

Multicultural Education and the Virtue of Comparative Philosophy

In his book on the notion of courage in Thomas Aquinas and the Chinese philosopher Mencius, Lee Yearley remarks that the study of comparative philosophy fosters in people certain virtues that are of unique importance in the world today. His purposes being elsewhere, Yearley does not go on to give us a completely developed account of what those virtues are or why they are so uniquely important. Nor does he say whether the benefits of comparative study can be conferred broadly as part of a liberal education, or whether they are limited to philosophers and scholars. So I will try to answer these questions for him. As a teacher of, among other things, Chinese philosophy, I have a natural interest in such issues. But beyond that, I think that the questions have a significant bearing on current debates about multiculturalism and education.

What, then, is the virtue of comparative philosophy? Or, to put the question differently, what is the distinctive contribution that comparative philosophy makes to a liberal education? The answer I want to propose is this: comparative philosophy teaches people to think like human beings. In order to explain what I mean by that, I am going to have to do three things. First, I will have to explain what I mean by "comparative philosophy." Second, I will have to give some model of the purposes of a liberal education. And, third, I will have to explain how the former contributes to the latter.

The Nature of Comparative Philosophy

To begin with, what do I mean by comparative philosophy? In the past, many people have thought of comparative philosophy as the search for universals. The Daoist classic *Laozi*, for instance, was first translated into Latin in the eighteenth century as proof that "the Mysteries of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Incarnate God were anciently known to the Chinese nation." (The reference is to Chapter 42, which reads "The dao begets one. One begets two. Two begets three. And three begets the myriad things.") Hume does something similar in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* when he explains divergent ethical systems as alternate expressions of universal human sentiments. A modern example can be found in

William Theodore de Bary's description of Buddhism as "an answer to man's finite condition and his longing for transcendence." In each of these cases, the comparison functions to uncover a universal. In the first case, it is a universal truth: the Trinity. In the third case, it is a universal problem, "man's finite condition and his longing for transcendence," which different people answer differently. And in the middle case it is a universal human nature that manifests itself differently under different circumstances.

The problem with this approach is that the universals tend to be assumed rather than proven. In point of fact, real universals are very hard to find. It is not that thinkers in different traditions disagree. Most of the time they do not even seem to be talking about the same things. (For the purposes of this essay, I will speak interchangeably of thinkers and traditions.) As a result, the universals that we come up with are either painfully forced or else so general as to be almost meaningless: "Confucius and Christianity agree that people should be good," as one student wrote.

This difficulty with the search for universals has driven an increasing number of comparativists in the opposite direction, toward questioning universals and looking instead for *discontinuities*. People functioning in different traditions, these anti-universalists argue, do not simply speak different languages, they think in different terms. Words take their meaning from context and so cannot be taken out of one context and translated into another without having their meanings changed. De Bary described Buddhism as an answer to humanity's "longing for transcendence." But our world is so different from the Buddha's, the anti-universalists contend, that we cannot possibly understand what he would have meant by "transcendence," if he had ever even used the word, which he did not. We cannot make the Buddha speak our language without putting words in his mouth. So rather than try to find similarities between traditions, comparativists of this second sort try instead to reveal differences. Their goal is not to show that apparently different traditions are somehow the same but rather to prove that they are fundamentally different, incommensurable, and untranslatable.

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But there are problems here, as well. Translating between different ways of thinking is not easy but it is clearly not impossible, otherwise we could never learn from other people. Nor is simply pronouncing other cultures "not the same" as our own by itself a particularly valuable lesson. It might be taken as an exercise in cultural humility, but it may just as easily be taken as a demonstration that other cultures have nothing relevant to offer.

The debate between these two approaches is ugly and ongoing, but it is not my purpose to argue for either side. I only bring them up to contrast them to a third alternative, which is the one described by Yearley in his comparison of Mencius and Aquinas. The purpose of comparative philosophy, on this third approach, is not to demonstrate the ultimate unity or diversity of traditions, but rather simply to juxtapose them to one another so as to map out what Yearley describes as "similarities within differences and differences within similarities."

