

# **PHILOSOPHY UNBOUND: THE IDEA OF GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Abstract**

The future of philosophy is moving towards 'global philosophy'. The idea of global philosophy is the view that different philosophical approaches may engage more substantially with each other to solve philosophical problems. Most solutions attempt to use only those available resources located within one philosophical tradition. A more promising approach might be to expand the range of available resources to better assist our ability to offer more compelling solutions. This search for new horizons in order to improve our clarity about philosophical issues is at the heart of global philosophy. The idea of global philosophy encourages us to look beyond our traditions to improve our philosophical problem-solving by our own lights. Global philosophy is a new approach whose time is coming. This article offers the first account of this approach and assessment of its future promise.

## **Introduction**

The future of philosophy is moving towards 'global philosophy'. The idea of global philosophy is the view that different philosophical approaches may engage more substantially with each other to solve philosophical problems. Most solutions attempt to use only those available resources located within one philosophical tradition. A more promising approach might be to expand the range of available resources to better assist our ability to offer more compelling solutions. This search for new horizons in order to improve our clarity about philosophical issues is at the heart of global philosophy. The idea of global philosophy encourages us to look beyond our traditions to improve our philosophical problem-solving by our own lights. Global philosophy is a new approach whose time is coming. This article offers the first account of this approach and assessment of its future promise.

The idea that philosophers should engage more substantively with different traditions is often met with scepticism. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the primary reason is the lack of clear pay-offs. Deeper engagement with unfamiliar philosophical traditions may involve significant transactions costs, such as the time required to build an

understanding of another tradition sufficiently robust to mine it for new ideas. These costs will not be considered worthwhile where the benefits are unsubstantial. Therefore, a major barrier to the pursuit of global philosophy is this concern that the potential benefits are outweighed by the likely costs. The idea of global philosophy might only succeed where clear benefits become more certain.

I believe that there are clear benefits and greater engagement between traditions will become more likely in future. Our world is shrinking: greater globalization has brought with it greater diversity in our social and political communities, as well as the academic community. Academic philosophy must rise to the new challenges arising from this multicultural diversity. For example, if philosophers lack a minimal understanding about non-Western thought, then this is increasingly less true of our students. Closer engagement between traditions may reap pedagogical benefits in better educating an increasingly diverse student body about philosophy. This engagement may yield a further benefit not merely in how different traditions might relate, but, more importantly, how one might learn from the other. The future engagement between traditions is more likely to occur and this is a welcome development for the further development of philosophy as a *global* approach.

This article offers the first account of global philosophy. I will begin by first addressing the idea of a philosophical tradition and how they have developed as relatively bounded traditions. This leads us to consider the possibility of global philosophy and this should be conceived. I will offer several illustrations that are meant to be indicative of the ways in which a more global approach to philosophy may be expected to produce useful philosophical benefits. The article concludes with a consideration of possible objections and why global philosophy offers much future promise. The conclusion is that global philosophy is an idea whose time is coming.

## Traditions as Bounded

Global philosophy attempts to overcome the limitations found in more bounded philosophical traditions. It is important to become clear of these limitations before turning to how they may be overcome. This section will clarify what is meant by the idea of philosophy as bounded and how this may limit attempts to address philosophical problems.

The idea of a philosophical tradition is rich and complex. Traditions are often sites of great diversity. Consider the liberal tradition. This tradition includes a wide range of canonical figures from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke through T. H. Green and John Stuart Mill to Brian Barry and John Rawls (see Barry 2001; Hobbes 1996; Locke 1988; Mill 1989; Rawls 1971; Rawls 1996). Liberals include advocates and opponents of popular democracy, as well as contractarians, Hegelians, utilitarians, and much more. At its heart, inclusion in a tradition often involves some acknowledgement of a shared identity. While they may be many significant differences over several issues, one important factor in understanding Hobbes and Rawls as co-members of a shared tradition relates to a shared sense of identity and philosophical belonging. For example, Rawls says that Hobbes's *Leviathan* is 'surely the greatest work of political philosophy in English' and that Rawls understands his project to be a further development of problems that Hobbes raised previously (2001, 1). So one common thread linking Hobbes with Rawls is the centrality of consent and the acceptance of a contractarian view about justice. But another important connection is the commitment to a shared philosophical venture. The idea of a philosophical tradition is linked with the sense of shared belonging and identity whatever else it may be.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My discussion brackets many related important questions about the form and content of a philosophical tradition as a tradition. I accept that there is more to any tradition than a set of family resemblances. But I also accept that a tradition is also related to the recognition of a shared belonging whatever else a tradition may be.

