Moving beyond identity: reading the Zhuangzi and Levinas as resources for comparative philosophy
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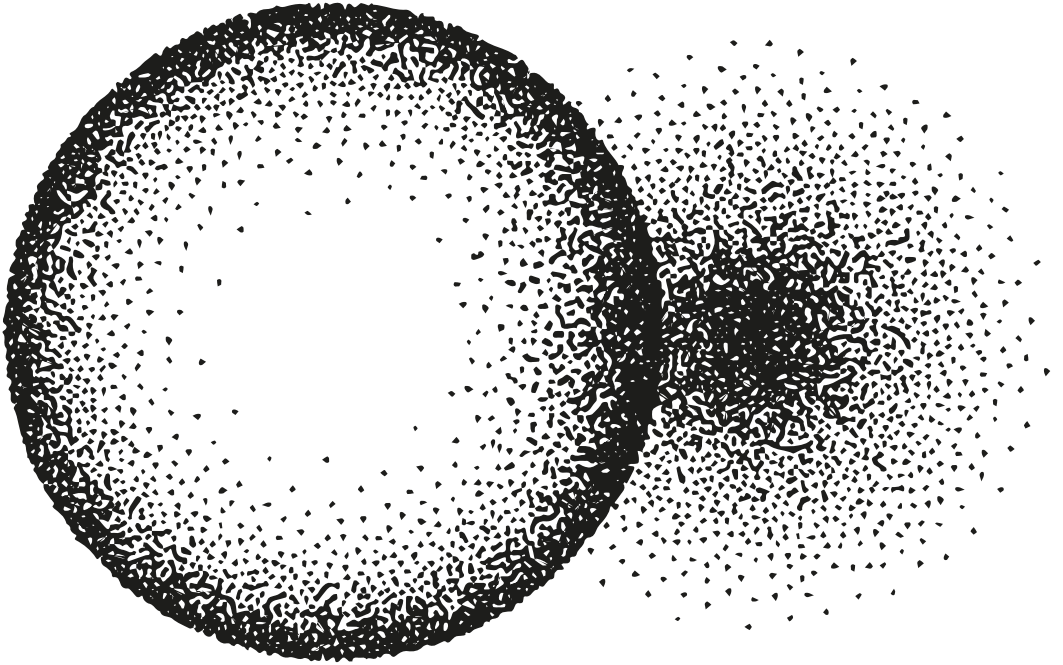
Introduction

§1.1 Doing Comparative Philosophy

In this dissertation, I present Emmanuel Levinas' work on the ethical relation and the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s articulation of the "pivot of *dào*" (*dàoshū*, 道樞) as important resources to reconceptualize comparative philosophy and to be able to attune to the tension in comparative philosophy between difference and sameness. Instead of current methodologies that are based on what culturally divergent philosophical concepts or thinkers have in common, this study aims to show how the position of the person doing the comparison must be taken into account, and which calls for the need to reflect on ethical competence as a necessary precondition for comparative philosophy. Ethical competence allows comparative philosophers to approach the cultural other in the most open way possible and to attune to the otherness of the cultural other. The challenge that the comparative philosopher faces is how to create a cross-cultural encounter that avoids the theoretical colonization of the other and does not rely on biases of cultural philosophical traditions in particular. The dissertation will articulate a conception of ethical competence based on the work of Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Their thinking on the self-other relation can help us to reconceptualize comparative philosophy in the face of issues and challenges in the modern and post-colonial academic setting.

Comparison is a fundamental aspect of philosophical research, yet it becomes problematic when we want to compare concepts from disparate cultural philosophical traditions and the concepts we want to compare are sufficiently divergent that we can no longer assume a common ground. Several problems of incommensurability, such as linguistic, foundational and evaluative incommensurability, threaten the comparative project and call for the need to reflect on what comparative philosophy is and how we should practice it.

Comparative philosophy as an academic discipline tries to discern similarities between culturally disparate philosophical concepts, and is motivated by the desire to learn from and understand a divergent cultural philosophical tradition. The aim is to expand our culturally confined perspective and acquire new meaning(s) by engaging with another cultural philosophical tradition; which suggests that expanding our own perspective is dependent upon the relation to the other.[1] The specific nature of comparative philosophy lies in the encounter with the other; the comparative encounter is valued because this other is deemed radically different to one's own tradition.

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[1] Connolly, T. (2015). Doing Philosophy Comparatively, Bloomsbury, 22-24.

Current methodologies in comparative philosophy try to secure the comparative encounter by showing how concepts or conceptual systems between distinct cultural philosophical traditions can be seen as "quasi-universals" and resemble in some ways. Although we need to rely on these points of commonalities to initiate the comparative project, I will call attention to the importance of being able to approach others in an open, critical and reflective way. I will argue that comparative philosophy needs to cultivate a non-totalizing relation between self and other, which more specifically entails that comparative philosophers needs to overcome their rigid patterns of thinking and have the responsibility to take the otherness of the other into account.

In philosophical research, the specific perspective of the person who is doing the comparison influences what is compared and in what respect. After all, what these concepts mean and entail, is dependent upon the particular interpretation of the person doing the comparison. Scholars such as Rorty (1991) argue that comparison between disparate cultural philosophical traditions is not a workable practice because truth and falsity and our way of reasoning, are the result of differing cultural conventions and standards of assessment. In a minimal sense, we can say that comparative philosophy is challenged by conceptual relativism, which calls for the need to reflect on how we are dependent on conceptual schemes, categorical frameworks and paradigms and how this dependence influences the comparative project. Concepts can be easily compared within the same ontological tradition, but this exercise becomes challenging when we try to understand concepts from a distinct cultural and philosophical tradition and cannot assume a common ground.

