What is (Comparative) Philosophy?

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Considering: Robert W. Smid, *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: The Pragmatist and Process Traditions*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. Pp.x+288.

One of the many questions that have taxed the minds of professional philosophers over the years has concerned the nature and dimensions of the philosophical enterprise itself. Many of the great philosophers have asked the question, 'What is Philosophy?' This is itself a philosophical question, and a difficult one, which causes much excitement and disagreement within the academy and beyond. Given the political, economic, and institutional pressures under which the discipline finds itself today, this question is just as powerful and pertinent as it has ever been.

Rather than focussing on the responses to this question that have been most influential in the formation of the modern, professional discipline, such as those by Plato, Hegel, Wittgenstein or Derrida, the challenge that I'd like to discuss in this short note is of a different kind; it is the challenge posed by the existence of a world outside of Europe and America. The publication of Robert Smid's recent book provides the occasion for this brief consideration.

An immediate dilemma for the 'rest' of the planet is that, according to professional philosophical conventions, it seems to have existed without philosophy for most of human history. Of course, this is also a rather serious blow to the claims of philosophers that their enterprise is in someway important or even essential to human well-being; if most of humanity has done so well without it for most of its existence, then the value of philosophy for our health and happiness seems deeply dubious. Nevertheless, the process of professionalizing philosophy in the academy in the twentieth century has seen an increasingly disciplined focus on the task of making technical advances within or emerging from established traditions with relatively coherent canons of (European and American) texts.[1] This appears to

[1] An interesting account of the professionalization of philosophy can be found in B. Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale

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be true even in the professionalized, non-Western academy. An implication of this has been the *de facto* establishment of the 'non-Western' world as the 'non-philosophical' world, at least historically, as though these two negative categories were coterminous.

This powerful, and decreasingly subterranean, regionalization of philosophy as a 'Western' enterprise has met with some opposition, most notably from the slowly emerging field of so-called 'comparative philosophy.' As Robert Smid notes towards the end of his book, this fledgling field 'runs counter to any predefined specialization within a tradition' (225). Indeed, the imperatives of comparative philosophy draw practitioners towards 'a much greater propensity to form broad philosophical views' that traverse the boundaries of established fields and practices. In other words, comparative philosophy is always and already counter to the trajectories of the modern, professionalized discipline. A result is that, to the extent that it has flourished at all, 'comparative philosophy has flourished only at the margins of the broader discipline' (226), where it has forged a cluster of new journals, associations, and forums for discussion. At the same time, philosophers seeking to work in this comparative milieu find themselves always on the defensive; they 'consistently run into challenges in trying to appease philosophers on the one hand and [area studies specialists] on the other' (225).

For Smid, the position of the comparative philosopher is undermined (or at least marginalized) by the fact that it is one of the only identifiable subfields of philosophy that lacks an identifiable canon. He notes that the choices necessary for a professional trajectory towards Continental philosophy are clear to everyone in the field, just as the list of key thinkers in Analytic philosophy is relatively uncontroversial. But, he asks, 'who does one read when one decides to become a comparativist?' (221).

Smid is certainly correct to observe that comparative philosophy lacks canonical texts at the present time. However, I am not convinced that this field can or should aspire towards being incorporated into 'broader' philosophy as a subfield since, it seems to me, comparative philosophy should be seen as a field broader and more inclusive than what has come to be called professional philosophy itself.

University Press, 1977. The fact that this kind of professionalization in the academy is not limited to philosophy but is, in fact, part of the general tendency in the development of the modern university is provocatively phrased in L. Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*, (New York & London: WW Norton, 2010).

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Indeed, the attempt to incorporate it as a subfield in this way seems (at least to me) to be a good example of the kind of 'appeasement' that Smid laments; it is at the same time a denial of the regionalization of philosophy that has accompanied its professionalization (i.e. the transformation of philosophy into Western philosophy) *and* the acceptance of the categorical potentials that are inscribed in that professionalization (i.e. the need for all legitimate philosophical practices to be subdivisions of Western philosophy). In the end, it is a denial of the radical potentials of comparative philosophy itself (i.e. the entertainment of the possibility that philosophy is not just about the West at all).

