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Response to "What Is Comparative Political Theory?"

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Andrew March's article represents a fine attempt to tackle urgent questions arising from current developments within comparative political theory; namely, questions pertaining to its identity, its scope, and its methodology. While many have long argued for the inclusion of non-Western texts as objects of analysis within political theorizing, few have argued as effectively for a particular methodological task and a specific purpose for comparative political theorizing as March has done in his article, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" For this, I applaud him. In principle, he and I share many common concerns and goals. Like March, I, too, have been concerned that the desire for a comparative political theory has not been thoroughly scrutinized or well elaborated. I have also been concerned about elaborating a rigorous methodology that goes beyond the desire for inclusiveness in making the field of political theory more global. However, despite these mutual interests, my admiration for his scholarship, and my general sympathies with the project of comparative political theory broadly conceived, I find myself taking issue with many of March's claims about an engaged comparative political theory. I also find myself taking issue with the implications of his constructive proposal for reforming the practice of comparative political theory as well as its relationship to the overall field of political theory.

I have no quarrel with much of what March has to say about the vagueness of scope and purpose in most current formulations of the comparative political theory. However, his proposal has two main problems. First, it is unclear whether and how seriously March is committed to the project of an engaged and comparative political theory or whether his argument is actually meant to demonstrate the implausibility of such a result. A lack of clarity in key elements of his proposal—particularly regarding the centrality of the role of doctrinal orthodoxy—leaves readers unsure of March's own response to the very motivating thrust of his essay, namely, the question of whether an engaged political theory can be comparative in a meaningful way. This uncertainty in turn leaves us with more puzzling aporiae than useful provocations. Second, I worry that March's arguments will reinforce the substantively and methodologically Eurocentric focus of political theory. Although March explicitly disavows any commitment to the dislocation of Eurocentrism as the goal of his project, the very structure of his proposal, as well as its implications, makes it necessary to raise this question.

First, let me elucidate the implications of March's proposal for restructuring the field of political theory. The upshot of March's proposal would seem to be that a comparative subfield of political theory, if it is to be established with any credibility, must focus primarily on principled value-conflict across traditions with distinctly autonomous moral doctrines. This comparative political theory should reveal the contours of a deeply moral disagreement between highly distinct modes of political thought, focusing on the most orthodox and ideal-type representatives across this divide, and speaking to a normative dispute that affects terms of social cooperation in public life. What would happen to the remaining majority of nonideal-typical thinkers and texts of all traditions, including thus far neglected non-Western texts whose treatment cannot be strictly comparative by the standard March posits? March does not directly address this question. However, everything he says about political theory as an inherently comparative endeavor suggests that all non-Western texts that shed important light on moral/political matters (and, therefore, which should not be neglected), but are not ideal-typical or orthodox enough to represent the mutually incompatible sources of authority across distinct doctrinal truth claims or to speak to normative disputes about terms of social cooperation, should be integrated into the existing studies of political theory proper. Thus, March suggests that Ibn Khaldun, al-Farabi, and certain kinds of Confucian doctrine would be read and studied as part of an expanded canon of global political theory alongside Machiavelli and Hobbes because they do not represent the orthodoxy and distinction that underlie deep moral disagreement.[1] Because they represent the authoritative center of orthodox Islamic theology and jurisprudence, thinkers like Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, and Yusuf al-Qardawi could be appropriate objects of comparative political theory thus redefined.[2]

I begin by taking issue with the very focus of March's argument. March has much to say about the redefinition and restructuring of comparative political theory as an explicitly engaged and value-conflict-centered endeavor, but little to say about what implications this has for the remaining overall field of political theory, other than to suggest it would perhaps be more appropriately global in its integration of Gandhi, Lao Tzu, Kautilya, and Ibn Khaldun alongside Plato, Machiavelli, and Foucault.[3] March openly suggests that those who are not interested in (by his own admission) the seemingly pedantic focus on the comparative moniker, or those who are simply concerned about globalizing the field of political theory proper, might not find his reconstructive proposal engaging. But in thus directing his argument to a restricted audience, March ends up dismissing his most important interlocutors:

[1]Andrew F. March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?" *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4: xx–xx]

[2]Ibid., xx.

[3]Ibid., xx.

namely, those who are interested in exactly how the overall field should be restructured and who might, therefore, take issue with the narrow focus on comparison. This is, in fact, a rather important question. We need to think about whether and why March's approach to the way political theory ought to treat otherness—namely, ensuring that an engaged comparative political theory focuses on those thinkers and texts who represent systematic doctrinal conflict and speak to normative disputes, while leaving all other treatments of non-Western thought to be incorporated into the existing disciplinary conventions and modes of inquiry—is the appropriate one.

