

The Assumptions of Cross-Cultural Philosophy: What Makes It Possible to Learn from Other Traditions

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1 Introduction

In “Global Knowledge Frameworks and the Tasks of Cross-Cultural Philosophy,” I read Leigh Jenco as seeking to answer the question of what knowledge must be like in order for cross-cultural philosophy to make sense. More carefully, she considers how we probably have to construe knowledge in order for it to be apt for us to adopt the attitude that philosophical frameworks other than our own have something of value for us. In search of which conception of knowledge would best justify the judgment that non-local ways of interpreting the world have something to contribute, Jenco considers four possibilities, and argues that one is to be favored over the other three. These options are, in catchwords, the esoteric, Enlightenment, hermeneutic, and self-transformative conceptions of knowledge, with Jenco defending the latter as more plausible than the former three.

Jenco’s article is a welcome reminder to the field that it is not enough merely to include non-Western views in largely Western anthologies and curricula, but to take them seriously as giving Western philosophers and related thinkers reason to reconsider their ways of interpreting the world.¹ Given that this fallibilist attitude is appropriate, it is well worth addressing what would make the best sense of it, as Jenco does. Furthermore, I appreciate the big picture that she has provided by way of doing so; despite the routine demand from many post-colonial and post-modern thinkers to focus on particularity and context, I believe there is still an essential role for broad, bird’s-eye philosophy. Jenco’s four-fold division of conceptions of knowledge from around the world is a revealing and useful way to organize reflection on what the proper aims of cross-cultural philosophy are and what pursuing them involves. Her self-transformative approach to knowledge is worth taking seriously, and her criticisms of rival approaches are *prima facie* compelling.

In this critical discussion of Jenco’s article, I consider whether there is a fifth conception of knowledge that might underwrite cross-cultural philosophy of the sort we both endorse, using my own engagements as a springboard. As someone who was initially trained in the Continental and Anglo-American philosophical traditions but who has spent more than a decade learning African philosophy and putting it into critical comparison with East Asian and Western thought,² I have read Jenco’s piece with an eye toward self-understanding. Which conception of knowledge has guided my own enquiry, specifically as someone who has indeed approached African philosophy with the attitude of expecting to discover some new truths from it? I find that my own assumptions are not well captured by any of Jenco’s four options, and so in this article am led to sketch an alternative, pluralist account of knowledge, one that I advance as explaining well what “makes it possible to acknowledge the value, and not only mere existence, of foreign bodies of thought” (Jenco 2017a).

I begin by briefly recounting Jenco's four-fold division of conceptions of knowledge and their purported advantages and disadvantages (section 2). After making some objections that appear to apply to her account, I bring out how a pluralist account of knowledge appears to have been guiding me in my enquiries and how it might serve as a plausible fifth option (section 3). I then consider whether my purported alternative is reducible to a form of Jenco's rejected Enlightenment conception, and argue that it is not (while also suggesting, that, if it is, then the Enlightenment view is in fact defensible when it takes a pluralist form) (section 4). I conclude by reminding the reader that the debate between Jenco and myself has focused strictly on cross-cultural philosophy in search of knowledge, but that it is worth noting that cross-cultural philosophy can make good sense as a way to obtain other epistemic goods even when knowledge is not forthcoming (section 5).

2 Jenco's Self-Transformative Conception of Knowledge

Jenco articulates four "ideal types" (as per Max Weber) of knowledge and associates them with certain views that have been salient in different parts of the world at various times. In this section I summarize Jenco's characterizations of them and of their respective strengths and weaknesses, which will set the stage for me to advance a fifth alternative.

