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

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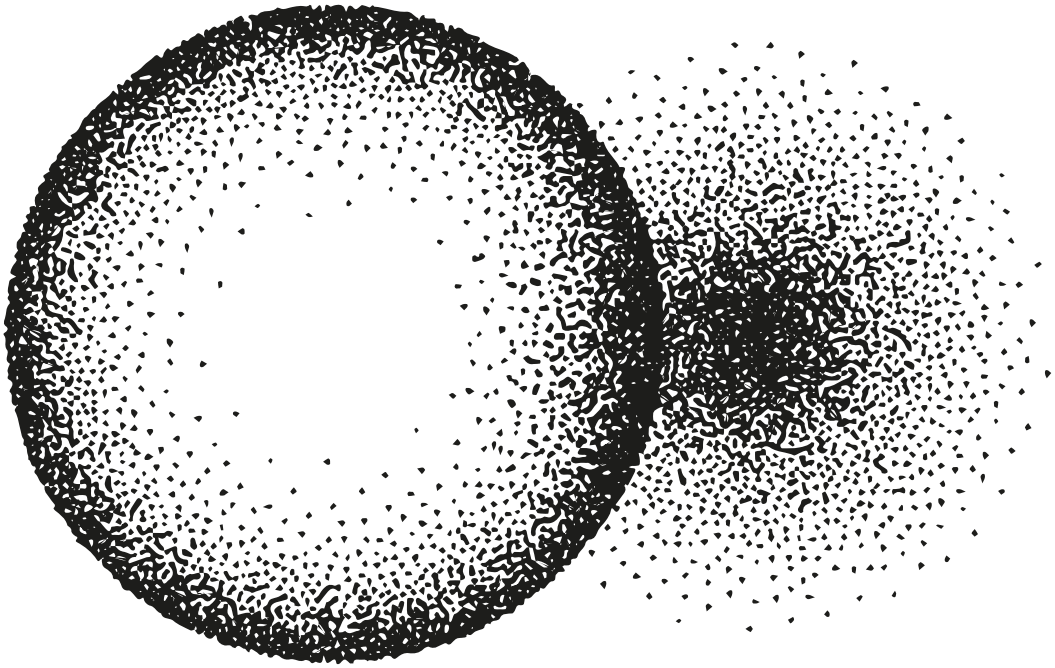

Chapter 5

# Levinas, the *Zhuāngzǐ* and the Task of Moving Beyond Identity

## §5.1 Introduction

In this study, I have presented the work of Emmanuel Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* as important resources for comparative philosophy. More particularly, this study has tried to provide a contribution to comparative philosophy and its methodology by highlighting how comparative philosophy is always a form of intercultural communication. Comparative philosophy is aimed at understanding and learning from another cultural philosophical traditions by identifying concepts or conceptual schemes that share family resemblance. Comparative philosophy as a philosophical praxis also appears to be an incitement to communicate with cultural others. In this study, I argued for the need to adopt a transformational-critical discourse that can facilitate the intercultural dialogue. The necessary condition for comparison or intercultural dialogue is aimed at becoming responsive and open to the cultural other.

At the closing of the age of Western imperialism and colonization, comparative philosophy should not only reflect on how to do comparative philosophy, but should also reflect on how the person doing the comparison should approach the cultural other. Reflecting on the self-other relation is crucial for comparative philosophy to become sensitive to its unreflected assumptions, in which the assertion of commonality and notions such as "similarities and differences" are presupposed without justification or critical assessment. Instead of concentrating on making these unreflected assumptions transparent, this study proposes to invest in ethical competence as the willingness to become open to the other and the other's perspectives. Intercultural communication is often confronted with significant cultural differences that cannot be overcome, which necessitates us to reflect on the ethical aspect of comparative philosophy.

