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# Teaching Comparative Political Thought: Joys, Pitfalls, Strategies, Significance

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## **TEACHING COMPARATIVE POLITICAL THOUGHT: JOYS, PITFALLS, STRATEGIES, SIGNIFICANCE**

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**Abstract:** This article reflects on my experience over the past twenty-five years in teaching undergraduate courses in comparative political theory, focusing primarily on texts from ancient China and ancient Greece. I focus on the promise and the difficulties of such courses, and offer suggestions for avoiding the latter, based upon my sense of the defining purpose of such teaching: not the development of a disciplinary specialty or sub-specialty, nor the theoretical promotion or underpinning of a political agenda, but as providing a key element of liberal education in a rapidly globalizing world.

This essay combines two distinct though complementary and intertwined approaches to the question of how and why to study comparative political thought.<sup>1</sup> The paper begins with a set of reflections on my experiences teaching such comparative courses to undergraduates. Here I deal with, as my title says, the joys and the difficulties I have encountered, along with some classroom strategies for enhancing the first and minimizing the second. But as the account of my pedagogical experience proceeds, the paper inevitably moves to a more abstract level, asking how such courses are best understood and justified as elements of higher education. My major contention here is that comparative courses should not be treated primarily as training in a disciplinary specialty, such as comparative philosophy or political theory or literature, but instead as essential features of liberal education in a rapidly globalizing world. Although my argument is that we should focus on liberal education, it is undeniable that these two distinct frameworks or orientations—the liberal education we practice as teachers and disciplinary inquiry we practice as scholars and theorists—are almost always co-present in contemporary academe, and I conclude with some thoughts on how these two practices or vocations can be

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<sup>1</sup> While my own experience is limited to political thought or theory courses, I think my experiences will be familiar to any teacher of “comparative” or “intercultural” courses, especially those in the humanities.

enacted in ways that reinforce rather than undermine the goals of liberal education.<sup>2</sup> Most of us practice both; many of us see them as complementary, at least some of the time. My argument is that complementarity can be achieved so long as undergraduate liberal education is treated as prior in importance as well as sequence, at least in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, to specialized disciplinary inquiry. I contend that, in comparative studies especially, scholarship and undergraduate education can and should engage in mutual criticism as well as support, but that in the end scholarship should be brought before the bar of liberal education, rather than, as is now generally the case in higher education worldwide, vice versa.<sup>3</sup>

I came to the teaching of comparative political philosophy<sup>4</sup> when I was already in mid-career, and my principal work in both teaching and writing is as a specialist in ancient Greek political theory, primarily Plato and Aristotle. I also taught and wrote about later works in the European tradition. Looking back, my experience of teaching what is misleadingly labeled the “Western

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<sup>2</sup> It is of course true that the meaning of the concept “liberal education” is contested *and* also true that the phrase often occurs as an empty cliché that obscures the importance of these contests over liberal education’s meaning. As will become clear, my own position is close to that of Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, Yale U.P., 2014.: liberal education is education in interpreting texts that seem to deal with the most important and most disputed human problems, with constructing from these texts dialogues that clarify these problems, and with participating in these constructed dialogues as we live our lives.

<sup>3</sup> I think that the natural home of liberal education is in liberal arts colleges and in those structures within universities that imitate the work of such colleges. On the other hand, I do not think there is such a thing as a “liberal art,” and thus I avoid the term “liberal arts education.” Almost any subject, even those in the core humanities, can be and often is taught in a pre-professional or narrowly disciplinary way that undermines the project of liberal education as I understand it.

<sup>4</sup> A word on the labels political “thought,” political “theory,” and political “philosophy.” Political *thought* is useful because it implies an activity than spans a wide variety of genres and disciplines, though it may also mislead by including too much. The other two terms, philosophy and theory, can help to sharpen the focus of our interpretive practice. I prefer philosophy to theory because I think it implies a stress on skeptical and critical questioning of a Platonic and Aristotelian kind (as I read them), thus avoiding the legislative or commanding implications of the term theory. But the meanings of all three terms clearly overlap and it is wisest to use them interchangeably, as I will do here, though with awareness of the questions about what we are doing that these three descriptors may conceal.

canon” in political theory was good preparation for comparative work, since as time went on it became clearer to me that Leo Strauss, among others, was correct in arguing that the political philosophy of the modern West was much less a continuation of the philosophizing of Plato and Aristotle than a sharp break with ancient thought. Moreover, *modern* Western philosophizing, from at least Descartes and Hobbes forward, sets out from presuppositions that are foreign to the Greek texts, suggesting that the moderns (and postmoderns) were not simply philosophizing differently within a shared culture, but were operating in a cultural frame quite distinct from the ancients, one that took for granted the centrality of Christianity (and primarily Protestant Christianity), the authority of modern European natural science as a mode of inquiry, and the primacy of economic achievement as a standard for evaluating the merits of political life. This is not to say that these three elements of the spirit of the modern West are compatible or mutually reinforcing, nor to deny that many of the principal theorists of the modern Western canon make it their business to sharply criticize some or all of these forces (consider Nietzsche). But the theorists of the modern West take as their point of departure a set of questions and perplexities that emerge from a cultural and historical background that would, initially, make no sense at all to Plato or Aristotle—and vice versa. But if this is so, how should those of us in the modern West who feel that there is something valuable in the Greek texts treat them relative to our modern cultural and political horizons? I began to think that the most attractive option—the way to avoid either detached antiquarianism or treating the Greeks as primitive modern Westerners-- was to treat these texts as ways of escaping, not from reality, but from the presuppositions of modern Western theory by bringing that theory into a kind of imaginary cross-cultural and comparative dialogue with ancient Greek political thought.

