RECENT WORK

THE MINIMAL DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGY OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY: 
A REPORT FROM A CONFERENCE

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In June of 2008, the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (ISCWP) convened its third Constructive Engagement conference, on the theme of “Comparative Philosophy Methodology.” During the opening speeches, Prof. Dunhua ZHAO, Chair of the Philosophy Department at Peking University, challenged the conference’s participants to put forward a minimal definition of “comparative philosophy” and a statement of its methods. Based on the papers from the conference and the extensive discussion that ensued, during my closing reflections at the end of the conference I offered a tentative synthesis of the conference’s conclusions. That summary has already been published on-line as part of the bi-annual ISCWP newsletter (Angle 2008). In this brief essay, I recapitulate the themes of my earlier summary and expand, in my own voice, on some of the key points.

An important goal of the conference was to bring together both practitioners and critics of comparative philosophy, in its various incarnations, to reflect on and debate the nature of our subject. There was thus no expectation that we would all agree perfectly on what “comparative philosophy” is, and on how it should be done. However, we did discover that there was considerable agreement. Most basically, it became clear that comparative philosophy has at least two potential dimensions that, while they may interact, are at least sometimes distinct from one another:

1. Use terms, ideas, or concepts from one philosophical tradition to help understand or interpret another philosophical tradition.
2. Through cross-tradition engagement, seek to advance or develop philosophy.

Depending on how one defines “philosophy,” often the “traditions” in question will not be only philosophical. Both historically and at the present moment, “Confucianism” surely can refer to many discourses and practices that are not in any obvious way philosophical. Almost all the conference participants agreed, though, that historical and

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more recent Confucian practice has included an important philosophical dimension, and thus that one can treat the tradition as philosophy for the purposes of comparative philosophy.

Not all participants agreed that comparative philosophy could successfully accomplish these goals; I will discuss in a moment some of the challenges that were articulated. In general, though, we thought that the goals could be met, and articulated some success conditions:

1. Success comes in either of the above dimensions when the work is constructive.
2. Many of us agreed that success — and constructiveness — must be measured in context. That is, what counts as an “advance” will be determined from within a given philosophical tradition, rather than from a neutral standpoint above or between traditions.
3. Some of us believed that it was possible to judge which idea or tradition was better overall, at least in some circumstances. None of us believed that one could readily judge which tradition was the absolute best.

Alasdair MacIntyre is well-known for having argued that, notwithstanding the existence of a kind of incommensurability (on which see further below), it is sometimes possible to compare two traditions and see which one is superior (MacIntyre 1988). He argues that one might come to see that one’s tradition has failed by its own lights, and furthermore that an alternative tradition can both explain this failure, and does not itself fail by its own lights. In such a case it can be rational, MacIntyre says, to adopt the alternative tradition. MacIntyre offers various possible examples, and it can also be interesting to think about Chinese advocates of “complete Westernization” in the early twentieth century in this vein. Still, even in such cases, the judgment of superiority is still made from a particular standpoint that is initially rooted in one of the two traditions.

If we set aside the type of case MacIntyre has in mind, then the only possible success criteria would seem to be internal notions of progress or fruitfulness, on the one hand, and a standpoint-independent idea of universal truth, on the other. In fact, if we grant that the only access one has to truth is via the best epistemological standards that one has so far come up with, then standpoint-independent truth will collapse into internal judgments. Therefore we seem to be on solid ground in emphasizing that success in comparative philosophy — the “constructive” kind of engagement that is referred to in the title of the conference series — is judged from within the distinct perspectives that the comparative philosopher is bringing into contact. One need not be limited to only one of the perspectives. In an essay a few years ago in comparative political philosophy, for example, I argued that if Chinese democratic centralism were to undergo certain sorts of reforms, it would then be legitimate both in its own terms, and from the standpoint of a Rawlsian “Law of Peoples” (Angle 2005). The exact significance of this result varies, depending on one’s own position; I did not offer either perspective as uniquely privileged.
Depending on the nature of the philosophical work, the ways in which its “constructiveness” might be evaluated will also vary. Current debates about the applicability of the category “virtue ethics” to early Confucianism can illustrate some of the complexities. For some (e.g., Van Norden 2007), the framework of virtue ethics can help us better interpret and understand a work like the Meng-Zi. Others have argued that this category highlights relatively unimportant aspects of the text, and leads to a misunderstanding of its actual significance in its day. Whether a “virtue ethics” approach to the Meng-Zi is constructive as regards textual understanding — the first dimension of comparative philosophy mentioned above — will depend in part on the outcome of debates like these. (It will also depend on the details of what a given scholar takes “virtue ethics” to be, since this very category is by no means univocal in current philosophical use.) If we turn to the second (“advance or develop”) dimension, we see that constructiveness will be judged by whether some version of Confucianism-as-virtue-ethics is judged to be a fruitful development of Confucianism, as seen either by someone committed to the contemporary development of Confucianism as a living philosophical tradition, or by someone interested in the development of virtue ethics in ever more robust, explanatory, or transformative ways.

