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

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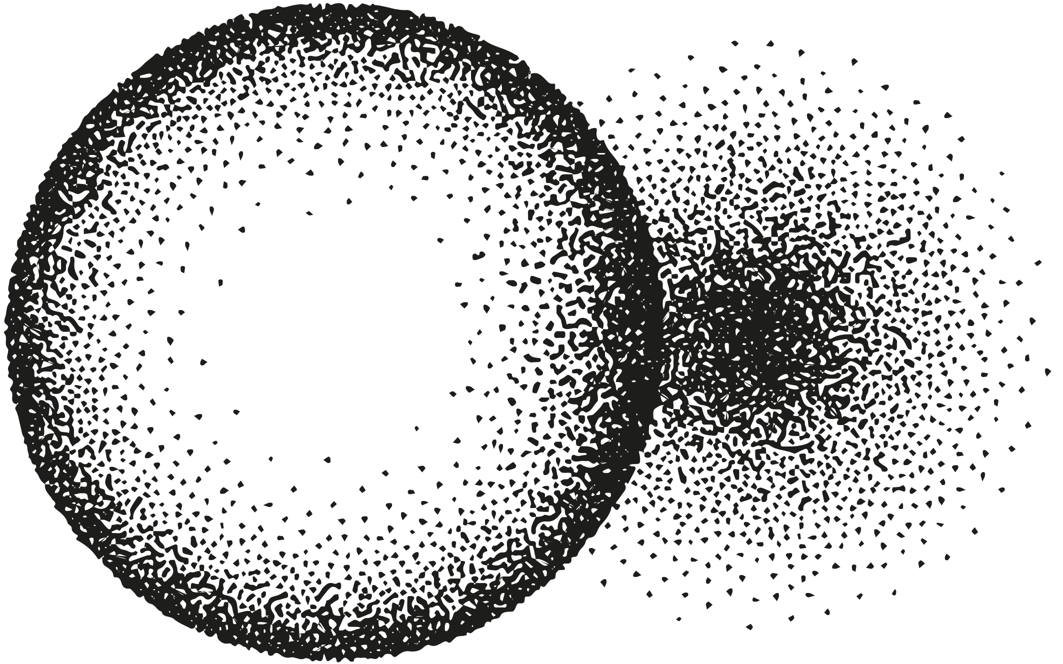

Chapter 2

The Theory of Comparison and its Methods

In this chapter I will criticize the unexplored presuppositions and biases in the prevailing methodological approaches to comparative philosophy and will conclude that comparison is bound to the interpretive perspective of the person doing the comparison. I will conclude that we need to see comparative philosophy as a form of intercultural communication in which philosophers need to become ethical competent. It is my aim to show that is not only important to reflect on methods of how we can compare concepts and conceptual schemes from different cultural philosophical traditions, but that it is equally important to reflect on the role of comparative philosophers and how their biases influence the comparative process.

This chapter will discuss methodological and hermeneutical approaches to comparative philosophy and will give a short overview of its development as an academic discipline. I will discuss the variety of challenges and issues of comparison and will reflect on the hermeneutics of comparison. I will accomplish the aims of this chapter first through a critique on overtly thematized approaches to comparative philosophy that have mostly developed in the last century. I will also arrive at the chapter's conclusion through a rehearsal of the development of philosophical hermeneutics through Heidegger and Gadamer, since hermeneutics is so essential to the methodological approaches that comparative philosophy, as a modern academic discipline, embraces. That is to say, both an analysis of the methodologies adopted by the modern comparative philosopher and of the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, on which comparative philosophy has heretofore been based, will help us see how deliberate methodologies of comparative philosophy remained shackled in the perspective of the person doing the comparing. The hermeneutic circle, which always ensures that the comparative interpreters will to a significant degree remain within the borders of their own cultural presuppositions, leaves comparative philosophy with no way to adequately address its self-chosen hermeneutic limitations. This problem alerts us, then, to the need for a more fundamental transformation of the philosophical attitude of openness to the perspective of the other, an openness that can best be achieved through the ethical obligations to otherness that Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* provide us.

§2.1 Comparative Philosophy as a Discipline

Philosophy, as the love of wisdom[23] is reflective in character and always involves a certain degree of comparison. Philosophers develop their thinking not in a social and historical vacuum but are participants in the cultural traditions to which they respond. Neither does a cultural philosophical tradition emerge in isolation; it is always affected and influenced by other traditions, due to human migration and military conquest.

Although intercultural philosophy is not a mere Western initiative and philosophy has been seen in merely all traditions as a universal enterprise, I will focus my critique on the modern Western approaches to comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophy should not only aim for comparing concepts and conceptual systems and discerning similarities and differences between disparate cultural philosophical traditions but should also aim to promote intercultural understanding. The aim of this study is to encourage cross-cultural ethical competence as a way to avoid stereotypes or clichés about cultures and disparate philosophies and as a necessary precondition for cross-cultural or intercultural conversation. The focal point of my argument concerns the need to expand the debate over the significance of the position of the persons doing the comparison and the ways their beliefs, comportments and emotions influence the comparative process.

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[23] The term "philosophy" already foreshadows the challenges of translation and interpretation and raises the question of whether we can refer to Chinese "philosophy". Philosophy in the Western world does not have a univocal meaning; it can refer to a general way of living, but also to specific branches of philosophy such as epistemology and ethics. Just like ancient Greek philosophers, ancient Chinese thinkers were concerned with how to harmonize human relations and which qualities, conduct and virtues needed to be valued. They were also concerned with the inclinations of human nature and the question of evil. Although their rhetorical style and argumentation differ, the questions that they try to answer are, I would say, philosophical in nature. "Philosophy" is translated as 哲學. The meaning of the word 哲 gives us an understanding of the differences between "Chinese philosophy" and "Western philosophy". The *Hànyǔ dàcídiǎn* (漢語大辭典) explains 哲 as: (1). Illuminated wisdom, (2) a person who is worthy and clear-sighted, (3) to know, to understand. (*Hànyǔ dàcídiǎn,* edited by Luó Zhúfēng (Shanghai: Cishu chubanshe,1993), 3:350-3).. The *Oxford Dictionary* explains the word as "The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline." (lexico.com). We do however need to consider that哲學 is a modern neologism introduced by the Japanese scholar Nishi amane. Amane introduced the term *tetsugaku* to mediate the Western sense of philosophy in Chinese and Japanese. See: Nakamura, H. (1988). "The Meaning of the Terms "Philosophy" and "Religion" in Various Translations" In: G.T. Larson & E. Deutsch, *Interpreting Across Boundaries. New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 149.

