

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE (1.1)

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE IDENTITY OF AN OBJECT OF STUDY IN COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

SORAJ HONGLADAROM

Bo Mou has presented a list of methodological principles concerning how to maintain adequate methodological guiding principle in doing philosophy comparatively. Its main idea is that these principles should maintain rationality and objectivity of comparative philosophy. Perhaps the most important principle in his list is the first one: in Mou's words, "A methodological guiding principle is considered adequate (in this connection) if, given an object of study, it enables the agent to recognize that there is a way that the object objectively is such that it is not the case that "anything goes," and we can all talk about that same object even though we may say different things (concerning distinct aspects of the object) about it." (Mou 2018,1-2 [Mou 2016, 269-70]). In other words, an adequacy condition for a fruitful undertaking of comparative philosophy is that both sides recognize that there exists at least an object in common. The object presents itself as the bedrock reality, so to speak, upon which different theorization about it can take place. According to Mou, "anything goes" when even this self same object is not recognized by both sides of the philosophies being compared. Perhaps "anything goes" when one side of the philosophies being compared does not even recognize that there exists an individual object; then presumably there is nothing to be compared as both sides would talk past each other since there is nothing they are talking about in common, there being no anchor point. In this paper I would like to take up this argument and show that in some cases comparative philosophy and constructive dialogs between different philosophical traditions could indeed take place successfully even without sharing an objective individual thing that Mou argues for. This, however, does not imply that "anything goes" because both the traditions can engage in a common enterprise even though they don't share any individual object in common. My example will come from comparing Buddhist philosophy with Aristotle's philosophy on individuals. The Buddhist and the Aristotelian can, as I shall argue, engage in a very constructive dialogue with each other even though they don't share anything in common in their respective ontologies. Not sharing anything does not entail that anything goes because

HONGLADAROM, SORAJ: Professor of Philosophy, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. Email: hsoraj@chula.ac.th

the Buddhist and the Aristotelian still can debate and understand each other's point through translations of their respective vocabularies.

It is well known that Aristotle has the kind of metaphysics that recognizes that there is a core of an object such that the object is what it is. According to Aristotle, the core is "the what-it-is-to-be" the object in question. If anything the core exists objectively and does not depend on perception or conception of someone who perceives or thinks of the object for its existence. A thing may change its appearances many times, but it will always remain the same thing if it retains the core that functions as the very identity of the object, what it actually is for the object to be what it is. Thus for a human being, the what-it-is-to-be a human being would be anything that makes this particular lump of matter—flesh and blood—a real human being. The key idea is that the human being is a human being by virtue of this core entity, in the same way as the form of a bronze statue makes it that of Apollo, or Venus, or any other god. In these cases the core does not even have to be an objectively existing entity; the core is not like the pit of a fruit, i.e., something concretely existing inside an object that gives the object its identity. The core in Aristotle's sense can be abstract in the same way as whatever form that the status of Apollo has makes it a status of Apollo and not of somebody else. In any case, the core, the essence of the object, has to be *objective*. Its existence does not depend on there being observers who perceive the object and conceive of it as that of Apollo, or a human being. Apolloness, if I may speak of such thing, is already there inside the essential form of the Apollo statue.

It would seem, then, that in order to follow Mou's First Methodological Principle, the essence of a thing would be an ideal candidate. It would seem that any methodologically sound comparative philosophy would have to recognize the essence here and get the philosophies that are being compared to recognize its existence. In other words, any task of comparative philosophy would not be methodologically sound if the philosophies being compared do not recognize the existence of the essence of an individual object. In Mou's words, let me repeat, "we can all talk about that same object even though we may say different things (concerning distinct aspects of the object) about it." An implication of this seems to be that 'we' (implying that it is a group of representatives of the different philosophical traditions that are getting together and discuss things together) all recognize that there is the object in question; we may differ about what we say to be the properties of this particular object, but at least we agree that there *is* the object before us whose properties we are debating about. It seems from the language used by Mou as he puts forward his theses that if there is no recognition of this common object, then "anything goes," perhaps meaning that everything becomes open and no truth can be ascertained whatsoever. It is comparable to the situation in formal logic when the premise of an argument is a contradiction, which opens up the conclusion in such a way that the latter can be any proposition whatsoever. In the case of formal logic, literally, anything can go as conclusion when the premise is a contradiction. Perhaps what Mou has in mind is that, without the object which is commonly recognized, then there will be nothing to talk about when the representatives of different philosophical traditions come to talk

together. The common object thus functions as an anchor tying the different strands together, preventing everything to go its own way.

