
10-1992

No Tourists

Edward W. James

Bridgewater State College, ejames@bridgew.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

James, Edward W. (1992). No Tourists. *Bridgewater Review*, 10(1), 12-14.

Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol10/iss1/6

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

No Tourists

By Edward James



Buddha
Indian sculpture of
Buddha meditating

For a number of years, the College has had a “Non-Western General Education Requirement,” and, in response to that requirement, I have developed and taught two courses—Philosophies of India and Philosophies of China and Japan. I have never been to India, China, or Japan; probably never will visit those countries; and cannot speak or read Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese. While I have taken courses in Indian thought from an internationally recognized Indian scholar and keep up with the literature in major journals and the like, I have no plans to contribute to the scholarship of Asian studies. So, how can I possibly justify teaching these courses? Isn’t this lack of specialization just what is wrong with college education, where standards are lost in a smorgasbord of offerings?

What gives this question its sting is that I believe and so readily grant that one should not teach a philosophy course unless one is creatively involved in research in key areas of that course. I don’t believe that it is enough that one be merely “intrigued” by a subject in order to teach it. For teaching philosophy is not so much a matter of imparting information as it is engaging in a quest—a quest to understand, and so actively do research in, some important areas of human life. And so if I myself am not engaged in that quest, if I am simply reporting on the quests and research of others, that Confucius said this and Sankara that, then all I am doing is being a *tourist*. And what I am then teaching is a history of crazy ideas, a visit to odd and strange places, which one leaves with a shower and a guffaw. Clearly, the “subtext” of any such course, what remains unstated but deeply instilled, is that these other ideas and cultures are not fundamental and thus to be engaged, but are superficial and thus to be looked at as at best “weird” and at worst boring.

To be a tourist in philosophy is to be justifiably damned. The non-apocryphal story goes that the American philosopher Ernest Nagel, while visiting in England,

knocked on the door of Wittgenstein, one of the few great philosophers of the century, aiming to participate for an evening in the Great Man’s “at-home.” Wittgenstein opened the door to Nagel, heard his request, and then slammed the door shut, uttering as he did so, “No tourists”: no dilettantes, no visitors, no gawkers, no “Gee whiz, will’ya look at that getup!” And I believe, deeply, that this attitude is right. For to teach philosophy is to do philosophy. It is not to visit but to build. So, what right do I have to teach these courses? Am I not a tourist in the area?

To escape the charge of tourism I need, first, to distinguish between doing research in the ideas of a culture and doing research in philosophy. On the one hand, researching a culture’s ideas involves doing such things as (i) delving into the etymology of a term—e.g., that “karma” designates an action, a performance; (ii) tracing the development of an idea—e.g., that the idea of karma began as a magic-minded ritual, either to keep the cosmos in order or to advance one’s own interests, and gradually evolved to the notion of liberating oneself from fear and hate; (iii) interconnecting such ideas with other ideas, e.g., that to liberate oneself is to free oneself from the attachment to one’s desires which in turn chain one to the circle of births and rebirths, *samsara*; (iv) inter-connecting this set of ideas with the practices of a culture, e.g., that the ideas nested in karma are seen as justifying the class and caste system in Indian culture—that each self is born into a situation which it deserves because of its actions in former lives; and so on. On the other hand, doing research in philosophy involves asking whether or not the ideas of a thinker or culture are true or justifiable. One asks: Is it the case that we live a life that is best seen in terms of karma, *samsara*, and reincarnation? Is it the case that the situation in which we find ourselves—as poor or wealthy, sick or healthy—should be seen in terms of the fruits of past actions, even past actions in other lives? Is it the case that we should

seek to liberate ourselves from fear and hate by detaching ourselves from our commitments and desires? And so on.

So, what I teach and do research in as a philosopher is the theory of justification—to look at reason-giving and to determine the “logic” of giving reasons. To do this it is not necessary to become an expert in a culture’s ideas. It is enough to rely on the experts to come up with a reasonable interpretation of how reasoning works in that culture and then to carry on the discussion by asking whether these reasons are defensible. Accordingly, one of the foremost interpreters of Aristotle is the thirteenth century thinker, Thomas Aquinas, who knew no Greek and even less of Greek culture and saw Aristotle through the eyes of the Muslim Averroes. But what Aquinas did know was that the questions, reasons, and theories found in Aristotle’s works reflected perennial concerns of human life. And he also knew that these questions, reasons, and theories could best be understood by engaging them in critical discussion.

To review, I started out by asking how I could legitimately teach an area like Asian thought. And in trying to answer that question, I have raised another and more difficult question: How is it that we can evaluate the ideas—like karma and reincarnation and *samsara*—of another culture? They are so *alien*!