§1.2 Comparing the Incomparable: The *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas

Comparative philosophy is initiated by the desire to expand one's own perspective and understand and learn from another cultural philosophical tradition. Comparative philosophers can however never approach the other in a neutral way, but always remain shackled to their own cultural perspective. They interpret and translate concepts from another tradition into their own language and their choice of methodology and concepts influence the comparison. Comparative philosophy is thus a hermeneutical practice in which comparative philosophers try to match concepts from different traditions.

Comparative philosophy seeks to justify the comparison of disparate cultural philosophical traditions by arguing that some concepts can be seen as "family resemblance categories." Slingerland (2004) and Ma and van Brakel (2016) argue for example that some concepts bear a resemblance to concepts found in many other cultural traditions because these concepts are all drawn from human interaction with reality.[2] Ma and van Brakel (2016), Kwok-Ying Lau (2016) and Chai (2020) argue that the family resemblance method is particularly suited to encourage comparison between East Asian and Western philosophy, in which, specifically, Chinese Daoism and the Western phenomenological tradition are seen as sufficiently alike to produce fruitful comparisons.[3] Several studies have compared Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze to the early Daoist texts the *Dàodéjīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ* and argue that these philosophies share similar philosophical insights.

Other studies have addressed the interconnection between the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Wu Meiyao (2014) for example provides a Daoist, Derridean and Levinasian reading of the Hundun parable that concludes Chapter 7 of the Zhuāngzǐ. Meiyao argues that the sentence "Hundun treats them very well" (待之甚善) might be understood as Hundun's ability to be purely open to the otherness of emperors Shun and Hu. These rulers continually meet in the land of Hundun, and in exchange for the latter's hospitality, drill seven holes in Hundun to "make him more human," which accidentally kills Hundun. Meiyao particularly emphasizes the relevance of the Levinasian reading of the parable and the ethical significance of the face-to-face encounter, for according to Meiyao: "after all Hundun or Chaos is also a Face, perhaps only a face, one whose original 'blankness' is destroyed."[4] Ellen Zhang (2017) provides a Levinasian reading of the ethical in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, arguing that the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s transfiguration of the self is based on the encounter with the other; a "constellation," concludes Zhang, "which resonates with Levinas' theme."[5]

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[2] Brakel, J. van & Lin, M. "Comparative Relativism" Common Knowledge, 17 No.1 (2011): 1-12.; Slingerland, E. (2004). "Conceptual Metaphor Theory as Methodology for Comparative Religion," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 72 No 4, 1-31.

[3] Brakel, van & Lin. Comparative Relativism; Kwok-Ying, L. (2016). Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding. Toward a New Cultural Flesh, Springer.; Chai, D. (2020). Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology: Thinking Interculturally about Human Existence. Bloomsbury.

[4] Meiyao, W. "Hundun's Hospitality: Daoist, Derridean and Levinasian Readings of Zhuangzi's Parable" Educational Philosophy and Theory, 46 No. 13 (2014):1442.

[5] Zhang, E.Y. "The Face/Facelessness of the Other – A Levinasian Reading of the Ethical of the Zhuāngzǐ" Front. Philos. China, 12 No. 4 (2017):533.

The apparent resonance between the *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas is also addressed in Zhao's essay, in which she compares Levinas' notion of subjectivity to the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s "non-being self."[6] In her essay, Zhao criticizes several studies that have compared Levinas' notion of the responsible self to the responsible self in Confucius. According to Zhao, Confucius and Levinas are incomparable because the foundation upon which Levinas builds his notion of the self is irreconcilable with the foundation from which Confucius draws. Zhao argues however that Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* can be compared, because they both build their notion of the self on "pre-ego, pre-reflective experiences."[7]

In this dissertation, I want to reflect on claims made in comparative philosophy in which A and B are seen as targets of "the right comparison," that is to say, on assertions about what is comparable and not. I want to show that these assertions rely on a rigid distinction between what is comparable and not comparable and are not compatible with the nature of comparative philosophy as a discipline that is hospitable to a variety of methods, approaches and possibilities. Instead of claiming what is comparatively "so" or "not so," it is my aim to show that comparative philosophy has a much broader meaning.

It is my contention to show that comparative philosophy is part of an intercultural conversation that allows us to reconsider how we represent others and helps us in overcoming our biases. By formulating a critical-transformational intercultural position in which the comparative philosopher reflects on the self-other relation and actively tries to become open to the other, this study tries to make comparative philosophy more sensitive to the tension between difference and similarity inherent in the comparative encounter.

§1.3 Comparative Philosophy and the Problem of the Tertium

When we want to learn from the other and the other's perspectives and want to transcend our own cultural horizon, we need to reflect on the hermeneutics of comparison. Weber (2014) distinguishes four aspects of comparison: (1) comparison is always done by someone, (2) at least two relata (*comparata*) are compared, (3) the *comparata* are compared in some respect (*tertium*

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[6] Zhao, G. "Transcendence, Freedom, and Ethics in Lévinas subjectivity and the Zhuāngzǐ's non-being Self" Philosophy East & West, 65 No. 1 (2015): 66.

