

Tim Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*. London, New York: *Bloomsbury Publishin*, 2015.

Comparative philosophy is an ambitious and dynamic discipline that has been increasingly gaining visibility in the last few years. By dealing with different philosophical traditions, it indirectly uncovers facts behind the reasons for the possible choice to keep non-Western philosophies away from departments of philosophy as more and more questionable. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* is one of the most recent publications addressing the issue of how to make cross-cultural comparison in philosophy. Connolly recognizes this task is more difficult than one might expect (p. 2), and the book represents a challenging attempt to introduce and make order in this particular branch of philosophy. He precisely structures the text in three different parts: to elucidate the nature of comparative philosophy, its main problems, and the most common approaches. In order to facilitate the explanation of the issues at hand, the author provides a significant number of clarifying examples with reference to both present and past works. Thus the target of the book becomes not only the student of comparative philosophy, but also whoever is curious about the possibility of engaging with unfamiliar philosophies. It is interesting to note that this publication can also be a practical course book, since at the end of each chapter there are a reading list and a set of questions for discussion. Hence, the author faces the topics in a concise but thought-provoking manner, by leaving the reader open to diverse perspectives.

The first part (pp. 9-64) explores the nature of comparative philosophy in a stimulating way. The delineation of this specific discipline involves a reexamination of the definition of philosophy as well as a reconsideration of the meaning of comparison. After engaging with different formulations, Connolly stresses that in a global context we should find the right way between a too narrow and a too broad definition of philosophy (p. 21). The complementary issue of making sense of the adjective “comparative” is articulated through an analysis of the two main dimensions of comparison. The first dimension is interpretive: since the goal is understanding other traditions, different approaches bring different outcomes depending on their focus, such as universalism, differentialism, self-understanding, and other-understanding. The second dimension is constructive: here the aim is to address other traditions in order to contribute to the debate concerning present-day issues. This dimension can be

adopted to identify an external source of critique in another tradition or to foster the development of a solution to a particular problem with the help of another tradition. Connolly articulates this preliminary examination further. He delves into the concepts of culture and tradition, since the study of philosophy across different traditions entails specific challenges related to language and other cultural factors (p. 59). Depending on the approach, a comparative philosopher can frame the features of distinct philosophical traditions as something to merge or preserve.

The second part (pp. 65-146) of the book represents another intriguing path of clarification related to a set of problems. Our understanding of texts in other languages can be affected by the issue of linguistic incommensurability. As the author remarks, even though it might be difficult to figure out the ways in which different traditions use a specific term, it is possible to improve our ability to listen to these traditions (p. 84). Comparative philosophy also deals with foundational and evaluative incommensurability, because it should foster our cross-cultural awareness regarding foundational differences and their justification. Moving on to the problem of one-sidedness, comparative philosophers should be able to avoid projecting something into other philosophical traditions, such as their own concepts, methods, ways of reading, and ways of writing. This second part concludes by addressing the problem of generalization as an ongoing debate. However, the main focus of comparative philosophy should be on specific passages or issues and generalization should only stem from complete and meticulous works (p. 143).

The third and last part (pp. 147-209) debates four possible approaches to comparative philosophy and provides interesting insights. The first approach is universalism, which is rooted in the early stages of development of the discipline. Even though it has been widely criticized as it tends to impose values onto other cultures, this approach is still adopted by some scholars. A different approach is pluralism. This aims at clarifying how the differences in philosophical traditions cannot be reduced in order to foster their interaction. The author moves on to two other approaches: consensus and global philosophy, by pointing out the need for attention to common values without flattening differences (p. 175). The goal of the former is to achieve agreement regarding elementary norms providing a balance between universalism and pluralism. The latter fosters interactions and exchanges between philosophical traditions with reference to contemporary issues. Connolly claims that the main concern of the global-philosophical

approach should be to combine its constructive dimension with the interpretive one, by finding a balance which also enables progress in our understanding of the different philosophical traditions (pp. 206-207).

The distinct feature of the book is that its tone is direct yet still scholarly. A significant number of examples throughout enrich and clarify the development of the discussion; the sharpest ones probably stem from the author's background – namely ancient Greek philosophy and classical Chinese philosophy (p. 6). Connolly explores and challenges each topic, suggesting questions which prompt useful answers. Hence he shapes a dynamic framework for analyzing philosophy comparatively. A passage in the first chapter elucidates what should make this book appealing for all scholars and students of philosophy, as it raises the issue of the almost total absence of engagement with non-Western traditions in introductory courses on philosophy in comparison to the same courses in other disciplines (p. 14). I am confident that looking at other disciplines can represent not only the starting point for perceiving the interdisciplinary problem, but also a way of furthering the debate. Sometimes the author mentions scholars from other fields when discussing concepts in various chapters. On the other hand, he does not engage with the ways in which other disciplines have developed and debated comparison in order to benefit from a cross-disciplinary examination, which probably deserves an accurate exploration in a specific publication.

The variety of open issues presented by the author is likely related to the fact that moving across different philosophical traditions is a delicate task, since a mistake can seriously compromise the quality of the research outcomes and bring harmful intercultural effects. However, the reading of the chapters suggests that this is not a plausible reason for ignoring other philosophical traditions. Thus comparative philosophy should also represent a possible step toward a more thoughtful engagement in cross-cultural research within the departments of philosophy. The book outlines the discipline in an exciting way, by debating viable tools for this fragile but noteworthy task. All in all, I think that there might not be universal starting points from which to work across philosophies, but rather the main concern is to enable dialogues and stimulate movements between them. This publication represents a vibrant introduction to comparative philosophy which can also invite the reader to envisage its future developments.

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