Both Levinas as the *Zhuāngzǐ* have recognized the need to reconfigure the self-other relation and can help us to redefine the task of comparative philosophy as the ethical vocation to overcome the binarities that permeates our interpretation of the cultural other and to become aware of our biases and presuppositions that influence and govern our comparative praxis. Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* suggest a radical rethinking of identity and highlight the relation between knowledge and violence. Instead of solely defining comparative philosophy as comparing two or more distinct cultural philosophical traditions and identifying similarities and differences, this study shows that comparative philosophy should also include the desire and willingness to deconstruct essentialist views of culture and the cultural other. Comparative philosophy is both the practice of identifying

differences and similarities between disparate cultural philosophical traditions, as the awareness that its claims are never entirely satisfying and are always open to indeterminacy and doubt.

Comparative philosophy is inherently a matter of "philosophical translation;" we are only able to engage with a text like the *Zhuāngzǐ* when we have gained access to it, - when we understand the text and its context-, but we at the same time have to realize that our understanding can never be objective or absolute. Ralph Weber's (2014) insight that all comparison is always done by someone and that it consists of at least two relata (*comparata*) that are compared on the basis of a chosen tertium, has been the main motivation for this current study to define comparative philosophy as a discipline that consists of a variety of different, sometimes incompatible, perspectives. Weber's analysis of comparison also draws attention to the fact that we as philosophers bring ourselves to the table, particularly because the choice of the concepts that are going to be compared and in what respect is dependent upon the philosopher's pre-comparative assertion of commonality. Comparative philosophy is a hermeneutical practice in which persons doing the comparison always remains shackled to their own cultural horizon.



Caution is therefore needed when we engage in comparative philosophy and while current methodologies try to address the problem of incommensurability and bias, few of them ask the question how we can approach the cultural other in the most open way possible. Comparative philosophy requires philosophers to approach cultural others on their own terms while at the same time recognizing that as philosophers, we need to capture and understand these others in our own language. This study has tried to illuminate how ethical competence as a form of intercultural communication or conversation can broaden our conception of what comparative philosophy entails. The *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas are thinkers who can offer us a fundamental reorientation for comparative philosophy in our own times. Reading the *Zhuāngzǐ* along with Levinas is not merely interesting when we try to compare these two lines of thought, but their thinking offers us some important insights on how to approach another cultural philosophical tradition.

The intercultural encounter is marked by the absence of a solid common ground, which makes the transmission of thought contents between the self and the other a risky endeavor that is haunted by various issues of incommensurability and ethical problems. The most pressing problem in postmodern comparative

philosophy is the problem of theoretical colonization, in which we (implicitly) privilege our own beliefs, assumptions and value the other from our own normative framework. Colonizing the other denies the uniqueness of the other and reduces the other either to our alter ego (the same) or to the absolute other (the absolute negation of ourselves).

These two approaches to the self-other relation need to be avoided in the practice of comparative philosophy as it jeopardizes the aim to learn from the other cultural philosophical tradition and leads to philosophical hegemony and the refusal to attune to differences. Learning from what is other requires a certain kind of ethical competence in which we approach the worth of the cultural other on its own terms. Comparison in intercultural philosophy is achieved through an active process of decision-making and evaluation and an interpretation of what counts as 'similarities' and 'differences'. This study contends that the position of the person doing the comparison and the way his or her emotions, beliefs and comportment influence the comparative process has been overlooked by modern European approaches to comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophers need to be aware of their emotional commitments, beliefs and biases, which illuminates the urgency for comparative philosophy to see its praxis as requiring a specific ethical attitude aimed at self-transformation. The central question of this study is therefore how comparative philosophy can employ a critical-transformation discourse that helps us to approach the cultural other in an open way.

In this chapter I will provide an understanding of what it means for a comparative philosopher to be ethically competent, which I have defined as the ability to become open to a variety of different perspectives and methodologies. In this chapter I will try to conceptualize ethical competence first by focusing on Levinas and then on the *Zhuāngzǐ*. In the last part of this Chapter, I will bring the *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas into a dialogue, in which I will answer the question of how comparative philosophers can relate to another philosophical tradition without relying on a stable, unified, and fixed vantage point. I will show how the reconfiguration of the self-other relation in Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* calls for the need for self-transformation and entails that we should deconstruct our beliefs in language, logic, and knowledge. The comparative encounter calls for an ethical position of competence in which we embrace the indeterminacy and incompleteness of our assertions and respond to the infinite task to move beyond identity. Ethical competence also reconceptualises comparative philosophy as a practice in which we can learn and understand from the cultural

other by becoming less biased and to become responsive and adaptive to an infinite variety of perspectives.