Before we push this too far, however, I should note that Smid's agenda is methodological rather than theoretical and that, in general, he is careful not to enter the dangerous territory of the politics of knowledge. Indeed, he eschews all judgement of which methods (and their goals) are 'best' in comparative philosophy (217). Nevertheless, while he does not seek to resolve it, his interesting and valuable book succeeds in drawing attention to a central theoretical, political, and even ethical dilemma that emerges for philosophers from the very existence of comparative philosophy today: if the subject matter of comparative philosophy is really philosophy (rather than culture, or religion, or just 'thought'), then what principle is there on which any philosopher can exclude non-Western sources?[2] In other words, if comparative philosophy really is

[2] Of course, there are principles of exclusion that could be operable, but we must be clear about their various implications, some of which are offensive.

The least offensive principles in this respect are simply historical ones: the discipline of philosophy has been clearly defined by a set of practices and literacies drawn from a constellation of interleaving intellectual traditions in European history; hence, ideas, thinkers, and traditions from outside that history are not part of the composition of disciplinary philosophy. This makes 'philosophy' into a simple, historically descriptive category: Confucius may have been a sophisticated and interesting thinker, but he was not a philosopher. This kind of principle for the category often bleeds over into accounts that make philosophy part of the narrative of 'Western' identity; edging 'philosophy' very close to 'culture'. In itself, this is inoffensive. However, it is rarely the case that philosophers (or even historians of philosophy) are content to view their enterprise as wholly located in this kind of category. Indeed, many of the most influential and formative answers to the question 'What is Philosophy?' singularly fail to say: it is part of the historical narrative of European identity (although some do). Instead, they tend to emphasise philosophy as the love of wisdom *per se*, or as a particular engagement with language and reality *per se*, or as radical

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philosophy (and we need not take this for granted), then philosophy itself should already be inclusive of the kinds of texts with which it concerns itself. So, either comparative philosophy is not about philosophy at all, or it is the richest and fullest expression of the philosophical endeavour, which means that we must revisit what it means to be a professional philosopher. In this frame, contemporary comparative philosophy is a kind of suicidal endeavour, striving to make itself redundant through the transformation of philosophy *per se* into a more inclusive field.

If, on the other hand, the kinds of materials dealt with in comparative philosophy do not constitute philosophy in an acceptable (or professional) sense, philosophy can happily marginalize all this talk of comparison into the tortuous and difficult terrain of its borderlands with area studies. Whilst this sense of comparative philosophy makes it peripheral to the core business of philosophy *per se*, since it suggests that this enterprise is fundamentally about culture, it does mean that the field retains purpose and value even if/when mainstream philosophy becomes more inclusive of those non-Western sources that *are* accepted as philosophical.

Regrettably, however, the field of comparative philosophy, such as it is, is profoundly (and, I think, essentially) conflicted about its own nature; no choice has yet been made about a coherent trajectory or purpose. As Smid observes, there is no central or classical text or agenda on which more than a few can agree. Given the fragmented and diverse nature of this evolving field, as well as his own pragmatist inclinations, it is little wonder that Smid chose to side-step the question of the identity and mission of the field and instead to focus on how various practitioners have contributed to the development of its methodological concerns. Indeed, in the end, Smid reveals that he has allowed his conception of comparative philosophy to emerge from the work of the thinkers he has chosen to consider (William

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epistemological or ontological critique *per se*. Any appeals to cultural specificity become immediately excluded as cultural theory rather than philosophy. As soon as these kinds of dimensions become essential to the philosophical enterprise, the category of philosophy ceases to be a simple historical one and hence the principles for excluding non-Western sources become less savoury.

In other words, if we seek to exclude non-Western sources on principle, and if we seek to make that principle ethically palatable, then we must reduce the category of philosophy to a simple historical one – as part of cultural studies – and thus surrender the discipline's pretensions to universal knowledge in the interests of its focus on culture and identity formation.

