

“So What?”: The Philosophical Import of Learning from Others

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Sharon Bailin’s contributions are legion. Her important work on creativity brings philosophical sophistication, deep knowledge of the arts and sciences, analytical rigor, and a healthy skepticism to her welcome challenge to the deeply problematic “critical/creative” dichotomy, and to her broader critique of the prevailing “Western” view of creativity. Her related, substantial contributions to the theory and pedagogy of critical thinking and to argumentation theory have been equally insightful and important.¹ I am honored, privileged, and delighted to have this opportunity to respond to her presidential address.

Bailin once again turns her attention to art and creativity, this time to consider the meta-philosophical question: can her investigations concerning those alternative traditions inform our best *philosophical* understanding of creativity, or are they rather un-philosophical empirical/descriptive exercises unable to inform our specifically philosophical theorizing? Bailin answers that those investigations can indeed shed philosophical light; she endeavors to show both what is wrong with thinking otherwise, and, more positively, what sort of light they might shed.

Bailin puts the case for the “philosophically empty” answer in terms of the “relativism challenge” and the “epistemological value challenge.” The first alleges an in-principle impossibility of learning from other cultures. The second allows that possibility, but denies the further possibility of such learning having any substantial philosophical consequences.

I applaud and agree with Bailin’s response to the “relativism challenge.” Her arguments here are telling, and her several examples compelling. However, Bailin’s treatment of the “epistemological value challenge” is less straightforward. While in considerable sympathy with Bailin’s position, I here register two reservations.

First, while Bailin argues that “*taking into consideration* such views and practices *does* have some epistemic benefit” (second emphasis added), her reasons entitle her to say not that it *does*, but only that it *might*.² Bailin is clear that by “having epistemic benefit” she means “results in the holding of better justified beliefs.” But whether taking the lessons of cross-cultural inquiry into account results in the holding of better justified beliefs depends upon what happens when so taken. If previously held beliefs prove superior to the newly considered alternatives, taking the cross-cultural studies into account need result in neither new beliefs nor the improved justificatory status of those previously held.

Consider Bailin’s example of Western vs. Chinese medicine. Suppose we are justified today in believing, on the basis of evidence produced by Western scientific inquiry, that the primary cause of gastric and duodenal ulcers is infection with the bacterium *Helicobacter pylori*. That belief’s justificatory status is a direct function of the evidential relationship obtaining between it and that evidence. Now consider

the alternative account according to which such ulcers are caused by imbalances among yin and yang forces in the stomach or intestine. We consider the alternative and find it wanting; as Bailin says, “initial consideration seems to show that there is no empirical verification of its theoretical claims and so no need to seriously consider the whole belief system as a viable alternative to Western medicine, which has impressive epistemic credentials.”³ The original belief is not better justified after consideration of the alternative, because its justificatory status is a function not of the alternatives considered, but of the evidential relationship obtaining between the belief and the relevant evidence.⁴ Whether or not those alternatives will find their way into that evidence set will depend on the case: sometimes they will, sometimes not.

Second, Bailin argues that there is an epistemic obligation to take into consideration the beliefs and practices of other cultures in our pursuit of better justified beliefs. Such an obligation, if there is one, does not extend to all beliefs. My current belief that the sun is now shining and a gentle breeze blowing outside my open study window is justified (setting aside skeptical doubts and other epistemological niceties) on the basis of my current visual and tactile experience. The beliefs and practices of other cultures are beside the point. Such cultures may well have other views concerning the role of perceptual experience in justification, which may be relevant to the consideration of higher-level beliefs concerning justification, and so I may be obliged to consider them when considering those latter beliefs — but not the target belief concerning sun and breeze.