Doing philosophy in the age of globalization begs the need to take cross-cultural influences into account and to reflect on the philosophical implications of globalization.[24] While cross-cultural philosophy has always been part of the history of philosophy, it has hitherto never been questioned as a troublesome activity. In the postmodern era, philosophers are more aware of the implicit colonization or what Edward Said called "orientalism" when engaging with another cultural philosophical tradition. Otherwise said, philosophers who engage in cross-cultural philosophy are now more inclined to reflect on the self-other relation and the need to approach the other as an equally valuable tradition.

Comparative philosophy is an attempt to leave the beaten track and to move across the boundaries of culturally distinct philosophical traditions. Comparing different traditions that developed their thought systems in relative independence from one other is an effort that raises questions as soon as we start comparing. One of the first set of concerns that we face is whether the term "philosophy" is not uniquely tied to Greek thinking and whether we can fruitfully engage with other traditions if we use this (narrow, parochial) Greek conception of what philosophy should be.

As the pursuit of wisdom involves adopting a questioning attitude, philosophy is a universal human practice. Deleuze and Guattari (1991) argue that the essential characteristic of philosophy is the development of fragmentary concepts that do not perfectly align with one another. Deleuze and Guattari also argue that philosophical concepts are "contingent" on their external contexts.[25] For this reason, Rorty asserts that when we try to understand a philosophical concept, we must understand its historical context, and take into account the cultural, political, social and historical environment.[26] However, since we can never completely understand the context in which a philosophical concept arose, particularly in the ancient world, we always need to assume and interpret what a philosophical concept means.

Philosophy is a hermeneutical practice but is not a mere Western human activity. When we want to engage with another cultural philosophical tradition, we need to reflect on how we see philosophy, as our biases of what philosophy entails

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[24] Smid, R.W. (2009). *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy: The Pragmatist and Process Traditions*, State University of New York, 2

[25] Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1991). *What is Philosophy?* Columbia University Press, 35

[26] Rorty, R. (1990). *Solidarity or Objectivity?* Cambridge University Press

might lead to dismissing the theories of the cultural other as "not philosophical". When doing philosophy comparatively, we should therefore try not to rely on a definition of philosophy that it is framed to fit only the Western metaphysical tradition. The tendency to classify other traditions as "non-philosophical" is a harmful bias based on the exclusion of the other who is seen as opposed to a norm, a tendency that theoretically colonizes the other.

In our postmodern era, it is important to decolonize philosophy, which entails, especially for cross-cultural philosophy, to de-essentialize the concept of "philosophy" and approach the disparate cultural philosophical tradition as equally valuable. We should refrain from regarding philosophy as a fixed concept because any pre-established notion of philosophy might lead to focusing solely on the features of other traditions familiar to us, and with this we risk ignoring less-familiar features that are nonetheless fundamental and crucial to other traditions.[27] Theoretically decolonizing philosophy helps us to engage in comparative philosophy.

Comparative philosophy is generally defined as a comparative examination of thinkers or ideas from two distinct intellectual traditions, one of which is usually Western.[28] The first systematic study of comparative philosophy was Paul Masson Oursel's dissertation in 1923 entitled *La Philosophie Comparée*. Oursel, who was strongly influenced by the French positivist school, argued that we should not compare single events, but should place these events in their proper historical relations. Oursel believed that a comparative study of thought patterns among culturally distinct traditions was possible because the histories of Europe, India and China were intertwined.[29] Oursel used the method of analogy to relate the development of philosophical thought in the West to that of India and China and argued that China and India should be viewed as belonging to a "*philosophia perennis*," the fusion of self and other into an organic, all-encompassing whole.

As a result of increasing contact and interest between different cultural traditions, scholars have become ever more eager to engage in comparative studies.[30] Attempts at comparative thinking were, for example, conducted in Asia, where scholars studied Western philosophy. One of the most popular and

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[27] Connolly, T. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, 17

[28] Swan, L.K. (1953). *Methods of Comparative Philosophy*, Universitaire Pers Leiden, 21

[29] Masson-Oursel, P. (1923). *La Philosophie Comparée*, F. Alcan, 39

[30] Swan-Liat. *Methods of Comparative Philosophy*, 8

well-known early comparative works was Fung Yu Lan's book *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*, published in 1923. In his book, Fung compares the general ideas of thinkers such as the *Zhuāngzǐ* Schopenhauer, Mozi and Descartes. Fung uses a classification system to compare these thinkers, classifying them as "nature philosophies," "civilization philosophies" and "philosophies who try to take nature and civilization into account."

In 1946, in the aftermath of World War II, the American philosopher F.S.C. Northrop published *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding.* Northrop was the pupil of William Ernest Hocking, a pragmatic idealist who greatly influenced the development of cross-cultural comparison by providing critical reflection on the nature of comparison. Northrop followed in his teacher's footsteps and developed an innovative comparative method.[31] He divided the world into two pairs of realms: that of man and nature and that of the aesthetic and the theoretic and argued that civilizations differ in the way they have developed these realms. He asserts that differences between cultures result from different accents that are placed on the different realms. Northrop's conclusion was that the civilizations of China, India and the West are prone to one-sided incompleteness and proposed the synthetization of the different civilizations to a new philosophy.[32]About the same time that Northrop published his study, Charles A. Moore founded the journal *Philosophy East and West* (1951) and organized the East-West Philosopher's Conference, which generally continues to take place every five years.

Especially at the beginning of the history of comparative philosophy as an academic discipline, there was a strong desire for a synthesis of culturally distinct traditions. The goal was to construct one "world philosophy" or a "fusion philosophy" that accounted for the meaning of every philosophical tradition. The problem with this self-other approach is that it is too demanding and neglects fundamental differences between cultural traditions. Today, scholars are aware of the need to make careful, informed generalizations when engaging in comparative philosophy. These generalizations should be neither essentialist nor universalist and should recognize that any comparative project begins with certain anticipations that arise from our own cultural framework.[33]

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[31] Smid. *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy*, 42

[32] Northrop, F.S.C. (1946). *The Meeting of East and West, An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding*, Macmillan, 432

[33] Mattice, S.A. (2014). *Metaphor and Metaphilosophy. Philosophy as Combat, Play, and Aesthetic Experience*, Lexington Books, 8

The need to see the other as different to us but not opposed to us became thus more important.