In the late 1980s I had the great good fortune to begin teaching undergraduate comparative courses on Chinese and Greek (and later Western) thought with my former Bryn Mawr College colleague Michael Nylan, a leading scholar and teacher in the field of early Chinese literature, religion, and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> After Michael left Bryn Mawr for U.C. Berkeley, I have continued to teach such courses, with a highly justified degree of anxiety, on my own. In the remainder of the first section of this paper (pp. 4-19), I reflect on my experience teaching comparative political theory in three stages. The first notes some simple (perhaps all too simple) truths about the joys and apparent benefits of teaching comparative political thought. The second stage concerns the traps and snares that lie in wait to undermine our feelings of achievement as teachers and students. The third stage lists some relatively practical suggestions about how these pitfalls might be avoided. The second part of the paper (pp. 19-25) is an attempt to respond to the question posed by David Wong: “Why do comparative philosophy if it’s so hard?” Or, if it is so hard to do well, why do it at all?<sup>6</sup> My answer will be that, carefully done, comparative work provides a constructive escape from the powerful presuppositions or “endoxa,” Aristotle’s very useful term for the for the prevailing opinions within a particular community that provide an indispensable point of departure for the practice of both liberal education and political philosophy.

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<sup>5</sup> See the account of these courses in Salkever and Nylan, "Comparative Political Philosophy and Liberal Education: 'Looking For Friends in History,'" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 27 (1994), pp. 238-247, and the comments on the courses by Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> David Wong, “Comparative Philosophy: Chinese and Western,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comparphil-chiwes/> (last revised October 2009) accessed August 1, 2014, p. 21.

My first sense of the pleasures to be had from studying with care texts from the ancient Chinese tradition, previously unknown to me, might be called theoretical in a not particularly reflective or esoteric way: there is considerable joy in simply getting to know better some important and unfamiliar things, more texts and thoughts and history, acquiring new perspectives on familiar problems and also discovering problems I didn't know existed, having the experience of understanding (in a more or less subtle way), after considerable hard work, the meaning of material that at first appears incomprehensible and "other." This experience can have practical benefits as well, perhaps indicating a theoretical underpinning for, in the long run at least, imagining the institutions and practices of a human world that is more peaceful, more just, and more free than the one we have now.<sup>7</sup> Such joys and hopes can indeed be transmitted to students, and are perhaps the greatest gifts teachers have to pass on in our classrooms. But there are important and more direct practical benefits as well, such as contributing to the project of internationalizing or globalizing the undergraduate curriculum, and to the broader goal of de-parochializing *or* provincializing<sup>8</sup> not only Western political theory but perhaps even liberal education as such.

***But not so fast!*** Comparative or intercultural studies often carry with them a fair amount of unexamined theoretical baggage, including presuppositions about human lives, and especially

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<sup>7</sup> On comparative political theory as an inquiry that can guide us toward more just and democratic world, see especially Melissa S. Williams and Mark E. Warren, "A Democratic Case for Political Theory," *Political Theory* 2014, vol. 42(1) 26-57. For Williams and Warren, "[w]hat distinguishes the project of comparative political theory from [other] approaches is . . . its orientation to the study of ideas as a resource for practical reason in the present, guiding action toward a future we might want to inhabit. By reconstructing the political imaginaries that already operate in the background of our words and deeds, comparative political theory reveals those often forgotten resources and influences that make us who we are as well as what we might become" (p. 48).

<sup>8</sup> That is, *either* making Western theorizing less narrow *or* demonstrating just how culturally or endoxically (see note 9 below) embedded and hence limited Western theorizing has been and is.

about the character of the links and difficulties that join and separate different groups of human beings into communities or cultures or sets of *endoxa*<sup>9</sup> that are bounded yet changeable and permeable to varying degrees. The undeniable pleasures and moments of self-congratulation may be deceptive and delusional, concealing from us what we are actually doing, both in theory and in practice. Many serious theorists argue that the practice of inter-cultural political theory may well involve *not* a process of positive self-transformation but rather of self-aggrandizement—instead of reaching out to and “conversing” with voices that are productively different from our own, we may simply be constructing an Other to satisfy our heart’s desire, finding things we already believed were there. We may be imagining imaginaries not so different from our own, as Bernard Yack charges in his critique of Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* as asserting a kind of pseudo-pluralism.<sup>10</sup> And practically, our apparent project of recognizing and respecting differences may in effect constitute an unintended moment of empire, a knowledge claim that is implicitly an assertion of power over the Others we claim to recognize and to listen to.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I prefer Aristotle’s term *endoxa*, prevailing reputable opinions, to our “culture” in this context because culture, for all its undeniable usefulness, too much implies both unity and permanence. By contrast, the term *endoxa* refers to the prevailing opinions about fundamental matters within a community, opinions that can be examined in terms of their accuracy and fruitfulness as guides to understanding and acting in the world. “The *endoxa* are opinions about how things seem that are held by all or by the many or by the wise—that is, by all the wise, or by the many among them, or by the most notable (*gnôrimoi*) and endoxic (*endoxoi*, most famous) of them.” *Topics* 100b21ff. The fact that Aristotle identifies a belief as respected does not imply that he finds it true, or even respectable; nevertheless, it is clear that he regards some such opinions as indispensable points of departure for both political life and philosophic inquiry.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Yack, Review of Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* in *Ethics* vol. 115 (2005), pp. 629–633. Often, attempts like Taylor’s seem to construe non-Western cultures as much more like modern Western democracy than they appear to be, leading to efforts to discover what some critics have called “a Kant for every culture.” On the other hand, there are good arguments to the effect that there are overlooked similarities across traditions as well as conscious importations—for nuanced and provocative discussion of these issues, see especially Stephen Angle’s work on conceptual and verbal translations of Western human rights discourse into Chinese political thought, *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry* (Cambridge U.P. 2002) and *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Polity Press 2012).

