

Interview with Chris Aflague, May 4, 2021

Chris Aflague 0:00

I'm Chris Aflague, and I believe I'm speaking to you about philosophy today, I think.

Zander Lu 0:15

Yep. So, Chelsea (Rissner) had mentioned that you studied philosophy in college. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

Chris Aflague 0:26

Yeah, absolutely. So when I was at my university, I started off really, as a political science major. My university had a philosophy department that was bunched in with the history department, but they didn't actually have a program. So a bunch of, basically other students and myself, we got together, we created this, like philosophy student association, basically, in essence, I think the year after I graduated, they added the philosophy major. So we did all the legwork, and all that sort of stuff to get the major incorporated into the university. Philosophy wise, we, mostly, I guess, like our brand of philosophy was, what they would have called, or what they call nowadays, like comparative philosophy, that can take a lot of different looks, but what you're really doing is just putting in conversation like two different traditions that usually weren't in conversation. In our case, it was Eastern and Western traditions. Because my, you know, that was just kind of our legacy. So we did a lot of what people will call continental philosophy, and then a lot of the ancient Eastern traditions we put in conversation with each other.

Zander Lu 1:45

What specifically did you talk about, or look into in eastern traditions?

Chris Aflague 1:51

So we were really lucky because our legacy came out of the Hawaii School with the East-West Center. And, you know, as far as the Western tradition, and like, at least contemporary sort of translations, they're known to be kind of where it's happening these days, in terms of bringing Eastern traditions into the western consciousness, I guess. We did—so, our lineage is, is a little bit. There's a long story there. But basically, we did a lot of Taoist philosophy, Buddhist, Confucian philosophy. And, you know, some of us were interested in, you know, the Hindu tradition as well. Maybe some more. It's, it's difficult with philosophy, especially when you're doing comparative philosophy, because drawing that line between the tradition of thought and philosophy is is problematic, you know, like to say the least, you know, one of the Western philosophers that I was really into, and I personally, like, studying it alive was Nietzsche, of course, and, you know, he's definitely, you know, like, one of the, the big German figures out there. But, you know, even within his philosophy, you can see where he was bringing in traces of

like Zoroastrianism, and, you know, other traditions that, you know, we'd know, these days is like, Middle Eastern traditions, you know. So it's, you know, I think that's, you know, that's a little bit, I guess, of a political response, but just political in the sense that, you know, I like to push the project of comparative philosophy.

Zander Lu 3:44

So, one thing that I've been looking at is similar to what you were looking at, in comparing Eastern and Western philosophies, I haven't been able to find much for Eastern philosophies.

Chris Aflague 4:05

One place I would direct you to, and, you know, like, these terms are even problematic in themselves, right, because Eastern and Western is such an odd division, when you're talking about thought. It really, like, has no place that's, you know, as a political science student I could have, you know, that's where the divisions come in, mostly, but philosophy itself, I don't think those divisions play. As far as directing you anywhere, I would say, like, a good place to start is the East-West Center. And they're independent of the University of Hawaii. But the University of Hawaii basically, within our, you know, my lifetime has kind of been the place to do it. They, you know, a lot of my professors' professors, were the original translators of, you know, the texts that they publish these days of like the Tao te Ching and like, you know, the analects of Confucius, and you know, a lot of the primary texts... I refer you to that, because that's what I'm familiar with. There are other schools out there, like, the—I think it's a Stanford school. I think that was more with, uh... But basically, they took a different approach of how they assimilated, uh, how they expressed Eastern thought within the Western tradition, right. And that's kind of the two projects that are going on between those two different, like, schools of comparative philosophy. The Hawaii School, the one that I'm, you know, that I studied, basically, they come at it from a Western lens of what they call continental philosophy. Are you familiar with that other division? Okay, we can get into that a little bit later, but there's basically, you know, some people will preference either continental philosophy or what we call, you know, some would call analytical philosophy. Analytical basically is like a bunch of like, you know, where you would usually group like logicians, a lot of the political theorists might get thrown in there, like, you know, John Locke and Barclay and, you know, all those folks, basically, a lot of the people that still get studied in philosophy departments these days. But the continental philosophy is much more open to like, the idea of the self being complicated, I guess, is the way I would I would phrase it; that we're not just logical beings, that you know, that there are conversations to be had, that are just as important, that may not be completely underpinned by philosophy, or excuse me, by logic, you know, that there are other realms of philosophy other than logic, and that, you know, it's we can study these and you know, we can talk about these. So, as far as you know, I guess those are the resources and why I would point you that way is you know, take a look at it at the, at the Hawaii School, anything that comes out of like the University of Hawaii, Manoa

Press they're usually pretty, pretty good stuff. There'—Is there a particular like portion of what Eastern philosophy that you want to zero in on? Or are you just...all of it?