Different scholars have tried to articulate a more apt approach to doing comparative philosophy amid all the issues of incommensurability. The work of Roger Ames and David Hall constitutes one of the most extensive approaches to comparative philosophy. Their collaborative work not only critically assesses how to think about other cultures, but also highlights methodological problems in the translation of philosophical texts of other cultures.[34] Ames and Hall concentrate their work on the comparison between the Western tradition and the Chinese tradition. They emphasize the limitations of a purely philological approach to translation and argue that an adequate translation of a term also needs to align with the general philosophical meaning of a given text in its larger context. Thus, recognizing our philosophical assumptions and presuppositions and the way they influence our interpretation in cross-cultural translation is necessary, as Ames articulates:

> *In a sustained effort to allow Chinese philosophy to have its own voice, over the past century our best interpreters of Chinese culture have been struggling to construct an interpretative context for reading the canons. This interpretative context begins by clarifying the cultural presuppositions we are likely to bring to the Chinese texts, and then continues by attempting to articulate those uncommon assumptions that make Chinese cosmology distinctive and different from our own philosophical narrative.*[35]

Comparative philosophy as a discipline became more aware of the challenges that comparing distinct traditions posed and became more critical with respect the foundation of its own meaning. The Leiden scholar Kwee Swan Liat concluded in his dissertation *Methods of Comparative Philosophy* (1953) that one of the goals of comparative philosophy should be to "rethink, critically and systematically, its own premises and basic concepts."[36] Swan Liat was, together with the American scholars Ames and Hall, one of the first who wrote systematically on *how* to engage in comparative philosophy.

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[34] Smid. *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy*, 82/83

[35] Ames, R.T. (2004) "Indigenizing Globalization and the Hydraulics of Culture: Taking Chinese Philosophy on its own Terms" in *Globalizations* 1, N° 2, 24

[36] Swan Liat. *Methods of Comparative Philosophy*, 30

Comparative philosophy not only focuses on the actual practice of comparing different cultural traditions, but also refers to reflecting critically on the methods that make such a comparison possible. These two aspects accompany each other; an analysis of the methods that make comparison possible provides us with insights into how we can practice the method, but the practical comparative study of specific ideas and arguments also offers useful insights into which methodology has the most potential for cross-cultural fertilization.

The general consensus among scholars is that comparative philosophy always involves some sort of bias and (unconscious) presuppositions. Comparative philosophy faces the problems of contingency and a lack of neutrality, and one needs to be aware of the specific assumptions and presuppositions that anyone practicing it inherently has when interpreting a text of a culturally distinct tradition. Comparative philosophy involves interpretation and is, as such, hermeneutical in nature. Understanding how our cultural assumptions and linguistic framework influence our judgments is a necessary step toward understanding the nature of comparative philosophy.

§2.2 The Problem of Incommensurability and Objectivity

Comparative philosophy as an engagement between cultures has been ongoing throughout history; Persian culture and particularly the teachings of Zarathustra had for example a significant influence on Greek and Roman philosophy, and perhaps on South Asian traditions as well. South Asian traditions had a significant influence on East Asian philosophy through the migration of Buddhism. Christianity itself should be considered a synthesis of Jewish and Hellenistic ideas. However, as a specific, modern academic discipline, comparative philosophy emerged in the 19th- century in a Western world marked by colonialism and is, as a philosophical discipline, in many regards “an outcome of colonialism.”[37]

In the last decade, postcolonial studies and decolonial theories have revealed the nature of Eurocentrism through a critique on constructed categories such as “history,” “culture” and even “philosophy.” One of the most influential writers on colonialism was Edward Said, who addressed in his book entitled *Orientalism*

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[37] Weber, R. (2013) “How to Compare? On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy” in *Philosophy Compass* 8, Nº 3, 594

(1978) the relation between imperial and colonial forms of power in the study of the "Orient." The book spurred a renewal of literary and cultural studies and spawned many studies that focused on dismantling representations of other cultural traditions as "non-Western" that tended to reproduce the image of a completely superior and dominant Western discourse. The different modes in which a dominant and superior Western world is (implicitly) affirmed is among scholars frequently called "Occidentalism" and all refer to a lack or neglect of appreciation for the ways other traditions produce their own valid practices of knowledge.

Theoretical decolonization as the process of examining presuppositions about other traditions and cultures has changed the way comparative philosophy is conceived, and it has instilled the need to reflect critically on biases and methodology. Recognizing that ideas and thought systems depend on a specific cultural, social, political and political context is still important but is today redefined as the task of "giv(ing) common voice to various philosophical traditions while remaining as faithful to each of those traditions as possible throughout the process of comparison."[38] The task of comparative philosophy is to critically assess the unarticulated assumptions we have when engaging with other cultures, which entails that we reflect not only on how we relate to the other, but also that we are open to being questioned by that other and changing our prejudices, beliefs and attitudes in the light of the encounter.

Critical reflection on how to do comparative philosophy is therefore needed to understand the challenges and limitations that comparison of two different philosophical traditions faces. The assumed assertion of comparative philosophy is that the challenges and limitations can be overcome by choosing the right methodology and that cultural relativism is no longer a threat. This belief is however unwarranted, particularly when we consider that what is compared to what and in what respect are always dependent upon the specific background, knowledge, interpretation, and choices of the person doing the comparison. We are always to some degree confined to our own perspective, which shows that our thinking is always relative to our cultural and socio-political context.

When we engage in comparative philosophy, we are confronted with comparing two (or more) cultural philosophical traditions that do not share the same culture and symbolic system. This raises the question of incommensurability, and how we are able to compare cultural philosophical traditions that do not

[38] Smid. *Methodologies of Comparative Philosophy*,10

share the same horizon of meaning. Connolly distinguishes in his book, entitled *Doing Philosophy Comparatively* (2015), three types of incommensurability. Linguistic incommensurability refers to the differences between languages, which often reveals that no shared meaning can be assumed, as traditions from different cultures depend on distinctive languages that cannot be translated into one another.[39] Translation is always interpretation and is always dependent upon the person doing the translation. A philosopher will for example give a different translation of the *Zhuāngzǐ* than a Sinologist.