However, in Buddhism the situation is completely different. It is also well known that Buddhist philosophy does not admit the existence of the core of an object in the Aristotelian sense. One of the key important themes in Buddhist philosophy (of all lineages and traditions) is that of the Three Characteristics: All things share the following three characteristics, namely they are impermanent (*anityā*), liable to change (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anātman*). These three characteristics are supposed to be true of everything with no exception. What concerns us the most here is the last characteristics. Non-self here means that everything lacks whatever it is that is the core of its identity in such a way that the individual derives its being—its characteristics as being the thing that it is—from it. Nāgārjuna calls this core identity *svabhāva*, literally ‘self-being’. The idea here is uncannily similar to Aristotle’s: the *svabhāva* of a thing is whatever that makes the thing what it is—it is the *self* of a thing; a thing may change its appearances wildly, but as long as its self or *svabhāva* remains the same, the thing retains its identity. Of course Nāgārjuna argues that *svabhāva* does not exist, and this is a rigorous formulation of the Third Characteristic, *svabhāva* being nothing more than the core identity that each thing supposedly has in order to make it what it is. But without a *svabhāva* the Buddhist accepts that nothing exactly speaking is what it really is. This is in fact what the Doctrine of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) says. Everything, according to the Doctrine, is empty of its inherent characteristics such that these characteristics make up what it really is. There is a debate among Buddhist philosophers whether this Doctrine is paradoxical or not. One camp, basically speaking, argues that it is not, as deeper down there is another level of understanding of the situation such that the paradox is only apparent. The other camp, on the contrary, argues that the paradox is there and cannot be resolved. We need not concern ourselves with the internal debates among Buddhists here in this paper. The point is that no matter what tradition a Buddhist belongs to, they accept the Doctrines of the Three Characteristics and of Emptiness. All Buddhists accept that, strictly speaking, nothing exactly is what it is because it lacks anything working as its own core identity, its *svabhāva*. (In fact the Buddhist has a number of elaborate arguments designed to justify the claim that there is no *svabhāva*, most notably from Nāgārjuna, but again these do not need to concern us here in the paper.)

We can thus imagine a situation where an Aristotelian and a Buddhist engages with each other on their respective metaphysics. The point of contention, obviously, is whether, to put it in the Aristotelian language, there is an essence to an individual, or, to put it in the Buddhist language, whether an individual has a *svabhāva*, or its own *ātman* (self). But of course in order for both sides to continue the debate, they need to make sure that the terms can be translated one into the other. Suppose that both sides can speak the same language (which is easier today than in ancient times because nowadays most philosophers, east or west, speak and write in English), then they can talk about their respective basic vocabularies. We can imagine the Buddhist explaining to the Aristotelian what is a *svabhāva* and what is the Doctrine of Three Characteristics, and we can also imagine the Aristotelian doing likewise. Certainly

there will be many rough edges that need to be ironed out before the actual debate can proceed. Each term has its own web of meaning comprising its own respective philosophy, but after a while we can imagine that both sides will come to an agreement on how the terms are going to be translated, which means that both sides come to understand at least the basic outlines of each other's philosophy. The point of contention will remain, of course. The Buddhist will maintain that the Aristotelian essence, which he compares with his own *svabhāva*, does not exist, while the Aristotelian will maintain that the Buddhist *svabhāva*, which he regards as the counterpart of his own the what-it-is-to-be, must exist in order for each individual object to exist at all. Then the two sides can debate in earnest. I do not believe that there could be any resolution in the debate, however. The positions of the two philosophies are so well entrenched and both can be fully justified according to its own system and vocabulary that it is difficult to imagine one side being convinced by the argument of the other. Perhaps in the end both sides might agree to disagree, or at least come to an agreement that at one level things are as one side says and at another level things are as what the other side says. But even this level of agreement is hard to imagine that it can take place in an actual debate between the two sides.

This is where Mou's Methodological Principles are necessary. In order for the debate between the Buddhist and the Aristotelian to be fruitful and constructive, some rules need to be there and shared by both. Mou's principles indeed capture what is needed for the dialog at this very high level of philosophical sophistication. However, to maintain that both sides in the dialog recognize that the subject matter being talked about need to exist is too strong. The Buddhist does not recognize the existence of *svabhāva*; in fact he explicitly argues that it does not exist, and anyone who believes that it exists suffers from an illusion. Thus the Buddhist cannot accept Mou's first rule. In other words, Mou's first rule here could be interpreted as taking side, favoring the Aristotelian.

