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Philosophy East and West, Volume 67, Number 3, July 2017, pp. 922-932 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0073>

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 67 · Number 3

University of Hawai'i Press

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FEATURE REVIEW

Philosophy: The Next Step



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Comparative Philosophy without Borders. Edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. viii + 246. ISBN 978-1-4725-7624-8.

Comparative Philosophy without Borders, edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber (hereafter *CPWB*) is an outstanding and groundbreaking anthology that is also a prolegomena to all future philosophy, not just comparative philosophy. The anthology sets forward an agenda that is arguably *the next step for philosophy*. Chakrabarti and Weber have a dream (a dream that, in this reviewer's mind, echoes the sentiments of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech "I Have a Dream"):

Our dream is that future fusion philosophy will shed its local epithets, even the epithet "comparative." All good philosophy should be unapologetically, and, eventually, unself-consciously, comparative and culturally hybrid. (p. 237)

They point out that the use of "comparative" must be seen from the perspective of epistemic inequalities that are part of the historical condition in which philosophy continues to be housed, and from which it needs to be set free. Their hope has an early Wittgensteinian ring to it:

Once we have climbed up to the level playing field of global combative cooperative critical creative philosophy from the fetid wells of centuries of unacknowledged epistemic inequalities . . . , we can, it is hoped, throw away the ladder of comparison. We can then do just philosophy. . . . (p. 238)

While there are many works in comparative philosophy that one can read in order to get one's feet wet or see where comparative philosophy is headed, it must be pointed out that this work is unique in the way in which it illuminates, through each piece, the ideology of doing philosophy without borders in a progressive, forward-looking way. Because of the depth and intricacy of each piece, I will focus my review on some portions of the "Introduction" and "Afterword/Afterwards" written by the editors. My goal is to engage the ideology of the anthology as opposed to the nuances of each individual piece.

The Ostensive Engagement

Aside from the wonderful "Introduction" and "Afterword/Afterwards," *CPWB* brings together nine engaging and educational papers. The editors point out three unique

features of the volume. First, the choice of topics is not narrowly captured. *CPWB* engages topics from metaphysics to politics. Second, the choice of method is not singular. Although the title engages with doing philosophy *comparatively* without *borders*, it is not correct to describe the collection as one in which the authors take on the method of *doing philosophy without borders* as a single methodology. Rather, the volume engages a variety of methods that come from *not holding on to borders* that allow for only a single method to be used, such as conceptual analysis or phenomenological analysis. Below, I list the table of contents with a brief summary of each chapter, and following that I offer my general comments.

1. "Count Nouns, Mass Nouns, and Translatability: The Case of Tibetan Buddhist Logical Literature" by Tom J. F. Tillemans is a highly engaging piece that traverses the important terrain in the primary and secondary literature on the Tibetan *Collected Topics* "in light of the now classic arguments on intertranslatability and its philosophical limits" (p. 23).

2. "Translation, Interpretation, and Alternative Epistemologies" by Barry Hallen also engages work on translatability deriving from Quine. He "sets out . . . to examine, compare, and, in terms of topic, fuse the philosophy retrieved from the semantics of the West African languages of the Akan of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria and of the English language . . . with regard to the underlying problematique of intertranslatability," and he engages issues surrounding criteria for truth in natural language (p. 23).

3. "Resolving the Ineffability Paradox" by Chien-hsing Ho engages a broad range of traditions that discuss what he calls the "ineffability paradox." The central question is: "how can one say that something is *unspeakable* without getting irretrievably implicated in paradox or self-refutation?" (p. 24).

4. "The Bowstring Is Like a Woman Humming: The Vedic Hymn to the Weapons and the Transformative Properties of Tools" by Laurie L. Patton "practices comparative philosophy crossing boundaries both of cultures as well as time-periods, using the most contemporary 'philosophy of instruments' . . . to interpret the hymns to weapons one finds in one of the most ancient mystical poems—the *Rg Veda*" (p. 24).