The second form of incommensurability refers to the different foundations upon which traditions make sense of the world around them.[40] This moderate version of cultural relativism, as Fleischacker (1994) calls it, argues that knowledge depends on a background of shared assumptions and standards. These assumptions and standards as well as judgments on what counts as evidence differ among cultures, making it difficult to compare terms that emerge from different foundations.[41] In order to take foundational incommensurability into account, Connolly (2015) argues that the comparer "has to defend the interpretive accuracy of the categories we use against other plausible alternatives."[42] Comparative philosophers need thus to be able to shift between different perspectives and justify their chosen perspective. The problem is how we can determine which rules and standards we need to use to defend our perspective.

This brings us to the last form of incommensurability that Connolly distinguishes which is evaluative incommensurability. Evaluative incommensurability is the assumption that there are no neutrally rational grounds for deciding whether a view from one tradition is superior to a view from another.[43] Connolly argues that there is a lack of shared evaluative standards when we compare two disparate philosophical traditions, especially when we want to use a standard that has to label one of these perspectives as the right or better perspective.

Although we have to reflect on these forms on incommensurability when engaging in comparative philosophy, this does not warrant the conclusion that comparison between disparate cultural traditions is not possible. To a certain degree, we are able to understand and identify different foundations among

[39] Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, 72
[40] Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, 72
[41] Fleischacker, S. (1994). *Integrity and Moral Relativism*, Brill, 21
[42] Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, 92
[43] Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Comparatively*, 72

traditions, even when these traditions developed in relative isolation to each other. Chinese thought developed independently from the Indo-European tradition, which makes it the best test case to see whether, and how, we are able to initiate a dialogue with the wholly other. Graham (1989) argues that the particular linguistic challenge of understanding early Chinese language often amounts to a pointless game of demonstrating that some central concept of our tradition is missing in Chinese thought, a comparison that yields little interesting results and shows little interest in genuinely initiating a dialogue with the other.[44] This reveals that comparison that treats a Western philosophical concept as the privileged signifier hinders cross-cultural understanding and is a very narrow, so not impractical, approach to comparative philosophy.

We should value another cultural philosophical tradition because it differs from our own, even when we at the same time can identify points of commonality. Philosophers often claim that, without a universal normative standard we cannot distinguish legitimate claims from socially specific prejudices or self-interested claims of power.[45] In line with thinker such as Young (1990) and Khader (2019), I argue that imposing standards on perspectives in the name of social justice does not consider the specific preferences and needs of a particular perspective and should therefore be avoided. When we want to avoid imposing standards on that other, we need to consider that in comparison; we always bring ourselves into the context. We cannot obtain a neutral position that will uncover the pristine "truth" of the foreign without – in one way or another – bringing it into the horizon of our own understanding. Therefore, intercultural comparison should consider the way the particular perspective of the person doing the comparison influences the comparison.

This entails taking responsibility for the way our perspective influences the comparative process. What we see as "similarity" and "difference" is for example dependent upon our philosophical background and the particular point of view from which we approach another philosophical tradition. Von Sass (2021) argues that it is therefore important to appreciate the extent to which comparison is the result of a constructive process, a process that can easily lead to the unwarranted privilege of one's own presuppositions and beliefs. Von Sass particularly points to the danger of comparative injustice and argues that:

[44] Graham, A.C. (1989). *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*, Open Court, 396

[45] Young, I.M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 4

> *Comparative injustice takes the form of experimenting with possible comparative constellations while giving one of them unwarranted privilege or it takes the form of prioritizing one relatum over all others without explicitly integrating this valuation into the comparison in question.*[46]

While comparative philosophy does reflect on how to compare two different philosophical traditions, it does not reflect on the unique role of the person doing the comparison. Comparative philosophy is not only comparing two or more distinct cultural philosophical traditions but is also a form of intercultural communication that requires comparative philosophers to become sensitive to cultural differences and the way our socio-cultural and historical background affects the comparison process.

§2.3 The Comparative Process

In this section, I will concentrate on the hermeneutics of comparison and the role of the philosopher who does the comparison. Comparative philosophy is often thought of as the application of comparative techniques to approach another philosophical tradition in order to describe and evaluate similarities or differences between the different traditions compared.[47] Connolly argues that a specific comparison is either done to (1) mutually clarify the two things that are being compared, or (2) to evaluate the relative merits of the objects of comparison.

Comparison is, in this framework, always dependent upon some degree of similarity; the comparability of two distinct *comparata* is not an intrinsic property of these *comparata* themselves but results from relating them comparatively in reference to a *tertium comparationis*, the respect to which the *comparata* are being compared.[48] The *tertium comparationis* asserts a point of commonality without which no comparison is possible by connecting the two concepts that are being compared.[49]

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[46] Hartmut, S.von. (2021). *A Philosophy of Comparisons: Theory, Practice and the Limits of Ethics.* Bloomsbury Academic, 62

[47] Connolly. *Doing Philosophy Compartively*, 29

[48] Hartmut, von. *A Philosophy of Comparisons*, 24; Weber. *Comparative philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing what with what, and in what respect?*,152

[49] Weber. *Comparative philosophy*, 155

The comparative process is dependent upon the pre-comparative assertion of commonality, an assertion that determines the comparer's construction of the *comparata* and the *tertium*. The comparative process is not an objective comparison, but a construction of the comparer; a subjective "act of the mind by which the comparison concentrates attention on two mental contents in such way as to ascertain their relation of similarity or dissimilarity.[50] Before the comparison is done, the philosopher who does the comparison already assumes that there is a certain resemblance between concepts from two disparate philosophical traditions and that the comparison is of interest, revealing the emotional investment of the philosopher in the comparative process. Commonalities in the comparative process are not ontologically given, but comparatively constructed; it is dependent upon the efforts and interpretations of the person doing the comparison.

Weber argues that even when we rely on family resemblance, we still face the problem of the assertion of commonality. Instead of asserting one point of commonality, we now assume several points of commonality. Even when the term is seen as a quasi-universal that relates two *comparata* through identifying so-called "family resemblance," we can discern a *tertium* that is in this case not one point of commonality but involves several commonalities. Games such as chess and badminton are comparable because they share several commonalities such as both being leisure activities, both having a winning element and both having specific rules on how to play it. Relying on family resemblance is always open to being challenged by focusing on the aspects in which the *comparata* are different, which shows that each comparison is a limited perspective.