<sup>11</sup> On these criticisms of the project of comparative political theory, see especially Williams and Warren (2014), as well as Leigh Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’ A Methods-centered

What can we do about these pitfalls? I suggest three steps in my experience as a sometime teacher of comparative political theory about what we should and should not expect from it: first, some recollections of my own introduction to comparative or inter-cultural work; second, a proposal that the goal of such courses should be that of encouraging ourselves and our students to become better interpreters of texts and, indirectly, of communities; and third some pedagogical suggestions about how to bring this goal about, including some questions to stimulate *active* and interpretive reading.

Before I began doing any comparative work, I wondered why my courses labeled *Western Political Philosophy* by my department needed to be “provincialized” in this way, when other courses were not listed as *Western Sociology* or *Western Economics* or, for that matter, *Western Physics*, in spite of the decidedly European origin of their central ideas and methods. Then one day a South Asian student told me she was pleased to find that this course, which read standard European texts, was really “just political philosophy” and not *Western* political philosophy only. What did she mean by that? I know that she did *not* mean that the course was in some way transcendently universal, since I stress the idea that political philosophy always emerges as a response to already existing local historical developments and presuppositions. My guess is that she meant she was pleasantly surprised to find that the course was not a celebration of the superiority of the West, but rather a consideration of issues about freedom, justice, etc. she was already familiar with and eager to discuss. The moral of the story, as I read it, is this: The

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Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement,” *American Political Science Review* vol. 101, no. 4 (November 2007), 741-755, and Andrew F. March, “What Is Comparative Political Theory?,” *Review of Politics* 71 (2009), 531-565. All of these insightful discussions provide thoughtful and subtle proposals for avoiding the pitfalls they identify—my only reservation about them is that they all focus on comparative political theory as an academic discipline rather than an educational practice.

character of political philosophy as such is problematic, always situated within a particular community or *endoxa* yet always attempting to push beyond the limits of that community in the direction of a critical or orienting (rather than directive or legislative) and ever-provisional universality.

Luckily for me, one of the first books I read when I started to teach these courses in the late 1980s was Benjamin Schwartz's *Search for Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West*—which persuaded me to treat “cultures” (like China and the West) as changeable unknowns and not as superhuman agents determining the thought and behavior of the individuals who enact the beliefs and practices that constitute a community rather than a random aggregate of human beings:

I would suggest that in dealing with the encounter between the West and any given non-Western society and culture, there can be no escape from immersing ourselves as deeply as possible in the specificities of both worlds simultaneously. We are not dealing with a known and an unknown variable but with two vast, ever-changing, highly problematic areas of human experience. We undoubtedly "know" infinitely more about the West, but the West remains as problematic as ever.<sup>12</sup>

Like Schwartz, my collaborator Michael Nylan and I both considered ourselves specialists in ancient thought (and hence were implicitly comparativists), not archivists or antiquarians--rather, we studied the ancient texts with an eye to establishing perspectives (vocabularies, explanatory and evaluative starting points) from which we might consider the meaning and value of our own quite different lives and communities. The point of considering historical “others” was to provide us as students and teachers with a way of stepping outside ourselves and our *endoxa*, as Aristotle would say. To a large extent, we agreed with a point David Wong makes about the relative

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Harvard U. P. 1965): 2. On the relatively recent genealogy of the term “the West” in Europe as a 19<sup>th</sup> century alternative to “Christendom,” see Michael Gillespie, “Liberal Education and the Idea of the West,” in *The West and the Liberal Arts*, Ralph Hancock ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

affinity of ancient Chinese and Greek thought as strangers to the philosophical views prevailing in the modern West:

The question of how one ought to live has occupied the center of the Greek and Chinese philosophical traditions. Modern philosophy, and most especially contemporary philosophy, has largely remained silent on what is arguably the first question of philosophy and has focused on the narrower question of what one morally ought to do or what are morally right actions.<sup>13</sup>

To use a more technical vocabulary, widespread in Western political philosophy at least since Rawls, both ancient traditions, Chinese and Greek, are like one another and sharply distinct from modern Western political theory in that they are “perfectionist.” I do not mean that they insist on utopian moral ideals at the expense of a concern with the best possible lives under imperfect real-world conditions.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they are perfectionist in two key theoretical respects: both ancient philosophical traditions treat questions about the human good as prior to questions about human rights (and hence are distinct from Kantian and NeoKantian Western political theory) and both treat questions about the value of a whole life as prior to questions about the value of a particular action or intention (and hence are distinct from Western utilitarianism).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> David B. Wong, “Complexity and Simplicity in Aristotle and Early Daoist Thought,” in *How Should One Live: Comparing Ethics in Ancient China and Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Berlin & NY: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 259-277, at p. 259.

<sup>14</sup> Every good reader of Kongzi and Zhuangzi, and of Plato and Aristotle, knows that they are not “perfectionist” (or moralistic) in this sense. For Kongzi, see Joel Kupperman, “Tradition and Community in the Formation of Character and Self,” in Kwang-loi Shun and David Wong eds, *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community* (Cambridge 2004) 103-123. Kupperman notes Kongzi’s “repeated insistence that he himself has much (in general) to learn from others,” and goes on to say, quoting *Analects* XIV, 32, that for Kongzi “[p]erfection is never presented as a realizable goal. It is a hallmark of a gentleman [or exemplary person, *junzi*] that he ‘grieves at his own incapacities’” (p. 111).