Some of March's own comments implicitly suggest that the demands and imperatives of what we currently consider comparative political theory—namely, the impetus to study thinkers and texts beyond the West—cannot be confined to an internal discussion because they are inextricably connected to the overall field of political theory. Why be concerned with pitching the imperative of comparative political theory to the entire field, or with commanding the respect of other political theorists, if the goal is simply to refine the internal methodological requirements of a subfield, most of which are ultimately self-sufficient and self-contained? March himself rightly reminds us of the centrifugal nature of political theory: adherents of subfields as methodologically diverse as feminist theory, pragmatism, Rawlsian pluralism, or hermeneutic theory often have nothing to say to each other, and thus little interest in—or need for—justifying their existence either to one another or to the field as a whole. However, in indicating that it has to command the respect of those not interested in non-Western thinkers, March's proposal implies that discussions about comparative political theory cannot continue to be internal ones. Meanwhile, the results of the restructuring that March proposes also clearly have implications for the field as a whole. This suggests, then, a need to examine the presuppositions underlying political theory's overall relationship to the otherness of non-Western texts and ideas. March alludes to this larger question, but chooses ultimately to bracket it entirely. I intend to argue, however, that the particulars of his proposal have implications for this larger question that cannot be ignored.

Engaged vs. Comparative: A Zero-Sum Game?

I turn now to the specifics of March's proposal. To begin, I find troubling the persistent ambiguity that runs through March's argument about the genuine possibility of an engaged comparative political theory, as he defines it. On the one hand, March uses strongly encouraging and constructive language—particularly in his elaborations of theses 7, 8, and 10 and in the conclusion—to suggest that an engaged comparative political theory centered around public value-conflict between the doctrinal orthodoxy of autonomous and distinct moral systems would be a rich, promising, and desirable

development for the field of political theory.[4] Yet his essay strikes many a note of pessimism about the possibility of a strictly comparative political theory as he defines it, precisely because of what he acknowledges to be the irreducible internal plurality of traditions and the porosity of boundaries between them.[5]

This uncertainty is further underscored by a lack of clarity about the centrality of doctrinal orthodoxy that March suggests should be the centerpiece of an engaged political theory. On the one hand, March seems to be quite serious about the focus on doctrinal orthodoxy, which he argues for most clearly and in an impassioned fashion in theses 7 and 8. Reading what sounds like a strong advocacy of the criterion of doctrinal orthodoxy in these sections, one is easily led to worry that the focus on traditions of thought with conflicting substantive moral commitments, mutually incompatible sources of authority, and the insistence on deep moral distinction between traditions with stable boundaries will have reifying, alienating, and radicalizing effects. That such an approach will make it tempting to deny hybridity and reify non-Western traditions by reducing them to a caricature of their most orthodox figures and texts is only the most obvious objection. One starts to worry that the sort of political theorizing March seeks to characterize as comparative would bring into relief only the most orthodox representatives of a given religious tradition or doctrinal view, further alienating or perhaps radicalizing the responses of their interlocutors from other traditions.

Soon, however, the reader is not quite sure whether—or how much—she has to worry about this reification of orthodoxies. March is sophisticated enough not only to acknowledge that examples of hybridity and nonideal-types abound in all traditions, but to suggest that he is, in fact, quite deeply concerned with the implications of this hybridity and pluralism. But what March gives with one hand, he takes away with the other, for it becomes less clear what sort of role March really does intend for the criterion of doctrinal orthodoxy to play in his argument. He now puts forth simultaneous requirements for two different things that seem to be in conflict with one another: namely, on the one hand, an *engaged* comparative political theory that focuses on the first-order implications of normative disputes and has the capacity to reveal important implications of such normative disputes to the adherents of multiple traditions, and on the other, an engaged *comparative* political theory that focuses on systematic conflict among deeply distinct entities, each representing the orthodox center of a moral doctrine. In thesis 9,

[4]See, for instance, March, page xx: "[A] patient, thorough and responsible excavation of the contours of moral conflict itself is a creative and engaged way of genuinely comparing distinct ethical traditions"; as well as page xx: "[C]omparative political theory will be richer and more interesting by moving further into the realm of normative justification within multiple traditions."