Moreover, in her argument for this obligation, Bailin repeats a claim I think problematic. She grants that there is “no necessary connection between consideration of the beliefs and practices of other cultures and epistemic worthiness or between a failure to do so and epistemic defect.”⁵ However, she argues,

There is, however, a similar lack of necessary connection between epistemic worthiness or defect and other epistemological norms, for example, assessing the credibility of sources or identifying fallacies in arguments. Nonetheless evaluations which failed to pay attention to any of these would be considered faulty for that reason. I would argue that evaluations which failed to seriously consider the alternatives offered by the beliefs and practices of other cultures are similarly defective.⁶

However, there is *not* “a similar lack of necessary connection between epistemic worthiness or defect and other epistemological norms.” If I fail to assess the credibility of sources or identify fallacies in arguments when I base my own beliefs on those sources or arguments, my beliefs *are* necessarily more defective epistemically than they would be if I engaged in that assessment or identification, since if I had done so my beliefs would not be based on either sources whose credibility is unassessed or fallacious arguments. That they are so based *itself* decreases their worthiness and increases their defectiveness. That is why “evaluations which failed to pay attention to any of these [norms] would be considered faulty.” But, as Bailin acknowledges, there is no such necessary connection between “cultural consideration” and epistemic worthiness/defect. That is why the lack of “necessary connection between consideration of the beliefs and practices of other cultures and epistemic worthiness or between a failure to do so and epistemic defect” allows us

to infer only that “evaluations which failed to seriously consider the alternatives offered by the beliefs and practices of other cultures” *might* be, but not that they are always or necessarily, epistemically defective. (I readily grant that they often are, and did so in the paper that Bailin here criticizes.)

Let us now address Bailin’s central contention: does her cross-cultural inquiry contribute to her holding better justified *philosophical* beliefs about art and creativity? Bailin’s thesis is that philosophical beliefs about art and creativity are better justified to the extent that they take into consideration the beliefs and practices of other cultures — for example, that “artistic creation requires radical discontinuity from past traditions” is less well justified once we acknowledge the contrary Renaissance view. I am inclined to agree with Bailin here, although much will depend upon further philosophical issues (for example, concerning the nature, reach, and individuation of concepts, the character of analysis, and the possibility of cultural error).

Bailin’s taking into consideration the beliefs and practices of the cultures she has studied has indeed strengthened further and added to the epistemic quality of her already very strong (but cross-culturally more innocent) case against the prevailing Western view, and for a more contextual and less dichotomous philosophical view of creativity. In this way she has answered the “so what?” challenge effectively. I hope you will join me in congratulating our President on her further strengthening of her already very well justified views concerning art and creativity, and for illuminating the ways in which cross-cultural inquiry and understanding are relevant to the achievement of better justified philosophical beliefs.

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1. As no doubt are those to arts education and theatre, but I do not know these well enough to comment.
 2. Bailin limits herself to the weaker claim that inclusion and the resulting consideration of alternative views “*can* [not *does*] produce epistemic benefits” in her “Inclusion and Epistemology: The Price Is Right,” in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 25, emphasis added, and in discussing the first two of her ways in which taking cultural difference into account promises epistemic benefit.
 3. Bailin apparently grants that the “impressiveness” of those credentials is independent of consideration of alternatives, thus seemingly contravening her view that epistemic merit “must be demonstrated in the light of alternative possibilities.”
 4. This is not to say that comparison of alternatives *never* enhances epistemic worthiness, but only that it *needn’t* do so. So I deny Bailin’s claim that “arriving at epistemically worthy beliefs involves more than an evaluation of the beliefs in isolation....Their merits must be demonstrated in the light of alternative possibilities.” In establishing epistemic merit, alternatives are sometimes but not always (or necessarily) evidentially relevant. Moreover, even where relevant, the justificatory status of the original belief need not be altered by consideration of the alternative (as in the Chinese medicine case). For further consideration, see Harvey Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 70–71. (Interestingly, Bailin seems to acknowledge the point in a passage cited on p. 71.) My claim here is compatible with Bailin’s important point that evidence for the efficacy of Chinese medical practices would properly place a demand on Western science to explain that efficacy, which might in turn force adjustments in Western theory and explanatory frameworks.
 5. A claim advanced in my “What Price Inclusion?” in Neiman, ed., *Philosophy of Education 1995*, 4–5.
 6. Here Bailin repeats an argument made in her “Inclusion and Epistemology: The Price Is Right.”