One reply that at least some are inclined to give to this question is that we should dismiss Indian thought and its like just because they are so alien to our own way of thinking. This is the way of *militant monism*, the view that there is one true view, and that *we* have it. And so in response to other cultures we adopt the way of the missionary who comes to convert the heathen.

While it would be quick and thus tempting to say that another perspective is

ESSAY

alien and so false, militant monism fails on at least three counts. First, to dismiss another point of view just *because* it is alien, strange weird, or absurd, is logically defective: it is inherently circular. For all such dismissals do is say that this is not our view. But as we well know, it hardly follows that because something is different, even very different, from our own view, that it is false. Second, these hasty dismissals of other perspectives are heuristically defective: they prevent progress in knowledge. For all the views which we hold and cherish today—whether religious, scientific, or political—are views which once were judged alien. In the world of ideas all ideas are immigrants. Finally, these hasty dismissals are morally defective: they express a profound disrespect of other persons. For one essential way that we take other persons seriously is to grant that what they say may be true. Hence to dismiss another point of view just because it is different is to say, right at the start, that those who espouse this point of view are not worthy of respect.

Moved by this rejection of militant monism, many proceed to insist that no one should judge the views of another culture. We have our views. They have theirs. And it is part of showing them respect that we do not try to foist our “intrinsicly better” ideas on them. Rather, much as an explorer comes to marvel at the works and ways of another land, we should learn to appreciate the internal logic of these other views and leave it at that. This is the way of *cultural relativism*, the view that truth is internal to a given culture because the criteria of truth, the standards by which we appraise a given claim or set of claims, arise out of the needs and interests of the culture. Hence, the relativist would conclude, any criticism of one culture by another of necessity must be circular: it must assume what it wants to show. For to criticize is to appeal to standards—to show that certain standards have not been met. But when we criticize one culture by appealing to the standards of our own culture, all we are doing is stating what we knew all along, that the standards of our culture differ from the standards of those other cultures

cultures we are “criticizing.”

There is much to be said for this sort of cultural relativism. Above all, it practices a praiseworthy cosmopolitan urbanity in its celebration of human variegation—crucial to a world growing increasingly smaller and more interconnected. Moreover, its understanding of reasoning—that we reason from a perspective, that this perspective reflects a culture—is a crucial insight into human inquiry. Still, cultural relativism fares no better than does militant monism.

First, like militant monism, cultural relativism is logically defective: it is self-refuting. For its central claim that standards are relative to a culture is itself intended to be a non-relative or absolute claim about standards. Thus, relativism is a non-relative (and so self-refuting) claim. Second, like militant monism, cultural relativism is heuristically defective: it, too, obstructs the advance of knowledge. For if truth is what a given culture decides, then there is no motivation for the dominant classes of the culture to find out “the truth.” They already have it. So, for instance, they will not worry about whether their social practices are justified. The fact that the practices are theirs, by the reasoning of cultural relativism, automatically justifies them. Any further questioning would only disrupt social stability. Finally, like militant monism, cultural relativism is morally defective: it does not entail a cosmopolitan urbanity. For all cultural relativism states is a theory of justification—that one’s standards are internal to one’s culture. This theory discourages a live-and-let-live attitude, particularly in cultures’ whose standards are closed and even hostile to the ideas of other cultures. In fact, cultural relativism in general entails cultural intolerance; consider, for example, Nazism, all fundamentalisms, Maoism, all nationalisms. Most of the world’s people live under one or another of these ideologies and are, then, by culture intolerant. Further, even supposing we did live in a culture that is cosmopolitan, by the lights of cultural relativism we could adopt no adequate stance to confront the deeply entrenched intolerance, racism, sexism, and genocide of other cultures. Cosmopolitan relativists

can say that they do not share such beliefs but they have no reason to condemn them. So Munich is repeated.

In sum, relativism is a form of tourism. It looks at a perspective and, commendably, tries to understand the perspective on its own terms, but then, condemnably, leaves it at that. It takes its admirable refusal to follow militant monism and condemn whatever is different to mean that nothing, even great evils, should be condemned. In doing so relativism ironically proves to be as condescending in its own way as militant monism. For relativism fails to see that to respect other perspectives and persons is not simply to understand them but to engage them in critical dialogue, where dialogue grants that there may be something both to teach and to learn. Indeed, to take other persons and cultures seriously is to grant with relativism that they have their own integrity and strengths—and thus may have much to teach us; and with monism that we have our own integrity and strengths—and thus may have something to teach them.

