

This dissertation elucidates both the rationale for, as well as the appropriate method of, interpreting and applying to Western political life non-Western texts and ideas that have been excluded from the “canon” of political theory. The field of political theory is still an internal Western discussion which privileges the Western experience as definitive of human experience, and treats ideas coming from outside the Western world as having little relevance. Non-westerners have been allowed to contribute to the discipline usually only if they focus on the usual Western texts, and on the questions dealt with in these texts. Understanding the sorts of answers which emerge from “other” civilizations -- answers to questions like “What is legitimate political authority, and from where does it come?” “What is the best kind of human life?” -- increases the likelihood of constructive engagement with such civilizations. Moreover, if political theory understands itself to be the study of the best available ideas about the human good and political order, then it seems odd to privilege ideas drawn from the Western experience, without any serious examination of the alternatives. Currently, any examination of non-Western texts occurs within an emerging field known as “comparative” political theory, which tends to be practiced in an unselfconscious and ad hoc manner reflecting a lack of clarity about several issues central to its identity. This project seeks to demonstrate that methodological clarity on this issue can be gained by broadly answering four key questions: What precisely is problematic about the way political theory has been pursued up to now? How do we identify precisely what sorts of non-Western texts and ideas would “count” as appropriate subject matter for comparative scholarship? What particular hermeneutic approach is appropriate for interpretive encounter with non-Western texts? And, finally, what is the purpose of such encounters, and how, if at all, will they lead to a more cosmopolitan political theory?