[5]"It may of course be that the distinction I am drawing is incoherent or unsustainable. But then so might the idea of an engaged comparative political theory if it is to be more than non-Western political theory" (xx–xx).

he suggests that value conflict has to be more than simply irreconcilable as a result of orthodoxy in order to bring to the fore normative disputes and that searching for the terms of consensus and the first-order implications of genuinely knotty moral problems has to involve something more than a confrontation between the most simple and basic doctrinal commitments of two parties. But the real problem seems to be that the requirement for orthodoxy and doctrinal conflict—namely, the comparative portion of the project—would make it less possible to say anything interesting or relevant about the implications of normative conflict for the grounds of consensus or the first-order implications of the conflict—namely, the engaged part of the project. The reader is now led to wonder: Is it March's contention that the two key requirements of an engaged comparative political theory are inherently in conflict with one another or that the one must come at the expense of the other? March needs to offer far more clarification than he currently does about how centrally his argument can rely on the criterion of doctrinal orthodoxy.

There are many different reasons why the requirement of doctrinal orthodoxy could potentially be the key stumbling block to an engaged and comparative political theory. March also needs to clarify which—if any—of these he finds the most problematic. First, is it possible that the more doctrinally orthodox the text or thinker, the more likely it is to be attached to the internal concerns of a tradition, and, therefore, less likely to be able to provide guidance on a value-conflict that could matter to the terms of social cooperation between multiple groups? Let us take the Brahminical formulation of caste-based hierarchy within Hinduism as an example of a central, orthodox doctrine. This caste hierarchy divided human forms of life into four classes or *varnas*, based on natural superiority or inferiority and on past karmic credit and debit.[6] Interpersonal social, professional, and religious interaction among Hindus was long said to be heavily regulated by rigid injunctions in the *Manusmriti* (The Laws of Manu), prescribing all ritual behaviors and social intercourse from birth, including marriage, occupation, and so on. Many orthodox Hindus would cite the *Manusmriti* and its rigorous codification, ritualization, and stratification of Hindu spiritual, political, and social life as the most central of doctrines. It may certainly be the case that an orthodox text like the *Manusmriti* provides a more challenging expression of a core conflict between two traditions, the moral problem in question presumably being the normative commitment to the absolutely free and equal status of human beings in a democratic society, with the Hindu tradition calling into question the dominant liberal Western commitment on this issue. For the

[6]For more details on the origins of the caste system, Vedic philosophy, and other classical Hindu texts, see U. N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, eds., *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957); and John B. Chethimattam, *Patterns of Indian Thought: Indian Religions and Philosophies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971).

very same reason, it is unclear whether this value-conflict alone could provide any insights pertaining to the terms of cooperation between the adherents of respective doctrines. After all, the stratification and regulation of social and political life through the caste system could only be said to be the deepest of internal concerns within a tradition, and in its most orthodox form, has little ability to speak beyond those concerns and contexts.

Another version of this problem could be the following: If hybridity, plurality, and dissent from ideal-types are, in fact, the conditions that tend more commonly to characterize adherence to traditions, then is the choice of orthodox or ideal-type figures and texts faced with the potential problem of irrelevance or disjuncture from the range of available existential realities within a tradition and thus from any real insight on the terms of social cooperation? "I myself doubt very much," March acknowledges, "that any person thinks and acts solely in terms of what their authoritative doctrine or ideology prescribes. Certainly, in the postcolonial world it is difficult to find non-Western thinkers who have been utterly unaffected (unpolluted?) by Western ideas, norms, and expectations" (xx). This suggests that it is often equally difficult to find actual practices—the realities of lived lives and practices by those who adhere existentially to the doctrinal truths being investigated—that correspond to the most doctrinally orthodox or central positions within that tradition. To revert to my previous example, one is less and less likely to find among Hindu believers a concern for adherence to caste-based hierarchy in its most orthodox doctrinal form. While many modern-day Hindus are content loosely to follow caste-based prescriptions for endogamy, the most orthodox doctrinal prescriptions of texts, such as the *Laws of Manu* pertaining to social interactions, employment status, and political rule, are increasingly irrelevant. If an engaged comparative political theory is to focus on genuinely knotty moral questions about public life on which only the most orthodox figures or texts can be consulted, then these problems may often not have much connection to the existential realities of lived lives within that doctrinal tradition. The purchase of orthodoxy or doctrinal centrality may have to come at the cost of relevance to public discourse about social cooperation.

Finally, could it also be the case that the most interesting and relevant guidance on matters of public life involving multiple traditions comes not from the orthodox doctrinal center of any given tradition but rather from thinkers and texts that dissent from orthodoxy, formulating hybrid and synthetic doctrines that lie at the blurry intersections of boundaries between traditions? For instance, March makes repeated reference to Gandhi—including, most kindly, to my own work on Gandhi. But Gandhi was neither orthodox nor ideal-typical as a representative of the Hindu tradition of political thought, as March himself acknowledges.[7] And Gandhi's capacity to provide