Most philosophical traditions operate in a relatively bounded way. For example, each seeks to address problems from their own set of resources without substantive engagement with multiple traditions. One illustration is the liberal tradition and its attempts to address the problem of political stability over time (see Hobbes 1996; Rawls 1996). While these attempts engage with non-liberal traditions, those engaged with share important spheres of established contact that breed greater familiarity. While Hegel's philosophy offers an alternative to liberalism, it engages with canonical liberal philosophers and ideas (see Brooks 2007; Hegel 1990). This engagement across traditions has led to later engagement in future (see Rawls 1996, 285-88; Rawls 2000, 329-71).

These examples are meant to be indicative of the view that traditions have great diversity and most traditions are bounded rather than closed. A closed tradition would be a tradition that denies all engagement with other traditions. While many debates may be conducted among members of a shared tradition, most debates make some attempt to engage with alternative traditions. So our situation is not about whether our tradition is open or closed to wider engagement. It is rather whether our tradition might benefit from becoming unbound and engaging more substantively with traditions where their relations may be less established.

Philosophical traditions are open to engagement, but they remain bounded. The idea of a bounded tradition comes in degrees. Wider engagement across traditions may be more or less bounded. Too often it is relatively bounded. This is where engagement occurs between different, but familiar and established alternatives. One example already noted might be the relation between liberalism and Hegelian philosophy. Each is distinct from the other although there is an established history of mutual engagement. This has led to important innovations in

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There is more to be said about the role of intended meanings and their reception by audiences over time that I bracket here although I am aware of these and other important issues that may bear on this analysis (see Bevir 2002; Brooks 2006).

the development of each tradition (see Bosanquet 1923; Brooks 2012; Brudner 2009; Green 1986).

There is then much potential promise for future benefits from wider engagement with new and less familiar traditions as these examples indicate. The problem is that there has been relatively little work satisfactorily making this case thus far. This is not to say that there have been no attempts already at bridging Western and non-Western philosophical ideas (see Barnhart 2012; Carpenter and Ganeri 2010; Hutton 2006; Hutton 2008; Parekh 2006). It is to say that such attempts have been too rare.

Most work exploring the bridges between Western and non-Western ideas has been in the area of comparative philosophy (see Scharfstein 1998). This work has produced important advances in our understanding about our traditions and alternatives in addition to highlighting illuminating points of relation.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, comparative philosophy as a disciplinary project has been unsuccessful at demonstrating to most philosophers the need for wider engagement with new traditions. Perhaps one reason for this lack of success is because comparative philosophy has been an enterprise primarily focussed on the history of philosophy. While comparative philosophy has demonstrated that diverse traditions may possess important points of comparison and similarity, it has unsuccessfully motivated further study by leading figures. The case not yet made is the philosophical importance of bringing traditions into relationship.

This is a case that should be made. Consider the issue of global justice. Most leading work in this area is found within a relatively narrow set of traditions generally exclusive of non-Western thought thus far (see Brooks 2008a). This narrow set of traditions offer solutions to global problems, such as the problem of severe poverty. Global problems like

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<sup>2</sup> One example that is often highlighted concerns the similarities between Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (see Brown 1953, 49-52).

severe poverty are neither exclusively Western nor non-Western. Yet, the philosophical traditions that attempt solutions to problems that may concern everyone are too often formulated without some substantive engagement with traditions that relate to global diversity. Global problems are ‘global’ in at least two ways. First, they are geographically global in that they are found in places across continents. Secondly, global problems are ‘global’ philosophically: such problems are not the exclusive subject-matter for any one tradition. At issue is the fact that much of the leading work on global justice operates almost entirely within a relatively bounded approach. Global justice is about global problems, but its formulation is largely independent of global thought.

My argument is not that such approaches should be jettisoned because of this shortcoming, but rather that this work might be improved through greater philosophical engagement. Global justice may address global issues, but it has not established its status as ‘global’ philosophically. We have seen that traditions meaningfully engage with each other to improve philosophical problem-solving. The problem is that traditions have tended to engage only with those alternatives where there is established engagement already. The obstacle now is to make the case for why new horizons are worth seeking for philosophical benefit.