<sup>15</sup> An elaboration of this insight underlies the constructive theorizing of Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*, Princeton U. P., 2014. Chan puts the matter as follows: “A political perfectionist approach takes the human good, or so-called conception of the good life, as the basis for evaluating a social and political order. It justifies “the right” by reference to “the good,” to use contemporary philosophical terminology. This approach decouples liberal democratic institutions from those popular liberal philosophical packages that place the right prior to the good and base liberal democratic institutions on fundamental moral rights or principles, such as popular sovereignty, political equality, human rights, and individual

Hence one goal of comparative teaching is to provide an opportunity to see ourselves from the outside. As Michel Foucault puts it, “What can the ethics of an intellectual be—I claim this title of intellectual, though, at the present time, it seems to make certain people sick—if not this: to make oneself permanently capable of detaching oneself from oneself (which is the opposite of the attitude of conversion)?”<sup>16</sup> It would not be misleading to describe the project of teaching political theory as, in this sense, postmodern and critical in a Straussian as well as a Foucauldian way. For Leo Strauss, liberal education is a mode of achieving this Foucauldian goal by the process of constructing a dialogue in which we participate, one that introduces us to a contentious world of thought that at its best has the power to give us a critical purchase on who we are and want to be, producing, in Foucault’s terms, an attitude that is the opposite of that of conversion:

Liberal education consists in listening to the conversation among the greatest minds. But here we are confronted with the overwhelming difficulty that this conversation does not take place without our help--that in fact we must bring about that conversation. The greatest minds utter monologues. We must transform their monologues into a dialogue, their "side by side" into a "together." . . . We must then do something which the greatest minds were unable to do. Let us face this difficulty--a difficulty so great that it seems to condemn liberal education as an absurdity. Since the greatest minds contradict one another regarding the most important matters, they compel us to judge of their monologues; we cannot take on trust what any one of them says. On the other hand, we cannot but notice that we are not competent to be judges. . . . Each of us here is compelled to find his bearings by his own powers, however defective they may be.<sup>17</sup>

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sovereignty” (p. 192). For Chan, Kongzi provides a better starting point for evaluating modern politics than does modern Western theory. I have made a similar case for the contemporary relevance of Plato and Aristotle in “Lopp'd and Bound': How Liberal Theory Obscures the Goods of Liberal Practices,” in R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald Mara, and Henry Richardson, eds., *Liberalism and the Good* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 167-202.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, in an interview, “The Concern for Truth” in L. D. Kritzman, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, (Routledge, 1988), p. 263.

<sup>17</sup> Leo Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?”, in Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (NY: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 3-8, at pp. 7-8.

Giving in to the undeniable temptation to treat any text or tradition as a potential Bible, or to treat our academic discipline as having the final say in such matters of meaning and value, can block the chances for liberal education.<sup>18</sup>

I learned another related lesson when I was teaching a comparative course on my own, from Youngmin Kim, now at Seoul National University in South Korea, who succeeded Michael Nylan at Bryn Mawr. I asked Youngmin to come to my class to talk with the students and me about the *Analects*. He graciously agreed, but said that there was one sort of question he would *not* answer: He would not give “the meaning” of various stories and sections from the *Analects*. The students were a little taken aback when I told them about the ground rules for the upcoming class, but in the end we had a wonderful session with Youngmin precisely because of what he refused to do—he forced us all to ask harder and better questions, to propose and then criticize various interpretations, rather than passively listening to discussion-stopping answers from an expert.

Such experiences and discussions persuade me that the goal, or at least the primary goal, of such comparative courses is primarily to develop the students’ capacity for the interpretation of texts (and not for the practice of specialized disciplinary scholarship), and secondarily and indirectly, though in the end more importantly, of the interpretation of communities, institutions, and practices.<sup>19</sup> Is this a political or normative goal as well as a theoretical or intellectual one? Yes,

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<sup>18</sup> Paying attention to liberal education calls on us to read the texts both as political or literary theorists and as human beings troubled by the question of the best human life.

<sup>19</sup> A stirring statement of the connection between the practices of close interpretive reading and of democratic citizenship, if perhaps a little too enthusiastic in its devotion to athleticism as a human virtue, comes from Walt Whitman: “Books are to be call’d for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep but, in the highest sense, an exerciser, a gymnast’s struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text

though indirectly—it rests on the hope that better interpreters are likely to be in some hard to specify way better human beings, including better citizens, better able to oppose the deep and powerful human inclination to pseudo-speciation, Erik Erikson’s name for the drive to falsely identify human beings different from oneself as members of another inferior and yet threatening species, not human beings at all—as in the ancient Greek distinction between non-Greek “barbarians” (*barbaroi*)<sup>20</sup> and Greek-speaking “foreigners” (*xenoi*).<sup>21</sup>

But how can we go about implementing this educational goal in classroom practice? I suggest one step lies in recognizing the need for two apparently antithetical moments or elements in the process of teaching intercultural or comparative political thought via text interpretation, both involved in the stage-setting work of laying out the historical and cultural or endoxic contexts for these texts, one *familiarizing* and the other *de-familiarizing*. To begin with, we need to make the texts less strange, more familiar: What was political life like in the Warring States period in China, and in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC Athens? What were the *endoxa*, the prevailing opinions, in these societies, the opinions and ways of life that set the stage for the emergence of the

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furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well train’d, intuitive, used to depend on themselves and not on a few coteries of writers.” “Democratic Vistas,” in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), pp. 929-994, at 992-993.