Participants in the conference identified a series of challenges to comparative philosophy:

1. **Incommensurability.** If it is impossible to compare or translate, then comparative philosophy cannot succeed.
2. Some say that philosophy is simply one thing; there is no room for “comparison.”
3. A complementary worry is that different philosophical traditions lack adequate common concerns.
4. Research and teaching of comparative philosophy lacks adequate institutional support and potential students find it difficult to acquire the needed training. On this we were all in agreement.

With respect to incommensurability, most of us at the conference believed that differences between concepts or languages or traditions did not make comparison impossible. Both theoretical reasons (e.g., Donald Davidson’s argument in Davidson 1984) and practical examples (of seemingly successful comparative philosophy) were offered as evidence that this challenge could be overcome. My own view (as seen, for example, in Angle 2002) is that there is ample evidence of cross-tradition philosophical engagement despite the distinctiveness of each tradition, and that we can readily understand how such communication across differences can occur. Indeed, according to many plausible theories of linguistic meaning, communication across difference takes place even when two native speakers of the “same language” talk to one another.

Concerning the idea that “philosophy” is one specific thing, leaving no room for comparison, we should acknowledge that if philosophy is defined very narrowly, it may be that there is not enough room for the level of different development on which the possibility of comparative philosophy depends. Few of us were convinced that
philosophy is such a narrow enterprise, however. Efforts to produce a narrow definition based on early Greek “philosophia” are typically extremely ahistorical — ignoring, for example, the evidence that philosophy was understood as a “way of life” (Hadot 1995). Turning to the opposite worry, that different philosophical traditions may lack common concerns, the most basic response is simply that many scholars have in fact found areas of common concern in our work across traditions, and those of us at the conference were therefore skeptical of any a priori argument that denied we could have done this. “Common concern” does not, of course, necessitate finding identical formulations of concepts or problems; this thought returns us to the same considerations that were discussed in the previous paragraph.

The challenge of inadequate institutional support, we agreed, applies to each of our countries. Pioneering comparative philosophers in China, as in the U.S., have certainly had an impact, and there are now some institutional structures that welcome and nurture comparative research. But many barriers remain. In China, it is often difficult to be simultaneously taken seriously by specialists in different traditions, even when they share a single department. In the U.S., specialists in traditions other than the dominant Western ones are extremely rare within major graduate departments, as has recently been discussed in an issue of the APA’s Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies (Olberding 2008). We have a long way to go.

Finally, on the basis of this understanding of comparative philosophy, what could we say about its methodology? At the conference there was quite general agreement on the following characteristics of a minimal methodology:

1. Openness is fundamental, though so is the exercise of critical philosophical judgment.
2. Traditions are not monolithic, but internally diverse; our specific methods should take advantage of this.
3. The idea of family resemblance is very helpful.
4. A focus on concepts or problems is often more constructive than the comparison of individual thinkers, though there are many exceptions — particularly if the figure studied was him or herself engaged in comparative work.
5. Careful attention to issues of language and grammar is important.
6. Adequate training and adequate institutional support is critical.

There is of course a great deal that could be said about many of these characteristics, but the key is to stress that the “minimal” nature of the methodology does not mean that we each felt that a more “maximal” set of principles was needed, but could not agree on such principles. A few at the conference did indeed argue for a more demanding methodology which they felt entailed constructing a kind of neutrality among traditions or a perspectiveless perspective. In general the conference participants were not sympathetic to such an approach, and noted that some of those who advocated such an understanding of comparative philosophy did so in order to
argue that the enterprise was impossible. Most of us felt this was attacking a straw man.

The general preference for a “minimal” methodology, therefore, does not express a compromise or a lowest common denominator. Admittedly, because comparative philosophical practice is diverse, this limits the number of helpful generalizations about methodology that can be made. Nonetheless, I feel that the conference’s agreed-upon methodological principles are far from empty. The idea of openness, in particular, puts the comparative enterprise into tension with many existing research programs in philosophy that are narrowly constrained by explicit or implicit assumptions about their subject matters. Still, some at the conference commented on the minimal methodology by suggesting that there was no real difference between doing what is here characterized as “comparative philosophy” and simply doing philosophy well. This may be true: perhaps all philosophy is comparative philosophy.

REFERENCES


