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# THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST WORLD CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY

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## **The Disadvantages of Radical Alterity for a Comparative Methodology**

**Jen McWeeny**

The idea of a philosophical Other as comparativists have often historically used it to signify radical alterity, although sometimes a remedy and correction for the erroneous generalizations which originate from a presupposition of human sameness, merely shifts the center of philosophy's unchallenged assumptions in at least two ways. First, the notion of a philosophical Other avoids an explicit characterization of how one recognizes that one is philosophizing in the sphere of this Other and of what "otherness" is philosophically interesting. Second, the notion of a philosophical Other is unable to capture and describe the dynamic, ever-changing relations that serve to demarcate philosophical traditions or spatio-temporal webs of thinkers in the first place. For the sake of the comparative project of exposing the comparativist's own culturally-embedded assumptions, comparative methodology should allow for the possibility of analyzing more than one place where similarities and differences can present themselves at the same time. In short, comparativists would serve their own interests better if they began to approach their projects in recognition of a complex, limitless, and dynamic array of sameness and difference, instead of with premature assumptions of radical alterity.

The project of comparative philosophy has centered upon at least the conceptual, if not actual, existence of a philosophical Other. If there were no other philosophical traditions, then there would be no difference to interpret, know, or understand beyond the scope of everyday human to human miscommunication. Seemingly divergent philosophies would be accounted for by differences between individuals and one philosopher's thoughts could be weighed against those of another's without any worries of incommensurabilities between groups of thinkers. However, if different spatio-temporal webs of thinkers and philosophies exist, then the task of evaluating individual philosophers is more complicated. With the affirmation of the existence of these webs comes the looming concern of whether any sound philosophical judgements can be made from outside the web of thought which enshrouds a particular philosophical work. The very possibility of more than one philosophical web or, what comparativists have termed "tradition", offers comparative philosophy an identity by providing it with not only a unique purpose but also with potential subject matter to compare, incorporate, draw from, think towards, or study. This idea of a philosophical Other throws assumptions made by Western philosophy in regards to its consideration of a "human condition" or any other notions which seek to have universal import into question. The notion of a philosophical Other also calls for a reevaluation of "difference" within individual traditions. In light of the

possibility of entirely distinct philosophical traditions, disparities that had formerly been seen as monumental may appear minor or not disparities at all. Comparativists have often used Emmanuel Levinas' notions of Otherness as radical alterity when reflecting upon good comparative methodology.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a "philosophical Other" that is radically different both warrants the label "comparative" and, when implemented, avoids the philosophical limitations and inaccuracies that cause one tradition to blindly extend its philosophies to people who are grounded in other traditions.

However, the idea of a philosophical Other as comparativists have often historically used it, although sometimes a remedy and correction for the erroneous generalizations which originate from a presupposition of human sameness, merely shifts the center of philosophy's unchallenged assumptions in at least two ways. First, the notion of a philosophical Other avoids an explicit characterization of how one recognizes that one is philosophizing in the sphere of this Other and of what "otherness" is philosophically interesting. Second, the notion of a philosophical Other is unable to capture and describe the dynamic, ever-changing relations that serve to demarcate philosophical traditions or spatio-temporal webs of thinkers in the first place.

In terms of what sort of otherness has been historically interesting, or in other words, what sort of implicit or explicit criteria have been used as a means to separate philosophical "traditions", the history of comparative philosophy primarily displays a privileging of a *cultural* Other. Why are comparisons between upper-class Chinese male philosophers and upper-class German male philosophers, for example, necessarily more philosophically fruitful to the comparativist than comparisons between male philosophers and female philosophers, heterosexual and homosexual or bisexual philosophers, or upper-class and lower-class philosophers? Comparative discourse that is shadowed by the notion of a Levinasian Other may avoid making explicit its assumptions about what constitutes a philosophical tradition in general. In order to treat the Chinese philosophic tradition, for example, as a philosophic Other during the process of doing comparative philosophy, one must necessarily have criteria, however implicit, that posit, Chinese philosophy as *more different* than, say, feminist philosophy. As a result of this implied demarcation of difference, similarities between philosophical webs considered to be Other and one's own are potentially concealed. For example, the fact that all of the "distinct" philosophical traditions recognized by comparativists (Western, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Islamic) are composed of thoughts and writings primarily from male lives has been either ignored or marginalized. Comparative philosophy's failure to make such issues central to its project implies that comparativists choose

to adhere to pre-established yet rarely disclosed criteria of demarcating which philosophical systems are Other or which Otherness is interesting. For example, by relegating "the woman question" as an issue for feminist philosophy, comparative philosophy decentralizes valuable inquiries potentially concerning radical philosophic differences and in turn does its own interests, as a philosophy that seeks to engender philosophic fruitfulness and creativity through the juxtaposition of ideas that are philosophically different, a disservice. Within the context of comparative philosophy's privileging of a cultural Other, one is reminded of Simone de Beauvoir's critique, in her 1100 page tome on the concept of Other, *The Second Sex*, of thinking of women as Other.<sup>2</sup> She writes: "There can be no presence of an other unless the other is also present in and for himself; which is to say that true alterity—otherness—is that of a consciousness separate from mine and substantially identical with mine"<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, to conceive of a philosophical tradition as Other is to unnecessarily reduce and obscure the complex and irreducibly dynamic relations which comprise the space between philosophical traditions. Susan Stanford Friedman in her article "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse", makes manifest the inadequacy of the concepts of Same and Other to explain, for example,

the interplay of privilege and alterity in a woman who is part of both a dominant culture and a marginalized one—such as a relatively dark-skinned Brahmin woman who moves back and forth between London and Calcutta. As a Brahmin she is privileged by caste; as a woman, she is oppressed. As a frequent traveler she is well-off in class terms, but called black by the British and subject to the disorientations of bicontinental postcolonial identity. As a dark-skinned woman, she is differently disadvantaged within the Indian context of colorism and the British context of racism. The categories 'woman of color' and 'Third World woman' are insufficient to explain her position at the crossroads of different formations of power relations.<sup>4</sup>