5. "How Do We Read Other's Feelings? Strawson and Zhuangzi Speak to Dharmakīrti, Ratnākīrti, and Abhinavagupta" by Arindam Chakrabarti is a remarkable piece that engages the work of the authors listed with respect to the question stated. Chakrabarti explores the connection between our self-awareness and our capacity to address and access other persons in order to suggest a theory of direct perceptual empathy that underlies the very possibility of dialogue (p. 25).

6. "The Geography of Perception: Japanese Philosophy in the External World" by Masato Ishida is a landmark piece in perception that should help theorists working on perception see the importance of reaching outside individual traditions and time periods. Ishida delves into the depths of an enactive realist theory of perception (p. 25).

7. "Authority: Of German Rhinos and Chinese Tigers" by Ralph Weber engages with the question "What is authority?" He uses "three nonnormative angles, that is,

the logic of authority, . . . its phenomenology, . . . and its conceptual history.” His piece “offers a fusion between two styles of philosophy, conceptual analysis, and anecdotal or narrative phenomenology, between several branches of philosophy, namely epistemology, logic, ethics, and political philosophy” (p. 26).

8. “To Justice with Love” by Sari Nusseibeh reviews different approaches to the definition of justice. He argues “in favor of viewing the natural human instinct of love (for the other) as constituting not only the cornerstone of a community factually, but also of the arrangement of a best human order normatively.” His work fascinatingly fuses “the famous concept of *asabiyyah* (compassion or affection) extracted from Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* with the liberal-communitarian debate and particularly with John Rawls’s theory of justice” (p. 26).

9. “Justice and Social Change” by Sor-hoon Tan begins with the question: what is the point of comparing such figures as Mencius, Confucius, and Aristotle, on justice? After adding some insightful points Tan aims at the reconstruction or development of a philosophy that could impact contemporary societies and their problems. She does this from a decidedly pragmatic/pragmatist standpoint as well as a decidedly Confucian standpoint (p. 27).

The Formal Structure of Comparison

With a brief view of the contents of *CPWB* in place, we can now look at some of the insights the editors draw attention to in their “Introduction” and “Afterword/Afterwards.” Starting with a core question in many minds, the editors inform us that those not familiar with comparative philosophy might be led to the view that an act of comparison has only two or more *comparanda*—things that are compared. They point out that this would be quite naive, since a comparison is far more engaged and nuanced. They offer a formal conceptualization of comparison as an activity:

1. A comparison is always made by someone (person P);
2. At least two *relata* (*comparanda*) are compared (A and B);
3. The *comparanda* are compared in some respect (*tertium comparationis*) (F);
4. The result of a comparison is at least a four-term relation between the two *comparanda* on the basis of the chosen respect and the comparer. (p. 7)
5. The two (or more) *comparanda* share a pre-comparative *tertium*, constituted by at least one commonality (i.e., being chosen for comparison by the comparer) and likely by many more commonalities (*tertia*). (p. 8)

The editors bring our attention to elements (1), (3), (4), and (5) in addition to (2). However, they take note of the *person making the comparison*, not just as a variable, but as a rich person with an identity that shapes and informs her ability and facility with carrying out (2) and (3), yet they accidentally perhaps fail to highlight *who the person is performing the act for: the audience*. Audiences are important and can be of various different types: academic versus non-academic, philosophical versus non-philosophical, or hostile versus open-minded. Some comparative philosophy has a recognizable political agenda, and as a consequence we must take note of

the audience for which the comparison is done, along with what the purpose of the comparison is for the respective audience. For some, acts of comparison may be judged to be superficial until it is noted who the audience is and what the purpose of the comparison is.

One audience that is left out in the editors' magnificent prolegomena to future philosophy is the public non-academic audience. It seems to me that one advantage that comparative philosophy without borders has over more traditional Western analytic philosophy or Western phenomenology is capturing the imagination of the non-academic public. At present we find that philosophy is largely out of favor with the public; technologists and economists appear to be the new "thinkers" compared to, for example, analytic political philosophers. But comparative philosophy without borders has the ability to bring philosophy to life for the public through the way it engages a topic, such as visual perception or the perception of another's feelings, by looking not only at scientific treatments but also Western and non-Western treatments, and through an engaging writing style that is more inviting to a larger audience. While the editors make a great case for philosophy without borders, tacitly, in the academic arena of philosophy, I was hopeful that they would have capitalized on the importance of philosophy without borders as something valuable for the public, as a form of public education toward enabling a cosmopolitan mind, understanding others, and generally just *spreading the word about other traditions*.