One major approach to knowledge is "esoteric," in the sense of "traditions that limit the scope of who may have knowledge of what," specifically to members of in-groups who have "special qualification or standing—such as their caste, social status, level of moral cultivation" (Jenco 2017a). Often the thought is that only those who have been initiated into a certain way of life are epistemically able to grasp the knowledge, while sometimes the idea is that, even if outsiders could in principle apprehend it, they should for practical reasons be excluded from doing so. As Jenco sensibly points out, doing cross-cultural philosophy in search of knowledge makes little or no sense if knowledge is esoteric. If those from, say, the West are epistemically or practically incapable of grasping knowledge from a non-Western culture, then there is no way that a cross-cultural philosophy can be done in which Westerners can learn something from the other tradition. Of course, one might be able to become a member of the in-group, but Jenco is aptly interested in how an outsider such as a professional academic philosopher could engage in cross-cultural philosophy.

The same problem affects the "hermeneutic" approach to knowledge, according to which knowledge is restricted not to a "small coterie of suitably qualified individuals" (Jenco 2017a) as the per the esoteric approach, but rather to those in "background conditions which give rise to embedded knowledge" (Jenco 2017a). The idea is that knowledge-claims are true, warranted, or even intelligible relative only to a certain culture, so that if one is not a member of this culture, one cannot apprehend the knowledge in it. Ultimately, this is a form of epistemic relativism, which entails that, while there might be *differences* between claims to knowledge throughout the world, there are in fact no *disagreements* between them: either interlocutors cannot understand each other enough to disagree, or truth/warrant obtains only in relation to beliefs that are part of a certain contextual web and are not ascribing competing properties to a mind-independent, common subject matter. Relativism entails that what is true-for-me cannot be true-for-you, insofar as your cultural background differs from mine. Again, a cross-cultural

philosophy, at least one in search of knowledge from a foreign tradition, gains no traction with this conception of knowledge.

A third understanding of knowledge is the “Enlightenment” view of “knowledge as singular, unified and uniquely true” (Jenco 2017a). According to this view, knowledge claims, or at least philosophical ones, are often universally true as opposed to true relative to certain societies, and they are in principle accessible to anyone, whatever one’s cultural background. The idea is that there is a single form of reason available to everyone (who has the relevant epistemic faculties) that can reveal truths that apply to everyone. On the face of it, this conception of knowledge appears easily to avoid the problem facing the esoteric and hermeneutic accounts. However, Jenco says that a bit of reflection shows otherwise:

In this framework, the various forms of knowledge [...] in which what we know is mediated and constituted by a huge range of social, religious, and political authorities, or which is derived from faith or revelation, would not qualify as knowledge worthy of the name. On this framework, or indeed any framework which claims its knowledge as singular, unified and uniquely true, provincialization is by definition impossible (Jenco 2017a).

By “provincialization” Jenco means an approach to knowledge that views itself as “one possibility among rival alternatives, rather than as the only form of true knowledge” (Jenco 2017a). Her suggestion is that since the Enlightenment approach implies that there is a single kind of rational enquiry, it cannot be open to discovering other forms that merit the dignity of the title of “knowledge.”

Finally, Jenco sketches a fourth understanding of knowledge, the only one, it appears, that can make sense of a cross-cultural philosophy seeking to learn from a radically different intellectual history. According to her “self-transformative” conception, those from a given culture can learn from another one insofar as they change their own culture to become more like the one from which they want to learn. Jenco gives the example of Chinese intellectuals who thought they could understand Western knowledge “through replication and participation in those ‘Western’ forms of life that supported such knowledge and made it meaningful” (Jenco 2017a). Roughly, the idea is that in order to appreciate Western knowledge claims, the Chinese had to become (more) Western. According to Jenco, this self-transformative conception “views knowledge as socially embedded, yet capable of circulating beyond its original contexts of production; it sets conditions upon the acquisition of knowledge, yet sees those conditions as malleable over time and across human efforts” and so it “may be the most congenial to the practice of cross cultural philosophy, because it provides a method by which knowledge might be transmitted without at the same time claiming that knowledge is unitary” (Jenco 2017a).

In the following section I provide a fallibilist account of knowledge that I believe rivals Jenco’s favored one. Before doing so, however, I provide some reasons to doubt hers.