We have to take the interpretive comparer into account when we want to engage in comparative philosophy. The *comparata* as the *tertium* are chosen for the sake of justifying the pre-comparative assertion of commonality, a process that is motivated by the belief that the more the comparer is able to give arguments why the two *comparata* are alike in the light of the *tertium*, the more they are comparable. Comparative philosophy is as such a hermeneutic practice that tries to map out the underlying common structures of concepts from different philosophical traditions. Questions of translation, interpretation and the ambiguity of language pose inescapable challenges when engaging with another philosophical tradition and should be considered when we reflect on how to do comparative philosophy.

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[50] James Sully quoted in: Hartmut, von. *A Philosophy of Comparisons*, 5

Nevertheless, these challenges do not make the comparative endeavour futile or meaningless. While each philosophical inquiry is initiated by what we already know, we can gain new insights and change or initial presuppositions during the comparative process. In participating in and not only commenting on the comparative process, our initial presuppositions and assumptions might change, our expectations might be challenged and our hypotheses on what we initially saw as resonances or similarities might in the end become differences. The self-knowledge that we gain is not produced within ourselves but is triggered by and the result of the encounter with the other who questions our implicit beliefs and assumptions. In order to understand the relation between the role of the comparer and the comparative process, it is important to pay attention to hermeneutics and the role it plays in the comparative encounter.

§2.4 Heidegger and Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Comparative thinking can never be objective or neutral, not only because we can never fully grasp the specific cultural, political, historical, and social context of another (cultural) perspective, but also because we cannot entirely make our own assumptions and biases visible. However, in the cross-cultural comparative process, we can learn things about ourselves that we did not see without the encounter with another tradition. This requires that we are open to the cultural other and enter into a dialogue with another tradition.

An "authentic dialogue" involves epistemological modesty, recognizing the inevitable prejudices and biases we carry with us. Comparative philosophers should, therefore, recognize how their interpretation depends on their historical and cultural situatedness and how translation as interpretation is always shaped by their cultural and historical horizon of understanding. Taking one's cultural and historical situatedness seriously entails recognizing that comparative philosophers translate and interpret another disparate tradition and that they can therefore never claim to comprehensively know what this tradition is about. Reflecting on language by making use of language is however a paradoxical activity. "Speaking about language turns language almost inevitably into an object," says Heidegger in *On the Way to Language*.[51]

Heidegger searched for a method that would disclose existence in terms of itself and hoped to construct a hermeneutics that would enable him to illuminate

[51] Heidegger, M.(1959). *On the Way to Language*. Harper Collins, [1982], 50

the presuppositions upon which the Western conception of Being was based. Being is the concealed prisoner that Heidegger hoped to reveal through the phenomenological method. This method that Heidegger developed in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) is frequently called "hermeneutic phenomenology." Heidegger's quest is marked by the fact that mankind is always completely embedded in the world, leading to Heidegger's conclusion that *Dasein* is always *being-in-the-world.*

Heidegger's conception of phenomenology as a method consists of a combination of *phainesthai* (bringing into appearance) and *logos* (a preliminary perception of the world that leaves a trace in verbal language), a method aimed at letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them.[52] This is important to comparative philosophy especially when we want to approach another cultural philosophical tradition as an equally important but different tradition. Heidegger shows that hermeneutics should not be conceived as a technique, but as the very constitution of being human.[53] Heideggerian hermeneutics is the "primary act of interpretation which brings a thing from concealment."[54] Hermeneutic phenomenology is thus not a technique that reveals a hidden meaning behind a text but is a method to clarify what constitutes existence itself.

Heidegger's fundamental contribution to hermeneutics lies in his disclosure of understanding that is always grounded in *Dasein's being-in-the-world*. Understanding emerges from the horizons of meaning in which man already finds himself. *Dasein* is never neutral in its stance in the world but is situated and attuned in a particular way. Understanding is not a mere reflection on the object that is at hand but operates within a horizon of meaning that provides the ontological possibility of words to carry meaning.

The phenomenological method draws attention to the fact that the being of *Dasein* is historically contingent, limiting the possibility that we can understand thinkers who are culturally different than our own. Applying this to the specific challenges of comparative philosophy, it means in the minimal sense that we never can initiate a dialogue without bringing our own historical situatedness into play. Some scholars argue therefore that Heidegger's analysis warrants the conclusion of cultural relativism, rejecting the possibility to understand

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[52] Palmer, R.E. (1969). *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer,* Northwestern University Press,128-129

[53] Guignon, C.B. (1983). *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowing*. Hackett Publishing, 71.

[54] Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 129

traditions that are separated in time, space, and culture from our own. Heidegger's conception of hermeneutic phenomenology in his early work seems to block the way from initiating a comparative dialogue.

However, scholars have drawn attention to the later Heidegger, whose inquiries were devoted to getting behind the reality-founding event, conceptualized as the idea of *Auseinandersetzung* as a keeping, or gathering of difference.[55] His later work might pave the way for an engagement between cultures. In *A Dialogue on Language* (1959), Heidegger engages in a conversation with a (fictive) Japanese person. The dialogue is a fictional reconstruction of an actual meeting that had taken place between Heidegger and Tezuka Tomio (1903-1983). The dialogue is centred on an inquirer (Heidegger) and a Japanese person who knows Heidegger through the work of Count Shuzo Kuki.