Although some papers may accomplish this task in varying degrees, such as Tan's "Justice for Social Change," it seems to me important to highlight the potential public component of philosophy without borders explicitly. I have done this in my own "Public Philosophy: Cross-Cultural and Multi-Disciplinary" (*Comparative Philosophy* 6, no. 2 [2015]), which compliments *CPWB* by making the case that public philosophy ought to take the model of comparative philosophy without borders by being cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary.

Different Paths to Comparative Philosophy

In an inquiry into the question "Can comparative philosophy be hard-core philosophy?" Chakrabarti and Weber remark:

It is almost taken for granted that one either gets into comparative philosophy with an adolescent zeal of radical counter-culturism or culture-tourism, or slows down into soft-core "New-Age" comparative philosophy at the senile end of one's (not-so) successful career in one of the hard-core mainstream philosophical disciplines such as Epistemology or Metaphysics or Philosophy of Mind or Aesthetics or Philosophy of Language or Philosophy of Science or Ethics or Political Philosophy. . . . (p. 11)

Commenting on the realization that some of us undergo in our exposure to comparative philosophy they also say the following:

[W]hen one painfully finds out that, in the insular power-enclaves of philosophy, even a mention of non-Western theories of mind, Indian theories of knowledge, Japanese theory of *amae*, or South African theory of *ubuntu* is punished by polite exclusion,

well-preserved prestigious ignorance about other cultures, that mono-cultural hubris defines the mainstream of professional philosophy in Euro-America, that the discovery of exciting connections, sharp oppositions, or imaginable dialogues between some ancient or modern Eastern and ancient or contemporary Western ideas is going to be greeted with condescension or cold neglect, *it is already too late*. (p. 11; emphasis added)

With regard to capturing the attention of a younger generation of philosophers who are interested in comparative philosophy, though they lack an education in it, it is important that these remarks be qualified in the following sense. They can be an accurate objective description of a person's career path without actually capturing the internal facts about their mind or intentions. For example, a person may come into philosophy with the intention of studying comparative philosophy, for example both Indian philosophy and Japanese philosophy, only to meet resistance whenever they ask to study these subjects because of the very political ideas that Chakrabarti and Weber point to. Thus, they may come to the conclusion early on that philosophy is often closed-minded. Consequently, they follow the advice of their mentors and study what they are told to study while all along believing that comparative philosophy is hard-core and more important than non-comparative philosophy of mind or epistemology because it requires (1) more knowledge, (2) more training in how to read different traditions, and (3) greater facility with languages, history, and scientific and mathematical training. However, because of the way the philosophy profession is structured they can only pursue these fields once they have actually achieved a station of security from which they can choose to express what they really believe. In such a case, the arc would look exactly as the editors describe. Early on, a person engages in what is believed to be hard-core philosophy, and then only later they turn to what is thought to be soft-core comparative philosophy. Importantly, this arc would fail to capture the social pressures, structural inequalities, and problems that many philosophers face as they attempt to pursue their interests in a philosophy department. The upshot can be simply put by elaborating two points.

First, there are many paths to comparative philosophy, and even if some are better than others (such as having a complete education from the beginning with multiple traditions), one path being better than another *cannot*, on its own, show that the other path is not good enough or important in a supporting role. It may only suggest that leaders in the field must derive from one path, but not the other path.

Second, comparative philosophy, like other disciplines, needs a diversity of pathways to engagement. If all members of comparative philosophy were to have the same cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary education from the beginning, things would be much better than they are now. However, the structure of that created group would lead to structural implicit biases brought about through sameness of education. Just as the lack of diversity in contemporary philosophy leads to implicit bias that could be ameliorated through adding diversity, a more diverse group of thinkers, which would also have implicit biases, can be checked by the presence of different pathways to cross-cultural thinking. In other words, to embrace the spirit of a collective cognition that can reduce ignorance due to socialization, it would be better to have models of comparative philosophy education that are sufficiently

diverse so as to allow for criticism that reduces ignorance due to implicit biases, and allows for the collective kind of exchange that the editors map out in this book. In short: the homogeneity of a diverse education is just as bad as the homogeneity of a non-diverse education.