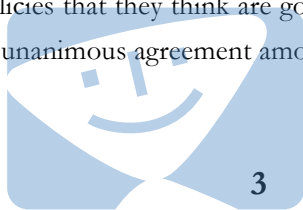
One concern is whether Jenco’s view adequately avoids the problem facing the esoteric and hermeneutic approaches. To be sure, she is not committed to thinking that cross-cultural philosophy is impossible. However, she does appear committed to thinking that it is not possible in the absence of self-transformation, where few cultures have, or might even be likely to, self-transform in the ways she prescribes. Her view does not seem able to account for the intuition that cross-cultural philosophy of a

sort that provides instruction can be done *now* by some philosophers sitting behind our laptops, reading books, going to conferences, corresponding with colleagues, and doing the other usual stuff.

Jenco might suggest that those who are doing cross-cultural philosophy now and learning something from it have self-transformed. However, that is unlikely, given that it is supposed to be a large-scale, intergenerational endeavor in the first instance. Note Jenco's key example of how Chinese intellectuals "Westernized" themselves, where this "replication of the social practices that produced certain kinds of knowledge was not the work of one individual, but rather happened collectively over many generations, through the construction of durable institutions, transformation of values over time, and alterations in the languages and forms of inquiry" (Jenco 2017a). As the West has not done that in respect of China, it follows that Westerners cannot yet learn from cross-cultural philosophy with Chinese sources. While I accept that those in the West might well do it better, at least in one respect, if they were to "Sinologize," I submit that they can do it, and indeed have done it,³ to some real degree without their broader intellectual culture having Sinologized.

Another concern about Jenco's hypothesis is that it cannot account well for the intuition that diversity, not sameness, is what really fosters knowledge. It is unfair to suggest that, for Jenco, we all must become the same in order to understand each other. Yet it seems fair to say that we all must become more like each other in order to do so. However, it is commonly held that creativity and insight are often a function of putting two very different perspectives together. Part of the present objection is that, if thinkers around the globe took Jenco's advice, then there would be less diversity among them and hence fewer discoveries by them. However, the deeper part is that cross-cultural discoveries are already being made in the apparent absence of homogenization.

For just one example, salient Western thought about the nature of democracy has plausibly been upended by consideration of consensus-oriented decision-making practices salient among a wide array of traditional sub-Saharan peoples. Contemporary Westerners tend to conceive democracy as a Euro-American invention that is essentially majoritarian and competitive, with it consisting of political parties that jockey for the most votes and then rule in ways expected to benefit their constituencies. However, as African thinkers from a variety of peoples have shown, pre-colonial politics in sub-Saharan Africa was intuitively democratic but did not allow for majority rule. For instance, sometimes a king would enact what was unanimously recommended by a group of (usually male) elders who had been popularly appointed and who sought to resolve conflicts in a way that was to the benefit of everyone. Other times, a king would have all those affected by a dispute talk under the proverbial tree until they found a way forward that all could accept. In the light of these kinds of practices, contemporary African political philosophers have proposed a "non-party polity"⁴ in which Parliamentarians would advance policies that they think are good for the public as a whole and would adopt only those that are the object of unanimous agreement among themselves.



3

A Pluralist Conception of Knowledge

In this section I suggest another way to construe knowledge that would make possible a cross-cultural philosophical engagement in which one seeks to learn from those working in different traditions. I start

by reflecting briefly on some of my own experience, and then draw out of that a pluralist account of knowledge that I have been presuming and that is distinct from Jenco's four categories.

I like to think that I have learned something substantial about African philosophy since I relocated from the United States to South Africa in 2004. If I have not, then someone owes me an explanation of what I am doing in those published works of mine in that field. To be sure, it could be that I am doing more Western (and specifically Anglo-American) philosophy than African philosophy and have hoodwinked dozens of African editors. There are indeed a handful of African nationalists who contend something like that, and I will not take offense if Jenco suggests it! However, for now, let me run with the claim that I have come to understand much of the African philosophical tradition.

