

(What) Can We Learn from Other Times and Places?

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I have a well-justified belief that Sharon Bailin's philosophical life has been well spent. Her contributions to the literature on critical thinking, creativity, the arts, and other topics — her inquiries into inquiry — have always been insightful, well argued, open to and respectful of the views of others, and generous to her critics. Her presidential address today is no exception. It is an honor to be asked to respond.

The main question Bailin sets us concerns the contribution of cross-cultural inquiry to philosophical inquiry. Accordingly, I'll consider two issues: (a) *What* can be learned from studying other cultures? (b) What is the relevance of this learning to philosophical work? (One caveat: Bailin rightly notes that talk of "other cultures" can be overblown. So, although I'll use "culture" talk, I do not want to be taken as supposing that cultures are discrete, independent, internally unified entities.)

LEARNING FROM CROSS-CULTURAL INQUIRY

Bailin emphasizes that encounters with other cultures can lead to critical reflection on one's own beliefs and practices; reconstruction of them where they are found wanting; and thus, enhanced epistemic justification for them or their descendants. While I agree that learning and improvement are important possible outcomes of cross-cultural inquiry, I would like to focus attention on other, not necessarily incompatible, themes that I believe are contained in Bailin's discussion.

Almost all human beings these days know that there are others with different beliefs and practices from their own, but they do not all respond in the same way to this fact. Bailin cites Martha Nussbaum as noting that a major response to cross-cultural encounters is being shaken from one's ethnocentrism. Each of us comes to see that our own view, which once seemed "neutral, necessary, and natural," is but one among others. I agree that this existential shift, in which we acquire a perspective on our perspective, is what many regard as a primary outcome of engagement with difference (more so, I would say, than enhanced epistemic justification).

Yet people can recognize that others see the world differently without having that shift in perspective that comes from no longer supposing that their own way of seeing is the natural one. My husband's young relative, visiting us from London, clearly thought "knickers" was God's way of referring to that piece of underwear and found the American alternative term a source of endless amusement. Prior education and receptiveness may be required for encounters between cultures to generate non-ethnocentric responses.

But if, through cross-cultural experiences, one does become aware that one's own way of seeing is not simply the natural one, what is the proper response with respect to one's original point of view? Citing Nussbaum again, Bailin suggests: "This recognition may, in turn, help one 'to distinguish, within their own tradition, what is parochial from what may be commended as a norm for others, what is

arbitrary and unjustified from that which may be justified by reasoned argument.” Here “parochial” seems to be linked with “arbitrary and unjustified.” From this perspective, the right response to cross-cultural inquiry is to examine claims or practices that previously seemed “natural” for their rational grounding and to make modifications, if necessary, thus arriving at claims or practices that can be universally endorsed (that is, “commended as a norm for others”).

But an alternative is that we acquire more humility and limit the scope of our claims. We examine our own “parochial” practices. We understand who we are better by contrast with others, by seeing the value tradeoffs we have made, the way our meanings are the result of our history and are embedded within our institutions. We come to understand our place in the world better and to appreciate the amazing variety of ways in which human beings have solved their common human problems. We recognize and appreciate the fact that other groups have beliefs and practices that mean as much to them as ours do to us.

Considering this possibility does not require us to suppose that every alternative is equally good, or that there are no universal truths or criteria or best practices; but only that there are sometimes alternative sets of morally and epistemologically permissible practices that humans have developed for solving their common problems. And absorbing this fact might help contain our more imperialistic urges.

From my limited vantage point (not being trained in the arts) the arts seem paradigm examples of where something like this takes place. As Bailin says, an understanding of the role of tradition and innovation in China or Bali may “lead us to recognize the tradeoffs we make in how we have come to locate ourselves on the continuum [of tradition/innovation].” Or “such a cross-cultural examination may... not alter one’s commitment to the value of creative freedom or innovation. But it may lead to a much more complex conception of what that commitment entails.”

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the early days of the analytic movement in philosophy of education there were different views about what constitutes analysis and what its benefits are. Some philosophers perhaps really were primarily interested in doing things with words, while a few others thought of concepts as windows on the world (though most, following the tenets of the ordinary language movement, drew no metaphysical implications from analyses). But very early on, the question of *whose* concepts these were that were being analyzed arose.

Writing in 1973, Abraham Edel made the point that concepts or meanings do not float free of culture; they are embedded in social practices and cultural institutions within a given historical location that shapes them for specific purposes. Consequently, Edel argued that philosophers should not attempt to strictly separate analytical inquiry from empirical and normative inquiry. He held that analytic philosophers must integrate “the empirical, the normative, and the contextual (especially the socio-cultural) *within* the analytic method.”¹

Given the social construction of meaning, what do we take ourselves to be doing as philosophers when we examine meaning structures? Are we aiming at universal

generalizations, as I think John Rawls was in *A Theory of Justice*, for example? Or are we examining a meaning structure with more limited scope, as Rawls in *Political Liberalism* aimed at understanding a concept of justice for liberal democratic societies?

Bailin says that “generalizations regarding human practices must encompass the entire range of practices that may fall within their purview.” But what is their purview? If conceptual analyses represent universal generalizations over all human societies, then the practice of the arts in Balinese society would be a counterexample to the hypothesis that creativity requires the generation of novelty. So one must either revise the analysis or restrict its scope. Considering those possibilities, Bailin says that “If one insisted on maintaining the generation of novelty as central to artistic creation, then one would have to recognize that one’s conception of artistic creativity applies only to contemporary Western art, and to maintain that the arts of these other cultures could not represent creative achievements.” But is not there another alternative? They may not meet the conditions for the application of the Western concept, but perhaps they have another conception of creativity.

So we may ask, does our President’s inquiry into other times and places correct the dominant analysis of creativity, limit its scope to a specific time and place, lead to recognition of neglected forms of creative work within Western culture (my mother’s quilts, made always according to a pattern — Double Wedding Ring, Eastern Star — come to my mind)? And how are we to understand the significance of the division some cultures make between the fine arts and the decorative or useful arts? In whose interest is it to make that distinction? These are at least lines of philosophical inquiry that might emerge from such cross-cultural comparisons. And I think it is evident that Bailin is correct that inquiry into “other times and places” is extremely useful for such work. It is not easy to see the connections and assumptions embedded within one’s own perspective and practices without comparison with relevant others.

The outcome of such inquiry could be a normative judgment that alteration in the meanings and social practices of creative work in Western culture is desirable, though it would clearly take more than philosophical analysis to bring about change. But the upshot of some inquiries might be greater humility about our structures of meaning, while still retaining our own practices, as in the arts, we celebrate different traditions without supposing that there is one best tradition.

I am fully open to the observation that, even in this case, our claims would still have stronger epistemic justification as the result of our inquiry. I am not trying to refute Sharon Bailin’s thesis but rather to offer a friendly amendment. I have attempted to explore the possibilities for inquiry into other times and places that would result in less cultural egocentrism and greater understanding and appreciation of both ourselves and others. I think this possibility offers one way to meet others as equal participants in a dialogue that does not assume the obliteration of difference as the outcome.

1. Abraham Edel, "Analytic Philosophy of Education at the Crossroads," reprinted in *Philosophy of Education: Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 1, ed. Paul H. Hirst and Patricia White (New York: Routledge, 1998), 41.