Reflexivity of Consciousness and Concept-Free Perception

As an example of a hard-core philosophy question that must engage fusion philosophy, Chakrabarti and Weber offer the following:

[I]t seems that the two issues—“Is awareness necessarily self-aware?” and “Are there non-conceptual perceptions?”—are closely linked. . . . Only an uncompromisingly analytic and fusion style of thinking that does not primarily ask for historical or cultural causes of views, but judges them for cogency and truth as seriously offered philosophical options can do justice to the comparative insights one can get by reconstructing the debates between Indian and contemporary Western reflexivists and nonreflexivists on the one hand, and those between conceptualists and non-conceptualists on the other. (p. 17)

The editors’ thinking about how to connect the two questions is remarkable and engaging. Here I offer my own summary of their argument, and present my own view of a possible area where investigation might be profitable. Their argument:

1. Reflexivism is the view “that a state’s being a conscious mental state consists in its being transparent, that is, immediately and incorrigibly known to the subject” (p. 15).
2. Conceptualism is the view “that all perceptual cognitions have conceptual content . . .” (p. 16).
3. If perceptual cognitions were non-conceptual, then there would be a collapse between perception and apperception, and non-conceptual perceptions would be introspectively unavailable (p. 17).
4. For Kantian reasons, it is inconceivable that a perceptual cognition would be such that one could not apperceptively or introspectively claim it to be one’s own (p. 17).

Therefore:

5. Either non-conceptualism must be abandoned or we accept reflexivism, or the accessibility “of one’s own intentional . . . state” is not always available (p. 17).

In my own estimation the editors are completely correct in stating that we should be engaging in a cross-cultural investigation of reflexive theories of consciousness and non-conceptualism jointly. Clearly, the idea is taking hold. We already have cross-cultural research on reflexive theories of consciousness, and in the summer of

2016 there was a conference in Australia on reflexive theories of consciousness in Indian and Western philosophy. Hopefully, the cross-cultural dialogue on consciousness will spill over eventually into a cross-cultural engagement with the issue of non-conceptualism. An Indo-Anglo Analytic inquiry into the role of concepts in perception and the nature of consciousness seems highly profitable to anyone who has gleaned the vast literature in both traditions. Let me propose a move worth considering with respect to the argument above.

One idea that motivates crossing the question concerning reflexivism with the question concerning conceptualism is the view that there might be some kind of incompatibility between conceptualism and irreflexivism or non-conceptualism and reflexivism. However, one assumption of that way of crossing the questions assumes *monism* about concepts, the thesis that concepts have a singular structure, as opposed to *pluralism*, which allows for multiple structures, or *nihilism*, which maintains that concepts do not exist. The core idea of pluralism is that the concept *concept* is not a classical concept with fixed boundaries like the concept *being even*. Instead, the concept *concept* is a family-resemblance concept like the concept *furniture*. When a concept is a family-resemblance concept there are core prototypes or feature lists that govern the paradigm instances of the concept, but there is no set of fixed necessary and sufficient conditions for falling under the concept. Applying pluralism to the concept *concept* yields the interesting result that some instances of *concept* may have certain features while others do not. Pluralism about concepts, understood in this way, allows for alleviating the tension between (1) all perceptual cognitions are conceptual and (2) some perceptual cognitions are either not transparent, or corrigible, or not accessible, that is, lacking some feature that a paradigm concept would have.

Of course, pluralism will not be satisfying for those who want to hang on to the incorrigibility and accessibility of perceptual cognition in a strong form that derives from Kantian reasoning. But that price is to be paid, if what is desired is a theory that does not focus primarily on adult human consciousness, but rather on the kind of consciousness we see naturally present in nonhuman sentient creatures as well as when we think about divergence from proper neurological functioning. Moreover, the consistency of the claim that (1) all perceptions are conceptual (non-conceptual) and (2) a mental state's being conscious consists in the consciousness being reflexive *depends on* what kind of (a) *conceptualization* or property of *concepts* is required and (b) the kind of consciousness that we are attributing to the mental state in question, for example being phenomenologically conscious or being access-conscious, or both.

