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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