Interestingly enough, this Count Kuki wrote a book attempting to understand the nature of Japanese art from a European aesthetic framework.[56] The prelude of the essay concentrates on the Japanese aesthetic notion of *iki* and revolves around the danger that it's meaning cannot be understood from European languages. In the dialogue, Heidegger explicitly questions the validity of Kuki's method as follows:

> *The name "aesthetics" and what it names grow out of European thinking, out of philosophy. Consequently, aesthetic consideration must ultimately remain alien to East-Asian thinking.*[57]

For Heidegger, "language is the house of Being," which is to say that language is the way we dwell in Being. This suggests that a dialogue between East and West is for Heidegger not possible, given that language is related to being, understanding and temporality. The danger of not being able to grasp an East-Asian experience from Western language applies as well to the dialogue itself. The language of the dialogue might confine what can be said about experiences from a culturally different tradition. This is exactly what Heidegger means when he argues that "the danger of our dialogues was hidden in language itself, not in *what* we discussed, nor in the *way in which* we tried to do so."[58]

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[55] Burik. *The End of Comparative Thinking*, vi
[56] Heidegger. *On the Way to Language,*2
[57] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language,*2
[58] Heidegger, *On the Way to Language,*4

What Heidegger wants to show is that no specific method or cautiousness about the content of a dialogue can fully prevent us from misunderstanding other cultural traditions that do not share the same linguistic origin. However, while Heidegger sometimes seems to emphasize the radical difference between the Eastern and the Western tradition, the essay also suggests their "sameness." The dialogue also shows us an opportunity, especially when we look at the way the inquirer and the Japanese person together try to reinterpret "language" in Japanese.[59] While words are embedded in their cultural and linguistic context, they can be translated in a different language, even though this translation will eventually misrepresent the full disclosure of the foreign word. Inherent in translating a foreign word is also the inability to fully know if we have fully disclosed the meaning of a word.

Even though Heidegger's dialogue shows that we can converse with another cultural philosophical tradition, it seems that the dialogue is essentially a one-way relation that hinders in the end cross-cultural philosophy. As Ma Lin (2008) argues in her elaboration on the nature of the dialogue between the inquirer and the Japanese person, Heidegger only focuses on the danger involved in translating Japanese experiences or concepts into European languages. Lin shows that Heidegger's thinking is guided by his notion of the "Same," which means *belonging-together* as the gathering of Being and thinking.[60] When engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, we have to make sense of this notion of the "Same," which for Heidegger is in the end tied to the possibility of each tradition to retrieve its own beginnings.

For Heidegger, sameness is not what is discovered in a dialogue between self and the other, but in the self-discovering of its own ground while conversing with and through the other. I agree with Ma Lin's conclusion that Heidegger's presupposition about the singularity of the historicity of Being, his belief that the relation between thinking and Being as shown in his immersion in Western historicity, makes it nearly impossible for him to engage with Eastern ideas. Heidegger shows how a cross-cultural dialogue can help us to retrieve our own origin but fails to see how we can transcend our own perspective in engaging with ideas from another cultural tradition.

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[59] Heidegger. *On the Way to Language,*13

[60] Lin, M. (2008). *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue. Anticipating the Event*, Taylor & Francis, 204

§2.5 Gadamer and the "Fusion of Horizons"

Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics of existence is of interest to comparative philosophy because it shows that interpretation and understanding are historically contingent and are dependent on our *being-in-the-world* as the specific way we are related to our past and to the horizon of meaning that constitutes the world in which objects appear. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) has tried to disclose what it means to belong to a tradition and how we can initiate a dialogue with a foreign person or text. He does so by criticizing the modern conception of experience that is too much oriented toward knowing as a perceptual act or as interactions among physical substances.[61] In his work *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) Gadamer showed how scientific knowledge is derived from the truth of experience itself, defined by Gadamer as the "experience of one's own historicality."[62]

The dialectical hermeneutical method that Gadamer developed originated from the idea that reality always stands in a horizon of still undecided possibilities.[63] This implies that we should understand our experience as happening, an event or an encounter in which the influence of history and dialectics plays out as a (mis)adventure of language for human beings. Understanding is never a pure subjective relation, but always an encounter of consciousness with an object, in which experience does not have its dialectical fulfilment in knowing, but in its "openness to experience." "Essential to experience," argues Gadamer, "is that it cannot be exhausted in what can be said of it or grasped as its meaning."[64]

Based on his analysis of experience, Gadamer formulates a historically operative consciousness that comes to understand its own heritage in "holding oneself open in conversation."[65] This hermeneutical experience is the specific encounter between an interpreter and a text or a person that is characterized as a dialogue with ethical implications. The encounter as dialogue needs to recognize that the horizon of meaning that forms the background of all our thinking is both a possibility as a limitation.

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[61] Palmer. *Hermeneutics*,194

[62] Gadamer, H.G. (1992). *Truth and Method*, Transl. D.E. Linge, University of California Press,340

[63] Gadamer. *Truth and Method*,112

[64] Gadamer. *Truth and Method*,58

[65] Gadamer. *Truth and Method*,356

Gadamer conceptualized a horizon as the collection of experiences that makes up our world prior to any explicit or tacit analysis. A horizon corresponds to what Heidegger calls *being-in-the-world*, referring to our anticipatory and pre-informed interpretations that help us in making sense of the world. One's horizon is for Heidegger a limit in the sense that no understanding can take place without this *being-in-the-world*. As Heidegger's dialogue with Tezuka suggests, different cultures have different horizons, suggesting that their *being-in-the-world* might also differ.

Gadamer understood this incompatibility of horizons as the task of interpreters to attune to the text, allowing the text to speak through the interpreter's retaining, despite his projections, an "authentic openness." This openness of experience has the structure of a question that is orientated towards the recognition of not knowing. Questioning refers both to the horizon from which the questioning arises, but also refers to the possibility of true dialogue and its dialectical structure makes a fusion of horizons possible. This fusion is possible because questions and answers are in a sense universal and grounded in being. Both the question as the answer light up their specific horizon, leading to self-disclosure and understanding. In other words; the fusion of horizons refers not to a transcendence of one's lifeworld, but rather to a possibility to extend one's horizon by allowing oneself to be challenged by what is other.

Gadamer stresses the importance of a dialogical understanding of an equal and mutual relation between the interpreter and the other.[66] For Gadamer, language is not an instrument to understand the world, but it is a being immersed in language, a living in language. We are born into a certain tradition and, therein, come to form our own thought that is dependent on an implicit, tacit horizon of meaning. We always enter a dialogue from this implicit, tacit horizon of meaning and our questions, answers and understanding emerge from this horizon. We cannot escape our prejudices or pre-judgments because they are necessary to make sense of our world. Yet, we can become aware of them when we initiate a dialogue with that which is other. Gadamer argued however that it is not completely possible to become aware of all our pre-judgments or prejudices; we are always ontologically situated in a cultural tradition, and we cannot adopt a neutral position.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the dialogue with the other should not be initiated or is destined to fail. "Every conversation," says Gadamer, "presupposes

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[66] What is other can be a text, but also a culture or a foreigner.

a common language, or better, creates a common language."[67] When we enter into a dialogue with a cultural other, we must make our prejudgments transparent, - we need to be open and committed-, so that we can value the otherness without denying the proper meaning of the other's experience by allowing our unrevealed prejudgments distort it. Only then are we able to extend our own horizon and come to a more sensitive understanding of our own language and our prejudgments.