Furthermore, let me suppose that I have not merely understood some African philosophy, but have also learned important things from it, particularly concerning relationality in ethics and metaphysics. For example, I now think that relational properties, concerning the capacity for a certain type of communion, are essential to grasp the moral status of a being, not intrinsic properties such as pleasure or autonomy, and further that right action is also at bottom a function of responding to relationality in the right way.⁵ I still remember the shift in my head when I heard an elderly African woman say that for her the biggest problem with being poor is that she has nothing to give away, a view I cannot recall having encountered living in the US.

I have also come to doubt my previously unquestioned acceptance of the view that the essence of a thing, whether it be the nature of the self or of water, is determined merely by intrinsic properties, such as a chain of mental states or a chemical composition, respectively. I am now open to the idea that it is constituted at least in large part by its relationships to other things, if not to a whole.⁶

I am pretty sure that I would not have come to take these views seriously if I had not immersed myself in African philosophy (or in Chinese philosophy, which, I have also come to learn, shares many features with it⁷). So, I believe I have been doing cross-cultural philosophy and with the sort of attitude that Jenco recommends, of seeking something valuable—indeed full-blown knowledge—from a different tradition.

However, I have not been initiated into a sub-Saharan people or in any other sense become an African—people still see me as a foreign white guy. I also have not been part of an on-going self-transformative intellectual culture in the West that has been trying to become more African in the way it experiences and interprets the world. There is no such project. Finally, I also have not subscribed, at least not intentionally or knowingly, to an Enlightenment conception of knowledge of the sort Jenco (2017a) articulates according to which “knowledge is unitary.” On the face of it, I have instead grappled with real disparity when it comes to knowledge in an African context. As above, with respect to ethical content, I have changed my mind in believing now that an individual's extrinsic and not intrinsic properties are fundamental to morality. With respect to metaphysical understanding, I now am tempted to think that one cannot know a thing in isolation but must grasp its relations. Still more, with respect to materials, I have had to deal with the fact that the African philosophical tradition has mainly been an oral one, with not even three generations of sub-Saharan philosophers writing in journals and books having gone by, which has meant, for example, needing to grapple with the meanings of proverbs and stories. With respect to sources of knowledge, I have expanded my horizons to consider emotion to be one alongside perception, memory, testimony, and reason, such that, perhaps, the “African world of art is as

fully knowing in its own right as the world of science” (Anyanwu 1987: 259).

Supposing my self-description is not wildly off the mark, which conception of knowledge underwrites it? What must knowledge be like for me to have been able to learn from the African tradition?

For me to have approached African philosophers with the attitude of learning from them implies that I must have been open to thinking that Western philosophers, from whom I had been trained, were not entirely correct and were epistemically mistaken in some respects. Now, for mistake to be *possible*, it must be the case there are mind-independent truths (or at least justified beliefs), ones that obtain not merely in virtue of the content of a particular society’s propositional attitudes. That is, it must be the case that relativism is false, as Jenco has pointed out in respect of the hermeneutic approach to knowledge. For mistake to be *probable*, it must be the case that there was evidence that the African tradition has had some insight into these objective truths that the Western one has by and large lacked. In sum, cross-cultural philosophy with the aim of learning from a foreign body of thought makes good sense if there are objective truths to which no one culture has a monopoly.

That claim is part of what I take to be the most powerful argument for multiculturalism: any long-standing epistemic tradition probably has some insight into the ways things truly are. The real argument for multiculturalism is epistemic; moral-pragmatic considerations of showing respect, being tolerant, avoiding arrogance, imparting self-esteem, and the like are extras.