Overcoming Grave Objections to Comparative Philosophy

Chakrabarti and Weber take on three grave objections to comparative philosophy. Here I want to engage these objections with some alternative responses, while taking note of the importance of the responses that the editors offer.

Objection 1

Either we have no need of comparison with foreign ideas because they are just the same or too similar to our own native ideas, or we cannot allow it to count as hard-core philosophy because it is too different from how philosophy is done in the Western tradition. (p. 18)

In this objection the editors see a similarity to *Meno's Paradox of Inquiry*, and they also see a response strategy that is similar to how one can respond to *Meno's Paradox*. This approach is interesting and also allows for analytically minded philosophers to see this objection as being disarmed in a logical fashion. However, there is a more political response that is available that may not serve the purposes of advancing philosophy without borders, but nevertheless should be noted.

Take the horn that says, "we have no need of comparison with foreign ideas because they are just the same or too similar to our own native ideas." It seems that one way to respond to this kind of objection is through the deletion strategy. For example, if some classical Indian philosopher has an idea that really is exactly similar to an idea forwarded by a contemporary epistemologist, then perhaps we ought to delete teaching the contemporary epistemologist in favor of teaching the classical Indian philosopher. Now one might ask: what is the justification for that? The answer is simple: if we accept that there truly have been centuries of epistemic injustice and inequality, then surely the mere fact that a Western philosopher has said something important should not put him on the list of who should be taught, especially once it is acknowledged and discovered that someone, long before him, and in another tradition, basically said the same thing and offered a good argument for it. It is actually better for the proponent of objection (1) to concede that the idea is not the same, and hold that it is inferior to a similar Western idea. But once that move is made we are in the game of really assessing two philosophical ideas from a comparative point of view aimed at some problem space where two thoughts can be ranked against each other.

Objection 2

Comparison in philosophizing is often valued for its illuminating effects, but at the same time, cross-cultural comparisons in comparative philosophy risk distortion of the thought of a very different culture and time by imposing alien lenses. (p. 19)

In the editors' response to this objection they hold that we should "welcome transformation as a healthy rather than repugnant consequence of interpretations" (p. 19).

I think this is the right spirit to take, especially in the advance of comparative philosophy without borders. However, I want to take note of my own ignorance in understanding this objection. And I want to put my ignorance as an objection to the objection. It seems clear that by charging that comparison risks distortion we assume that there is some view from nowhere when doing philosophy of the

non-comparative kind, and thus we get our hands dirty when we do philosophy of the comparative kind by adding the distorting lens. I don't understand this at all. All philosophers, as the editors point out with formal condition (1) of their account of comparison, come with social baggage and an identity that is rich. Although they seek to bring this out in the case of comparative philosophy, the rich identity and baggage are also present in non-comparative philosophy. We impose alien lenses not just when we do history of philosophy or comparative philosophy. We impose alien lenses even when we do first-order metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Given that each of us is a socially conditioned creature who cannot always filter out our socialization in our philosophizing—yes, it even creeps into our thoughts about logic—there is no philosophy without distorting. So, the concern is really one of care. Is the person being blind to the distortion? Why is the person comparing? Is the distortion, from the view of others that have also thought about the issue, too much? There seem to be ways to navigate the issue safely and productively.

Objection 3

Either you are interested in objective truth, in which case, you will have to evaluate and grade different views coming, let's say, from Christian Europe, Buddhist Japan, and Islamic Arabia about the relation of human actions and the moral status of the world, and end up exposing the errors or relative inferiority of some traditions in comparison to others. If you are not a believer in such realist absolutist appeal to truth, all you can do is juxtapose an anthropological account of all these "ethno-philosophies" of other cultures, which each of them—it is often assumed—can do anyway with better justice, entitlement, and accuracy. In the first case, you are encouraging a destructive contest. . . . [I]n the second case you are not doing philosophy at all. Since there appears to be no third option, comparative philosophy is either odious . . . or perniciously anti-cosmopolitan. (p. 19)

In their response the editors offer an account of fusion philosophy:

We would like to think of fusion philosophy as a third option, in which one neither risks the pitfall of supposing that one tradition has reached the truth (or could possibly have reached the truth) nor references back to different traditions in a manner that leads to unwelcome destructive consequences. Fusion philosophy makes use of different traditions (or rather different philosophical standpoints) in a consciously methodological or instrumental fashion. (p. 19)

While I think that the response is more than adequate to the objection, I would like to offer another point of view that brings together two ideas, one of which is already implicit in the editors' response.