Zander Lu 7:26

I'm trying to focus in on contemporary moral philosophy. I read a paper that was examining the classic Indian traditions and reframing it with a modern lens. Um, I read ethics of identity by Kwame Anthony Appiah.

Chris Aflague 7:58

Nice. Definitely a good start. Or not even start just great conversation to be and honestly, yeah, yeah, those are I mean, that's, that's, that's a big, those are some big topics that you're going into, and you know, you're in, you're in high school. I know, like, I wish I would have had that much straight in my head at that point. But yeah, I mean, those are, those are fantastic places to start. I think that, you know, you can start really from, like, a rigid and, like, a traditions sense. You know, chronologically paced way of learning philosophy, you know, or you can go where your interest are, in my books, philosophy is so big that, you know, I think you're kind of on the right path, not to say that you shouldn't understand the underpinnings, you know, like, you mentioned, like, looking at the Hindu tradition with in comparison to contemporary Western philosophy, right. I personally, and a lot of people I studied with, would probably argue that, you know, Hinduism, has a lot in common with platonic thought, you know, in terms of how they see reality and things like that, and a lot of the moral sort of questions and answers that come out of that have a similar, you know, manifestation, I guess, in history, you know, what I'm thinking of right now are class divisions and things like that, caste divisions. But, and there's a place where I would argue that comes from like, in terms of like, your notions of how you grasp reality, you know, like for Plato, there was always a perfect object, you know, something that was unknowable, unreachable to us like the form, basically, you know. And, you know, if you start talking, there's certain conceptions, I think that you could argue within the Hindu tradition that start, you know, edging in that way, especially if you start but there's a... You know, that's the fun part about philosophy is that you can like, listen to all these different perspectives. There's other people that argue that like things like the gunas are much more like, like Freudian drives, you know, so you can take a psychoanalytic perspective with with it, you know, ultimately, I think that we do a bad job at understanding philosophy and what we're doing when we're studying philosophy, you know, we can take a historical perspective, but I think, to me, that's a history of philosophy approach. And there are programs that do that in a great way. But philosophy for me mostly, is just teaching you how to understand thought, you know, I know that for me, after a while with philosophy, like, you know, you can come get into somebody's system. And if you're reading with them, if you're making every effort to like, understand them, you can start manipulating, like, you know, systems of thought and like, back away from them and see, like, how this thing is functioning, or at least in your mind, how you interpret that functioning. So that's like, really what I would, I guess, I don't know, I guess that's what I would say to you, is

just like, be aware of what you want to get out of philosophy. And then also be aware of, even if they're teaching you a chronological point in history, if they're teaching you a, a full philosophical book, just remember that what you're studying are modes of thought, you know. And, you know, if you can remove, we're all...we're human, we're always going to have value judgments and all that sort of stuff. But if you can suspend that for as long as you can, and just try to think along with the, the tradition, I think you'll get much more out of anything you read or anything you approach, you know, I'm not saying don't be critical, but understand first and then be critical. That was a really big answer for her for probably something I could have been a lot shorter.

Zander Lu 12:03

No, that was really great. Um, you touched on a lot of different topics. And one thing you mentioned was, at the end, what you want to get out of it? And so I'm curious what that means to you, in philosophy.

Chris Aflague 12:27

Yeah, I mean, there's, you know, if we can, like, regard philosophy as a tool, and thought as a tool, then you know, it's the world is, you know, there's any direction you'd want to go in. Like, now in life, I'm a UX designer, so I work mostly with, like, designing digital products and things like that, but you know, a huge part of, it's just trying to understand that person that I'm designing for. So if I can like, kind of get in somebody's mind, if I can understand somebody's ontology, I can understand what their reception of reality in the world is, and those things that make it hard on them, I can understand that person much better. And I can try to, you know, design for that person in a much better way.