What Mou could do, then, is to modify his Principle and say instead that the first rule does not exactly require that both sides in the debate accept that the object being talked about exists. Perhaps the first rule should say only that in a debate like this, where the existence of the object being debated on is itself in question, the existence of the object is not required, but the description of the object itself—what it is like, what its properties are, and so on—be accepted by both sides. In this case the description of the *svabhāva* by the Buddhist could well be accepted by the Aristotelian, and likewise for the Buddhist accepting the description of the Aristotelian essence. That in itself would be a laudable accomplishment, for Buddhism and Aristotelianism existed far apart, if not in time, but in distance and in highly different cultural and historical milieux. Not requiring that the object in question must exist does not have to lead to the situation where anything goes because it is the common understanding of the description of the object in question that prevents the situation from happening.

So the requirement that there be a common object turns into one where there be a common *description* of an object of discussion. This requires that there is a sufficiently strong calibration between the languages of the two sides of the debate, so

much so that we could say that there should be a common *meaning* that is recognized by both sides, and in order to establish that there be a common meaning both sides need to understand each other. We thus land ourselves in a hermeneutic circle. In order to have a fruitful constructive dialog, both sides need to understand the other sufficiently, but in order to do so some common meanings need to be established. One way to resolve this dilemma is of course to learn what the other side has to say; we can imagine a scenario where a proponent of Buddhist philosophy, say, enter Aristotle's Lyceum and study the Master's ideas so that the Buddhist can reformulate the Master's views in his own system of Buddhist vocabulary, and certainly we can imagine the reverse situation too. In today's world this has been made much easier due to the common academic language of English, but still in order to engage fruitfully in comparative philosophy, one needs to be well versed in both, so much so that, it seems, one can pass oneself off as a proponent either of the two traditions one is comparing. The imagined Buddhist, studying under Aristotle, would presumably be proficient enough in the Master's own philosophy so that he could expound on the latter's philosophy and defending it against attacks. But of course deep down he is a Buddhist and he does not believe in the core of Aristotle's philosophy. And likewise for the Aristotelian studying Buddhist philosophy.

Thus perhaps the number one methodological principle could be that either side knows the content of the other side well enough to be able to understand the point and the arguments of the other's side fully. This can only be done only after a long effort at trying to understand the other's point, having lived in the atmosphere of the other sufficiently long enough, so much so that he can pass for being a native, so to speak. A possible challenge to Mou's First Principle is how one knows that the object being discussed in comparative philosophy is one and the same. Mou's example is filial piety, which seems to be the common theme of both Confucius and Socrates (Mou, 2018, 3 [Mou 2016, 270]). However, in this case the object in question does exist. One side is not arguing that filial piety does not exist. So Mou's First Principle has to answer this charge of how to tell that both sides are actually talking about the same thing, and I have answered that both sides need to share largely the same description of the thing being talked about. This can only be done if both sides speak a common language as we have seen, and a necessary condition for this is that both sides understand the other's position well enough. So the issue becomes a search for an anchor of common meaning so as to act as a guarantee that both sides do really understand each other even if they do not agree. Common meaning can only be established through long period of assimilation into the atmosphere, or the world, of the other side. Practically speaking, this means that the practitioners of comparative philosophy need to double their time and effort in studying philosophy. They not only have to master their own native tradition; they instead must belong to two native traditions, in the same way as one who is a bilingual can switch back and forth effortlessly between two languages. This is why comparative philosophy is among the hardest of all philosophical undertakings.

In fact there are two ways of doing comparative philosophy. One way is to engage in a dialog with the members of the other tradition that one is comparing one's own

tradition with. We can imagine a Chinese philosopher, Mou himself perhaps, engaging in a constructive dialog with a Western analytic philosopher. In this case both are doing philosophy in the sense that they both are interested in finding a solution to the philosophical problems. For example, the Western philosopher and the Chinese philosopher may be engaging with each other on the ethics of filial piety—whether the children owe any moral duties to their parents simply by virtue of the fact that they are the latter’s own children. This topic has not been much discussed in Western ethics, but the point here is that both sides are deliberating with each other, summoning the resources of their respective tradition, in order to find a satisfactory answer to the question. In this case I have argued that both sides need to be so well-versed in the other’s tradition as to pass as a native of the other tradition. For without such deep common understanding, the dialog could not be as fruitful as it could be, as the comparative task would then be little more than a learning of rather superficial summaries of the other’s position. For example, the Western philosopher who is superficially familiar with Confucianism would learn only about the brief outline of what Confucianism has to say about filial piety, and the same goes also for the Confucian philosopher learning what the West has to offer. In this case, in order for both sides really to benefit from the dialog, both sides need to become the other’s student, learning from the other and taking rather long time doing it. Obviously the same goes for the Aristotelian and the Buddhist philosophers too. Furthermore, we can also imagine further and conceive of a philosopher who is so proficient in both traditions that she can conduct the comparative work all on her own. She may be thinking about whether there is in fact the essence of a thing and marshal the resources of both Aristotle’s and the Buddhist philosophies to help solve the problem. In case she is a Buddhist, she then would need to understand Aristotle’s argument fully in order to think up a counter-argument which purports to justify her own argument in light of Aristotle’s powerful view. In this sense perhaps comparative philosophy ceases to become *comparative* since both traditions have become native in the philosopher’s mind.