This kind of comparison can take place on many levels. For instance, one could compare specific beliefs and assumptions, such as whether thinkers take for granted the existence of free will or an afterlife. Or one could compare the conceptual structures thinkers use

in formulating their questions, as Yearley does in his analysis of the notion of a virtue in Mencius and Aquinas. Or one could compare the background motivations that inspire and guide philosophical inquiry in different times and places. This is not to say that thinkers in different traditions can always be easily mapped onto one another: there are often incommensurabilities, words or ideas that cannot be easily translated from one context into another. But these incommensurabilities can be identified, their boundaries can be traced, and their significance can be measured.

Learning to do this kind of comparison well requires the development of certain characteristics. It requires the creative ability to project oneself into an unfamiliar tradition and to imagine seeing the world in that way and that way only. It requires a receptiveness to the unexpected. It requires ingenuity in formulating appropriate categories for comparison. And it requires a cultivated judgment to determine when two thinkers are talking about the same thing in different ways and when they are talking about different things altogether.

That is what I mean by comparative philosophy: the sorting out of similarities and differences. The result of such an exercise is not the discovery of universal truths, nor is it the demonstration that no such truths



Northern Qi Scholars Collating Classic Texts (detail).
China, Northern Song Dynasty.
Handscroll, ink and color on silk.
Denman Waldo Ross Collection. 31.123.
Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

exist: it is merely the mapping out of the different positions relative to one another. Comparative philosophy is purely descriptive in the sense that it does not address the question of who, if anyone, is right: all it does is to stake out the alternatives.

But if this is all comparative philosophy does, to stake out the alternatives without deciding between them, then it seems even less obvious why comparative philosophy should form a crucial part of a liberal education. What good does comparative philosophy

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do us if all it does is to describe the landscape without giving us any guidance through it? I think I have an answer to this question. But I would like to come around to it indirectly, by first considering what a liberal education is supposed to accomplish. To help clarify our thoughts on this matter, let me propose a few different models.

Three Traditions

Speaking in rough terms for the purposes of illustration, one might distinguish between Platonic and Aristotelian models of education. On what I refer to as a Platonic model, the purpose of an education is to impart *knowledge*, in particular, knowledge of what is good, because knowledge of what is good enables people to lead good lives. No one does evil voluntarily, Plato has Socrates argue in the *Protagoras*, but only out of ignorance of the implications of his or her actions. Since it is ignorance that leads to bad choices, it is knowledge that enables people to live well. Now, while I admit the difficulty in pointing out the flaw in the reasoning here—the effort to do so has been one of the most enduring problems in Western philosophy—still, few people believe that knowledge alone is all that people need. Very intelligent people, and cultures, can do very unfortunate things. People need something more than just knowledge to enable them to use their knowledge wisely. And that “something more than just knowledge” is precisely what people look for in a liberal education.

Aristotle offers a different model, in which the primary function of an education is not to impart knowledge per se so much as to cultivate *virtues*, that is, certain habits and traits of character that are useful to people in leading flourishing lives. This strikes me as closer to what most of us think of as the object of edu-

cation, particularly in the humanities and liberal arts: the development of character as much as the simple transmission of information. But even if we accept this notion, that the purpose of an education is the cultivation of virtues, there still remains the question of what virtues we aim to cultivate. Aristotle's list of virtues included courage, generosity, and self-control. He is frequently criticized for basing his selection on the characteristics required of a fourth century B.C. aristocratic Athenian male. While self-control would presumably be to everyone's advantage, by “courage” Aristotle means battlefield courage, which had no applicability to Athenian women. In fact the word translated as “courage,” *andreia*, literally means “manliness.” If we were to ask ourselves what virtues we try to cultivate now, we would probably name things like intellectual curiosity, self-discipline, and tolerance. But how do we arrive at this list? What is our principle of selection? What kind of people are we trying to cultivate?

