Walter Benesch. An Introduction to Comparative Philosophy: A Travel Guide of Philosophical Space

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The contemporary Western university is founded on a series of assumptions and presumptions about the nature of the knowing subject, the objects or possible objects of knowledge, and the multifarious relationships between those various entities. As evidenced by the plethora of academic disciplines and departments - and perhaps even more so by the proliferation of fields and subfields within each of these - the knowledge gathering enterprise of the past several hundred years has relied heavily on then principle of divide and specialize.

Nominally, we still grant doctoral degrees in broad areas like Philosophy, History, and Anthropology, but most scholars are far more cautious and conservative when delineating their field(s) of specialization. Within Philosophy, for example, one must typically choose between ethics and aesthetics, between metaphysics and epistemology, or perhaps between philosophy of religion and philosophy of science. A scholar who opts for a historical approach must choose between the thought systems of Classical Greece, Medieval Europe, and Twentieth Century America (for example).

Within Classical Greek Philosophy, one may specialize in the thought of Thales, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or any number of others. It is a system that rewards detail and depth of understanding but provides relatively little in terms of perspective or interconnection between the various pieces. Cross-cultural studies, difficult under any circumstances, require a special breed of scholars who combine the arduous task of studying multiple traditions with the uncertain challenge of connecting the dots in a pattern that does not seem overly capricious or contrived.

In “An Introduction to Comparative Philosophy” Walter Benesch invites the reader to join an excursion across a broad expanse of what he terms “philosophical space.” As he explains: “In its simplest sense, space for the ancients, East or West, was where things happened, the uncontained container of events. For some Indian schools it was the non-human source of touch and position. For Hindu and Greek atomists alike, space was the emptiness which atoms required for their motion. Euclid held that it possessed three dimensions and that geometry was its science. One of the earliest definitions of matter was it occupied space, and for the Eleatic philosopher, Zeno, spatial extension was the line
between something and nothing.

“If something did not occupy space it was nothing. All of these ideas of place, position, sequence, dimension can also be applied as analogies in thinking as well, for any idea occupies a position in a train or sequence of ideas, has origins and ends. Understanding what a word means is to locate it in the thought contexts which it symbolizes. The analogies that can be made between our thinking of space and the space of our thinking provide the basis for what I am calling philosophical space.” (p.1).

Specifically, Professor Benesch suggests that philosophical space has at least four dimensions. Although each dimension may be exemplified to some extent in any given tradition, chances are that one (or perhaps two) will be emphasized far more than the others. In terms of this metaphor, one may say that European and American philosophers have explored the object dimension of philosophical space more extensively than their counterparts in India or China. This does not thereby assume either exclusivity or superiority - because the philosophers of India and China are presented as having explored the subject, situational, and aspect/perspective dimensions more thoroughly than their western counterparts. To develop a comprehensive, balanced view of philosophical space, we need the contributions and perspectives of multiple traditions.

To recap and clarify, philosophical space has at least the following four dimensions: object, subject, situational, and aspect/perspective.

The object dimension “rests upon the assumption that thoughts and statements originate in contact with, or are about things in physical space. In this dimension, an external, object world is the source of sense experience and of the abstractions from sense experience that we call knowledge.” (p. 29)

The subject dimension “rests upon the assumption that all concepts and statements reflect the mental processes of thinking and speaking subjects, thus observations, interpretations and explanations of objects and events are made within and express the points of view of subjects and speakers. . This dimension presupposes that consciousness is the final source of knowledge and meaning.” (pp. 29-30)

The situational dimension “rests upon the assumption that the experience of objects by subjects always occurs in situations at times and in places. Thoughts and statements reflect the encounters of subjects and objects in situations under certain conditions here and now. These are retained and organized in memories that then define and influence
recognition in future situations. Knowledge and meaning are situational. The only constant is the process of becoming.” (p. 30)

The aspect/perspective dimension “is one in which human awareness and the world of which we are aware are usually seen as aspects of a changing nature/mind continuum. In this continuum, consciousness is both in the world and of the world. Inference techniques on the one hand facilitate the making of distinctions in reference to aspects of nature and thought, and on the other hand facilitate developing perspectives upon the process of distinguishing.” (pp. 177-178)

The object dimension of philosophical space emphasizes the external world and its elements as objects of knowledge, deemphasizing both the subject (the knower) and the various relationships that exist between knower and known. It is a set of values and assumptions that characterize the dominant Western knowledge-gathering enterprise, one that Professor Benesch aptly illustrates with a series of examples drawn from Greco-Roman philosophy, Judeo-Christian theology, and the complex interplay between those traditions that fueled the development of so-called “modern” philosophy and science in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

To illustrate the subject dimension of philosophical space, Benesch relies on the traditions of India, especially Vedanta, Samkhya, and Jainism. His primary examples of the situational dimension come from India as well: Nyaya and Buddhism. Finally, for examples of the aspect/perspective dimension of philosophical space, Benesch turns to China, drawing on both Classical Daoism and Neo-Confucianism.

Throughout the text, Benesch pays careful attention not only to the content of thought typical of a tradition (to its ideas, concepts, theories, etc.), but to the ways of thinking as well (to its logic, manner of reasoning, style of argumentation, etc.). He examines both thought and thinking, steadfastly refusing to separate process from result in any fashion that would privilege one rather than the other. For example, understanding Chinese Philosophy requires understanding how people within that tradition philosophize, not simply the concepts and theories they devise. This requires understanding the questions they ask, the puzzles that occupy their attention, the methods by which they attempt to solve/resolve those puzzles, and of course the standards by which they judge purported solutions to the puzzles.

This relentless emphasis on the inseparability of process and result is indicative of the seriousness and sensitivity with which Walter Benesch approaches the field of Comparative Philosophy. His
“Companion Guide to Philosophical Space” is a delightful, well-written overview of an impressive array ofnings, thoughts, and thinkers. Moreover, his analogy of multidimensional philosophical space has considerable merit. Because humans have often used spatial metaphors to describe features of thought - perspective, attitude, insight, exoteric vs. esoteric teachings, etc. - the mind readily accepts the metaphor as intelligible, meaningful, and reasonable.

He provides a framework (another spatial metaphor) for studying multiple traditions without assuming either superiority or reducibility. In fact, because we readily accept that three-dimensional space is richer and more complex than two-dimensional space, which in turn is vastly superior to anything one-dimensional space has to offer, the analogy may afford a measure of positive encouragement to those who study multiple traditions in an effort to develop a greater “depth of understanding” than might otherwise be possible. Because there is no obvious upper limit to the number of dimensions that philosophical space may exhibit, it is an open - as opposed to a closed - metaphor.

Upon careful examination of Native American, African, or other traditions we may decide that they offer valuable perspectives in dimensions of philosophical space that have been largely ignored in European, Indian, and Oriental traditions. Along the way, we may fashion a better understanding not only of ourselves and the world, but of the ways in which we understand ourselves and the world, than individuals within any single tradition could ever hope to achieve.

—Douglas W. Shrader