[7]On p. xx, March recognizes that Gandhi's thought was never distinct or radically alien enough from Western thought as to form a distinct community of moral

challenging insights on an interesting and meaningful normative dispute between traditions was hardly a result of his centrality, orthodoxy, or representativeness within the Hindu tradition; rather it arose precisely at the point of hybridized contact between the fuzzy, porous boundaries of traditions that had already been somewhat intertwined with one another. For instance, his most fundamental metaphysical and epistemic views may have relied almost entirely on Vedic claims about the status of humans in relation to the divine, while the role of self-suffering within nonviolent political action was distinctly influenced by the ancient Hindu concept of *tapasya*, the purifying effects of ascetic discipline and self-mortification.[8] But these were also deeply fused with a commitment to the human capacity for moral reasoning as well as a role for the autonomy of the human conscience that was clearly influenced by Western Enlightenment ideals. His reading of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for instance, celebrates the individual's capacity for moral autonomy while deliberately rejecting some of the communitarian, hierarchical, and caste-based implications that other thinkers take from the same text.[9] This, combined with the influence of liberal Enlightenment views on freedom and equality in political life, made Gandhi's social and political thought a creative fusion of early Vedic/Brahminical metaphysics, later folk political practices, and modern Western liberal influences. Moreover, the capacity of Gandhi's thought to dislodge and problematize the liberal Rawlsian commitment to toleration through what I have called his "civic virtue of nonviolence" is a result not only of Gandhi's creative and synthetic capacity to reinterpret the orthodoxy of inherited doctrines, but also of our own ability to reread and reinterpret Gandhi himself.[10]

What, then, are the implications of this Gandhian fusion for the possibility of a justificatory comparative political theory? If anything, my own treatment of Gandhi implies that many meaningful and challenging disputes over

argumentation. On Gandhi's reinterpretation of orthodox Hindu doctrines, see Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1989); *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973); Anthony Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[8]See Farah Godrej "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration," *The Review of Politics*, 68, no. 2.

[9]On Gandhi's interpretations of the *Gita*, see Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*; M. K. Gandhi, "Anasaktiyoga," in *Anasaktiyoga or the Gospel of Selfless Action: the Gita According to Gandhi*, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1956); M. K. Gandhi, "The Meaning of the Gita," in *Gita the Mother*, ed. Jag Parvesh Chander (Lahore: Indian Printing Works, 1947).

[10]Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth."

interesting value-conflicts affecting multiple traditions rarely occur through confrontation with the deep distinction, alienation, and orthodoxy of one's counterpart from another systematic autonomous doctrine, through the influence of distinct coherent wholes or ideal-type doctrines. They tend to occur in hybrid and piecemeal fashion, at the confluence of porous borders between autonomous doctrines, rather than through the influence of their orthodox central thinkers, beliefs, or themes. Yet at the end of his article, March suggests that my work on Gandhi may provide a good example of the sort of engaged and justificatory comparative political theory he advocates.[11] Thus, there is an ambiguity here that leaves me puzzled about whether work such as my own could be considered engaged *and* comparative, in March's terms. It is clear what would make it engaged: it challenges and dislocates a particular Western normative commitment and shows why the implications of this normative dispute should matter to us. However, is there something that continues to make it comparative, as he seems to suggest in thesis 10, if it does not represent the orthodoxy of an autonomous moral doctrine constructed in its ideal-typical form? If not, are there other examples of thinkers, texts, or ideas that could satisfy both the engaged and the comparative criteria in different ways? Or is this criterion simply impossible to fulfill?[12]

March implies that treatment of thinkers outside the Western tradition will probably have to yield on the comparative element in order to deliver well on the engaged element of a justificatory comparative political theory. But he needs to do something beyond simply alluding to this problem: he must tell us exactly why this might be the case. Moreover, what does this imply for the task of the justificatory comparative political theory that he advocates in thesis 10? Certainly, March does raise the question of whether political theory can be both engaged and comparative in method and purpose, and he puts this forth as the central question driving his investigation. But the reader is left wondering where exactly he stands on the question. The picture of a justificatory comparative political theory that he provides in thesis 10 (and beyond) reveals what seems like a ringing endorsement of the project. However, it provides no clarification on the precise role of doctrinal orthodoxy therein or on whether its centrality might have to be rethought in the pursuit of an engaged comparative political theory.

[11]See footnote no. 47 on p. xx.

[12]Indeed, March makes fleeting references to Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Taymiyya, Al-Ghazali, and Al-Qardawi as orthodox representatives of Islamic doctrine, as well as to the possibility of a problem-driven investigation of the Danish cartoon controversy. But absent a more detailed example, one is left wondering what distinguishes these particular cases as good examples of systematic value conflict based on doctrinal orthodoxy or distinction, with no way to judge what other cases from traditions outside Islam might fulfill similar requirements.