## Part I: Comparative Philosophy as Levinasian Ethical Competence

### §5.2 Cultural Identity, Imperialism, and the Relation to the Cultural other



Comparative philosophy tries to connect disparate cultural philosophical concepts or thinkers by asserting commonality and identifying concepts or conceptual schemes that resemble, resonate or are the same. The comparative process is aimed at the reconciliation of difference, which is a necessary step when we want to compare two or more cultural traditions. Seeing concepts and conceptual schemes as sharing "family resemblance," or by seeing them as "quasi-universals" sees cultural difference as a problem that can be resolved. This reconciliation interpretation of cultural difference in which difference is seen as an obstacle in being able to learn and understand the cultural other, can be complemented by an ethical interpretation of difference in which the cultural other is approached on their own terms.

Levinas is not a philosopher of culture, but he did have something valuable to say about conversing with the cultural other and the tension between difference and sameness. Especially Levinas' essay *La Signification et le Sens* can help us to understand how we can articulate an ethical orientation that does not originate in any assertion of commonality. Levinas is in search for the possibility of meaning that cannot be determined by Being. In his essay, Levinas' question with respect to meaning is whether a wholly immanent understanding of meaning does not restrict meaning in a way that violates or muffles any alterity that cannot be subsumed under Being.

Levinas primarily attacks the anti-Platonic, immanent worldview in which relationality is conceived in terms of a neutral term; in which, to apply it to this current study, the cultural other is approached by using "neutral" quasi-universals. In this early essay we already find the trace of his critique on cultures, when he describes Heidegger's phenomenology of *Dasein* and its relation to *Being* as a form of barbarism. Culture originates in the desire for a

communal identity and is rooted in blood-ties and enrooted in a shared common language. Racism is thus a "permanent possibility woven into the dynamic of our very being."344 At the same time, the European civilization has thought idealism or transcendence as that what is beyond mere Being:

> *And yet the value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being.*[345]

While Western philosophy has systematically neglected that which is other and has failed to see that its quest for universality has led to the theoretical colonization of the other, it at the same time has thought transcendence as the "Good beyond Being" (*epekeina tês ousias*).346 The value of Levinas' thinking for comparative philosophy is that Levinas can provide us with the possibility of a non-colonizing (or totalizing) relation between self and other. For Levinas the self is implicated in its relation to the other, an implication that concretizes in ethical discourse.

Transcendence provides the world of Being with its ethical orientation, an orientation that concretizes in the face-to-face encounter with the Other. The ethical relation is the move towards transcendence, an infinite responsibility to the Other that Levinas classifies as "liturgical work." For Levinas, human fulfilment as the move towards transcendence is not a withdrawal from the world, but a full commitment to our embodied existence and the incarnated vulnerability we have to the Face of the Other. The ethical (intercultural) encounter with the Other gives the self the surplus of a teaching that "is a movement going outside of the identical, toward an other who is absolutely other."[347] Intercultural conversation as the encounter with the other, is an ethical relation of interruption, a disruption of self-identity and a disruption of cultural identities.

Instead of aiming at the erasure of differences by relying on methodologies that rely on a common identity, resemblances or a shared understanding and trying to reconcile two or more disparate cultural philosophical traditions, Levinas maintains the absolute separateness of self and other. Philosophy as "vision"

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[344] Levinas, E. (1988) "La vocation de l'autre", In Hirsch, E., *Racismes. L'autre et son visage*, Cerf, 89–102.
[345] OE:73; DEE:98
[346] Plato, *Republic*, 6, 509b8-10
[347] CPP:91; HAH:41

or "light" centres around the autonomous thinking subject that perseveres in its being and "weaves between the incomparables, between me and the others, a unity, a community."[348] Levinas offers an alternative approach to comparative philosophy in which we can only learn and understand the cultural other because of the prior ethical relation. Levinas shows how my relation to the Other, which I will describe as ethical competence, is a necessary precondition for any comparison to be possible, indicating that ethical openness to the Other is prior to any intentional activity.