Ma and van Brakel (2018) argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics points to the various choices and constraints of the interpreter that come into play in understanding a text. The different choices that interpreters makes and the way these choices are influenced by their cultural background constrain as well as guide their interpretation of that which is other. Ma and van Brakel see this "hermeneutical relativity" as the main cause for the variation of competing interpretations and argue that the comparative process is the result of implicit or explicit choices that interpreters make when they initiate a project in comparative thinking.[68] The choices that affect our interpretation are for example the choice of language in which we express our research, our commitment to a philosophical method, as well as more practical concerns such as choices of translations that are used and the texts that should be studied.

§2.6 Family Resemblance Concepts and Quasi-Universals

Studies that try to compare two different philosophical tradition often justify the comparison by referring to how the chosen *comparata* "resonate with each other", "bear similarities" or "share family resemblance." Ma and van Brakel (2015) argue that Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance plays a necessary role in interpreting, comparing, and explaining concepts from a different tradition. They also believe that the notion of family resemblance is able to overcome the "false antinomy of universalism versus relativism," offering us a pragmatic approach to cross-cultural research, aiming not for a perfect correlation of concepts or ideas but looking for concepts that bear similarity but of which no fixed analytic definition can be given.[69]

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[67] Gadamer. *Truth and Method,*371

[68] Lin, M. & Brakel, J. van. (2018). "On the Interpreter's Choices: Making Hermeneutic Relativity Explicit" in *Dao* 17, 455

[69] Lin, M and Brakel, van J. (2016). *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy,* SUNY Press, 96

The basis of the concept “family resemblance” is formulated in Wittgenstein’s recognition that a concept word covers a highly complicated network of various similar or different meanings. As Vattimo (2002) aptly explains it, the recognition of “family resemblance” is not realized logically as a conceptual necessity, leaving the definition of a concept that is generated through family resemblance as somewhat impure. This does not however mean that we are confused about the concept, these concepts will be “rationally legitimized on the basis of meanings, links, persuasiveness generated in the course of its development.”[70]

Wittgenstein pointed to the fact that in practice, language is always more or less vague, mostly because our assertions are not as precise as logic would demand of us. In his later work, Wittgenstein introduced the notion of “family resemblance” to clarify how we think about the sense and meaning of words. Language is a social activity that can be understood as language *games*; the meanings of words cannot be understood by giving analytic definitions, but by giving examples. The concept *games* is such a family resemblance concept: in order to understand what a *game* is, one has to become familiar with the different sorts of games such as chess, checkers, sports, and hide-and-seek. All these games do not share one common aspect, but share similarities and affinities:

> *Don’t say “They must have something in common, or they would not be called ‘games’” – but look and see whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to all, but similarities [Ähnlichkeiten], affinities [Verwandtschaften], and a whole series of them at that.*[71]

Games share “multifarious relationships,” a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.”[72] Similarities of detail refer according to Ma and van Brakel (2015) to similarities according to the conceptual schemes with which the interpreter is familiar, while overall similarities refer to similar ways of fitting in the embedding life forms of another tradition.[73] Identifying similarities is a hermeneutic practice that is dependent upon the point of view of the comparative interpreter.

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[70] Vattimo, G. (2002). *After Christianity.* Transl. L. D’Isanto, Columbia University Press, 23
[71] Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Transl. G.E.M. Anscombe. Blackwell, 31
[72] Ibid., 31/32
[73] Brakel, J. van & Lin, M. (2015). “Extension of Family Resemblance Concepts” in *Dao* 14, 480.

The reliance on family resemblance helps us to initiate the comparative endeavour; it helps us to engage in a dialogue. But during the comparative process we might find that the family resemblance we presuppose are actually differences, which not only highlights that relying on family resemblance is a necessary presupposition that helps us to initiate the cross-cultural endeavour, but also shows that these presuppositions are not static and can change by the encounter with the other. While we need to rely on the family resemblance theory to initiate the comparative encounter, we thus at the same time want to remain open to being challenged in our assertions about the cultural other.

Ma and van Brakel argue that all concepts involved in comparative and intercultural philosophy are family resemblance concepts, in none of the comparative or intercultural studies we can rely on concepts that are identical. Concepts that can be compared are so-called "quasi-universal concepts;" concepts that describe basic human relations and modes of being.[74] Quasi-universals are family resemblance concepts that have no core and are open-ended in their use, they connect notions from a limited number of traditions by means of family-resemblance-extension. They are working hypotheses and are revisable as a consequence of the continuing process of interpretation. Quasi-universals fulfil a necessary role in interpretative practices, but Ma and van Brakel argue that not all concepts can be classified as quasi-universals. The notion of quasi-universals presupposes that, although traditions are culturally distinct, we can recognize them as human practices, supervening on the "most basic assumption that "the other" is a human being, living in communities and having a learnable language."[75]

When we try to learn from and understand another cultural philosophical tradition, we need to assume that our beliefs, assumptions, intentions, and attitudes share some similarities; otherwise, we become locked up in our own perspective and will never be able to learn anything new. Nevertheless, we do need to critically examine our assertions of commonality and be open to the possibility that this assertion might be false. Furthermore, in engaging with the other we might also discover new quasi-universals that we did not yet know of. The question that becomes more and more important is how we can keep ourselves open in the cross-cultural dialogue and how we can approach the other and the other's perspectives in the best way possible.

[74] Ibid., 478
[75] Lin & van Brakel. *Fundamentals*, 494

Quasi-universals are according to Ma and van Brakel also necessary to make comparison between two different traditions possible. They argue that "one can compare only after having assumed a number of quasi-universals in terms of which the *comparata* can be investigated," implying that only these quasi-universals can serve as *tertia comparationes*.[76] But identifying multiple quasi-universals between two distinct traditions does not make these concepts objectively comparable; they are still dependent upon the person doing the comparison and who identifies similarities from his or her own perspective. Although Ma and van Brakel do recognize the hermeneutic aspect of comparison, they do not discuss how family resemblance concepts are dependent upon identifying many rather than one points of intersection.