Absent further clarification, one is left wondering how seriously to take the pessimistic remarks March makes about the possibility of a truly engaged comparative political theory and how—if at all—to reconcile these with his keen advocacy of the project and of the centrality of doctrinal orthodoxy therein. As a result, which of the alternatives he truly endorses also remains unclear throughout March's article. Should we have a comparative political theory focused purely on value-conflict among autonomous moral doctrines as a subfield of a global umbrella of political theory in which Gandhi and Qutb are taught alongside Plato and Hobbes? Or are the requirements for an engaged comparative political theory, if we understand them properly, so unrealistic—given the preponderance of hybridity, plurality, and synthesis—that it seems implausible that we could ever fulfill them and still have something interesting to say about value conflict, as, in fact, the very last words of the essay tell us?[13] We are left wondering, then, whether March endorses the project of a distinct subdiscipline of comparative political theory organized around the pursuit of problem-driven value conflict, or whether his argument is intended to demonstrate the implausibility of such reform, and to endorse the alternative he implies, namely, that all non-Western texts are subsumed into the existing canons and methods of political theory proper, both scholarly and engaged. The reader is left puzzling over the goal of March's project: Does he simply intend to pose the question of the viability of an engaged comparative political theory as an unanswerable one? Or does he intend to answer it? If the latter, one does not know which of March's possible conclusions most accurately describes his position.

The Alternative: The Already Comparative Nature of Political Theory

If March's pessimism regarding the possibility of an engaged and comparative political theory is to be taken seriously, then shifting the focus to the

[13]His final paragraph suggests that hybridity and synthesis, rather than orthodoxy or authoritative doctrinal centrality, are the conditions that tend more commonly to characterize relationships between traditions, and that the project of building a subfield focused on problem-driven value-conflicts between autonomous, moral doctrines is, therefore, a tenuous one because the distinction of entities and sharpness of boundaries defining those distinctions is rather more blurred in the case of political theory than in other fields. "As it turns out, it might not be so easy for any form of 'engaged' political theory to follow political science, law, and other disciplines in inaugurating comparative methods. For unlike fields where the object of study is a well-contained entity … political theory has a special burden. In dealing with the realm of thoughts, ideas, and truth-claims, it is not always clear when the boundary between 'ours' and 'theirs' obtains and when that boundary per se is generative of compelling questions" (xx).

question of what remaining alternative is implied in the field of political theory to account for its relationship to non-Western texts seems appropriate. The response to this problem, rather than merely denying that an engaged comparative political theory defined in this manner is almost implausible, should be to think more carefully about what option is left. March may not have set himself this task, but I want to follow through on it and to show that the implications of his argument are neither insignificant nor unproblematic. March's argument implies that if an engaged and comparative political theory is not a possibility, then our remaining alternative would be to go with the adequacy of our existing structures, that is, to integrate the study of non-Western texts and thinkers into the existing canons and methods of political theory proper, both scholarly and engaged. This would be the case for one of two reasons. Either any treatment of non-Western texts/thinkers/ideas that was scholarly rather than engaged would be nothing different from political theory proper, since political theory as it is currently practiced is already comparative in some sense;[14] or the nebulousness of boundaries between civilizations and their products, and the ensuing hybridity, synthesis, and porosity of boundaries suggest that a focus on non-Western texts that is engaged but not strictly comparative is also to be subsumed into political theory proper. What is being compared is no longer the deep distinction of autonomous doctrines stemming from religious or doctrinal difference, but simply the specific ideas of each thinker, a difference that already exists within political theory as we know it.[15] (Notice that we would still have to think about this question even if March *is* serious about the possibility of an engaged comparative political theory: March still implies that the treatment of most nonideal-type and unorthodox thinkers from all traditions should be integrated into the existing study of political theory.)

In principle, I have no objection to March's vision of a political theory in which Ibn Khaldun—as well as Gandhi, Confucius, and many others—would be studied and taught alongside Thucydides, Hobbes, and Weber, as he suggests on page xx. Indeed, I have called elsewhere for a *cosmopolitan* political thought and argued precisely against the ghettoization of thinkers by

[14]"Of course, there is no denying that non-Western traditions are rich and have other interesting things to say besides those which bear on justification or value conflict. However ... there would be nothing particularly comparative about the study of non-Western traditions that focus purely on the internal concerns of those traditions. There is no reason not to have a scholarship devoted to the noncomparative study of non-Western political thought (as, of course, we do)" (xx).