In considering other cultures, in short, what we have first and foremost to rely on is the guide of the full-blooded conversation as found in cooperative inquiry. This guide itself is a gift from many traditions: a gift of ancient democratic Greece—especially of Pericles, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—and of the European Renaissance—especially of Bacon, Galileo, Locke, and Newton. As such it is part of “our” culture, “our” overall perspective, and so, of course, can and should be challenged. But one way it can’t be challenged is by inquiring whether it, inquiring conversation, is a proper practice. For to challenge it in that sense is not to



Confucius
Traditional portrayal
from a rubbin of an
18th-century engraving

ESSAY

challenge it at all but to assume it. Nor can it be challenged by forcibly stamping it out—as found in some evangelical and imperialistic monisms. While this no doubt poses a *threat* to the practice of inquiring conversation, it does not challenge its rationality. Nor again can it be challenged by the relativistic claim that no practice is objectively better than any other. For this claim is self-refuting; it is the absolutistic claim that no claim is absolutistic. Rather, the practice of inquiring conversation can be challenged only by determining whether or not it provides the most complete and coherent set of ideals for living a human life. Is there another guide, another practical source of ideals, which offers as much as the practice of inquiring conversation does about living a good life?

It is in this way, for instance, that I argued for the superiority of the practice of the inquiring conversation over both militant monism and cultural relativism. The practice of the inquiring conversation suggests what is important in militant monism, that there are real wrongs to fight, and what is important in cultural relativism, that there are many good ways to live a life, without falling into the traps of militant monism's imperialism or of cultural relativism's spinelessness. In this way the ideals supportive of the practice of inquiring conversation can be seen as more inclusive and coherent than those supportive of the practices of militant monism and cultural relativism. Further, we can see that the ideals suggested by the inquiring conversation surpass by embracing the ideal of tolerance. For the ideal of tolerance not only is condescending—suggesting that the superior view will deign to allow the inferior to exist—but also is morally spineless, seeming to call for tolerance of the intolerant. Instead of tolerance the practice of the inquiring conversation calls for the celebration of the ideals that emerge out of cooperative inquiry. This pluralistic celebration recognizes that these ideals will often have different emphases and so will compete with each other, but that we need all of them to express ways of life that cannot be exhaustively presented by any one set of ideals.

Our ideals, in other words, are not initially obvious in the way we live. Rather, like electrons and other intellectual constructs, they are only potentially present in our lives. They lie implicit in our everyday practices and so have to be drawn out and made actual by our articulating them, as we use them to help us make more sense of what is best in our lives. Thus, for instance, we may and do challenge whether a particular account of the inquiring conversation is the most complete and coherent one available, or whether inquiring conversation is itself an incomplete practice that needs to be embraced by some practice that gives rise to more inclusive ideals. Ideals are thus both discoveries and inventions: discoveries, in that not any concept will suffice to make sense of the best of life; but inventions, in that many concepts will suffice to make sense of a good life.

One image that helps to unfold the practice of the inquiring conversation is the well-known Indian story of the blind persons who met an elephant. One felt the elephant's side and said that the elephant was a wall; another felt the elephant's tusk and declared that the elephant was a spear; another the elephant's underbelly and judged that the elephant was a roof; and another the elephant's legs and concluded that the elephant was a grove of trees. The story concludes that each was right in what each specifically said and was wrong only in claiming to have the whole truth. In doing so the story teaches the paradox that while truth can be arrived at only by all inquirers listening to each other, we can come to truth only through the specific language that we ourselves speak. For it is only by speaking a language, seeing the elephant this way rather than that, that we have something clear to criticize, discuss, surpass. As Francis Bacon remarked, the truth is more likely to emerge from a clearly presented claim, however wrong, than from a vague and obscure notion, however well intended.

In summary, it is a central task of the College to help students to work through the paradox of the blind persons and the elephant—that truth depends on many languages but can at first only be ap-

proached through one's own. By trusting their languages and practices without peremptorily dismissing the languages and practices of others, they can come to learn that they need other languages to escape their culture's limitations and simplistic recipes of life and to gain some semblance of the whole truth. Moreover, by being raised out of their culture's narrow perspective into a more encompassing and world-wide view, they can attain a more deeply embedded commitment to their culture's truths. For they thereby come to see, with a confident appreciation that can only be based on honest inquiry, what the truths of their culture are. They have learned to reject both the easy answers of the "How To" book of the culture and the despair that so often follows when the given recipes have failed. Such thinkers at once energize a culture, invigorating it with new ideals and possibilities, and also undermine the unexamined and studied simplicities of that culture's life. Hence they are often regarded as a mixed blessing by the more entrenched powers of the culture. Yet they alone remain open to and aware of the ambiguities of life and of the complexities of issues, and at the same time shrewdly hopeful of the possibilities of cooperative inquiry over time to address these challenges. Such, then, is a central aim of the General Education Requirements, especially as exemplified by the Non-Western requirement, and it makes me glad to be a part of it—engaging students in research in the theories of justification found in non-Western works.



Edward James,
Professor of Philosophy