Have We Got a Method for You!
Recent Developments in Comparative and Cross-Cultural Methodologies

Abstract
Recent developments in comparative and cross-cultural philosophy converge on the question of philosophical methods. Three new books address this question from different perspectives, including feminist comparative philosophy, Afrocentricity, and metaphilosophy. Taken together, these books help us to imagine interventions in the methodologies dominant in Western academic philosophy through a fundamental reevaluation of how we think, reason, and argue. Such reevaluation underscores the problems that Eurocentrism poses for feminist discourse and the resources that comparative philosophy offers for addressing these problems.

Keywords
comparative philosophy, cross-cultural philosophy, feminism, postcolonial studies, Afrocentricity, philosophical methods, aesthetic experience.

The three texts selected for this review article all address the social and political ramifications of the methodologies employed in cross-cultural philosophical work: Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue: Liberating Traditions edited by Jennifer McWeeny and Ashby Butnor, The Demise of the Inhuman: Afrocentricity, Modernism, and Postmodernism by Ana Monteiro-Ferreira, and Metaphor and Metaphilosophy: Philosophy as Combat, Play, and Aesthetic Experience by Sarah A. Mattice. Taken together, these books help us to imagine

interventions in the methodologies dominant in Western academic philosophy (such as analysis, hermeneutics, and the phenomenological method) through a fundamental reevaluation of how we think, reason, and argue. Such reevaluation underscores the problems that Eurocentrism poses for feminist discourse and for philosophy in general, as well as the resources that comparative philosophy offers for addressing these problems.2

1 Feminist Comparative Philosophy

McWeeny and Butnor are explicit in their intention to present the methodology that they label »feminist comparative philosophy« as »a new mode of philosophical practice – one that could well serve as an exemplary methodology for any twenty-first century philosophy« (2014: 2). The editors characterize a methodology as feminist »insofar as it regards the voices and experiences of women as philosophically significant in a manner that is not sexist or discriminatory, but instead promotes the expression and flourishing of those who have been oppressed due to this social location« (ibid.: 4). They describe a methodology as comparative »insofar as it regards the ideas of more than one disparate tradition of thought as philosophically significant in a manner that respects each tradition’s individual integrity and promotes its expression« (ibid.). Taken together, feminist comparative philosophy is »the practice of integrating feminist and non-Western philosophical traditions in innovative ways, while still being mindful of the unique particularity of each, in order to enact a more liberatory world« (ibid.: 3). The last phrase speaks both to the progressive political commitments that accompany this methodology as well as to the notion of performativity that guides its practical application. As the authors explain: »An essential principle of feminist comparative methodology is that philosophical works should be assessed both in terms of their explicit content and in terms of the claims that they perform within the wider social-political contexts in which they are situated« (ibid.: 2).

The essays gathered in the collection all seek to enact this more liberatory world through philosophical interventions both critical and creative. The book is organized into five parts, the first of which focuses on various approaches to gender in Asian traditions, including Hsiao-Lan Hu’s chapter on karma as a lens through which to view issues of agency and determinism in the performance of gender; Kyoo Lee’s chapter on gendered language in the Daodejing; and Ranjoo Seodu Herr’s argument against historical distortions of Confucian teachings within patriarchal social systems. All three chapters are forward-looking, stressing the relevance of their source material to contemporary feminist inquiry.

The second part, on the topic of consciousness-raising, contains Keya Maitra’s chapter on feminist self-consciousness and Jennifer McWeeny’s chapter on María Lugones and Zen Master Hakuin. Both of these look to Buddhist practices as resources for developing a feminist political consciousness. The third section on »place« includes a chapter on situated knowing in the Zhuangzi and feminist standpoint epistemology (Xinyan Jiang) and a chapter on Vandana Shiva’s use of the Hindu feminine principle prakriti in her ecofeminism (Vrinda Dalmiya). As Dalmiya says, prakriti provides an epistemological tool for mitigating differences between communities of knowers in ways that do not simply privilege rationalism, universalism, and contemporary scientific materialism.

The fourth section on selfhood contains two contributions on care ethics: one focused on Confucianism (Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee) and one on Zen Master Dōgen (Ashby Butnor). Both highlight ways that Asian traditions can expand, and at times challenge, contemporary care models in ethics. A third chapter in this section (by Erin McCarthy) enters the conversation from the perspective of continental feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Luce Irigaray, discussing points at which contemporary Japanese philosophy can intervene in discussions of nondual subjectivity. The final section contains a chapter by Namita Goswami as well as an engaging »Feminist Afterword« by Chela Sandoval that provides some general reflections on the significance of the volume as a whole within contemporary feminism.