[7] Ibid., 67

comparationis), and (4) the result of the comparison is a relation between the *comparata* on the basis of the chosen *tertium*. Weber argues that objectivity in comparative philosophy cannot be easily obtained, because the comparative process is influenced by the comparer's "pre-comparative assertion of commonality." This "pre-comparative assertion of commonality" informs the decision which *comparata* and *tertium* are chosen and serves as a privileged vantage point from which to carry out the comparison.[8]

Weber and Xinli Wang (2018) argue that the success of comparative philosophy largely rests on unquestioned notions of comparison.[9] In several studies, scholars do not offer criteria for the validity of the comparative process, nor address how the pre-comparative assertion of commonality influences the comparison. Wang, whilst providing an analysis of the incommensurability of concepts derived from different cultural symbolic traditions, also shows how comparative philosophers do not reflect on their own assumptions and commitments. He concludes that comparative philosophy has not overcome cultural relativism, but merely assumes that relativism poses no threat anymore.[10] Comparative philosophy should therefore reflect on the comparative process, and should pay attention to prejudices and assertions that influence the comparative outcome. This entails that comparative philosophy as a hermeneutical practice should reflect on the position of the persons doing the comparison and how their attitudes, beliefs and emotional commitments influence what is compared and in what respect.

Comparative philosophy is a human affair and involves thinking about and interacting with another cultural tradition, and because tradition is formed by humans there are always concepts that show similarities with the concepts that we used in our tradition. Nevertheless, what is compared with what and in what respect, as well as which method is chosen is dependent upon the specific background and emotional investment of the person doing the comparison. The pre-comparative assertion of commonality reveals the emotional investment of comparative philosophers, because it is formed by what interests them and what they see as a relevant and productive comparison.

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[8] Weber, R. "Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?" *Dao*, 13 (2014):169

[9] Ibid.,169.; Wang, X. "Incommensurability and Comparative Philosophy" *Philosophy East & West*, 68 No. 2 (2018):564

[10] Wang. *Incommensurability and Comparative Philosophy*, 566

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The praxis of comparative philosophy requires thus the reflection on the persons doing the comparison and a critical assessment of their stance. Weber argues therefore that philosophers should justify their choices of *comparata* and their choice of the *tertium* to make the comparative process more transparent.[11] While reflection on the comparative process is certainly needed, merely justifying their choices will not be enough to avoid the problem of cultural philosophical hegemony, as it does not reflect upon the tension between sameness and difference. Comparatie philosophers need to do more than justifying their choices; they need an ethical commitment to become open to the cultural other and to avoid cultural imperialism as much as possible.

The comparative process is dependent upon the cultural horizon of the persons doing the comparison, which entails that comparative philosophy generates a variety of different perspectives on what is comparable and in what respect. Instead of seeing comparative philosophy as a discipline that reveals the truth about what is objectively "comparable" and what is not, we need to see comparative philosophy as a discipline that generates a variety of different, sometimes incompatible, perspectives. Truth in comparative philosophy is not related to what is comparable and what is not, but is concerned with the commitment to avoid the theoretical colonization of the cultural other, showing that comparative philosophers need to approach the other and the other perspectives in an unbiased and responsible way. The question that this study aims to address is how and in which way comparative philosophers can approach the other and the other's perspectives so that they can expand their perspective without colonizing the other. In other words, comparative philosophers need to be committed to openness in order to engage critically and transformative with regard to the other. The other is not only the cultural other who we try to understand, but also the community of comparative philosophers to whom we discuss our claims and findings. The point is that we need to allow for an open and responsible conversation with others in which we should accept to be constantly challenged and questioned in our beliefs and presuppositions.

Weber and Chakrabarti (2015) argue that comparative philosophy needs to adopt a borderless discourse that draws upon philosophical resources from across a variety of cultural philosophical traditions so that their horizons are fused and a space is created for "conceptual thinking outside all sorts of

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[11] Kahteran, N. "Towards Post-Comparative Philosophy: Interview with Ralph Weber" *Asian Studies*. 9 No.2 (2012):218

boxes."[12] Weber and Chakrabarti give some compelling insights in the nature of comparative philosophy. They suggest that cross-cultural philosophy cannot claim to have reached the truth and that there is no correct way of doing cross-cultural philosophy, recognizing that no rules can be set up on the right way to approach the other and the other's perspectives. They emphasize that the person doing the comparison is allowed to appropriate elements from a variety of different traditions, but only for the sake of solving problems and/or raising problems that have not yet been considered. In line with this requirement, Weber and Chakrabarti argue that deconstruction is not a fruitful method to practice comparative philosophy, as it does not help us to solve or raise unfamiliar problems.

But is solving philosophical problems and raising new ones the only aim of comparative or intercultural philosophy? Does not the value of the cross-cultural encounter also consists in being confronted with the cultural otherness of the other; a moment in which comparative philosophers are forced to question certain commitments and beliefs they have? Comparative philosophy is more than solving philosophical problems and raising new ones; it also has an ethical aspect and is motivated by overcoming stereotypical representations of the other. When comparative philosophy wants to pay attention to this ethical aspect, it needs to reflect on the comparative philosophers who are doing the comparison and how they can approach the cultural other in the most open and sensitive way possible.

§1.4 The Problem of Theoretical Colonization

The main aim of comparative philosophy is to understand and learn from a cultural divergent philosophical tradition. Comparative philosophers can only genuinely learn and understand another cultural tradition when they approach to other as an equal valuable philosophical tradition. Privileging our own beliefs, assumptions and attitudes prevents us from transcending our cultural philosophical perspective and denies the unique value of the other cultural tradition, the latter of which is a staple of colonialism.

Western philosophy has benefited from and continues to benefit from colonization, particularly by promoting the assumed neutrality of its enlightened

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[12] Chakrabarti, A & Weber, R. (eds.) (2015). *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 218.

