What is the goal of studying the philosophy from non-Western cultures? One possibility is that it is to produce consensus, in which adherents of different religious or philosophical worldviews reach an agreement on certain shared norms, though based on their own individual reasons that are not necessarily compatible with one another.

The approach draws on John Rawls’ idea of “overlapping consensus." A main application of Rawls’ idea in cross-cultural philosophy concerns human rights, where the method of consensus is thought to be superior because it tries to find support for human rights within other cultures’ philosophical traditions rather than imposing them from without. In working toward an “unforced consensus” on rights, we end up traveling different paths toward the same goal.

However, consensus on a norm establishes only that it can be found in particular traditions at a particular point in time; what it does not show is that the norm is justified. For this reason, critics have objected that the approach has no inherent philosophical worth. This talk examines some applications of consensus in cross-cultural philosophy, as well as various arguments for and against the approach. Is consensus a legitimate philosophical method?

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