To illustrate this view of knowledge in the context of moral values, consider the way Allen Wood has characterized the epistemic status of a given globally-situated ethical philosophy:

[S]ince we cannot coherently act or reason at all about what to do or think without presupposing that there are objectively good reasons, we should not abandon that presupposition. But since the fact of cross-cultural disagreement gives us good grounds for doubting the accepted or traditional ethical beliefs and attitudes of our own culture, we should allow ourselves to question whether these beliefs and attitudes are correct, and we should accept [...] that we will never be entitled to think that these beliefs and attitudes are infallible [...] Accordingly, the most natural assumption about any culture's ethical beliefs and attitudes—those of our own and other cultures—is that they may contain part of the objective truth [...] Different cultures have widely different conditions of life and historical backgrounds in apprehending these truths, so the awareness of any culture regarding this will be fallible and probably partial or skewed in certain ways (Wood 2007: 338, 339).

What Wood says of moral values strikes me as plausible in respect of philosophical knowledge more generally. I presume this pluralist account of who in the world has philosophical knowledge contrasts with Jenco’s and others’ characterization of the Enlightenment as monist, i.e., as presuming that Western scientific culture alone has access to knowledge or is “singular, unified and uniquely true.”

It does not follow that all philosophers should engage in cross-cultural philosophy. There could be excellent practical reason for some to specialize, to stay burrowed in their intellectual homes with their familiar conceptual furnishings, and for others to leave in search of something unfamiliar. The point is that doing the latter with the aim of acquiring new knowledge makes good sense on the supposition that many cultures have some insight into objective philosophical truths and that a decent chunk of that

insight does not get lost in various kinds of translation.

It is surely the case that one would *better* understand another culture's insight into philosophical truths if one knew its language, were not aspect-blind to its ways of perceiving the world-as-something (cf. the late Wittgenstein), could readily deploy its conceptual apparatus, and all the rest that would be particularly facilitated by collective self-transformation of the sort Jenco recommends. A key question is whether doing so is necessary in order to learn something substantial from another culture. I submit not, or else I would not have been able to change my mind so much upon having engaged with the African philosophical tradition.

4 Is Pluralism an Enlightenment Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?

Jenco may contend at this point that I have not in fact changed my mind all that much. I need to engage with her powerful point that even if Enlightenment advocates are open to discovering new knowledge when it comes to *content*, they are not when it comes to *form*. They are "criticized for placing constraints, not on who may have capacities to obtain such knowledge, but on what counts as knowledge itself" (Jenco 2017a), excluding, recall, appeals to faith and revelation. Is the pluralist conception of knowledge vulnerable to this charge?

Looking at the sort of putatively African moral philosophy I myself have advanced, a theory grounded on the value of communion, it appears so.⁸ It reeks of the search for something comparable to scientific law in the realm of the moral. It relies heavily on argumentation, and especially analogy and inference to the best explanation. It does not appeal to faith, revelation, or, it should be added in the African context, the paranormal or divination of what a people's ancestors prescribe for it. Its key elements are secular, including no essential reference to any imperceptible agents such as ancestors and God.

However, it is not merely relational content, as it were, that I take myself to have learned from African philosophers. For example, I now do believe that emotion can be a source of moral knowledge akin to the usual suspects of perception, testimony, and so on. In addition, I am now strongly inclined to think that the best, or at least an important, way to know the nature of something is to consider its relational properties. These are substantial departures from the analytic canon, ones that are seemingly "formal."

More generally, if I am going to be pluralist about not just morality but philosophy generally, then it follows that I must be pluralist about epistemology and, specifically, about what counts as knowledge. Consistency demands, therefore, that I must treat my own tradition's conception of knowledge as fallible and be open to learning differently from other traditions.

However, there are limits to this pluralism about the nature of knowledge itself, limits that I am willing to "bite the bullet" to accept and that I believe would be hard for others to reject reasonably. One limit concerns definitional elements of talk of "knowledge." When using the word "knowledge" (more carefully, "knowledge that") in our linguistic community, we are analytically talking about a belief that is true and has some kind of warrant. If some other community were to use the word "knowledge" without this sense attached to it, then it would be speaking about something different from what we are. We

would be speaking past one another, so that its different use of the term would neither constitute disagreement with us, nor provide any reason for us to change our minds about what counts as knowledge. By analogy, if Buddhists started suddenly speaking of “God” as essential to their long-standing religion, one would be foolish to approach it with an eye to learning about what the monotheist tradition means by the word; for they simply would not have in mind anything about a self-aware, spiritual creator of the physical universe.