<sup>20</sup> But on the difficulties and complexity of understanding the meaning of “barbarians” in ancient Greek and ancient Chinese literature, see Michael Nylan, “Talk About ‘Barbarians’ in Antiquity,” *Philosophy East and West* 62:4 (October 2012): 580-601. Nylan suggests that it is an all too tempting modern Western mistake to treat the views of the Chinese and Greek ancients as primitive rather than as a possible source of self-criticism: “we products of modern nationalist rhetoric come equipped with such impoverished senses of personal identity and worth that we may be much more likely to trade in unthinking excoriations of the Other outside our communities than did members of the governing elite in the distant past.”

<sup>21</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), on the perhaps surprising growth and strength of this parochializing and horrendously destructive as well as profoundly unjust falsehood in our age of globalization and expanding cosmopolitanism.

philosophical and literary texts we will be studying? This will have to be superficial and sketchy, and so it is very important to stress both the tentativeness of any such history (of its permanently provisional and revisable character) and the need to return to it constantly as the term proceeds. The second element of this introductory process involves making the texts *less* familiar and more strange by calling into question prevailing stereotypes about, say, China and the West that students bring with them to this study, both positive and negative, firmly held stereotypes that will lead them to find in the texts things they think they already know are there. If familiarizing tries to make the context less strange, de-familiarizing attempts to make the contexts *more* strange and difficult to understand. Kongzi and Xunzi and Plato and Aristotle are not our contemporaries, and must not be read as if they were. They do not share our endoxa, or our histories, or our immediate futures. On the other hand, they also must not be read as if they either confirmed “our” sense of our own moral and intellectual superiority (as good democratic opponents of various forms of dogmatic despotism) or, at the opposite extreme of the student expectations I have encountered, “our” sense of the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of modern Western materialism and individualism. I realize that most good teachers will perform these familiarizing and de-familiarizing moves as a matter of course—my recommendation is only that we not only be very aware of what we are doing but that we also share our intentions with our students.

These familiarizing and de-familiarizing moments are matters to be opened during the first week of class—I don’t want to lay down the law and thus unduly limit “their” imagination in interpreting the texts. But I do want to tell “them” at the start that the kind of work “they” will be doing in the course is difficult, and “they” can’t treat the texts as bits of information to be absorbed or slotted neatly into the concepts and categories “they” bring to it—or into specialized

disciplinary concepts and categories “they” expect teachers to supply. The task here is, in John Furlong’s words, “to diminish those exaggerated and pedagogically tendentious student desires for an Other of their own making.”<sup>22</sup> I have used scare quotes around the third person plural pronouns in this paragraph to call attention to the fact that our students are not a uniform and homogeneous mass, and that a central element of teaching well is to find out who the students in each class you teach are. This is especially true of comparative theory courses. To do this you have to encourage students to speak and/or write as much as possible about the matters you are discussing—and thus try to lecture as little as possible—but, and this is never simple, you need to be clear that the work in the course calls for a certain kind of rigor and self-discipline, that it is not the case that anything goes. The great pedagogical problem we all need to address is this: How can the activity of text interpretation be characterized in a way that will give students a sense of rigor and discipline without supplying them a misleadingly precise algorithm? I know of no better guide to how to achieve this purpose than a lightly but essentially ironic piece of advice from Harry Berger, a master of literary and philosophical interpretation, about how to “induct” students into the community of interpreters we wish to construct in the classroom:

The first and most important move every young citizen of the interpretive community should make is to perform the pledge of allegiance to interpretation, and I don’t think it’s a bad idea for students to learn a little piety along with the move. So I urge all teachers everywhere to insist that their students begin every class by murmuring in unison, and with expression, dutifully and even prayerfully, the two parts of the primal invocation that will prepare all American children to question both church and state:

1. Let there be at least one unacceptable interpretation of any text.
2. Let there be at least two acceptable interpretations of any text.

This little pair of exhortations seems innocuous, but taken together and perused more closely they open up a space between dogmatism and indeterminacy; they establish textual boundaries that can be policed. More important, they establish a contestatory field within which what counts as truth, or as knowledge, or as fact, emerges only through a process of

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<sup>22</sup> Furlong, “Reenchanting Confucius: A Western-Trained Philosopher Teaches *The Analects*,” in Jeffrey L. Richey, ed., *Teaching Confucianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 187-201, at p. 194.

textual perusal and interpretive negotiation. These are fine words, but they don't mean a thing unless we can agree on the way we use terms like *peruse* and *text*, about which more below.<sup>23</sup>

Berger's playfulness and irony bring out quite wonderfully the character of such teaching, as well as the need to avoid taking our work either too seriously (as "police") or not seriously enough. His instructions remind me of Plato, Kongzi, Zhuangzi—and others?

The kind of approach to the texts and contexts that I want to encourage is thus one that avoids admittedly stereotypical and criticizable versions of my own about cultural anthropologists (but see Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*), economists (but see Amartya Sen), and missionaries (both of the older religious kind and of the more recent political variety).<sup>24</sup> Beyond that, however, I want to stress my belief that political theorists/philosophers should avoid making a sharp division of labor between historical scholars who examine events and institutions and theorists or philosophers who concern themselves with the interpretation and critique of texts or concepts. This is so much easier to say than to do: The great demand on us is that to do either history or theory well we have to be at least familiar with each of the two approaches. For text or "canon"-centered people like me, this means being able to place texts in an historical context, treating them as a potentially critical response to or interrogation of that context, without reducing their meaning to those contexts. In intercultural political philosophy this means stressing the extent of *contestation* within a community or culture even more than the extent of the agreement and unity that establishes the borders of that community.<sup>25</sup> I agree very much with a position set out by

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<sup>23</sup> Harry Berger, *Situated Utterances: Texts, Bodies, and Cultural Representations*, (New York 2005), pp. 494-495.