Let me offer Confucianism as a third alternative that I think will help us to clarify our own purposes in education. The Confucian tradition embraces a model of education that is more Aristotelian than Platonic in the sense that the communication of information is secondary in importance to the cultivation of certain traits of character, though these two things, knowledge and virtue, stand in a very close relationship, as we shall see. The virtue around which the Confucian tradition revolves is called *ren*, which is usually translated as “benevolence” in English. The character for *ren* is composed of two parts, the pictograph for a person on the

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left and the number two on the right—two people, people together, people in community. To be benevolent, for a Confucian, means to participate in the community in both a practical and also a moral or psychological sense. That is, a benevolent person is a contributing member of the community and also identifies her own interests with the interests of the community. Simply being a successful civic leader, for instance, though laudable, does not qualify as benevolence unless one acts out of the right motives. The right motives, however, do not constitute benevolence unless one follows through on them in practice.

The primary community for everyone is the family, which Confucius cites as the “root of benevolence.” But this community can be extended to include wider

and wider circles. The Confucians thought it only natural that one would care most about one's own family, but they saw no reason in principle why this concern could not be extended, in diminishing degrees, to reach all people. Ideally, then, benevolence is participation in the *human* community. Again, this means taking part in the human community not just in one's actions but also in one's mind, seeing oneself not just as an isolated individual nor simply as a member of a particular family or state but as a member of the human race.

With the exception of a few peripheral barbarians, all the humans Confucius knew were Chinese. And all

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the Chinese people, Confucius thought, were bound together by a common tradition, which he referred to as the *li*. The word *li* is usually translated as "rites" or "rituals," and Confucius does use it to refer to everything from grand state ceremonies to minute elements of etiquette and deportment. But he also uses the word in a broader sense to refer to the whole body of history, literature, art, and customs that had been handed down from the Zhou Dynasty.

This body of tradition represented many things to Confucius. For one, it contained the accumulated wisdom concerning such things as statecraft, agriculture, and economics that were crucial in maintaining a well-ordered society. For another thing, it provided a shared set of rules that all the various elements of Chinese society could play by. Most important, it provided the Chinese people with a common language. An education in the tradition made it possible for people to communicate with each other clearly and subtly. "Why is it none of you studies the Odes?" Confucius asks his disciples. "An apt quotation from the Odes may serve to stimulate one's imagination, to show one's breeding, to smooth over difficulties in a group, to give expression to one's feelings . . . and to acquire a wide knowledge of the names of birds, beasts, plants, and trees. . . . To be a man and not to study them is, I would say, like standing with one's face directly towards the wall." Perhaps because Chinese is not an alphabetic language and there is no correlation between the pronunciation of a word and its written form, it has a constant tendency to disintegrate into regional and local dialects that are unintelligible to one another even over very short distances. Confucius saw this as a terrible problem for the

obvious reason that communication is a necessary prerequisite to community.

All of this helps to explain the connection between virtue and knowledge in Confucianism: knowledge of tradition, *li*, makes participation in the community, *ren*, possible. Confucius is careful to say that knowledge of tradition does not itself constitute benevolence: simply educating people in a community's tradition does not guarantee that they will feel a part of that community. At the same time, Confucius is equally careful to say that there is no way to participate meaningfully in a community without knowledge of its traditions: a truly benevolent person not only *feels* like a member of the community but also *knows* what that membership involves. Simply feeling like a member without knowing what it means, or knowing what it means without feeling it, is not enough. Virtue and knowledge are interdependent.

Participation in the Human Community

The Confucian notion of education provides us with a very useful point of comparison, both on account of its similarities to our own ideals and on account of its differences. The Confucian goal of humanity as an informed, self-conscious participation in the human community comes very close to what many contemporary thinkers understand as the principal goal of education. E. D. Hirsch's ideal of "cultural literacy," for instance, though not developed along the same ethical and psychological lines, is reminiscent of Confucianism in many respects. The implication is not that, without an education, people are beasts, but that without an education they are isolated in their villages, in their families, in their minds. One of the primary goals of education, both for the Confucians and for ourselves, is to lift people out of that isolation.

