on the latter reading. In any case, it is hard to see how comparing what distinct philosophical traditions have had to say about some of the perennial questions of the human condition could be an essentially reprehensible exercise.

On Ganeri's view, comparing non-Western philosophy with Western philosophy in the modern era was bound to lead to unhappy results because Western philosophy pretended that only its use of ›reason‹ was legitimate. This is how he puts it (*ibid*.: 135–136):

> When in what follows I refer to ›the colonial use of reason‹ I shall not mean its use by the ancients or pre-moderns but by those philosophical giants in the 18th and 19th centuries who provided colonialism with its moral and intellectual foundations. This colonial use of reason represented itself as impartial, objective and universal but was in fact anything but, and that was its first dishonesty. Its second was the way it defended its claims to impartiality and universality over and against competing claims from outside. It did not engage in honest debate, philosopher to philosopher, but instead dismissed the alternative's claim to universality altogether. So colonisers took what was in fact itself a local way of using reason (one contextually entangled with the history of the colonial project), falsely promoted it as a uniquely acontextual methodology, and denied that outsiders had so much as a concept of the general application of reason on the grounds that they did not share its parochial epistemic practices.

I found myself a little unclear about exactly what Ganeri means by the ›colonial use of reason.‹ He says it is the use of reason by those philosophical giants of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that provided colonialism with its intellectual and moral foundations. But as he is no doubt aware, the intellectual and moral legitimacy of colonialism was a matter of active debate among those giants (John Stuart Mill, for example, being an apologist for it while Diderot was a critic). But on any notion of reason that I recognize, both of those thinkers were using the same principles of reasoning.

It's a good question what accounts for disagreement between good thinkers when it occurs. Presumably, more often than not, it derives not from the fact that they *reason* differently from premises to conclusions, but, rather, from the fact that they find different *premises* plausible. In the debates about colonialism, for example, some thinkers found it plausible that there was such a thing as ›natural law,‹ that the alternative practices of indigenous peoples violated that law, and that this served as a proper basis for justifying their exploitation. Others, though, rejected these claims. Ultimately, disagreements

about these matters can be traced not to disagreement about principles of reasoning but to a disagreement about various initial assumptions or axioms.

Ganeri (*ibid*.: 138–139), however, seems very much to hold that it is principles of reasoning that are at issue, rather than the differential plausibility of competing axioms.

> As philosophers in every linguistic and geographical region of the globe re: emerge, so too do innovative ways to use reason […] My studies of logical theory in India have led me to see that there is a fundamental contrast between two styles of reasoning, that of formal deduction and that of particularist, case-based ›blueprint+adaptation‹ extrapolation. […] The basic idea is that an object is inferred to have one, unobserved, property on the grounds that it has another, observed, one: ›there is fire on the mountain because there is smoke there‹. The most distinctive aspect of the schema is the fundamental importance given to the citation of an example, a single case said either to be similar or else dissimilar to the topic at hand.
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> Suppose I want to persuade you that it is about to rain. I might reason as follows: ›Look, it is going to rain (pakṣa: proposed thesis). For see that large black cloud (hetu: sign). Last time you saw a large black cloud like that one (dṛṣṭānta: exemplary), what happened? Well, it's the same now (upanaya: application). It is definitely going to rain (nigamana: decision)‹.

Ganeri goes on to make interesting claims about what makes this ›blueprint and adaptation‹ (b+a) type of reasoning distinctive, and why it might not have so easily contributed to justifications of colonial exploitation. Unfortunately, I don't have the space to consider all those claims. Instead, let me simply invite him to say a bit more about the following questions.

First, how does this form of reasoning differ from standard forms of inductive reasoning – for example: whenever we have observed large black clouds in the past, they have led to rain. So, this large black cloud is also likely to result in rain?[1]

Second, assuming it is a distinctive form of reasoning, distinct from standard inductive reasoning, is it supposed to be *compatible* with standard inductive reasoning or not?

If the former, then the two methods would yield all the same results under the same circumstances, so there would be at best only a notional difference between them.

[1] Ganeri contrasts this ›blueprint and adaptation model‹ with formal deduction, but it seems to me that its closest Western cousin is induction not deduction.

Presumably, then, Ganeri must think that the b+a model is *incompatible* with standard inductive reasoning. Suppose we agree with this and also accept his claim that it is an innovative and legitimate way to reason. How should we respond?

Should we conclude that standard inductive reasoning, which is essential to the scientific method as practiced in the West, is to be rejected in favor of this b+a model? That seems implausible.

Or is the idea that while inductive reasoning is appropriate for the West, blueprint and adaptation reasoning is appropriate to non-Western countries?

If we take that line, though, it seems as though we will have to concede that colonial reasoners were perfectly justified in their pro-colonial conclusions, even as colonized subjects may have been justified in rejecting them.

But the conclusion we wanted was that putative justifications for colonialism were mistaken. (Similar questions could be raised for the second example that Ganeri provides.)

Ganeri (*ibid*.: 141) concludes:

> This conception of philosophy embodies a type of pluralistic realism, a commitment to the claim that there are many ways to investigate a reality whose existence is independent of human inquirers, a plurality of ways of thinking that cannot be reduced to any single mode of interrogation (least of all to the colonial use of reason).

However, as I have tried to argue here, and as I have tried to show in detail elsewhere, it is in fact very hard to make sense of the idea that there are many conflicting, yet equally valid, ways of arriving at justified beliefs about the world.[2]

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[2] See my *Fear of Knowledge* (2006).