EDITOR’S WORDS

To implement the constructive-engagement emphasis of the journal Comparative Philosophy in a more straightforward and engaging way, the current issue features a special section entitled “Constructive Engagement Dialogue”. It consists of two “Author-Meets-Critic” sub-sections and includes articles from seven authors and critics, respectively on two recent publications: Kristie Dotson’s “How is this Paper Philosophy?” [Comparative Philosophy, vol. 3, no. 1 (2012): 3-29] and Mohammad Azadpur’s Reason Unbound: On Spiritual Practice in Islamic Peripatetic Philosophy [SUNY Press, 2011], both of which are more or less provocative but philosophically engaging and have aroused healthy discussion in the field.

Dialogue for critical engagement has been emphasized in philosophy, as being open to reflective criticism is one defining character of philosophical exploration. No matter what specific form it takes in various philosophical traditions (say, either in a Socratic elenchus form in ancient Greek philosophy or in a bian (辨/辯) form in the pre-Han Chinese philosophy), and no matter how one characterizes and implements (a variety of) justification, various forms of philosophical dialogue share the same spirit: it is not merely an intellectual game but is intended to enhance dialogue participants’ understanding and treatment of their jointly concerned issues or topics of philosophical significance and value via critique and justification. It has thus possessed the character of engendering change in the direction of constructive cooperation and joint contribution, as addressed by Donald Davidson concerning Socratic elenchus method in this way:

…there are two vital aspects of the Socratic dialectic which transcend the mere attempt to convict a pretendor to knowledge of inconsistency. One is that both participants can hope to profit; the other is that unlike a written treatise, it represents a process which engenders change….There can be a great difference between a dispute involving people who understand each other well, and an exchange in which achieving mutual understanding is a large part of the problem. But there is even greater chasm between an exchange viewed as a situation in which the participants have clear concepts whether or not they use the same words to express those concepts, and an exchange seen as a process in which the concepts themselves come into focus. A written discussion veils this distinction almost completely. Writing reduces the number of active interpreters to one, the reader, thus

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1 Earlier versions of the author’s and critics’ writings on Reason Unbound were presented at an “Author-Meets-Critic” session, American Philosophical Association Pacific Division 2012 meeting (3rd April 2012, Seattle, USA).
eliminating the interaction of minds in which words can be bent to new uses and ideas progressively shaped.²

Davidson’s ending point in the foregoing citation is not to deny that philosophical writings can be effectively involved in a philosophical dialogue but to address one important aspect of its spirit: all participants in a reflective dialogue, whether the authors, critics or readers in this case, are expected to be open-minded and sensitive to critiques and distinct approaches so as to progressively and jointly shape and refine ideas that contribute to our understanding and treatment of the issues or topic under examination. In the above sense, the engaging discussion presented in this issue is a beginning of the dialogue, rather than its ending; it invites further interaction, reflection, critique and constructive contributions from the readers’ part as well as from the current authors’ and critics’ parts.

Indeed, the constructive-engagement exploration in comparative philosophy not only intrinsically demands, but also can significantly enhance and effectively implement, the foregoing crucial character of philosophical dialogue, specifically speaking, and philosophical exploration, general speaking: distinct approaches and resources from different philosophical traditions, whenever they are constructively relevant and contributing, can provide broad visions, complementary perspectives, and other valuable or even indispensable resources in need for philosophical dialogue to enhance our understanding and treatment of various objects of study in philosophical exploration ³ (they can be jointly concerned through appropriate philosophical interpretation and from a broader philosophical vantage point). The point can be vividly captured via a poetic adage by Su Shi, an ancient Chinese poet in the Song Dynasty: “One can’t recognize the genuine facets of Lushan Mountain, just because one has oneself caught in the midst of this very mountain.”⁴

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³ The identity of a (genuine) object of study in philosophy is understood broadly: whether it is a naturally produced object in physical reality, or an object in social reality, or an abstract object out of theoretic construction, or a ‘linguistic’ object which are introduced linguistically, or an object of philosophical inquiries as an issue or topic in philosophy, which are referentially accessible and critically communicable among participants in philosophical dialogue.
⁴ The sentence (“不識廬山真面目，只緣身在此山中” in its Chinese original) is from Su Shi (蘇軾)’s poem “Inscription on the Wall of Xilinxi Temple” (《題西林寺壁》) (my translation).