The other way of doing comparative philosophy is that of a scholar or a historian of philosophy. In this case the main objective is not as much to find the truth behind the problems but only to understand the nuances, arguments and complex ideas behind each of the traditions being compared. The two ways here thus reflect the usual separation between the task of a philosopher and that of a historian of philosophy. Certainly such a separation cannot be fully made, and the task of one usually spills out onto the domain of the other. But we can still imagine someone whose main task is not, for example, to find out whether *svabhāva* does exist and once found to argue for it wholeheartedly. This is because for him the main task is to understand exactly what *svabhāva* actually means for Nāgārjuna or for the Buddha himself, as well as what kind of historical, cultural and intellectual contexts surrounded both Buddhist Masters in their times. Sometimes we find both the scholar and the philosopher in one person, but often it is not the case.

The difference between these two ways is their attitude toward truth. The philosopher wants to know the truth—whether there exists in fact the Aristotelian

essence, or whether in fact children owe some moral duties to their parents. The historian, on the contrary, does not want to know those; instead he wants to know another kind of truth—how we are to understand what is meant by Aristotle, Confucian, or the Buddha, but not whether what is said by these ancient philosopher is actually true or false. For the philosopher, the methodological principles have become one's own principles when one is doing any kind of philosophy. It is part of the methodology such as one saying that the "Strawman Argument" should be avoided. In the same way as one should avoid claiming that the perspective of the other side is not valid or viable, one should also avoid creating a "strawman" when one discusses the view of one's opponent. Alternatively, the historian should also avoid being biased against one of the traditions that he is studying. The work of the historian of philosophy should not such that the traditions being compared turn out to be a situation where one tradition is superior to the other in every way. For example, the historian would be in breach of the methodological principle (one that governs scholarship in general, and not only in philosophy) if he has some hidden agenda and tries to make one tradition look better than the other under the guise of neutrality and objectivity. Mou's Principles should emphasize this point more prominently. In this sense the philosopher would also undermine the strength of her argumentation if she violates the Principles and make a strawman out of the positions that oppose her own.

One thing, however, remains a thorny issue. What justifies the Methodological Principles? Suppose one is comparing two different philosophical traditions (either as a philosopher or a historian) and follow Mou's set, then the question becomes: Which philosophical tradition do Mou's Principles fall under? This is an important question, and if not answered correctly it could lead to still further biases and lack of rigorous scholarship. If the Principles are the products of Western philosophy, then it shows that Western philosophy has precedence over the other, non-western tradition that is being compared with it, precisely because the methodology governing the comparison falls under the domain of Western philosophy. This is a complex issue that deserves a fuller treatment on its own in another paper. But at least I think I can give a sketch of an answer here. We have talked about a hypothetical Buddhist coming all the way from India to study under Aristotle in the Lyceum. We imagine that the Buddhist, having studied with the Master for some time, becomes quite internalized in the Master's philosophy and thus is able to compare both Buddhist and Aristotelian philosophies in his own mind. Here the methodological principles he is using, if he is to remain a viable and rigorous philosopher, cannot literally speaking belong to any tradition being compared. It has to be neutral and stand apart from the traditions. The principles need to be clearly metarules. Its status as neutral metarules can only emerge after a long period of internalization as I have said before, and even so it can only emerge piecemeal, as a result of trials and errors when the result of the comparison by the Buddhist in our example is presented to the wider circle of philosophers, both Greek and Indian. In the absence of an absolute gold standard of philosophical truth, this is all we have. To speak of the matter in contemporary terms, this means that methodological principles such as Mou's cannot belong to any tradition in particular (such as Western analytic philosophy) but has to belong to all

traditions at the same time. This is the condition of possibility for the different traditions to speak and understand one another.

REFERENCES

- Mou, Bo (2018), "On Adequacy Conditions for How to Adequately Maintain Methodological Guiding Principles to Look at Distinct Approaches", presented at the 24th World Congress of Philosophy, 15th August 2018, Beijing, China. [Editorial note: the partial contents of this unpublished paper under the engaging discussion in this "Constructive-Engagement Dialogue" section previously appear in Bo Mou (2016), "How Constructive Engagement in Doing Philosophy Comparative is Possible", *Synthesis Philosophica* 62.2: 265-277; the interested reader can see them in this published article.]