A second limit of the pluralism concerns various conceptions of the concept of knowledge, that is, different substantive accounts of the three core properties of belief, truth, and warrant. There is much debate, both within Western philosophy and between it and other traditions, about what a belief consists of, what truth is, and what counts as warrant. A given culture should indeed, by my lights, be pluralist about the nature of these elements, and so be open to learning from other cultures about them. However, it does not follow that the former will in fact learn from the latter at the end of the day. Contending that knowledge about the nature of knowledge is not unique to one culture does not entail that it is distributed equally across cultures. Some might have (much) more insight into the nature of knowledge than others, in the way that some, for a time, had much more insight into the nature of gravity.

Interesting questions arise at this point about how to know that one knows about the nature of knowledge! Those questions deserve answers. However, answering them is not essential to make the points that it is not unreasonable to think that knowledge is unequally distributed among philosophical traditions and that it could turn out to be the case that knowledge about the nature of knowledge in particular is more heavily concentrated in one of them. If so, some philosophers might well know that mere faith is not in fact knowledge since it lacks warrant. They might know that without being certain and while acknowledging they could be mistaken.

Am I back to the Enlightenment view? I do not believe so, for I have not been supposing that when doing philosophy I am deploying, or that others should deploy, a “given set of universal principles or forms of knowledge already known to the investigator” (Jenco 2017a). Being a pluralist about the form of knowledge means being open to debate about the nature of belief, truth, and warrant and hence seeking to learn from other long-standing traditions about those matters. It happens also to mean, however, that there might be cases in which those other traditions have something substantial to learn from one’s own.

5 Conclusion: Why Cross-Cultural Philosophy without Knowledge Would Still Be Worth Doing

This exchange has been framed by a specific question, namely, whether certain knowledge frameworks are more congenial to the aims of cross-cultural philosophy. Jenco and I have therefore focused our attention on knowledge, and not other epistemic goods. I conclude by pointing out that this is a fairly large restriction, and that if it were loosened up, one would discover substantial epistemic reason to engage in cross-cultural philosophy even if knowledge were not forthcoming from doing so. Again, one can “acknowledge the value, and not only mere existence, of foreign bodies of thought,” and indeed their epistemic value, even if one does not expect to learn true propositions from them because of either

relativism, monism, or a “lop-sided” pluralism in which one tradition has a corner on the epistemic market (even if not a full-blown monopoly).

For a key example of an epistemic good that does not consist of knowledge, consider imagining the world to be a certain way. As Ward Jones, an epistemologist, has said, “Imagining a theory to be true is a matter of ‘trying it on,’ of temporarily taking the world to be as the theory describes it to be” (Jones 2011: 134). Thinking in a new, coherent way and considering plausible hypotheses that one had not before are good candidates for intellectual virtue. And even if one denies that they are good for their own sake, they are at the very least good as a means for broadening one’s cognitive horizons, and so can provide strong reason to engage with cultures different from one’s own. There are plausibly additional epistemic but non-doxastic reasons to engage in cross-cultural philosophy besides one’s imagination being exercised in a certain way, but they merit thorough exploration elsewhere.

² For some recent representative texts, see Metz (2016, 2018b); and Hoffmann, and Metz (2017).

³ Might some of Jenco’s other work, particularly insofar as it has engaged in Western and Chinese comparative philosophy, be a nice example of cross-cultural success?

⁴ In the words of Kwasi Wiredu (2000).

⁵ E.g., Metz (2012); and Metz, and Clark Miller (2016).

⁶ E.g., Metz (unpublished draft).

⁷ Metz (2017a).

⁸ E.g., Metz (2012, 2018b); and Metz, and Gaie (2010).