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"humanism," that relates to a series of commitments to human reasoning, freedom and truth. In the *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon articulated the need to call into question the colonial situation, which he described as a world based on exclusion, a world "obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic."[13] The rationality of the universal refers to the belief that the Western epistemological tradition provides the tools to understand, capture and analyze the entire world. This rationality relies on a sharp demarcation between what is "self" and "other" in which that what is other is seen as inferior.

The relation between identity and difference, between same and other, has played a vital role in the Western history of philosophy and is the pervading principle behind theoretical colonization. Decolonization as a historical process that criticizes and assesses the several ways that theoretical colonization has left an imprint on human thinking, language, practices and culture, pushes Western philosophy to reflect on its assumptions and to take responsibility for its colonizing tendencies. Silva (2019) emphasizes that epistemic injustice occurs when indigenous ways of thinking are devalued through relying on the logic of an externally constituted commonality, leading to the exploitation of "any commonalities they had with the colonized and reject inconvenient differences."[14] It is therefore important to reflect upon the inherent tension between sameness and difference when we compare different cultural philosophical traditions. This study will show that a certain kind of ethical competence in which comparative philosophers embody certain beliefs, emotions and comportments that enable them to respond in an open, flexible way to the cultural other. This form of ethical competence is needed in comparative philosophy to respond to the problem of theoretical colonization and epistemic injustice.

Furthermore, as a discipline that wishes to understand and learn from another cultural philosophical tradition, comparative philosophy needs to reflect on and respond to the tendency of Western philosophy to see its standards as ultimate. Learning and understanding from another cultural philosophical tradition is not merely valuable when it can help us to solve a certain problem or in order to explore novel issues, but also lies in the encounter itself; learning from the other means being questioned by that other and critically assessing

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[13] Fanon, F. (2001). *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin Books, 28
[14] Silva, G.J. (2019). "Comparative Philosophy and Decolonial Struggle. The epistemic Injustice of Colonization and Liberation of Human Reason" *Southern Journal of Philosophy*. 57, Nᵒ S1, 107-134

our assumptions and beliefs. In order for decolonization to be realized, we need to critically examine the nature of the comparative praxis and endorse a philosophical discourse of intellectual tolerance. Ethical competence is formulated in this study as the willingness to embrace a variety of different perspectives and methods and is motivated by the desire to move beyond the boundaries of one's own culture and is a necessary surplus to the existing practice of comparative philosophy.

The willingness to embrace a variety of different perspectives, does not entail that comparative philosophy should become a "borderless" philosophy or a "fusion" philosophy because this tends to a situation in which we no longer critically reflect on how our own choices, emotions and background influence the comparative process. In *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (2015) Weber and Chakrabarti define fusion philosophy as a philosophy in which no philosopher, philosophy or philosophical tradition can suppose that they have reached the truth, but which does not lead to unproductive deconstructive consequences. This is why Weber and Chakrabarti introduce the standard of using a variety of different perspectives to sustain an argument.[15] They justify their method by pointing to the fact that this is already what comparative philosophy does at this moment. Normalizing what we already do is however not convincing, especially when we tend to do comparative philosophy based on unquestioned assumptions and do not reflect on the problem that comparing is always dependent on the specific perspective of the person doing the comparison.

While using a plurality of standards rather than one standard alone does allow us to reflect on a problem or issue from different points of view, it does not effectively address the problem of bias and theoretical colonization. Comparative philosophers who can use a variety of different standards from a variety of cultural philosophical traditions are practically competent but might not be willing to critically reflect on the way they represent the distinct cultural philosophical traditions. Comparative philosophy should be committed to challenge stereotypical representations of other cultural philosophical traditions and this aim can only be realized when we ask the question what is needed for comparative philosophers to approach the other in most respective and open way.

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[15] Chakrabarti, A & Weber, R. (eds.) (2015). *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 24

Comparative philosophy should therefore take the self-other relation into account and should reflect on the position of comparative philosophers, a position that entails their beliefs, comportments and commitments and influences how they approach the comparative project. The relation to the other is not only a creative moment in which we can explore new meanings and issues, but it is also a self-transformative moment that helps us to discover the contingency and confinements of our own perspective. Thinking with and through another cultural philosophical perspective helps us to move beyond the contingency and confinements of our own perspective, while at the same time being limited by it.

Comparative philosophy works within an intercultural context and needs to be seen as a form of intercultural communication aimed at intellectual tolerance, understanding of a distinct cultural tradition and respect of the otherness of the other. In this study I will show that comparative philosophers should become ethically competent and need to embody openness, flexibility and indeterminacy in which they actively try to deconstruct any emotional commitment or rigid patterns of thinking that interferes with the intercultural encounter. Comparative philosophers can approach the cultural other in the most open way possible when they take the task of philosophy as a discipline that desires to learn from the cultural other seriously. It is my contention to show in this study that Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* can help us to see how we can respond to the otherness of the other and approach the cultural other in the most flexible, open and non-colonizing way.

§1.5 The *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas: Reconfiguring the Self-Other Relation

Methodologies in comparative philosophy tend to focus on bridging the gap between two or more cultural philosophical traditions so that concepts and conceptual schemes can be fruitfully compared. Few studies consider the undeniable influence of the persons doing the comparison and the way their commitments influence the comparison. By drawing on the need to take responsibility for the self-other relation, translated as the willingness to become open to a variety of different perspectives and methods, this study seeks to broaden the conception of comparative philosophy.

Instead of comparing Levinas to the *Zhuāngzǐ*, this study will present their thinking as important resources for comparative philosophy. Levinas contributes to our understanding of the necessity of transcendence that gives comparative philosophy a prior indispensable ethical orientation. Levinas' analysis of the relation between immanence, violence provides an intercultural praxis to engage responsibly and critically with regard to the cultural other.