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Hocking, Filmer Northrop, David Hall & Roger Ames, and Robert Neville), rather than starting with a conception of comparative philosophy and then choosing to interrogate, *qua* comparative philosophy cases that fit within its parameters (213). The result of his own methodological pragmatism is that his book echoes the indecisiveness of the field itself, which makes it accurately frustrating at times. In particular, the material chosen for this book describes and documents the conflicting tendencies of the field to seek, on the one hand, methods to affect the incorporation of non-Western philosophy into the overall discipline as a way to move the whole enterprise forward to greater insights (i.e. methodologies for the transformation of Western philosophy into a more worldly philosophy) and, on the other hand, methods to demonstrate and demarcate the particularities of Western and other 'philosophies' as ways to better understand (and communicate between) different cultures.

In the case of the former, which Smid identifies with Hocking and Neville, the purpose of comparative philosophy is to open Western philosophy to enrichment from outside its own traditions; its goal is inclusive and synthetic. In the case of the latter, which Smid identifies with Hall and Ames, the purpose of comparative philosophy is to document where similarities and differences between Western and Other philosophies exist and, through such documentation, improve mutual understanding of peoples and cultures; its goal is distinguishing and comparative.

This schema suggests that what is presently considered 'comparative philosophy' has at least two agendas, one of which might more properly be termed 'synthetic' and the other genuinely 'comparative.' The synthetic agenda is a radical one that seeks to transform the general field into a less geo-culturally exclusive landscape, hence resolving and dissolving itself on the point of its own success. The comparative agenda does not seek to transform philosophy *per se*, but merely to establish a space within which other 'philosophy-like' traditions can be discussed and analyzed with mutual benefit for our understanding of those traditions and (Western) philosophy itself.

It is not inconceivable that both of these agendas could be pursued at the same time, and that the resolution of the synthetic agenda would still leave room for the continuation of the comparative agenda, since synthesis calls for the inclusion of recognizably 'philosophical' sources into the mainstream, while comparison calls for the distinguishing of non-philosophical but 'philosophy-like' sources into an adjacent space. It seems plausible that the non-Western world (like the Western world itself) is rich with both of these types of sources. The only reason that both of these enterprises fall

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under the umbrella of comparative philosophy at present is because 'comparative' has become synonymous with alien, and hence the category has been made ambiguous by convention. The ambiguity of the category remains resilient for as long as philosophy as a whole maintains that its professionalism is bounded by a European (and recently American) identity. Hence, the question of the nature and dimensions of comparative philosophy is tied inextricably and deeply to the perennial of question, *what is philosophy?* Indeed, it may be the same question.

This question is beyond the scope and ambition of Smid's book, but it lurks rather menacingly in the background, occasionally slipping into the foreground in phrases such as: 'the subfield rests on a conception of philosophy that is not currently very popular in the broader field of philosophy and … it rests on this conception not by choice but by necessity' (226). Whilst seeking to address this may not have been Smid's intention, he cannot escape from the fact that it is difficult to investigate appropriate methodologies for a field before properly understanding what the field actually is. However, his descriptive approach means the book doesn't help us to understand what comparative philosophy is (except in so far as it *is* its present confusion of methods and aims); instead, it gives us some interesting, valuable (and often fascinating) insights into the range of things being done in its name in what Smid calls the 'American tradition,' ranging from the synthetic, worldy-philosophy projects of Hocking and Northrop, through the comparative philosophy of culture of Ames and Hall, to the grand comparative religious thought project of Neville.

One of the consequences of this approach is that Smid is forced to leave behind some of the most intriguing implications of his own definition of comparative philosophy, which was a compelling and powerful one:

> Comparative philosophy can be defined by its attempt to move across the boundaries of otherwise distinct philosophical traditions – especially insofar as these traditions are divided by significant historical and cultural distance – thus enabling a comparison of what lies on either side of the boundary. (2)

This definition, which is theoretically rather than descriptively driven, opens the door to the possibility that 'a comparison of Descartes and Locke would constitute no less an instance of comparative philosophy than one of Mencius and Aquinas' (2), even if the latter represents a more extreme case of comparison. This position is consistent with some recent theoretical work on the meaning of