The difference, however, is that, unlike Confucius, we do not have a shared tradition to fall back on. Admittedly, some people question whether the Confucians ever really had such a tradition, either. Although Confucius did not discriminate on the basis of social class but accepted as a student anyone who was eager to learn, regardless of his ability to pay, the Confucian tradition never granted equal access to women. And it was open to foreigners only on the condition that they agree to renounce their uncouth barbaric ways. Be that as it may, Confucius certainly thought of his tradition as the common property of all human beings. Whether he was right or wrong about this, the point is that we no longer have the luxury of even kidding ourselves on this issue. The notion of a shared tradition was crucial for Confucius in providing the foundation for community. We share the Confucian goal of community. But one of the great problems for us is how to establish that community in the absence of

a shared tradition. How do we teach people to communicate in the absence of a common language?

And this, I think, is where comparative philosophy as I have described it has a unique contribution to make. Unlike Confucianism, comparative philosophy does not presuppose any one tradition as the human tradition but, quite the contrary, presupposes a diversity. Like a map, comparative philosophy locates traditions relative to one another without needing to establish any one of them as a fixed center. What students walk away with from comparative philosophy is the ability to locate different ways of looking at the world relative to one another, and the disposition to see themselves within this larger context. Our own views, after all, are what they are by virtue of their similarities to and differences from other views. The better we understand ourselves in this way, the better we understand ourselves as human beings.

Understanding oneself in context does not mean simply acknowledging that there are other ways of seeing things. Anyone can do that, with or without the benefit of a liberal education. Thus comparative philosophy is more than simple exposure to other traditions. A person needs to know not just that there are other traditions out there, but what they are and how they stand in relation to his own perspective. Admittedly, this kind of knowledge is potentially infinite, and one could never achieve an exhaustive knowledge of the world's traditions or compare them in every possible way. But the same is true with history, literature, and science: one has to make do with a judicious sampling. The point is that the fully human way of thinking I describe is like Confucian benevolence in the sense that it requires an education.

This way of thinking requires knowledge, but like Confucian benevolence, it is not reducible to knowledge. The goal of comparative philosophy is not simply to inform people of their situation relative to one another, but to habituate them to thinking of themselves in this way. That is why I describe the contribution of comparative philosophy as a virtue rather than as a body of knowledge: its function is to develop certain dispositions and traits of character rather than simply to communicate information.

Many people resist thinking of their own perspective as only one point of view out of many because they feel that doing so would require them to surrender their perspective or devalue it. Thus they worry that study of other traditions will detract from the study of the Western tradition. But this need not be true as long as the study involves systematic comparison in addition to mere exposure. It is only by virtue of comparison that people are able to understand what is distinctive about the Western tradition. People trained only in that tradition, without any points of comparison, would perhaps think like Westerners, but they

wouldn't *know what that means*. Consequently, though they might be mouthpieces of that tradition, they would not be apt defenders of it.

Cultural Understanding and Self-Knowledge

Comparative philosophy has one further virtue: it acknowledges that we are not simple creatures, but rather unique individuals with multiple identities and allegiances. By helping us to sort through these aspects of ourselves, it allows us to come to a much more textured and layered understanding of who we are. Socrates took his cue from the inscription over the Delphic oracle, *γνῶθι σεαυτόν*, "know thyself." Our present position at the confluence of so many great traditions gives us an unprecedented opportunity to know who we are, as Westerners, as moderns, as human beings, and as unique individuals. Comparative philosophy takes advantage of this opportunity which, far from being a repudiation of the Western tradition, is the fulfillment of its highest ideals.

I have said that comparative philosophy situates views relative to one another. But this does not mean that it is committed to moral relativism. Comparative philosophy does not say which views are right or which views are wrong. But it does not say that none of them are right or none of them are wrong. It is simply silent on the issue. The modern world presents us with a dizzying variety of perspectives to choose from. Not choosing among them is neither possible nor, even if it were possible, desirable. What comparative philosophy does is to clarify the alternatives so that we can make our choices among them in the most informed, self-conscious, and human way possible. And this is one of the highest goals we have for a liberal education.

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