I would like to focus attention on the chapter by Goswami, since it presents an application of feminist comparative philosophy outside of the »East-West« comparative context. In »De-liberating Traditions: 2

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2 My title is a reference to M. C. Lugones, and E. V. Spelman, »Have We Got a Theory for You!: Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for »the Woman’s Voices««, Women’s Studies International Forum, Vol. 6, No. 6, 1983, pp. 573–581. This influential article marks an early engagement with questions of cross-cultural theorizing against the backdrop of feminist politics.
The Female Bodies of Sati and Slavery. Goswami begins by arguing against the uncritical acceptance of values rooted in Western philosophical inquiry, such as free will. As she discusses, when we measure the apparently diminished agency of oppressed groups against the gold standard of free will qua rational autonomy, we overlook the imperialist and Eurocentric history of this particular picture of the thinking, willing, individual subject. Goswami credits Gayatri Spivak for calling attention to this problem, but she also notes that Spivak’s critique could benefit from a «comparative methodology» that more explicitly engages differences in the histories of various colonized peoples (2014: 249). Goswami’s own comparison focuses on postcolonial and African-American feminisms respectively, and she draws attention to the different statuses of Indian, African, and African-American women vis-à-vis the socio-economic disparities associated with the North-South divide.

In more general terms, this chapter raises an important question regarding the relation of feminist comparative philosophy to postcolonial theory, given that the intersection of race, gender, and class is an issue in both fields. What is the origin of the »East-West« dynamic that so dominates contemporary comparative philosophy? Why is comparative philosophy not more widely associated with, for example, African, Latin American, and indigenous scholarship? Goswami’s chapter reminds us that the South-South dynamic can complicate the cross-cultural philosophical project by addressing issues of race and gender as these affect the unequal distribution of cultural power and legitimacy within contemporary academia. Attention to this North-South framework – or, in other words, attention to the global inequalities in which all scholarship is located – must be a priority for feminist comparative philosophy.

2 Afrocentricity as a Methodology

Monteiro-Ferriera’s statement of her own methodological commitments in The Demise of the Inhuman addresses a similar set of issues and seems well in line with Goswami’s call for diligent attention to specific, historical realities: »Afrocentric theory seeks neither a totalizing nor a universal scope and certainly not an essentialized perspective on knowledge. […] What the Afrocentric perspective on knowledge requires is location: African location as the methodological approach to African traditions and cultures while refusing the subaltern place that has always been conferred to Black expressions, artistic and cultural, by Eurocentric scholars« (2014: 3). And, like McWeeny and Butnor, Monteiro-Ferriera presents Afrocentricity as a methodology that might be adopted widely, i.e., by any scholar concerned with Eurocentrism in a given discipline.

In addressing the scope of Eurocentrism, Monteiro-Ferriera’s sustained critical engagement with postcolonial theory both contextualizes and complicates the landscape in which progressive methodologies such as Afrocentric and feminist comparative philosophy operate. Monteiro-Ferriera portrays postcolonial theory as caught between two moments of critique: On the one hand, postcolonialism rejects the systematic philosophy of modernism, which under the guise of rationality passed off European culture and history as universal. On the other hand, postcolonialism casts doubt on whether any attempt to return to pre-colonial indigenous cultures can rise above naive, atavistic essentialism. Monteiro-Ferriera worries that this scarcity of resources leaves postcolonial studies in a position of perpetual anti-Eurocentrism, unable to put forward positive claims or fully sever ties with Eurocentric discourses. The methodologies of postcolonial theory are, as Monteiro-Ferriera points out, critical tools derived in part from debates internal to European history: Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and postmodernism.

To be clear, my own scholarship is deeply indebted to postcolonial theory. We might complicate Monteiro-Ferriera’s picture by pointing out that postcolonialism itself provides both critical and constructive answers to the double bind that she describes. That said, Monteiro-Ferriera’s aim, too, is both critical and constructive. She

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2 Throughout her discussion of postcolonial theory, Monteiro-Ferriera identifies these methodologies associated with various postcolonial scholars (2014: 137–156). These same methodologies are the subjects of critique in earlier parts of the book, where Monteiro-Ferriera describes them as problematically Eurocentric and hence not suitable for the project of Afrocentricity; see especially 128–129.