Levinas' primary aim is to show how the transcendence of the Other is constitutive for the self. The Other in Levinas' work is an ambiguous term that is a translation of Levinas' use of *l'Autre, l'autre* or *Autrui*. Adriaan Peperzak (1993) has paid attention to the difficulty of translating these terms and points to the fact that Levinas is not always consistent in the use of these terms.[16] In this study I apply Levinas' thinking to understand and clarify the nature and practice of comparative philosophy. I will relate Levinas' ethical relation to our approach of the cultural other, primarily because Levinas' ethical relation is not grounded in any form of commonality. The "Other" refer in Levinas' work to a relation in which "[the Other] and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say "you" or "we" is not a plural of the "I"."[17] The Other refers to any person whose radical alterity stays exterior, remains infinitely outside of what the self can know or grasp.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) rejects an identity-oriented recognition that assumes that the subject can grasp and represent another human being entirely. He criticizes the Western metaphysical tradition, which to him amounts to a thinking that is preoccupied with conceiving truth as the encompassing of all there is. The Western philosophical tradition has the tendency to reduce everything that is other to the same, a tendency that culminates in Hegel's idealism in which the neutral term "spirit" reduces any relation to relation of self-knowledge, or self-consciousness. This conception of relationality reduces everything that is other to the same and leads to the construction of a wholly immanent world. Levinas argues that Western philosophy has failed to think transcendence or radical exteriority (the Other), as pure exteriority, a relation that precedes the opposition between difference and identity.

Although Levinas is not a philosopher of culture, he has written two essays,
- *La signification et le sens* (1972) and *Détermination philosophique de l'idée*

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[16] Peperzak, A. (1993). *To the Other, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Purdue University Press, 18-19.
[17] TI:39; TeI: 10

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de culture (1986)-, that specifically address the variety of cultural expressions and their relationship with the encounter with the Other. In his entire work, Levinas tries to show how the ontological realm, a wholly immanent world in which nothing is exterior, needs the surplus of transcendence that gives it its ethical orientation. Transcendence is in Levinas' work translated as the infinite responsibility of the self for the Other and which gives cultures their ethical orientation. Transcendence is the higher culture that makes concretely realizing meaning of communal life possible.

Levinas rethinks the becoming of the subject to reveal that the self is already infinite responsibility to each and every human being prior to any choice or commitment. In rethinking the becoming of the subject, Levinas stumbles upon the subject's desire for the beyond being, a desire to be "otherwise-than-being." The desire for the *otherwise-than-being* is conceived by Levinas as the Cartesian relation to infinity. The relation to the infinite is a passive relation, a relation not contracted nor assumed, but that nevertheless constitutes me. Levinas interprets this relation as the divine relation of pure goodness, a relation of transcendence that is grounded in the Jewish command to be one's brother's keeper. The self as the chosen one responsible for the Other takes part in the universal and sacred history of fraternity: human fraternity is grounded in each person being his or her brother's keeper.

Levinas' articulation of the self that is infinitely responsible to his brothers originates in the ethical-religious transcendence of the Other. For Levinas, the immanent world cannot provide a non-allergic relation to the Other, because all relationality is explained in terms of a neutral term, which he classifies as "ontological imperialism."[18] Levinas' critique on a wholly immanent world is also voiced in *la Signification et le Sens* in which he criticizes both theoretical absolutism as moral relativism. "Morality," writes Levinas, "does not belong to culture: it enables one to judge it; it discovers the dimension of height."[19] Culture is not the ultimate horizon of meaning but receives its ethical orientation from the transcendental relation to the Other.

Cultural expressions are a constant re-arrangement of meaning in a totality, is always incarnate and realized in its historical context. In *Détermination Philosophique de l'Idée de Culture* Levinas argues that each culture originates in communion with being, in which cultural expressions can become esthetic

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[18] TI:38/39; TeI:10
[19] CPP:100; HA:54

objects of idolization, and the approach to being becomes one of pure enjoyment. Disparate cultural traditions are as such independent totalities that have nothing in common. This would leave us without any orientation to evaluate and judge the cultural other.

Transcendence gives the cultural communal world its absolute ethical orientation, an ethical orientation that originates in the personal face-to-face-relation derived from the transcendence of the Other. Levinas criticizes philosophical theories that see meaning as wholly immanent and rejects the anti-Platonism of modern philosophy. At the same time, Levinas draws on a different understanding of how to think being that originates in the same Judeo-Greek tradition. His conception of transcendence is revealed in the Western monotheistic tradition, which is why Levinas argues that the cultural other needs to be translated into the Greek-Judeo tradition[20]. In the end, Levinas' philosophical thinking of transcendence seems to privilege Western or European philosophy because it has revealed the prior significance of the ethical relation that can provide the immanent world its ultimate orientation. Scholars such as Caygill (2002) and McGettigan (2006) argue that Levinas' Eurocentrism makes it difficult to use him for postcolonial purposes.

Although we critically need to reflect on Levinas' thinking about the cultural other and his alleged Eurocentrism, his articulation of the self as an ethical vocation to the Other helps us to reconfigure the self-other relation as an embodied personal relation that provides comparative philosophy with a discourse ethics of responsibility. More specifically, Levinas' critique on a wholly immanent world highlights the connection between knowledge of the other and the theoretical colonization of the other. Instead of solely focusing on knowing the other, Levinas calls for the need to take the otherness of the other into account, and to respond to the Other who infinitely interrupts our usurpation of the world. The self and the other are in Levinas not identical terms who have nothing to offer to each other but engage in a profound unbalanced relation in which the self is passively exposed to the speaking of the Other, a pre-original meaning that makes communal meaning possible.