That wasn't always my direction with philosophy. When I was studying philosophy, I definitely wanted to become a philosopher. My intention was, you know, fully to go to like grad school and do the Masters and the PhD course, and teach and write and, you know, have, you know, just basically crowd a bunch more shelves in a library that probably don't need crowding. But that was my intention at that point. It doesn't mean that that's necessarily how...that that's what I walked away with, I think that I walked away with a much better ability to look at situations that you know, might be troubling, and that might be difficult to think through, you know? Yeah, I'd say that that's kind of what I got out of it. I think—There's always going to be a level in philosophy where you're trying to place yourself in the world. Because otherwise, why would you try to understand anything, you know, but I think to me, that's one of those things that's kind of implicit in it, if you're doing it, at least in a way that I would say you're doing it well, because, you know, I would—think of all the cliches, nobody's an island, you know, again, I'll be in isolation forever. So yeah, if you can't place yourself within a frame of reference, then you're gonna have a hard time either understanding anything, period. You know, so like, the first thing to do, like, I'd say, let's say you come up on a new scene, the first thing to do is look at your feet,

and then understand what your feet are in reference to what you're looking at. So that's kind of one of the things that I walked away with from philosophy. You're constantly, in philosophy, I think if you're trying to do something sincerely, you're always trying to figure out your own biases and your own blind spots. And it doesn't mean that you necessarily disagree with those when you identify them. But you just need to be aware of them and understand how it is that they interact with, with what you're thinking about. Yeah, does that kind of along the lines of what you're asking, feel free to like, rephrase the question. And I can be more direct.

Zander Lu 15:25

Um, that was more or less where I was going. That drawing out of key concepts, not with content, but rather in ways of—in practices. Is a really powerful thought. And I read some David Foster Wallace. And he, I've read specifically, *This is Water*, in which he talks about how his Kenyon education was instrumental in the way that he perceives the world.

Chris Aflague 16:28

Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, that's, and that's a difficult thing, man. Like, I don't think that, you know, it's difficult in so many ways, because everything is constantly changing, you're never the same static being, you're always in flux you're always becoming. So, you know, frames of reference are tough, just because if you get too stuck on them, then you're always looking backwards, right? You're just gonna crash into whatever's ahead of you. But I do think that, you know, it can be a lot, like, you know, think of an athlete, right? Like, they're not thinking like, statically, right, you're not thinking, um, you know, that, for example, a basketball player is not thinking of like, Oh, this ball goes through the basket. And that's an object, a point, right? They're thinking, I'm gonna, like, flex my muscles in certain way, try to, you know, dodge the defender and get the right arc on things and hopefully, you know, all the wind and everything I'm thinking of works out and lines up in the way that I'm predicting it to. And that's, you know, what I'm trying to say there's that there's thinking in motion. No philosophical system worth its salt is ever going to be stagnant, right? Everything has to be in motion and function. For me, it's always been easy to think of things like you know, step systematically like that, like, you know, a philosophy, a definable philosophy, you can, you can think of it kind of like a machine, right? It has inputs, it has functions, that needs to be energized in a certain kind of way. And it usually has a certain logic that it follows, at least within itself. I think that there's some newer philosophy or areas of philosophical thought that... that might be up for debate. But at least up to this point, we've kind of...we've kind of held true to that.

Zander Lu 18:27

Is there any specific moral thought that you identify with? Or that particularly resonates with you?

Chris Aflague 18:36

Man, I mean, it's, you know, for me, yeah, I mean, there's, there's definitely a lot. But it's something that I think you always carry, it's, it's situational, right? Like, there's not—a moral thought doesn't exist within a vacuum, it's always in reference to some interaction, whether it's yourself in an object or yourself in another being. Yeah, it's, it's all sort of interactive, as far as moral thoughts, or moral runs of thought for me, you know, power relations, I think are something that always come to mind. And that's, you know, so much of, of is what structures, our society, our interactions, all of that sort of stuff. And I know like, and I, you know, there's a power relation in everything, like, I know, when I was much younger, like, when I was like, in middle school, I was definitely like, you know, an advocate of like, you know, kind of down with a man to not get too explicit with things. But—and that's not what I mean necessarily, by power relations. You know, power relations, I think are a lot of times, like, loaded with what your responsibility is to another. I was looking at LinkedIn this morning, and I don't know if you know this guy, I think what's his name...It's one of the motivational speakers out there, but basically like to paraphrase him badly, he said that you don't basically, like you don't become a leader to lead you become a leader to care for those that you're leading, you're choosing that responsibility. To me, like some of the better readings of, or at least, as I know, as a Westerner, in readings of Confucianism are so much about that, you know, like we we get stuck from a Western perspective, thinking of, you know, what we knew of 1970s, China and things like that. But really, it's, it's this whole thing of like, it's just a system of understanding of how it is that you're going to care for your loved ones and everybody else that you interact with, you know, like, and this is being super simplistic about a very complex tradition. But for me, like the moral thought out of Confucianism was one that always resonated, being balanced out with, you know, some thoughts, the moral thoughts that you might be able to pull out of Taoism, you know, these ideas of like, non-coercion, these ideas of elevating harmony, as, as, you know, the outcome and understanding that harmony, you know, has destruction within an as well, you know, understanding the full complexity, of, of harmony. You know, there's even like ancient Greek philosophers that you can, liken to that, oh, Heraclitus, he has like this one little fragment. Basically, like twice, and again, you can never step in the same river, right, you're gonna disturb the water, you're gonna disturb the rocks, you're going to disturb everything. It's never the same river, even though there's water flowing in the same spot that it was yesterday So yeah, I mean, like, to me, those conceptions of like non coercion, but also my responsibility to another. That's morally what sticks out to me the most. When I was in college, we—I remember, we would do a, I was a captain of the, of our ethics bowl team. And we would go down to like Florida every year and do like an ethics bowl competition. And I'm not sure if you're familiar with those, but basically, like somebody throws out a moral quandary, there's two teams one is charged with taking one stance then the other one is basically charged with breaking down their moral stance. And perhaps, like, if you're doing it well, like, you know, punching you basically just punching holes in it. It's something that, like, I know a lot of law students do. Because it helps with, like, argumentation and things like that. And like, I think the best team, consistently for a long time has been like West Point, because they get, like, ethics training from, you know, freshmen till