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comparative philosophy, which attempts to divorce the category from any necessary or sufficient connections with the 'non-West' by focussing on comparison across radical epistemological (or even cosmological) boundaries. Such boundaries exist within regional cultural histories as well as between them.[3] However, Smid is not able to pursue this line in his book and he quickly reverts to an equation of 'comparison' with 'non-Western' and of 'philosophy' with 'culture,' because this is the resilient practice of the tradition on which he focuses. Indeed, Smid is clear that the cases he has selected form part of a coherent tradition of American pragmatism and process philosophy, in which he also participates; this is the tradition of practicing comparative philosophy to which he seeks to contribute.

To his credit, Smid is clearly aware that there are other approaches to comparative philosophy, including an ever-widening field in Continental philosophy that draws on Heidegger's scepticism about the project and also an increasingly strong literature on the mechanics of 'comparison' in various 'non-Western' traditions, but these fall outside the tradition that defines the parameters of his book.[4] Hence, while Smid talks tentatively about the need for comparative comparative philosophy, or sometimes metacomparative philosophy, it is difficult to read his own text in that spirit, since it appears to be a genuine, deliberate, and valuable account of the

[3] This case is made, for instance, in Chris Goto-Jones, 'A Cosmos Beyond Space and Area Studies: Towards Comparative Political Thought *as Political Thought*,' *in Boundary* 2, **38**:3 (2011). A parallel argument about why the oft made 'comparison' of Heidegger and Nishida Kitarô should not be considered 'comparative philosophy' is in Chris Goto-Jones, 'When is Comparative Political Thought (not) Comparative? Dialogues, (dis)continuities, creativity, and radical difference in Heidegger and Nishida,' in Michael Freeden & Andrew Vincent (eds), *Comparative Political Thought: Theorizing Practices*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2012).

[4] Recent work on Heidegger in this frame includes, Ma Lin, *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue*. London: Routledge, 2008. A different perspective is Steven Burik, The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking: Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). In terms of approaches from 'non-Western' schools of philosophy, much recent work has focussed on the Kyoto School. See, for instance, part 1 of Bret Davis, Brian Schroeder, Jason Wirth (eds), *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). Or, in the pages of this journal, Chris Goto-Jones, 'If the past is a different country, are different countries in the past? On the Place of the Non-European in the History of Philosophy' *Philosophy* **80** (2005).

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practice of comparative philosophy within a single, clearly distinguished tradition of philosophy in twentieth century America.

In the end, Smid should be congratulated on producing the first monograph to attempt to map and systematize methodologies of comparative philosophy from any tradition. This is a valuable and timely endeavour, and the text will be of great help to academics and students interested in the modern history of this confusing field. In his own terms (cultivation of a better understanding and relative merits of various comparative methods in the American tradition – see page 13), he succeeds admirably. However, for me, some of the most important issues about the field arising from this book fall outside of its ambitions precisely because its ambitions are largely documentary: instead of resolving the question of whether comparative philosophy must necessarily or sufficiently be concerned with the 'non-West,' Smid simply observes (correctly) that this has been the case in the 'American tradition'; instead of resolving the question of whether the subject matter of comparative philosophy is really philosophical or actually something else (religious, cultural etc.), Smid asserts (correctly) that the American tradition has incorporated both trajectories; instead of resolving the question of whether comparative philosophy requires a radical rethinking of the dimensions of the entire philosophical enterprise, Smid notes (correctly) that it is practiced as an uncomfortable subfield at the margins of the discipline.

In other words, Smid is absolutely right about the state of this field – his exegeses are sound and reliable. But at the end of this book the field of comparative philosophy remains as confused and controversial as it was at the start (although we may now understand more fully how it got into such a condition); the field, and philosophy as a whole, is trapped by the resilience of an ethnocentric history. In the end, as at the beginning, the fundamental relationship between this field and the basic, perennial question, *what is philosophy?*, must be addressed. The implications of what we now call comparative philosophy for that question could be momentous, but we won't know unless we ask it.

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