### **Towards a Global Philosophy**

Global philosophy is any unbounded approach to philosophy. We participate in global philosophy whenever we engage beyond traditional boundaries in pursuit of philosophical benefits. The difference between global philosophy and alternative approaches is that it is unbounded: global philosophy is unfettered by self-limitation to engagement with what is established and familiar, but open to what is new. Global philosophy is an approach to philosophy that may be pursued by liberals, Hegelians, and much more. Thus, a liberal

committed to global philosophy is open to exploring a wider range of traditions for new ideas. The motivation involved is the improved ability to address philosophical problem-solving. So a liberal global philosophy may seek to engage with traditions of both East and West to discover new ideas that might become redeployed within liberalism that might improve its success at offering compelling arguments.

It should be noted that often the lack of serious engagement confronts philosophers working from within Western traditions. There is a large body of impressive work that seriously engages with Western traditions from alternatives, such as Indian philosophical traditions (see Ganeri 2011; Parekh 2006; Raghuramaraju 2011; Sivaraksa 1992). There is also an increasing amount of work available that renders Indian philosophical traditions more accessible for Western audiences (see Bushan and Garfield 2011).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is much outstanding philosophical work being undertaken within the Indian philosophical tradition that has developed with an awareness of developments in Western philosophical traditions (see Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 575-637; Raghuramaraju 2006; Raghuramaraju 2009). So the issue is not a lack of high philosophical engagement by non-Western traditions. Nor is the issue the availability of such work. While many Indian philosophers have meaningfully engaged with Western traditions, this has not yet been reciprocated in large measure.<sup>4</sup>

There are several ways in which our taking more seriously an engagement with less familiar philosophical traditions may lead to illuminating avenues for future work. I will confine illustrations to how Western traditions might engage further with Indian philosophical traditions in the areas of ethics and political philosophy. These examples are meant to be indicative only of the likely future benefits for Western traditions: an exhaustive examination would require far more space than permitted here. I will now turn to three

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<sup>3</sup> There are also related developments in Buddhist philosophy (see Hanh 2008; Kongtrul 1987).

<sup>4</sup> My interests in Indian philosophy are longstanding and my original interest in philosophy more generally (see Brooks 2002; Brooks 2008b).

different issues where the Indian philosophical literature that may contribute to new developments for liberalism.

One issue concerns our diverse identities. Societies are social spaces filled with diversity. The challenge is how best to respond to the diverse identities that individuals claim for themselves while best guaranteeing political stability over time. This is understood as the problem of political stability (see Rawls 1996, 3-4). One solution is the creation of an overlapping consensus through the use of public reasons (see Rawls 1996,131-72). The idea is that reasons acceptable to all provide satisfactory public support for policies that respect the reasonable diversity characterizing political society.

There have been several important objections to this solution to the problem of political stability. One objection is that any overlapping consensus we might construct will be too fragile to guarantee future political stability in light of the deep differences that remain (see Wenar 1995). A second objection is that an overlapping consensus should be rejected to the extent it is contractarian (see Nussbaum 2006).

The Indian philosophical tradition offers some possible insights into how this problem might be better addressed. The first insight is to challenge the model of ‘moral monism’ and resistance to cultural pluralism that may be found at the core of much contemporary liberal thought developed from a greater understanding of an ‘intercultural’ view of equality and fairness indebted to Indian philosophical ideas (see Parekh 2006). A further insight might be to claim that political stability might best be secured through a guarantee of a threshold in human capabilities (see Nussbaum 2000). The capabilities approach is to some degree a major achievement of a global philosophy approach with deep roots in multiple traditions, including Aristotelianism and classical Indian philosophy (see Sen 2009). This approach



claims that all persons should be guaranteed well-being in terms of the capability to do or be. Political stability might be best secured through the protection of human capabilities.

A second issue is the relationship between our moral duties. The problem arises where there may be possible conflicts between duties. For example, Immanuel Kant argues that our moral duties do not conflict as part of a universal moral law (see Kant 2011). Hegel famously rejects this position as ‘an empty formalism’ lacking content (see 1990, 161-63). Nonetheless, the idea that our duties should not come into conflict has continued popularity. One concern is that if our duties did conflict we might lack some means to decide between them.