graduation. But it's, you know, that doesn't necessarily mean that anybody there is an ethical being in themselves, they just understand the ethical systems and manipulations and the argumentations that go into it, you know? And that's, you know, again, another long answer. And I guess what I was trying to draw at the end is that, you know, it's, it's a hard thing to do moral and ethical thought, right? Because you can't necessarily always separate yourself from it. But you also have to, like, create those moments of, of, you know, suspended disbelief to be able to understand a problem or challenge to understand another's perspective, you know. So yeah, I mean, I guess that's for me, it's like non coercion, responsibility to others. And I feel like we drew one more out there at the end. Yeah, you know, just always do your best is at the end of it like nothing is is is ideal, nothing is perfect, nothing is that shapeless, you know, everything gets shaped.

Zander Lu 24:38

Speaking of moral quandaries, one that I really like is the trolley problem. So I'm wondering what your stance on that one is.

Chris Aflague 24:47

Give it to me what's, what's the who's posing this one.

Zander Lu 24:51

There are a bunch of different variations once you get past the first most basic one. But you are on a trolley, the brakes don't work, you are going to hit five workers down the track. And you can pull a lever to divert the trolley and hit one. But do you want active, an active choice to kill someone?

Chris Aflague 25:26

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I mean, that's, that's definitely. And that's definitely like, the way the West, like Western ethical traditions would pose that question. I think that, you know, coming from other traditions, it might be posed in a different way. And that's, you know, basically has to do with, like, ideas of agency and all that kind of stuff, right? Yeah, I don't know. I mean, to me, that's, I have a hard time just because that's definitely like, not the, the flavors of philosophy that I was ever really passionate about, like, you have to understand them. But, you know, these these sort of disembodied things that we expect to lead to, like ethical axioms is just like unrealistic, right? Everything is far more complex. There's a million ways, you know, obviously, I think the the initial way that people want to respond to that is like, you know, the utilitarian. You know, Kant's, like sort of take on it, the deontological sort of answer. But yeah, you know, I don't I don't know. And I think that's always like, my favorite answer is like, I don't know. Cause you don't know, until until the moment is there? And even if you did, no, I don't know that you can necessarily represent that for everyone else. Yeah. But that's our I guess that's where like, you know, personal choice and personal outlook can kind of deviate from the philosophy that you're

studying, or the philosophy that you're trying to develop? You know? How about you? Where do you come out on this one?

Zander Lu 27:19

I am very similar to you. I really don't know what I would do. I would like to be able to say, I would go the utilitarian path. But I'm not sure that it would make sense in the moment.

Chris Aflague 27:38

Yeah, yeah. No, like you're, you know at one point, you're in an accident, at a second point, you're actively choosing, you know, to take somebody's life. And then also add another point, you don't know who these people are, and what their impact is on society, you know, that one person could be father or mother to, you know, quite the family, whereas the other folks might be, you know, single people who, you know, sounds cold, but like, let's say, you know, just really don't have to make connections and loyalty, you know, that that wouldn't have that great of an impact on somebody else's life. And that even raises the whole question of is like, is that a proper way of evaluating life? You know, I've always kind of fallen on the bandwagon of like, once you start trying to place value on life. You're kind of going in the wrong direction, you know? Because, you know, it's, it's yeah, I don't know. I mean, for me, it's always been a matter of like, the flux of everything is what's sacred to me, I suppose. But that can mean a lot of different things and look, in a lot of, you know, look a lot of different ways, I suppose.