Levinas' emphasis on the tension between the self and the other and his emphasis on the fact that the other cannot be known but always remains Other, helps us to consider the complex process of gaining knowledge of the cultural other and the ethical vocation to the Other in which we always already

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[20] Mortley, R. (1991). *French Philosophies in Conversation*, Routledge, 18.

respond to the Other as our interlocutor. To genuinely converse with the Other implies seeing the comparative process as an embodied face-to-face encounter with an unknown alterity that infinitely interrupts our discursive activities. Levinas emphasizes the radical alterity of the other, an alterity that resists being reduced to something known to me, even though this ethical otherness produces an ontological separation that gives the self the ability to capture the other in concepts and categories. Levinas however recognizes that for practical purposes infinite responsibility for the Other needs to become an action to respond to the call, an action that originates in the self's freedom and implies that the self can refuse or ignore the infinite call.

Levinas' work is important to comparative philosophy because it shows us how the radical otherness of the other is respected when we honor the space between sameness and difference and approach the cultural other without the expectation of mutual understanding. Philosophy is not the search for the all-encompassing truth, but as an activity inspired by the desire for the Other, a desire that triggers questions about social justice and radical alterity. Nevertheless, this desire for the other is a source of trauma, a continuous disturbance of any firm belief that we know how to understand the cultural other.

Levinas' emphasizes the dialogical nature of human interaction but argues that it is the "relation to the Other" that opens primordial discourse. Ethics and transcendence precede and make cultures and immanence possible. It is the Greek-Judea tradition that has shown us the significance of transcendence for human discourse, which is why Levinas claims that other cultures who lack the articulation of the precedence of transcendence need to be translated. Instead of dismissing Levinas' work as Eurocentric, I will turn to Derrida's work on the duty of Europe to answer the question what this privilege of the Western tradition consists in. A Levinasian/Derridean reading of privilege entails the commitment to be always questioned and deconstructed in one's beliefs and presuppositions about the other.

The task for comparative philosophy is the willingness to adopt a critical-transformation attitude in which comparative philosophers try to move beyond identity. In this study, I will introduce the proto-daoist text the *Zhuāngzǐ* as the resource that can help us to see how we can adopt this critical-transformational attitude. The *Zhuāngzǐ* can be seen as a necessary surplus to the Levinasian/Derridean framework, particularly because the *Zhuāngzǐ* seeks to liberate the self from its conflated sense of self-identity and proposes practical strategies to

see the interconnection between self and other without unifying self and other into a whole. One of the crucial passages in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is its articulation of the "pivot of *dào*"; a position in which persons approaches a variety of perspectives from a position in which they do no longer rely on objective standards of evaluations and are freed from dogmatic patterns of thinking. In the pivot, the person affirms the rightness of each perspective while at the same time denying their absolute truth, revealing that right and wrong are only locally situated value judgments that create artificial distinctions that justify their respective norms.

 The *Zhuāngzǐ* favors a position in which we creatively and spontaneously can respond to different situations and are not restrained by emotional commitments and rigid patterns of thinking. When we have liberated ourselves from mental, personal and social constraints and train ourselves to become empty and wandering philosophers, we are most open to the other and the other's perspectives and can see their value while also seeing their limitations. The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s rejection of disputation (*biàn*, 辯) can furthermore help us to formulate a more inclusive conception of philosophy in which we are hospitable to a variety of methods, practices and approaches.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is a collection of texts that dates from a span of time between the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), a period also known as the period of the "hundred schools" (*Zhūzǐ Bǎijiā*, 諸子百家), a period also known as the "pre-Qin period," or the period of the "Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods," and the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE-9 CE). The pre-Qin period was a period in Chinese history of near-constant civil war and social and political upheaval in which states and political actors were constantly fighting for prestige, authority and wealth. In this time, philosophy was seen as intellectual disputation (*biàn*, 辯), as most of the time intellectual debates were concerned with the best way to govern a state, the moral values that needed to be cultivated and which way (*dào*, 道) should be pursued.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* responded to an epistemological crisis that revolved around whether the alternatives humaneness (*rén*, 仁) or justice (*yì*, 義) should be pursued as the guiding principle of governing.[21] Instead of emphasizing the cultivation of our heart-mind (*xīn*, 心) and the ritualization of the body (*gōng*,

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[21] Jiang, T. (2021). *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China. Contestation of Humaneness, Justice, and Personal Freedom*, Oxford University Press

躬) as the other major schools of the period recommended, the *Zhuāngzǐ* sought to liberate a person from mental, personal and social constraints.

The text endorses an ideal of the genuine person (*zhēnren*, 真人), the sage who has freed himself from traditional social values and approaches the different relations in which he finds himself from a flexible and adaptive attitude. It stresses the importance of self-adaptation to a world that consists of a variety of different perspectives and a universe that is constantly generating, transforming and changing the infinite number of people and things. The overarching theme in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is how we can respond harmoniously to the myriad of things that are presented to us and how we can align with them in a non-invasive way. One of the central concerns of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is the reformulation of the self-other relation. The *Zhuāngzǐ* seeks a positive affirmation of the self-other relation in which self and other are equalized in their difference, which the text calls the "great equalizer" or the "pivot of *dào*". In the pivot, persons are able to affirm themselves in relation to other things and approach the various perspectives as equal to their own, as they recognize that they are simultanesouly "self" and "other".