The Indian philosophical tradition has relevance here. The *Bhagavad Gita* is perhaps one of the most famous Indian texts and its most often discussed section relates to a specific dialogue between the divine Krishna and the human warrior Arjuna (see Radhakrishnan 1948). It is the eve of a battle between Arjuna and his army against their cousins. While he is certain his cause is just and he will be victorious, these results will only become achieved through much bloodshed and suffering including the deaths of many including his own relatives. Arjuna becomes resigned to the view that perhaps it would be better to permit his unjust cousins to govern in order to avoid these tragedies. Krishna advises Arjuna that he must engage in battle using, in Sen’s words, ‘duty-centred and consequence-independent reasoning’ (Sen 2009: 209).

There are several suggestive lessons that arise from this account. The first is that our duty to justice trumps other duties that may potentially conflict. Arjuna may have duties to fight his just cause and duties against causing harm to his relatives, but where such a choice must be made it should be on the side of the just cause. The second suggestive lesson is that our duties require commitments. The decision to perform our duties may be consequence-independent, but the resolve to complete our duties must account for our personal

responsibilities (see Sen 2009, 213-14). Some decisions are easier said than done independently from questions about whether we suffer from weakness of will. These positions about weighing up our different prospective duties in light of our other commitments inform leading work in the Western philosophical tradition as well and not least Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. So the argument is not that Western traditions lack a similar perspective, but rather that they might benefit from a closer engagement with these related ideas found in less familiar traditions.

A third issue for many philosophical traditions more generally relates to the goal of philosophical disputes. What is this goal? For some in the Western tradition this goal may be nothing more than the desire for greater clarity into some important philosophical issue. Or perhaps for others the goal is not merely to provide improved illumination of key issues, but to convince others to join in agreement.

The Indian philosophical tradition has a fairly clear position on this issue: our goal is to seek liberation (see Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 46-47, 95-96; Swami 1935). Literally speaking, the truth will set you free (see Rinpoche 1991). The idea of liberation through the pursuit of improved knowledge has several connotations and some are religious. Nevertheless, there is something liberating in the satisfaction that comes each time we improve our understanding about important philosophical issues. Perhaps we pursue philosophical arguments not merely for its own sake, but in order to learn something about ourselves as well. Maybe even to enjoy a sense of satisfaction that may arrive with each forward step towards our philosophical goals. In these ways, this tradition may help inform why we engage in philosophical disputes.

This discussion is intentionally suggestive and indicative of where future benefits may be mined from the Indian philosophical tradition broadly conceived. The ambition is to

demonstrate that our issues are not exclusive to our traditions and that alternative traditions may have resources we might employ in our own way to better address issues we are engaged with. Alternative perspectives may encourage us to look more closely at our debates in a new way.

### **Critical Appraisal**

We have been able to identify global philosophy as a distinctive approach and considered three arguments indicative of how a global philosophy might be pursued for philosophical benefits. I now turn to several potential criticisms concerning its future promise and popular appeal.

A first possible criticism is that global philosophy may breed redundancy. The worry is that less familiar traditions may be too alien for meaningful engagement. Instead, we must cash out these less familiar traditions in ways that are more recognizable to make progress with their ideas. The problem is that this may render less familiar traditions redundant. For example, suppose we understood an unfamiliar philosophical tradition in light of its close relation to something more familiar. Thus, we grasp a philosopher, such as Shankara, in terms of Hegelian philosophy. This may help render Shankara's philosophy as more intelligible in some sense, but the problem is that we might be better off examining Hegelian philosophy more closely instead. To grasp Shankara in this way is to reinvent the philosophical wheel.

This criticism mistakes the goal of global philosophy. Our goal is not to compare and contrast *per se*, but to uncover new philosophical insights in order to further develop our own traditions. While a deeper engagement with Shankara's work is surely rewarding, it is also highly time intensive. The goal of an approach rooted in global philosophy is not necessarily

to comprehend every possible school of thought. Instead, the goal is to further develop our own tradition through engagement with other traditions. We need not come to any definitive views about alternative traditions: what matters is how their ideas might be put to good philosophical use in our own tradition. So global philosophy may overcome this potential problem.