3 I would also note that the vexing question of research methods is addressed in detail in fields such indigenous studies and cultural studies. For example, see Linda Tuhiwa-Smith’s Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (London:
critiques the dominance of Eurocentric methods while at the same time issuing a call for an Afrocentric methodology that can support innovative and forward-looking scholarship within and about Africa. Her proposal for a renewed look at the intellectual traditions of pre-colonial African societies asks us to consider how contemporary scholarly methods have constrained the fields of study that make up academia at large. The aims of the Afrocentric project help make explicit the often-implicit potential of fields such as comparative and Asian philosophy to intervene in such methods. That is, the tools of comparative philosophy – including proficiency in Asian languages and familiarity with critical discourses internal to Asian traditions – point to methodological possibilities that would not be imaginable within the framework of Western philosophy alone.

However, the success of such methodological developments in feminist comparative philosophy, Afrocentricity, and other cross-cultural philosophical projects will require, I suggest, a more wide-ranging reevaluation of the theories and methods of philosophy in general. By ›theories‹ I mean broad explanatory frameworks in which we understand and interpret phenomena, and by ›methods‹ or ›methodologies‹ I mean scholarly practices or ways of conducting research and inquiry. Within philosophy these terms tend to overlap, as when we use the terms ›feminist theory‹ and ›feminist methodology‹ interchangeably to describe the same set of scholarly commitments. We perhaps come closer to the concrete, practical methods of philosophy in activities such as analysis, hermeneutics, and phenomenology – these are methods for reading texts, articulating concepts, reflecting on experience, and, in general, doing philosophy. Recent developments in cross-cultural methodologies invite us to imagine interventions in philosophical practices at such a concrete level.

3 Non-Combative Philosophical Methods

Mattice’s work in Metaphor and Metaphilosophy concerns these most basic of philosophical methods: how we think, reason, and argue. And yet, ultimately, her portrayal of these core philosophical activities will not map neatly onto terms such as analysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, or other Western-derived methods. In this sense, her sustained engagement with Chinese sources throughout the book indelibly marks her vision for philosophy as both a discipline and a profession.

Her project takes initial inspiration from the influential work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on metaphor. As she says, »Although theories of metaphor going all the way back to Aristotle relied on the assumption that metaphor was a special kind of language, Lakoff argues that when we examine closely how language – and so thought – functions, we find that metaphors are an intrinsic part of how we think« (2014: 3). Metaphors are, at the most basic level, conceptual mappings that allow us to understand what anything is. Mattice explains: »the most fundamental metaphors, those that make up our conceptual systems [...] are inference preserving; they provide a slide for reasoning used in one domain to be imposed on the second domain« (ibid.: 4). This »slide« is one of the avenues by which Eurocentrism constrains how we think, particularly when we understand terms such as ›philosophy‹ and ›religion‹ on European models. In academic inquiry, such models significantly limit the kinds of questions that we ask and the kinds of answers that we find plausible, hence shaping what we accept to be known and knowable.

For example, in his book The Invention of Religion in Japan, Jason Ananda Josephson also draws on the work of George Lakoff to discuss the so-called prototypes that anchor our networks of inference-preserving, metaphorical mappings (Josephson 2012: 76). Discussing the inadequacy of the category ›religion‹ as applied to non-Western cultural traditions, Josephson explains that Christianity serves as the prototype member against which other potential members are judged (ibid.: 76–77). The issue goes well beyond the academic study of religion. In the long history of Western colonial expansion, to be appropriately religious was counted as a mark of civilization; hence, to have one’s tradition included in the category ›religion‹ – and not, say, in the category ›pagan‹ or ›heathen‹ – afforded a measure of protection against colonial conquest (ibid.: 15–17).

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6 See, for example, the now-classic, G. Lakoff, and M. Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003 [1980].

In Mattice’s work, the issues at stake in how we define the category of philosophy are similarly political. Mattice draws explicit attention to contemporary standards for so-called philosophical rigor, that is, the standards that mark “strong” arguments and “good” reasoning. These standards, as she demonstrates, have been imported from the language of war, such that a “combat metaphor” indelibly shapes our understanding of philosophy, and philosophy qua combat serves as the prototype against which the intellectual and scholarly traditions of other cultures are judged.

In her second chapter, Mattice discusses the historical conditions that gave rise to the dominance of the combat metaphor in defining philosophy. She notes: “The general adversariality of philosophical discourse is, at least in some ways, a socially and historically located feature—a by-product, as it were, of the situation of the Greeks and the importance of Greek philosophy in Western narratives” (2014: 24). As Mattice notes, many Indian philosophical traditions “also prioritized combat metaphors and methods for philosophical activity” (ibid. 25). So, her point is not that the combat metaphor is particularly “Western” but that it has come to be prominent in Western discourse to the extent that its status as metaphor has been obscured: the combat metaphor can seem almost like it is not a metaphor, but simply part and parcel of philosophical activity” (ibid.). Under the influence of this received narrative, contemporary academic philosophy becomes a battle for truth: Just as victory in combat is decisive and unambiguous, so too philosophical success is defined as a matter of establishing truth with the certainty of unassailable conclusions. However, when we are able to understand philosophy outside the yoke of the combat metaphor, we find resources for handling ambiguity, nuance, and complexity that a zero-sum game for deductive certainty simply cannot accommodate.