[15]See March's elaboration of thesis 2 on pp. xx–xx. See also p. x: "Comparative methods are thus already assumed to be part of the wide, variable, and diverse forms of activity which for disciplinary-organization purposes go under the name *political theory*."

tradition.[16] But the particular way in which March makes this argument relies heavily on the idea that the practice of political theory has always been comparative in some senses, which in turn leaves intact the existing structures and methods of political theory, implying that there is no need to reorganize its disciplinary practices or its methods of inquiry.[17] Suggesting that the treatment of most non-Western thinkers, texts, and ideas can unproblematically be assimilated into the existing and available practices of political theory may unwittingly end up reaffirming the hegemony of Western categories if it implies (as March's argument currently does) that Gandhi can simply be studied and taught alongside Plato and Machiavelli without any rethinking of the very categories of inquiry that structure our treatment of these texts. To suggest that political theory as it now exists is and always has been comparative is quite right in one sense. But this focus on comparison as an inherent feature of all political theory obscures important nuances. It obscures the fact that the dominance of Western political theory arises not only from its substantive foci but also from the dominance of its structures of inquiry, its practices, and methods. It also ends up denying the parochial specificity of those structures, practices, and methods by leaving them intact, rather than problematizing them. It suggests that the existing substantive and methodological canons of political theory require no reform or rethinking, and that the very ways in which political theory has thus far conducted its comparative inquiries are satisfactory to the task at hand, well-structured enough to subsume the category of a whole new kind of distinction that confronts its practitioners in new ways.

This in turn reveals another assumption embedded within the claim, namely that what is required to do good scholarly work on Gandhi or Confucius is, in the end, not any different from what is required to do good scholarly work on Aristotle, Machiavelli, or Kant. The claim that the alienness that separates us from our own ancients is no more or less mystifying than the alienness that confronts us when we read Gandhi, Kautilya, or Ibn Khaldun also lends implicit support to the hegemony and subsumptive zeal of Western categories of inquiry, and to its propensity cheerfully to engulf all other kinds of knowledge into its own tent. It suggests that most kinds of otherness can be studied as though they were, in the end, no different from the internal othernesses cleaving the category of West itself, and that political theory is comparative enough to absorb the cultural difference of

[16]See Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," *Polity* 41, no. 2 (April 2009): 135–65. I do not claim that March explicitly embraces the agenda of a global or cosmopolitan political thought, but rather that some global or cosmopolitan structure is implied in his argument.

[17]I am deeply indebted to Leigh Jenco for pushing me to think about the most radical implications of decentering the parochialism of Western political theory. See also Leigh Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?: A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007).

non-Western otherness as just another category of difference. Recently, in my own work, I have argued strenuously against such a view.[18] While it may be true that Machiavelli and Aristotle confront certain kinds of Western readers with some amount of otherness, the very movement of that Western reader within the Western tradition of political theory—her training in the tradition; her immersion in its languages, conventions, and protocols; her awareness of its history—places her in a certain kind of relationship to these texts and may subsequently place her in conversation with Machiavelli in a way that is qualitatively different from her encounter with Kautilya. This placement involves practices and methods of inquiry as well as substantive understandings, and to presume that we can unproblematically situate ourselves similarly with respect to texts and ideas from traditions beyond our own masks several important issues. To think in new ways about how to structure our inquiry into texts from other traditions requires a radical scrutiny and even rethinking of this location, at a minimum, examining carefully our own position in relationship to these texts, ideas, and traditions,[19] and perhaps even resituating ourselves in terms of the other tradition's practices of inquiry in order to understand these texts and ideas at all.[20] March's focus on the inherently comparative nature of political theorizing contains an impetus neither to recognize the centrality of these issues nor to address them.

Another important consequence of the approach March advocates is that it tends to eclipse the important fact that any thinker's placement within a tradition is a complex and tricky issue, and that this should be a central problematic within the globalizing of a political theory that may now have to account for its encounters with more than one dominant tradition of political thought. Being deeply situated within one tradition of political thought does not preclude any thinker or text from reaching conclusions that are either entirely at odds with those of her own tradition and, as a result, have a kind of transcultural resonance, whether intentionally or otherwise. This makes it (misleadingly) easy to attribute a kind of familiarity to them, but on the other hand, makes it more difficult to grapple with their position within a non-Western tradition, along with their often simultaneous placement at the confluence of various traditions (particularly in the case of more modern thinkers). In the case of someone like Gandhi, for instance, it is easy to assume that the message of nonviolence is intentionally a universally familiar one, precisely because Gandhi writes in English, using references, concepts, and idioms that are an inevitable result of his immersion in the English language, his placement as a colonial subject educated in Britain, and his resulting absorption of some Enlightenment ideals. To assume, however, that this alone makes crucial elements of his thought

[18]See Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought," 139.
[19]Ibid., 153.
[20]Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?"