A second possible criticism is that global philosophy may breed incoherence. The problem is that our traditions possess some identifiable coherence that makes possible their recognition as a particular tradition. The problem is that a closer engagement with other traditions might undermine the coherence of our own positions. Rather than engage more closely, we should instead maintain the distinctiveness of our philosophical positions.

This criticism rests on a mistaken view about the nature of philosophical traditions. Traditions are never static, but constantly evolving to respond to the changing issues that confront traditions over time. A good example is the development of liberalism from Hobbes through Mill to Rawls. Our traditions change. So the problem is not that we might revise our arguments in light of close engagement with alternative traditions. Our goal should be on improving the ability of our tradition to address philosophical issues. We should actively seek resources that best facilitate this goal. One potentially promising approach is the idea of philosophy as unbound and engaged with diverse traditions. Global philosophy need not render our traditions incoherent, but it might improve our ability to address philosophical issues.

A third possible criticism is that global philosophy may be insufficiently 'global'. What is global about global philosophy? Global philosophy is an unbounded approach to how we might improve our existing traditions. It is not a claim to their being one true philosophy that best combines all others. Nor is it about bringing together as many traditions together as

possible for its own sake. Instead, global philosophy is about our having an openness for the need to pursue wider engagement in order to improve potential argumentative power. Global philosophy is global in light of its global pursuit for philosophical resources only. Of course, many philosophers, including Hegel, have offered us world historical accounts of philosophies that attempt to speak to all traditions. However, the difference is that global philosophy as understood by me is not about speaking to all traditions, but rather speaking with diverse traditions. This is not pursued for its own sake. Instead, our goal is philosophical improvement through unbounded openness to new horizons.

The three possible criticisms of global philosophy are not exhaustive. Nonetheless, they present serious obstacles that global philosophy must overcome. This discussion has concluded that global philosophy is able to address these challenges. We must keep in mind that the idea of global philosophy exists only in its infancy: I am addressing a philosophical field that I believe will rise to some future prominence in academic circles rather than identifying an established disciplinary field.

## **Conclusion**

Global philosophy is an approach to philosophical problem-solving that is likely to become more commonplace as our societies and universities further diversify. While philosophers may already engage meaningfully across traditions, this engagement is often confined to what is established and familiar. More importantly, this work often excludes meaningful engagement more widely with less familiar traditions, including Indian philosophy. There has already been any number of substantial contributions arising from deep engagement between traditions familiar with each other. Similarly, there may be the likelihood of further substantial contributions arising from engagement with less familiar traditions. A major

obstacle has been that comparative philosophy has been largely confined to historical comparisons without highlighting sufficiently clearly how contemporary Western philosophy might improve their ability to address problems through engagement with non-Western philosophical traditions.

Global philosophy accepts this challenge. It calls on each of us to unbound our philosophical traditions. The goal is not to develop one single view of philosophy for all, but to improve the philosophical views we have already. I have indicated briefly three potential areas for how such engagement might be established. While the illustrations used have related to my interests in ethics and political philosophy as well as their development in Indian philosophical traditions, the wider possibilities of global philosophy extend far beyond these fields and traditions.

If I had to predict the future of philosophy, then I am willing to bet that its future will find greater engagement between less familiar philosophical traditions including Western and non-Western traditions. This is a future well worth welcoming with open arms. We have much to learn from each other about how we might improve our understanding of philosophical issues. As the world grows ever smaller, so our philosophical engagement will develop more widely. Philosophy will become unbound, more engaged, and better situated to address pressing future problems as a result. The future, in short, is global philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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<sup>5</sup> This article has benefited from many years of reflection and debate. I am grateful to Stefan Andreasson, Joy Chaudhuri, Jack Crittenden, Peter Haworth, Niall Keane, Chris Lundry, Mary Midgley, Avital Simhony, and, most especially, to Martha Nussbaum, Bhikhu Parekh, and Tim Williamson for helpful discussions that have further developed my perspective on this subject-matter. I must also thank colleagues involved in the Association for Philosophy Journal Editors as well as authors who have submitted work to the *Journal of Moral Philosophy* over the last ten years for helping develop my sense of philosophy's future. Finally, special thanks to Luciano Floridi and Armen Marsoobian for insightful comments and the invitation to participate in this important special issue.

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