Throughout the book, Mattice draws such resources from Chinese material. For example, as she discusses, the split between logic and rhetoric has no analog in Chinese intellectual traditions. As a result, these traditions do not privilege logic, and the attendant search for certainty, as the best method for philosophical inquiry (ibid.: 26). Moreover, combat in general is not viewed as an opportunity for victory; rather, the need to go to war always marks important failures on the parts of all those involved (ibid.: 27). Accordingly, across Chinese intellectual traditions, metaphors for philosophical activity are drawn not from the domain of war but from domains such as “traveling, agriculture, and the natural world” (ibid.: 26). Mattice builds on these resources from Chinese traditions to describe, in her final chapter, an alternative method for philosophical inquiry based not on combat but on aesthetic experience. In her source domain—esthetics—she focuses on the interrelated roles of “artist, work of art, and participant” (ibid.: 84). She discusses artistic creativity not as the work of individual genius but rather in terms from Chinese art theory— for example, the balance between ziran (自然 naturalness) and fa (法 regularity), the relation between imitation and transformation, and the successful manipulation of the vital energy of qi (气) (ibid.: 99–100).

Similarly, she describes the aesthetic attitude of viewers, and their interactions with artworks, in Chinese terms such as guan (观 observation and attention), he (和 harmony), and ying (应 resonance) (ibid.: 92–96).

Extending this structure from the domain of aesthetics to that of philosophy, Mattice discusses the relevance of “aesthetic distance” to philosophical activity. Similar to the phenomenological reduction or Gadamer’s suspension of prejudices, Mattice’s notion of philosophical distancing serves to foreground and make visible those assumptions that inevitably color speculative inquiry. However, somewhat unlike the philosopher in Western phenomenology or hermeneutics, Mattice’s “philosophical artist” is more concerned with imagination than investigation. Such imaginative philosophizing is not simply a matter of free play and fantasy— to the contrary, the source domain of aesthetics provides its own standards for evaluation, judgment, and appropriateness. Such standards, Mattice concludes, help redefine our understanding of philosophical rigor in ways that take into account the complex and at times ambiguous relations between philosophers, works of philosophy, and participants or readers of those works.

Mattice’s proposed method for doing philosophy is the creative and syncretic product of a comparative inquiry, informed by both European and Chinese sources. In this sense, she models the method that she describes by demonstrating standards for good reasoning that take into account aesthetic resonances across her various sources. As I say above, such retooling of basic philosophical activities is an important component of any discussion of Eurocentric methods in philosophy— both feminist comparative philosophy and Afrocentrism require this fundamental reevaluation of how we think, reason, give evidence, and seek conclusions. Taken together, the three books
reviewed here provide ample resources for future scholarship concerned with such reevaluation and committed to enacting liberatory practices within the profession of philosophy at large.

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An Epistemological Turn in Contemporary Islamic Reform Discourse: On Abdolkarim Soroush’s Epistemology

Abstract

Abdolkarim Soroush’s thought is regarded by some researchers as a turning point in contemporary Islamic reform discourse. This article concerns Soroush’s epistemology as a determining factor in this paradigm shift and interprets this shift as an epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse, shifting from Islamic genealogy of modernity to (re)rationalization of Islamic methodology. After a short introduction to Soroush’s intellectual biography, this article will isolate neo-rationalism or neo-Mu’tazilism, religious post-positivism (post-scripturalism), historicism, hermeneutics, and dialogism as main features of Soroush’s epistemology. This paper suggests that rationalism as reasoning independent from revelation and non-essentialism are two main determining pillars of Soroush’s epistemology. In the conclusion, I shortly compare Soroush’s thought with some other contemporary Muslim reform thinkers and discuss how and why Soroush’s thought can be interpreted as an epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse.

Keywords
Abdolkarim Soroush, Islamic reform discourse, Islamic religious epistemology, epistemological turn, neo-Mutazilism, intellectual discourse in post-revolutionary Iran.

1 Introduction

When Abdolkarim Soroush (born 1945), Iranian philosopher and theologian, referred to the Qur’an as being »The Word of Mohammad« in 20071 there was a diverse reaction. While many Muslim

1 A. Soroush, »The Word of Mohammad,« in A. Soroush, The Expansion of Prophe-