One should question the relevance of this scenario to comparative philosophy in noting that a long standing written philosophical tradition does not have the same mixing of alterity and privilege that the Brahmin woman does as the philosophical traditions that have historically been studied by comparativists are those that were able to develop "on their own", millennia ago, before contemporary mixing occurred. However, the relevant question for a comparative philosophy which seeks to cling to a concept of Other is not whether the traditions themselves are pure or impure, but whether the situated individual

undertaking the comparative project can discern purity based on her/his own multi-varied relations with the tradition studied. By her/his very attention to the writings and thoughts of a philosophical tradition, the comparatist at once changes her/his relationship with the tradition, and by changing this relationship, the methodological categories of Same and Other are constantly being dismantled. To designate a tradition as Other is to ignore this interaction and in consequence, conceal the relevance of *who* is interacting with the Other. The comparatist can never flee from the relations she/he has with her/his work, her/his life, and with the particular contemporary political system of power and privilege that she/he is inescapably embedded in. The unique and aesthetically productive relationship between a contemporary philosopher (a subject-in-process creating a philosophy-in-process) to a philosophical tradition (which can act just like a dynamic serial collectivity<sup>5</sup> of thoughts due to the political relationships of power that affect its reception in a contemporary world), is a relationship that if explored, lends itself to more relevant and reliable comparative philosophies. To conceive of an "absolute other" is to be unable to account for subject positions in which the relation between the two is not so clearly drawn such as the case where the subjects in question are both male and both rich, but one is from China and one is from England. In short, a comparatist who makes methodological use of the concept "Other", which already carries with it presuppositions of difference, risks obscuring relationships that function in terms of both similarity and difference.

In place of "the Other", comparative philosophers should seek methodological insights in ideas of what Friedman has termed "relational positionality"<sup>6</sup> within the context of feminist discourse. According to Friedman, scripts of relational positionality "regard identity as situationally constructed and defined and at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification" and rest upon 1) "the analysis of multiple oppressions and interlocking systems of oppression that has been pioneered especially by women of color and the new discourses of relation, positionality, and standpoint", 2) "feminist object relations theory, which...has emphasized how the formation of identity, particularly women's identity, unfolds in relation to desire for and separation from others", and 3) "poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of identity and formulations of subjectivity, which stress the nonunitary, indeterminate, nomadic, and hybrid nature of a linguistically constructed identity"<sup>7</sup>. If Friedman's idea of relational positionality is extrapolated from feminist discourse to that of comparative methodology, a new and potentially more philosophically fruitful comparative project begins to emerge. By recognizing that the borders of seemingly disparate philosophical webs are constantly changing, and by acknowledging more spectrums of sameness and difference than purely cultural

ones, comparative philosophy can expand its own borders for the sake of addressing more diverse kinds of philosophic difference. To undertake comparative philosophy in the context of relational positionality is to recognize a whole spectrum of ever-shifting sameness and difference between the comparatist and what she/he is studying, whereas to undertake comparative philosophy in the shadow of radical Otherness is to keep implicit what criteria delineate a subject as Other while also making a premature claim about difference. A comparative methodology that centers around notions of relational positionality calls for the comparatist to reveal her/his criteria for assigning difference while still allowing for the possibility of two positions being separate but more similar than not. The methodological concept of radical alterity calls preconceived notions of difference to mind and clouds the possibility of a subject being both Other and Same as may be the case with, for example, a western upper-class male, studying Indian philosophy.

In conclusion, despite its good intentions, the way that comparatists have historically used the notion of Other to signify radical alterity is too narrow a notion to avoid the methodological pitfalls of dynamic positions that move along a spectrum of similarity and difference and of the situatedness, or embeddedness in political power structures of similarity and difference, and dynamic nature of the comparatist him/herself. For the sake of the comparative project of exposing the comparatist's own culturally-embedded assumptions, comparative methodology should allow for the possibility of analyzing more than one place where similarities and differences can present themselves at the same time. In short, comparatists would serve their own interests better if they began to approach their projects in recognition of a complex, limitless, and dynamic array of sameness and difference, instead of with premature assumptions of radical alterity.

#### NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Richard J. Bernstein, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited" in *Culture and Modernity*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 96.
- 2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
- 3 *Ibid.*, 140.
- 4 Susan Stanford Friedman, "Beyond White and Other: Relationally and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse" in *The Second Signs Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 123.
- 5 I am thinking of Iris Marion Young's notion of a serial collectivity in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997) which is discussed particularly in chapter 1, 12-37.

- 6 The term "relational positionality" was first used by Susan Stanford Friedman in her article "Beyond White and Other: Relationality and Narratives of Race in Feminist Discourse" in *The Second Signs Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 125. Friedman stresses that "relational positionality" recognizes real difference but should not be confused with pluralism as it ultimately seeks a common ground. Friedman uses the idea of "relational positionality" to address cultural and racial concerns in feminist politics.
- 7 Friedman, 125.