Rather than seeing the opposition as one between a person who believes in objective truth and a person who denies objective truth, one could have a more nuanced position that says that *access* to objective truth, or, better yet, *access* to a more objective picture of the world, requires consulting distinct points of view (standpoints, as the editors call them). Why?

First, all pictures of reality are from some point of view, and every point of view is simply a point of view that presents a picture of the world from *somewhere*, *when*, *how*, and *what*. We cannot avoid that. More importantly, encoded in a point of view is, by the very notion, the idea of an implicit bias. And implicit bias is even more present when we are taking into consideration human points of view as opposed to the point of view generated by a camera, because human points of view are a product of enculturation (which I discussed before with respect to education in comparative philosophy) and socialization as well as mere physical properties, such as lighting and angle of view. We cannot get outside of this. However, we can rub up against different points of view, and in a moment of contact with a distinct point of view our own biases and prejudices can be revealed.

Second, different points of view coming into contact don't always contradict one another. The individuation of points of view and stances is not done by logical means alone. More importantly, different points of view can corroborate one another in the same way that two persons looking at the same red apple from opposite sides can offer observations that, though distinct, corroborate what the other person would expect to see on the other side. If coming to make a judgment about the nature of reality requires robust analysis, following the work of philosophers of science, it will be important to take into consideration distinct points of view generated from other standpoints.

My response might be thought to miss the mark of the critique. So, let me also offer a direct engagement with the two horns. *The ranking component* in the objection holds that in order to do comparative philosophy objectively one must rank and thus encourage a destructive contest. *The ethno-philosophy component* in the objection holds that the non-objective approach to comparative philosophy is not really any kind of philosophy at all. As a response we have the following.

In the case of ranking we can see a quantifier fallacy. What is true is that in some cases we will encourage a partially combative engagement about who is right about something. The objection makes it seem as if we will do this in all cases. It is more likely, however, that in other cases we will encourage not ranking but rather cooperation or even the search for corroboration of ideas. Consider the project under way in experimental philosophy concerning the universality of concepts. Just as we can look for different ways in which philosophical traditions approach an issue and fuse them together, we can also, through comparative philosophy without borders, engage the issue of what kinds of concepts are universal.

In the case of ethno-philosophy not being philosophy we can expose the objection as flawed by asking: what philosophy is it that makes comparative philosophy without borders not-philosophy. Put another way, one might say the following: *when we go in for comparative philosophy without borders, we not only aim ultimately to drop "comparative," "without," and "borders," but ultimately also to drop the baggage associated with "philosophy" as a historically generated term with epistemic injustices tied to it.* Moreover, we cannot criticize "ethno-philosophy" for being non-philosophical if we don't already have a certain kind of philosophy in view.

Conclusion

Let me close by saying that I believe that much more comparative philosophy without borders—that is, philosophy—needs to be produced, and that this excellent anthology comes out at a time when many young philosophers are desperate to engage the model proposed by Chakrabarti and Weber. There are at least three advantages of doing philosophy this way: (1) it is more attractive to the public, (2) it has a firmer epistemic foundation, and (3) it has a more socially informed and politically equitable structure. As a younger philosopher who believes that comparative philosophy without borders is extremely important right now let me stress that part of what needs to change, to make more work like this possible, is the political climate in philosophy. It needs to change so as to be more inclusive of the kind of work that is done under the banner of fusion philosophy, comparative philosophy, or philosophy without borders. Congratulations to Chakrabarti and Weber, and to the contributors, for making this agenda-setting anthology an actuality rather than a mere possibility.