<sup>24</sup> See Salkever and Nylan 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Contrast Schwartz, *Yen Fu and the West* and *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (1985), with François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece* (New York, 2004). Schwartz stresses the permeability of cultural borders, while Jullien treats them as nearly absolute. On the contrast between these two approaches to comparing China and the West,

Melissa Williams and Mark Warren, on the need to see comparative inquiry as a productive and creative enterprise, rejecting an older approach that tried to catalogue and contrast the presupposed “givens” of particular cultures—though we should be prepared to find that this kind of cataloguing is precisely what all too many undergraduates, even sophisticated ones, want from our comparative courses. What I propose as a less misleading though admittedly less direct path to thinking across cultures or communities is to focus on intra-cultural *contestations* (Kongzi *versus* Zhuangzi, Thucydides’ Pericles *versus* Plato’s Socrates—and *both* versus the mainstream of modern Western political philosophy) along with analysis of the questions that are implicit in these contests—and how the questions, such as the question of the best life,<sup>26</sup> take different forms in different times and places. I do assume here, and I think we all do in both our theorizing and our teaching, that there are certain quasi-permanent human questions, such as the question of the best life, that need to be asked and answered by each of us as individuals in conversation with others, but which cannot be answered universally and with certainty by any universalizing theory or philosophy, no matter how compelling and helpful.

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and on the need to take both seriously whichever one you prefer, see my review of Jullien in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (2004) 2004.08.17.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Williams famously argues that the question Plato’s Socrates poses in Books 1 (344e, 352d) and 10 (618b-c) of the *Republic*, “What is the most choiceworthy life for a human being,” is “the best place for moral philosophy to start”: “Philosophy starts from questions that, on any view of it, it can and should ask, about the chances we have of finding out how best to live; in the course of that, it comes to see how it itself may help, with discursive methods of analysis and argument, critical discontent, and an imaginative comparison of possibilities, which are what it most characteristically tries to add to our ordinary resources of historical and personal knowledge.” “Socrates’ Question,” in Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard U. P. 1985): 1-21, at p. 3. For modern Western political theorists, such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, the initial question is much more narrowly framed and much more susceptible of certain and even formulaic (as opposed to discursive) answers. For Habermas, “[I]n general, moral philosophers and political theorists have felt that their task is to provide a convincing substitute for traditional justifications of norms and principles.” *Inclusion of the Other* (MIT Press, 1998): 79. Habermas goes on to argue that this question is made more complex by the increasingly “plural” character of the modern world, but that it is nevertheless open to the NeoKantian solution he provides.

What questions should students bring to the texts to help achieve these goals? Here are five suggestions I supply to students in all my classes--and I think they are especially valuable in comparative courses--as a way of initiating an *active* and interpretive reading, a reading that turns the words on the page into a voice in a dialogue with you the reader and with others. All five direct attention to approaching texts not as a celebration of ideals but as accounts of *problems*, as problematizing discourses. On my reading at least, one that is surely open to challenge, this approach is in line with the practice of Kongzi<sup>27</sup>, Zhuangzi, Plato, and Aristotle (not to mention Arendt and Foucault)—though perhaps not of philosophy understood in the mode of analytic philosophy (as with Rawls and, to a lesser degree, Habermas), whose primary goal is to remove disputes about key normative concepts so that we can move forward to establish the best possible political constitutions and institutions. The five questions I regularly use are as follows:

1) Ask the text not only “What are your ideals or hopes?”, but also what do you fear most about the future of your or my polity or community or . . .? Of course, any sensible person sees more than one danger, but what are the priorities?

Examples: bureaucratic control, class oppression, corruption, injustice of various kinds, internal conflict and civil war or disorder, loss of civic energy or public spirit, loss of public or private identity, oppression by outsiders, oppression of minorities, poverty, too much equality, too much inequality, tyranny, totalitarianism, etc.

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<sup>27</sup> I suggest the following as a Confucian reflection on the place of interpretation in the education of a good human being or exemplary person (*junzi*): “Confucius said, “One who does not understand fate (*ming*) lacks the means to become a gentleman (*junzi*). One who does not understand ritual (*li*) lacks the means to take his place. One who does not understand words lacks the means to evaluate others.” Confucius, *Analecets*, 20:3, Edward Slingerland trans. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003). One might add 17:2, in the same translation: “By nature (*xing*) people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice (*xi*).”

2) What causes the dangerous trends you fear? Specific local conditions? Regional or global ones? Universal human qualities?

3) How can these dangers best be met—and to what extent? What measures can be taken to combat these dangers? Change institutions? Policies? Attitudes? Beliefs?

4) What stands in the way of carrying out these measures? Culture? Economy? Local problems? Regional or global ones? Universal human qualities?

What are the principal arguments against your position? Why doesn't everyone agree with you?

5) To what extent can these dangers be averted or overcome? This is the theory and practice problem. Where to place this text and voice on a continuum that runs from utopian moralism to cynicism or fatalism?