The *Zhuāngzǐ* proposes that we should "find the pivot of *dào*" or "stay in the middle," a position in which persons are able to shift between different perspectives, enabling them to see the situation in a clear, non-biased way. The sage who possesses greater knowledge, - a knowledge of not-knowing-, embraces indeterminacy and doubt as a way of life, and is able to harmonize the different perspectives by equalizing them and abiding in the "truth of Heaven". The "truth of Heaven" refers in the text to the way Heaven is impartial and sees the different perspectives as expressions and treats them thus as One, and "the truth of the earth" that nourishes and gives space to all of these different perspectives in an equal way.

The central claim of the text is that humankind has lost its natural spontaneity to align harmoniously with the myriad things by clinging to artificial schemes and beliefs. The *Zhuāngzǐ* observes that much of human suffering originates from the heart-mind's clinging to "so" and "not so" evaluations and our belief that we can know in advance what is wrong and what is right. Instead of privileging the heart-mind as the governor of all the other organs, we should restore our natural spontaneity through adopting a wandering, empty and mirroring heart-mind. In a state of carefree wandering (*xiāoyáoyóu*, 逍遥遊)) a person is liberated from mental, personal and social constraints and can affirm life as it is (*zìrán*, 自然).

This means that we accept the infinite flow of self-transformation in which each perspective carries out its own destiny without the need for interference.

The Sages who respond from a position of emotional equanimity to the different perspectives, occupies the best perspective because they reside in the "pivot of *dào*." The pivot of *dào* is a receptive, hospitable perspective in which a person recognizes that valuing "this" is dependent upon "that" and this person is as such able to see "both sides simultaneously." This entails that the sage has transcended the self-other dichotomy and affirms the togetherness of self and other without dissolving their uniqueness. Being free of preferences and constancy sheds an impartial light on things, giving a person the advantage of seeing things more clearly and from different angles. Self-adaptation and the ability to approach perspectives in an impartial way is preferred above perspectives that see themselves as ultimate and cling to their subjective preferences and in which the other is approach as the negation of the self.

In this dissertation, I will argue that self-adaptation and the attempt to become free of rigid patterns of thinking enables us to approach another cultural philosophical tradition as "equally different" to our own tradition. This study argues that current methodologies that are based on the assertion of commonality to bring two radical different traditions together need the surplus of ethical competence that takes the otherness of the cultural other into account. Current methodologies in comparative philosophy are based on the minimization of difference and are ill equipped to take the incompleteness and indeterminacy that marks comparative philosophy into account. Based on the readings of Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, this study provides an alternative understanding of comparative philosophy in which comparative philosophy is seen as a form of intercultural communication in which ethical competence as the need for self-transformation is incorporated. This study will outline what ethical competence consists in and how we can make comparative philosophy more sensitive to critical-transformational discourse.

§1.6 Pursuit and Relevance of the Study

Comparative philosophy seeks to identify similarities and differences, raises philosophical problems and tries to raise novel issues by making use of a variety of perspectives from disparate philosophical traditions. Comparative philosophy is based on the self-other relation in which the other cultural

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philosophical tradition is, presumably, valued and approached because of its otherness. Nevertheless, current methodologies all rely on the assertion of commonality and tend to erase differences between disparate cultural philosophical traditions.

The main problem in comparative philosophy is the theoretical colonization of the other by privileging our own assumptions, beliefs and judgments, a tendency that originates in the erasure or neglect of the value of differences. The relation between self and other is a relation of difference that at the same time can be related as similar in a multiplicity of various aspects. This study looks for a way to take the tension between difference and sameness in the comparative project into account.

In this dissertation, I will reflect on problems and issues in comparative philosophy in the light of the self-other relation. The main challenge to comparative philosophy is not to reduce differences to unity, as this inevitably leads to the dichotomy of "comparable and incomparable" and a neglect of aspects that do not fit in a given category. Instead, I will show how meaning in comparative philosophy is produced in relation to the other, a relation in which self and other can be related in their difference. I will show that this calls for the need to reflect on how and in what way comparative philosophers can become ethical competent and can resist the tendency to rely on static conceptions and rigid patterns of thinking. I will show that ethical competence is the willingness to transforming ourselves as an attempt to move beyond identity. Ethical competence entails furthermore that we should see comparative philosophy as a discipline that consists of a variety of different, sometimes incompatible, perspectives. Perspectivism enables us to reformulate the self-other relation and to affirm the togetherness of self and other in their difference.

Perspectivism emphasizes that knowledge is not objective but contextual and is the result of human practices. This leads to the achievement of epistemic humility; the assertion that when our knowledge of the world is filtered, interpreted and constructed by our faculties, dispositions and situations, there is no such thing as "real," "pure," or "objective" knowledge.[22] Perspectivism does not claim that there is no such thing as correspondence with reality, but argues that this correspondence is always specific, situated within the perspectives in question. In holding that "all knowledge is dependent upon a perspective"

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[22] Matthews, D. (2006). "Epistemic Humility. A View from the Philosophy of Science" In: J.P. van Gigch (eds.). *Wisdom, Knowledge, and Management*, Springer, 105-137

it presupposes the objectivity of dependence, situatedness and the limitations that these entails.