either easily transcultural or intuitively more familiar to Western readers would be a mistake. The messages of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *satyagraha* (civil disobedience) may be universal, and certainly Gandhi himself may have intended for them to be so—this in itself is not a terribly novel claim to make. But any decontextualized assumption about this familiarity or transculturality that ignores how deeply these messages are situated within the Vedic language of *dharma* and Hindu metaphysical assumptions about human nature risks misunderstanding Gandhi's thought. Elsewhere, I have argued that Gandhian nonviolence can scarcely be understood without at least a basic familiarity with the hermeneutic struggle over the meaning of the term *dharma*—variously translated as sacred duty, or alignment with cosmic force of moral law—as it appears in the *Bhagavad-Gita*.[21] In fact, most of Gandhi's thought is so deeply rooted in Vedic metaphysics that at least a cursory reading of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Gandhi's own interpretive relationship to it are crucial for a complete understanding of Gandhian nonviolence. But at the same time, I have also argued that Gandhi's thought can be creatively reinterpreted to produce a new way of thinking about conflict resolution in multireligious democracies, a transcultural application that he himself never explicitly intended for the theories of *ahimsa* or *satyagraha*.[22] Such rereadings of Gandhi's thought, however, must emerge from a deep understanding of his placement within a tradition, locating the continuities and the fissures that simultaneously bind him to and make him a critical outsider to this tradition. If we understand Gandhi simply as an advocate of nonviolence and universally apply his view to any understanding of political life, we miss something, we detach it from his deeply religious and virtue-based concept of *dharma* and its role within the Vedic tradition. Nor do we get the entire picture if we see Gandhi as simply providing an internal critique of that tradition, and acting as its critical transcultural voice.[23]

In the end, of course, Gandhi is neither utterly alien to us nor utterly familiar. Nor is his work easily categorized as utterly situated or utterly transculturally intended. Seen through either Western or non-Western lenses, the encounter with otherness is rarely either utterly mystifying or entirely comprehensible. For the same reason, civilizational representation and transcultural resonance are hardly mutually exclusive. The challenge, then, is to strike a delicate balance between seeking to subsume all otherness by explaining it in terms of the familiar, suggesting, therefore, that a familiar or transcultural message is implicitly contained within the works of a given thinker, or

[21]Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought."

[22]See Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth," as well as "Gandhi's Civic *Ahimsa*: A Standard for Public Justification in Multicultural Democracies," *International Journal of Gandhian Studies* (forthcoming).

[23]Ashis Nandy uses the term *critical traditionalist* to refer to Gandhi's unique relationship to the Indian tradition. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

insisting that otherness is recognizable only to those embedded in its context and that transcultural knowledge is, therefore, impossible. It is precisely the recognition of this complexity that is obscured by the claim that we can treat Gandhi as though he were no more or less alien to us than Plato, and that we can, therefore, carry on with business as usual. Such a claim ignores the complex question of Gandhi's placement within a tradition and what meaning this placement may or may not have for his thought. More problematically, it decenters the crucial question of what the complexity of this placement means to how—or even whether—we think about our relationship to the otherness of Gandhi's thought, and indeed, of all non-Western texts and ideas.

One may claim (as March perhaps would) that any good scholarly exposition of a thinker should recognize and be able to deal internally with these problems. March's own work on Islam is, in fact, a wonderful example of such rigorous scholarly work.[24] But the problem is that the existing canons, methods, and practices of inquiry within political theory are not structured in any way that makes such a recognition central. Any reform of the field of political theory that seeks to include texts from all traditions must center these problematics and address them as crucial methodological questions, rather than leave them implicitly to the imagination of rigorous scholars. What may seem utterly self-evident to someone as highly trained in the methods of inquiry and practices of another tradition—as March no doubt is—requires far more explicit and fundamental recognition as a general methodological question pertaining to the field at large. In order to treat Ibn Khaldun or Confucius as worthy of study alongside Thucydides and Hobbes without sustaining the domination of Western categories, a more inclusive and global—and, indeed cosmopolitan—political theory must focus on the dilemma that many non-Western texts are placed at a crucial intersection of alienness and familiarity. Moreover this alienness and familiarity may not map neatly onto the ways in which our *own* thinkers are both alien and familiar to us; Gandhi is alien to us in a different way than Machiavelli is, and Plato's works may present us with a sense of familiarity that is entirely different from that which we feel when we encounter, say, Confucius. This in turn presents unique challenges to how we might structure our study of these texts, challenges that cannot be addressed by straightforwardly integrating them into existing models of inquiry. Unfortunately, the picture of a globalizing political theory that March leaves us with does no justice to the centrality of these problems, for it suggests that all that is

[24]See, for instance, Andrew March, "Islamic Foundations for a Social Contract in Non-Muslim Liberal Democracies," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007); "Sources of Moral Obligation to Non-Muslims in the 'Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities' (*Fiqh al-aqalliyyat*) Discourse," *Islamic Law and Society* 16, no. 1 (2009).

required is to incorporate the study of these thinkers into the existing practices and methods of a political theory that is, as yet, inadequately structured for the complexities of the task at hand.