Zander Lu 29:01

Those are all the questions that I have. Are there anything, any things that come to your mind that you'd like to talk about? Hmm.

Chris Aflague 29:13

Well, do you want to tell me a little bit about the project that you're conducting? Maybe I might have more directed information that might be helpful to you.

Zander Lu 29:21

So I've been consuming a lot of philosophical content. Um, I've been watching a Harvard miniseries by Michael Sandel. Um, I've watched a couple Crash Course videos by Hank Green and a few TED Talks. And I want to be able to turn what I take in into a series of interviews that I can then put my touch on, and put it out into the world. Bring these ideas forth that I gained, and see what people's reactions to them are.

Chris Aflague 30:21

That's pretty cool. I like what you're doing, it's pretty interesting. It's a cool idea. I like that a lot. It's like so like severely authentic in so many ways. Like, if we're talking about thought, and like the way that that we come up with thought. Yeah, I think that's, that's pretty awesome. I don't

know how to give you direction on that one. Because it's such a creative project that like to say anything, or to put anything out there, I feel like would just almost like ruin the experiment. You know, it's like, you got to be like, hands off on that one. Yeah, I think the concept is cool. If I was to give you any advice. Just think about those things that go into making a thought, right, you have to have a person that you have to have a person that can acknowledge...you know, thought and cognizant, or mean, cognizance is a dangerous word there. That's not what I mean, there so don't, like, we didn't say that word. But yeah, just be systematic, is the best I can tell you, because like these projects can, when you're trying to do something like this, it can get so big and so unwieldy. Another sort of point of advice is, feel, if your urge is to like narrow in then narrow in, you know, because this is so big. Any one little tiny question, anyone low point that we spoken about can easily easily be a dissertation for a PhD. So, you know, just acknowledge that, don't be overwhelmed by it, just acknowledge it. And, yeah, I mean, philosophically, I think that like, you know, every time like I presented at a conference, it was a very odd dynamic, because you have a lot of young people that are into philosophy, and even though we should be the most aware of our egos, there's some really huge egos out there, and philosophy. And conferences are a perfect place to see them at work. Because, you know, it's beautiful. At one point, people come, they share their ideas, they ask others to think with them. And then you get to the q&a section, and everybody's just trying to punch holes into into each other. There have been times that I've witnessed something, which is awesome, which I think, to me is the ideal. And that's where instead of trying to punch holes into somebody's thought, you think with them, and you add to their thought, and you just start seeing this, like, co-creative stream of thought of creativity of of, you know, humanity at its best, just overflowing. And that's kind of like the ideal for me, that was the rush. And that's what I always like, you know, sought in philosophy. So yeah. Yeah, so, you know, narrow in, if your question is—feels big, then make it smaller. If it feels too small, then open it up and see what direction it takes you in. It's always, like, zoom is something that I think is amazing. I don't know how like, people before, like, telescopes, and things like that might have, like, understood the world, right? Because for me, I'm so into, like, just focusing in like, at a microscopic level, and then, like, zooming out at a telescopic level, you know, like, for me, like going in the, you know, having that motion of thought is like, what helps me understand things. So, I can't imagine a world before, you know, we had those tools of thought, or we could even conceive of that idea, you know, so you got to use it. Yeah. If you want to zoom in on your question, do it, but also, like, don't forget to like, step back every now and then. And just see what that looks like, you know, as you know, not objectively but just as much yourself as you can when you're doing that.

Zander Lu 34:45

Forests and trees.

Chris Aflague 34:48

Uh, what, I'm sorry,

Zander Lu 34:49

Forests and trees.

Chris Aflague 34:51

Exactly. Exactly right. Yeah. And that's not you know, it's almost cliché, but it is for a reason always right. Like there's a there's always some degree of truth in clichés. Yeah, man, I'm trying to think. I'm sure everybody's just overwhelming you with, with stuff. Yeah, is do you? Yeah, I don't know, man, just, uh, I'd say always feel free to reach out. If there's anything I can help you out with. Let me know, always glad to help, especially anybody who's interested in philosophy and just always gonna be an old philosophy geek at heart. So any chance to talk about thought or ideas or anything like that I'm always into, especially if somebody is wanting to pursue that. I'm more than happy to share whatever tools I have left in my toolbox for that direction. And yeah, if you have questions along the way, if there's points of clarification you need you've got my email, just reach out.

Zander Lu 35:59

Thank you so much.

Chris Aflague 36:01

Pleasure meeting you, Zander, man. Good luck with everything and yeah, man. Sounds like your project's gonna be awesome, too. So keep it up. Right on.