Ethical competence thus consists in recognizing that there are a multitude of perspectives available to comparative philosophy, but also urges for the need to deconstruct our conflated sense of self-identity and self-centeredness, as this will give us the opportunity to see the richness and diversity of cultural others and are more inclined to take cultural others they are. In this dissertation I will concentrate on answering the following question:

> *How can comparative philosophy employ a critical-transformational discourse that helps us to approach the cultural other in an open way?*

This study argues that Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* can help comparative philosophy to articulate a critical-transformational discourse grounded in responsibility and provisionality. Adopting a critical-transformational discourse also enables us to formulate a more inclusive conception of comparative philosophy that is hospitable to a variety of different methods, practices and approaches. The study itself also will be an attempt to practice ethical competence by comparing Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* in respect to self-transformational discourse while attempting to approach them on their own terms.

Levinas' thinking is of fundamental importance to comparative philosophy because he sees philosophy as a liminal practice that oscillates between ethics and politics. Ethics is the personal relation between two unique people in which the *I* bears absolute and infinite responsibility to the particular, unique other person. Levinas' thinking on cultural formation shows how cultural expressions are dependent upon communal being and has the tendency to erase differences. Levinas' thinking provides comparative philosophy with the insight that we should consider the ethical dimension of the comparative project and to take the embodied relation between the self and the cultural other into account. This is a relation beyond the powers of the self, a relation that questions those powers and is as such a form of ethical competence in which the self is *non-competent*. This study will show how the Zhuāngzǐ's articulation of the "pivot of dào" (*dàoshū*, 道樞) enables us to give us valuable insights in what ethical competence without being competent might entail.

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The *Zhuāngzǐ* complements Levinas' perspective by showing how "this" is always simultaneously created with "that," and that what is "this" or "that" is the result of a certain perspective affirming it as "this" or "that." The *Zhuāngzǐ* shows how our clinging to preferences and *shìfēǐ*("so" and "not so") distinctions prevent us from enlarging our perspective. Adopting an all-encompassing perspective is the best way to relate to a multitude of perspectives, because the person who embraces this perspective stands in relation to the whole and sees that each perspective has some rightness to it. Emptying the heart-mind and seeing the variety of different perspectives from the "pivot of *dào*," enables the comparative philosopher to adopt a perspective in which the philosopher affirms the uniqueness of each of these perspectives but also understands how these perspectives are limited and dependent upon each other.

The current dissertation combines the insights of Levinas and the *Zhuāngzi* to articulate a form of ethical competence aimed at self-transformation and critical thinking in which the comparative philosopher is committed to respond to a variety of perspectives in an open, less-biased way. The argumentative structure of this dissertation is as follows: I will start with a reflection on comparative (intercultural) philosophy and its history. In this second chapter I will discuss the general theory of comparison and how the comparative process is a constructed process and depends on the background, choices and interpretations of the person doing the comparison. I will show how different methods available to the comparative philosopher cannot eliminate nor reduce this subjective involvement. I will specifically pay attention to how current methods tend to erase differences. The chapter will conclude that the subjective involvement calls for the need to investigate the ethical aspects of the self-other relation.

In the third chapter, I will trace the movement in Levinas' work to rethink the relation between self and other. I will specifically focus on the relation between transcendence, immanence and culture. The main aim of this chapter is to answer the question of whether Levinas can sufficiently take the otherness of the cultural other into account especially in the light of his alleged Eurocentrism. I will outline how Levinas indeed privileges the Greek-Judeo-tradition and how transcendence as the relation of pure goodness is related to sacred fraternity. In contrast to McGettigan (2005) and Drabinski (2013), I will conclude that Levinas' Eurocentrism is the result of his critique on a wholly immanent world that cannot give the relation to the cultural an ethical orientation which is not based on any commonality. In the last part of this chapter, I will investigate how

Levinas redefines transcendence as the tension between self and Other within the self. By relying on Derrida's view on Europe, I will try to show how seeing Europe as the privileged place or tradition can be translated as the infinite task to move beyond identity. I will conclude that this task calls for an embodied form of ethical competence in which the comparative philosopher tries to take this task serious.

Chapter Four is introduced as an answer to the question how we can embrace ethical competence as the willingness to move beyond identity. I will show how ethical competence calls for a position in which comparative philosophers have deconstructed their egocentric self and have dissolved the self-other dichotomy. Self-transformation in the *Zhuāngzǐ* restores the natural spontaneity and freedom of the self and is done to free the self from artificial constraints so that the natural interconnection between self and other is restored. The pivot of *dào* is the position in which the person responds to the other and the other's perspectives with the most clarity (*míng*, 明), mainly because the self is no longer disturbed by intense emotions. In this chapter, the philosophy of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is presented as a quest for liberating human beings from mental, social and personal constraints that will as a consequence help us to approach the other and the other's perspectives in a responsive and adaptive way.

In the fifth chapter I will answer the question of how the readings of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas can help us to understand the nature of comparative philosophy in the light of the self-other relation. I will show that comparative philosophy will always be marked by undecidability, provisionality and struggle, which is nevertheless a "fine risk to run," as the encounter enables us to transcend our confined perspective and adopt a broader, more encompassing position. In this chapter I will introduce ethical competence as necessary for comparative philosophers and outline what ethical competence entails. Ethical competence as the responsiveness to the otherness of the other entails that we as philosophers become aware of our biases and reflect critically on our motives and preferences in the light of the encounter with what is other. I will show how comparative philosophers can become responsive to the infinite task to move beyond identity by abiding to the pivot of *dào*. Abiding to the pivot entails that comparative philosophers quell expectations and disputations by taking infinite responsibility to deconstruct their views on language, knowledge, truth, morality and conventional logic so that they can approach the other and the other's perspective in the most open way. In the end, I will reflect on a few limitations of the current study, which mainly revolves around the question of

whether comparative philosophers should eschew debates and how they need to respond to other perspectives that are incompatible with the central task of comparative philosophy.

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