To summarize, although the family resemblance concept theory helps us to understand how we can, to a certain degree, make sense of another perspective, it does not pay attention to the fact that it is the interpretive comparer who decides what concepts can be seen as family resemblance-concepts. Assuming family resemblance helps us to initiate the encounter; it helps us to move towards the other and the other's perspectives, but it does not tell us anything about when and why we have to give up the reliance on family resemblance; it does not pay attention to the dynamical nature of the self-other relation that sometimes causes us to change our initial assertions and presuppositions.

In many contemporary studies of comparative philosophy, philosophers tend to solely focus on what way concepts or thinkers A and B are comparable and fail to see that what makes them comparable is dependent upon the pre-comparative assertion of commonality. Problems occur when we cling too much to the assertion of commonality, when we focus too much on why certain concepts share similarities or resonate with each other and fail to see in which respect(s) they differ. This requires that the person doing the comparison does not cling to his or her beliefs, attitudes, and presuppositions, it requires an open, unbiased attitude that is not addressed by the family resemblance method, even though Ma and van Brakel do recognize that there are limitations to the method. Quasi-universals do not solve the problem of the self-other relation, they do not help us in understanding how we can expand our perspective and learn something new from another cultural philosophical tradition without colonizing the other, because they only entail that we should assume some concepts are quasi-universals.

[76] Ibid., 487

This brings us back to the main problem with comparison in philosophy, which is the problem of constructivism: the commonalities that are assumed even on the basis of family resemblance are not straightforward but are guided by the preferences and background of the comparative interpreter.[77] When we do not take into account how our preferences influence the comparative perspective, we tend to split into endless discussions in which the comparer eagerly tries to defend why their assertion of commonalities that is of interest to them, might be interesting for their scholarly peers.[78] This approach however fails to take into account the dynamics of the comparative process and does not make us reflect on how we can approach the cultural other in its difference.

When we initiate the intercultural encounter, we have to assume that we share some basic similarities, but this does not prevent us from changing and reformulating what we assume or assert. Our perspective is not invulnerable to change; the comparative process is not a mere "knower-known relation" in which we investigate the other as an object and deem it comparable but is a dynamic relation in which we come to understand that tradition and in which we are being confronted with a new way of looking at things and urges us to transcend our confined perspective. Understanding and learning from the cultural other always requires the openness of comparative philosophers which is to say that they need to be open to question their assumptions and beliefs and a willingness to understand and evaluate cultural others on their own terms.

When we see comparative philosophy as a mere epistemological practice, we can only affirm that some concept or idea from another cultural philosophical tradition resembles or does not resemble a certain concept. Comparative philosophy is however more than this shallow identification of differences and similarities between concepts from different traditions. It is also a self-transformative practice in which we become aware of the limitations of our presuppositions, intentions and beliefs and become aware of our own bias. Our philosophical attitude, and more particularly our openness to learn from and thinking with the other, is the driving force of the success or failure of comparative philosophy and even the factor that determines what counts as failure or success.

While the current tendency in comparative philosophy is to delineate the field in terms of methodologies, techniques, issues and solutions, the vital role of

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[77] Weber. *Comparative Philosophy*, 166

[78] Ibid., 169

the interpretive comparer is neglected. Instead of trying to answer the question of how to do comparative philosophy by introducing standards or by defining comparative philosophy in a specific way, we should reflect on the problem of bias and the way comparative philosophers influence the comparative process. In other words: interpretive comparers need to take responsibility for the way their emotions, presuppositions and beliefs influence their approach to the other and the other's perspectives. This requires that comparative philosophers are ethical competent and are willing to take responsibility for the way they approach and interpret cultural others.

Comparative philosophy as a form of intercultural conversation that aims to overcome stereotypical and cliché representations of the cultural other requires a kind of ethical competence in which a philosopher can openly but critically judge a variety of different perspectives and cultivates an openness towards the other. These points of attention will serve as a basis for my own discussion of comparative methodology in chapter five, based on my reading of Levinas (chapter three) and the *Zhuāngzǐ* (chapter four). I will show that these characteristics are best guaranteed when we reflect on the self-other relation and do not merely see the self-other relation as an intellectual relation, but also as an interdependent relation that is ethical in nature.

§2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented a short overview of the history of comparative philosophy as a branch of modern academic philosophy. I have discussed how comparison is always dependent upon a particular perspective and is the outcome of the choice of two or more *comparata* that are being compared in respect to a *tertium*. Our hermeneutical embeddedness does not have to lead to cultural relativism but highlights the need to reflect on the way we approach the other and the other's perspectives.

Comparative research however always starts with the person who thinks that two concepts or thinkers from disparate philosophical traditions are similar and are interesting to be compared. While this assertion of commonality is necessary to initiate the comparative endeavour, it does not entail that this assertion is a rigid presupposition; during the comparative process we might conclude that we are wrong and that the similarities are actually difference. While comparative philosophy is thus a hermeneutic practice whose primary

act is interpretation of a yet unknown philosophical perspective, we can expand our confined perspective in the encounter with the other. It is in the relation to the other, who is different from us, that we can learn novel ways of looking at phenomena. Furthermore, in the encounter of the other we come to reflect on our own presuppositions, beliefs, and attitudes, indicating that the comparative process is also important to becoming more open to different perspectives.

There is no specific method that can prevent us from misunderstanding another philosophical perspective; we are immersed in our own horizon of meaning that constitutes our ways of thinking and questioning and we always approach the other from our own perspective. Furthermore, Gadamer points to the fact that experience cannot be exhausted in what we can say, there is as such always something that has not been said. While we can never be certain that we fully understand a disparate philosophical perspective particularly when we do not share the same language, we can initiate a dialogue with another tradition by assuming some point(s) of commonality and being as open as possible to the other. Nevertheless, the comparative philosopher can move towards the other's perspectives by "holding oneself open in conversation," a philosophical attitude that is receptive to a different way of thinking and which originates in the openness of questioning.

As the effort of comparative philosophy is dependent upon the comparative interpreter, we must, rather than merely reflecting on deliberate steps of methodological approach, recreate the philosophical attitude as a kind of ethical competence in which we are open to and think with the other instead of approaching another cultural philosophical tradition as an object. In the following chapters, this study seeks to discern how we can cultivate ethical competence as critical openness towards the other and the other's perspectives.