There is nothing special about these questions, and others will find better ones to suit particular educational settings. My goal here is only to encourage reflection on how to present the problem of text interpretation in a way that satisfies the aims of Harry Berger's program quoted above. In particular, these five questions, by asking students to place the texts in the context of ongoing conversations with "projected readers" from another time and place, are especially valuable in comparative courses, as a means of avoiding imposing presupposed cultural stereotypes, categories, and ideals on the texts' "implied authors," to use Wayne Booth's indispensable phrases.<sup>28</sup>

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that any adequate account of how to teach comparative theory courses has to deal with the question of the relation between classroom teaching and the activity of doing comparative theory for a disciplinary or public audience—how should we see the connection between teaching and scholarship? I think these two practices are

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<sup>28</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1983).

not the same and that they pull those of us who practice both in different directions, and that, unfortunately, the point of classroom teaching is often regarded as nothing more than preparing students for professional scholarship (and the content of such teaching is too often seen as a watered-down byproduct of our scholarship), rather than as an element of liberal education, an education that aims at promoting choiceworthy human development rather than the acquisition of specialized knowledge. But if this is so, the question of how best to understand the relationship between teaching and scholarship in comparative work remains to be considered. I have the following suggestions to offer concerning the possibility of a dialectically productive relationship between these two activities.

To begin with our scholarship, comparative theorizing often seems to involve a potentially harmful resistance to several forms of uncertainty and imprecision. We, like other scholars in the humanities, share an inclination to avoid *ambivalence*, however appropriate that ambivalence might be.<sup>29</sup> Good political theorists in their writing want to stake out a clear position, one that is, as far as possible, not open to critique. There is a powerful desire not to appear weak and wishy-washy. There is a related disinclination to tolerate *ambiguity* of expression, which results in the tendency to aim at precision and finality above all else, even at the price of inaccuracy.<sup>30</sup>

Aristotle's advice in Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1104a) about the need to recognize that different fields of study require different degrees of clarity and certainty, and that the degree of precision of a discourse must vary with the subject matter of that discourse, is often cited but

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<sup>29</sup> See David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006), for a defense of "appropriate ambivalence" in the sense used here. This is especially important in comparative political philosophy today.

<sup>30</sup> I have discussed the importance of the capabilities framework developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on the question of precision and accuracy in Salkever, "Precision versus Accuracy: The Capabilities Framework as a Challenge to Contemporary Social Science," *The Good Society* 9 (1999), pp. 36-40. Sen, as an economist, is especially important for his insistence that an excess of precision can lead to less accuracy.

rarely taken seriously. But in matters concerning human ways of life, too much precision and clarity is as much a vice as too little. We all recognize the drift toward excessive single-mindedness and precision when dealing with quantitative arguments—but this is surely true of many discursive and non-quantitative theoretical arguments as well, especially since our modern Western academic *endoxa* often elevate, inappropriately, natural science and predictive laws as a standard for rigorous inquiry in the humanities.

On the other hand, the activity of classroom teaching, as distinct from disciplinary scholarship, tends to be less driven by a felt need for single-mindedness and precision. In teaching, what we come to worry most about, in my experience, is avoiding as best we can certain known pitfalls that get in the way of educating students, such as *either* pandering to students by telling them what we think they want to hear *or* laying down the law concerning the true meaning of our texts. We also want to avoid inducing boredom, to stay away from flattery or self-aggrandizement, and to resist over-simplification as well as over-complication. We want not so much to persuade and convince, as we do when we theorize in print and at professional conferences, as to get students to love what we are doing and to practice it well for themselves—to introduce them to a practice, the practice of Harry Berger's or Walt Whitman's (see note 19 above) community of active interpreters. *But* it is also surely the case that teacherly tentativeness and ambivalence can be over-valued and fetishized. Perhaps the best way to think about the relationship between theory and teaching for those who practice both is to recognize that they are different from each other, and to hope that there are productive ways in which these two different approaches to the same subject matter—the one we practice in the study or the conference and

the one we practice in the undergraduate classroom-- can correct one another, each pointing out and guarding against the characteristic pitfalls of the other.<sup>31</sup>

If I am right about this, the goal of comparative political theory or philosophy should not be to discover the truth about the world or about human action by taking the best elements of various texts from different traditions and cultures, nor to treat such comparison as the royal Hegelian road to uncovering the truth about the inner character of the cultures from which such philosophizing emerges, but to enrich our own imagination and inquiry into the problems that we confront in our own worlds of thought and action. The goal is improved judgment rather than certain knowledge or wisdom. Probably such a goal is easier to grasp for professors of comparative literature than for professors of philosophy—and this in turn is a good reason for resisting any tendency to draw a sharp disciplinary distinction between comparative literature on the one hand and comparative philosophy or political theory on the other, a tendency that is likely to be quite powerful today not only in research universities but in small colleges that aspire to be known for research as well as teaching. On the other hand, I do think it is a good idea to maintain a clear sense of the difference between the humanities and the natural sciences. But in stressing the importance of distinguishing between the humanities as a whole and modern science, I am not suggesting that we should build a “two cultures” wall between the two. The best teaching and learning in the humanities and the sciences is informed by an understanding of

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<sup>31</sup> I have focused on the undergraduate classroom because I think it is the key space of liberal education, but I believe my point can be extended to the question of graduate instruction. To begin with, graduate teachers and students could recognize that graduate education aims at training good practitioners of both theory and pedagogy, to see that good undergraduate teaching is not simply applied or watered-down theorizing, *and* to avoid the tendency of the theorists of pedagogy to replace discursive reflection on the meaning of our teaching with precise algorithms derived from the currently expanding project of educational theory.

work done in the other—but both suffer (and especially the humanities) insofar as it is presupposed that there is no significant difference between the two.<sup>32</sup>

I conclude with two reflections on the meaning and the prospects of liberal education as I understand it here. One of the terms that has recently become popular as a label for the intellectual virtue that liberal education aims to develop is “critical thinking,” which is often taken to mean the negative ability to unmask and debunk the positive claims contained in the texts we consider. Michael Roth’s critique of this understanding of “critical thinking” as a goal or a virtue is acute:

The skill at unmasking error, or simple intellectual one-upmanship, is not totally without value, but we should be wary of creating a class of self-satisfied debunkers—or, to use a currently fashionable word on campus, people who like to “trouble” ideas. In overdeveloping the capacity to show how texts, institutions, or people fail to accomplish what they set out to do, we may be depriving students of the capacity to learn as much as possible from what they study.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Two excellent resources for thinking through the connections between political theory, philosophy, and the humanities as a whole are the essays by Ruth W. Grant, “Political Theory, Political Science, and Politics,” *Political Theory* 30:4 (August 2002) 577-595, and by Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,” in Williams, *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton U. P., 2006): 180-199. Grant and Williams, in quite different ways, recognize the importance of modern natural and social science, but argue that philosophy and political theory and the humanities in general should be understood as distinct from science, something denied, in different ways, by scientifically inclined analytic philosophers and practitioners of the digital humanities, who argue that rigor and disciplinary respectability can be achieved only insofar as the humanities become sciences, as well as by many recent postmodernists, who deny any distinction between the humanities and the sciences. How to draw the line between science and the humanities is the central question. Grant proposes that work in the humanities is distinct from work in the sciences in three ways: it is historical (Grant says “conservative,” but by that she does not mean that work in the humanities is supportive of the political status quo), rather than presentist; it is critical and evaluative, rather than value-free and predictive; and it is productive or action-guiding rather than complete in itself.

<sup>33</sup> Roth (2014): 182-183. Roth’s point is reminiscent of Plato’s Socrates’ assertion (*Phaedo* 89c-90d) that the greatest of evils that can happen to a human being is misology, the hatred of *logoi* or discourses, that occurs when someone becomes convinced that arguments they have previously accepted are false, and concludes from this that all arguments are therefore false. This, for Plato’s Socrates, is an evil because without a willingness to listen and respond to texts we can never live an examined life.

But there is another and older sense of “critical thinking,” located in the modern German tradition of philosophizing about education and the development of judgment as an intellectual virtue that fits my account of liberal education more closely. Hannah Arendt was one of the most committed and eloquent defenders and practitioners of this kind of education. In rejecting a critic’s claim that political theorists should present themselves as committed political actors in the classroom, Arendt reflected on the nature and the political meaning of her own teaching, rejecting the idea that the teacher’s job is to indoctrinate, but still asking herself about what the political consequences are

of this kind of thought which I try, not to indoctrinate, but to rouse or to awaken in my students, are, in actual politics. . . . And then this notion, that I examine my assumptions, that I think—I hate to use the word because of the Frankfurt School—anyhow, that I think “critically,” and that I don’t let myself get away with repeating the clichés of the public mood [comes into play]. And I would say that any society that has lost respect for this is not in very good shape.<sup>34</sup>

A central element of liberal education is to increase both the taste for and the ability to engage in reflexivity: the examined life, something close to the core of education in both the ancient Greek and Chinese philosophical traditions, but much less so from the perspective of the pedagogical and moral *endoxa* of the modern West. We are now more likely to admire objectivity if we are scientists and commitment if we see ourselves as humanists. Following Arendt, a superb classroom teacher as well as theorist/philosopher, I suggest we try to walk a third way.

One final concern. The English expression “liberal education,” and the existence of a relatively large number of colleges devoted to the practice of liberal education have emerged historically,

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<sup>34</sup>“Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt,” in Melvyn A. Hill ed., *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (New York 1979) 301-339, at 309. Arendt’s resistance to the Frankfurt School is based on her view that while its leaders (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, et al.) stress self-critique, they do so on the basis of overly deterministic theoretical frames, mostly revised versions of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist historicism.

over the past two hundred years or so, within the modern West, mostly in the United States though to a considerably smaller degree in Europe. Does liberal education represent one more form of modern Western cultural imperialism? This question has to be taken seriously, and I know of no way to rebut with certainty the charge it enunciates, but there are grounds for hoping that liberal education is not guilty. Michael Roth gives voice to such a hope in his comments on his experience of lecturing and speaking with students in China: “My experience in China raises my own hope that the thoughtful inquiry sparked by liberal education will enable diverse communities to overcome more of their blindness to one another and to the problems they (and we) share.”<sup>35</sup> My own brief visit with students and faculty at Boya College of Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) University in Guangzhou, as well my work over the past several years with Chinese undergraduates at Bryn Mawr, leads me to a similarly hopeful conclusion. Liberal education as I know it in the United States is no doubt modern and Western, but the practice of this education will, I think, seem very familiar to any culture that has a tradition of close, active, and critical reading of carefully selected texts (plural, not singular!), as China surely does, and as the study of ancient Chinese political thought demonstrates. Work in comparative philosophy and literature is, in my view, likely to succeed insofar as it is tied *primarily* to this project of liberal education, and not to the much more widespread and powerful project of establishing one more carefully bounded and self-consciously distinctive academic discipline, or to any immediate political project, whether the refinement and extension of the democratic vision or of some non-democratic alternative to it.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Roth 2014, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> Contrast this account of the goal of teaching with Habermas’s NeoKantian account of the two things that “professors” do. Undergraduate teaching and the practice of liberal education, unsurprisingly, is not one of them: “Professors are, of course, not only scholars who are concerned with public-political issues from the viewpoint of an academic observer. They are also *participating citizens* [italics in text]. And on occasion they also take an active part in the

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political life of their country as intellectuals” (*Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciarin Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 22.