Finally, March's implicit support for the hegemony of Western categories of inquiry is also reinforced by the subtle privileging of engaged over noncomparative or scholarly political theory as the ultimate warrant for addressing non-Western texts and thinkers. March insists that he does not wish to downgrade the status of scholarly political theory, and in many places, he acknowledges that it may be a richer and more rewarding kind of scholarship than purely engaged comparative political theory.[25] But he also suggests that purely scholarly work pertaining to non-Western thinkers or ideas has little capacity to add value to existing political theory by exciting the imagination of political theorists working in and on the West, or convincing them to care about ideas and texts from other traditions.[26] Comparative political theory, he claims, must aspire to be engaged rather than to be scholarly if it is to add value to what is already inherently a sufficiently comparative endeavor. But this claim fails to recognize an important potential contribution of what March would call "scholarly" or "noncomparative" political theory; namely, that scholarly treatments of a thinker, a text, or a set of ideas may have the potential not only to challenge our normative commitments but also to change entirely the sorts of questions we even ask and the problems we seek to focus on. Western political theory's dominance arises from more than simply its focus on certain texts and methods of inquiry; it also involves asking certain kinds of questions motivated by certain presuppositions and preoccupations. Leigh Jenco has reminded us splendidly that thinking within the categories of Western experience limits our ability to engage in modes of knowing and being that are removed from these categories, and that thinking within another tradition—immersing oneself in its categories of experience and practices of inquiry—may be a more effective methodological antidote to this problem of Eurocentrism.[27] Deep immersion in the sorts of things March might consider scholarly activity—immersing oneself in another tradition, its practices of inquiry, its ways of knowing and understanding the political world, its modes of questioning, and the kinds of problems it seeks to focus on—has a potentially groundbreaking contribution to make by bringing to light entirely new kinds of questions arising from

[25]See March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?": "A scholarship devoted to the noncomparative study of non-Western political thought . . . may indeed be richer and more sophisticated than various forms of comparative political theory" (xx).

[26]On p. xx, he calls it the "weaker" form of political theory. He also states that "the interest in non-Western political thought . . . merely to decenter the canon or to frame 'cross-cultural dialogue' . . . without rigorous epistemic or normative standards . . . would be nothing . . . for the broader disciplines of political science and political theory to get too excited about" (xx).

[27]Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?"

new preoccupations and new frames of inquiry. March suggests that texts from outside the Western tradition should be able to excite the imagination of political theorists trained and situated within the frameworks of the dominant Western problematics and categories, making them care about non-Western texts or ideas without having to dislodge their own frames of thought. He thus implies that it is more important to make the treatment of non-Western texts fit categories of Western inquiry and Western preoccupations than to shed critical light on or to problematize those categories and preoccupations altogether.

March may respond (and, indeed, does suggest repeatedly) that he is less interested in and/or committed to the political act of dismantling or troubling the parochialism of settled Western understandings of political life and methods of inquiry, as he is in the intellectual act of bringing rigor to the project of comparative scholarship. But it is one thing to value rigorous scholarship over affirmative action, and quite another to provide a reforming vision that implicitly contains the danger of reinforcing the intellectual and methodological hegemony. This result seems especially awkward because March suggests that the hegemony of Eurocentric categories is so obvious that no one who chose to deny it would have a leg to stand on.[28] My critiques do not necessarily suggest that March should be more committed to the project of dislocating the hegemony of Eurocentrism than he currently is, but rather that he should be more attentive to the implications of his own argument for acquiescing to—and perhaps reaffirming—that hegemony.

I have argued in this essay that Andrew March's article, while presenting an important contribution to the development of a crucial debate, leaves the reader both somewhat puzzled about its actual goal and concerned about its linkages to the dominant practices and methods of Western political inquiry. In the end, of course, I am grateful to March for having started an extremely important conversation, one that I hope to continue in spirited fashion over time. I am also grateful to him for having done so in an interesting and provocative way and for opening the door to a series of exchanges, both with each other and with our other colleagues in the field. I believe we are together in hoping for this to be the commencement, rather than the finale, of such rich and challenging exchanges.

[28] "Who today would assert with confidence that concepts and categories developed in European and North American societies are necessarily applicable to other societies? Who today would deny that European and North American societies have defined for themselves and others the dominant normative understandings of contemporary philosophical concepts?" (March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?" xx).