The Levinasian conception of ethical competence gives comparative philosophy some important insights. First, it emphasizes the close connection between knowledge and violence. Levinas correlates ontology with imperialism that attempts to bring everything to light and neglects the Other. We need to take the inherent tension between cultural difference and radical alterity into account; comparative philosophy is not only weaving together concepts and conceptual schemes but is also a moment of face-to- face contact with the cultural other. When comparative philosophy does not recognize the way it is responding and indebted to th cultural other, is ultimately ad odds with itself as it refuses its own heteronomous structure.



Secondly, Levinas shows that each assertion about the other is at the same time conversing with and to that other. Levinas shows the need to see comparative philosophy as a form of intercultural communication or conversation. The ethical relation as ethical transcendental discourse gives humanity a common orientation that is not dependent upon a historical culture, but which also does not destroy or negates culture. Transcendence allows us to judge and evaluate the cultural other as our neighbour and provides an invitation to approach the cultural other not in terms of the one who can be known, but from his or her ethical dimension.

Thirdly, Levinas' thinking on transcendence shows us how we are always hospitable and open to the Other and provides us with a transformational-critical discourse in which we are being questioned in our assertions and beliefs. The Other as the stranger is the first comer, revealing that the Other is every human being I am responsible for, whether this human being is culturally close or not. The plurality of first comers makes it necessary to compare that which cannot be compared, indicating that we have been burdened by the difficult task to concern ourselves at each instant with the question of social justice. The ethical

[348] OTB:182; AE:

and the cultural can never be bridged, revealing that comparison is a never-ending commitment an infinite being put into question, an infinite suspension of the "right to keep anything for myself "[349] While Levinas himself is reluctant to translate transcendence into any practical commitment or competence, we can argue that the Face of the cultural other questions our tendency to colonize the entire world and makes us guilty of not taking other perspectives into account. For Levinas, the epiphany of the Face interrupts the *I*'s *being-at-home* and transforms the *I* to an infinite responsiveness to the Other.

Relying on identity, even if it is the loose form of resemblances, potentially involves the use of social categories that neglect the alterity of the cultural other. It might also implicitly privilege the paradigm of the Wester philosophical tradition by only using elements of other cultural traditions that are seen as useful to us. As comparative philosophers it is thus not only our task to erase or minimize differences between cultural traditions by relying on the assertion of commonality, but we also need to take the separateness between self and other into account. Ethical competence as the recognition of the other as my interlocutor, is an embodied vulnerability to be questioned by the Other; an ethical competence that is a "non-competence," or a "beyond competence," and entails the willingness to be disrupted, traumatized, and haunted by the Face of the Other. Comparative philosophy has thus a paradoxical and risky task and is haunted by provisionality, inaccuracy and indeterminacy. In the next section, I will show how the ethical relation disrupts the idea of transparency in language and what consequences this has for our current conception of comparative philosophy.

## §5.3 The Ultimate Unsayability of the Other

Levinas distinguishes in his essay *La Signification et le Sens* "meaning" from "sense". "Sense" is amidst our existence but resists and escapes every appropriation, while "meaning" articulates a determined intelligible content. In his later work, *Autrement qu'Etre*, Levinas formulates "sense" as "the semantics of proximity, in which the Saying (*le dire*) signals itself in the Said (*le dit*). The Saying attests to the infinite and transcendent properties of the ethical relation in which the self is implicated in a constitutive relation to the Other.

[349] CPP:94; HAH:46

Levinas' articulation of radical alterity originates in the idea that the realm of the Same, despite its totalizing tendencies is open to pure transcendence. The egological self has the infinite desire for the other, a desire to overcome Being as a plea to be liberated from one's own materiality. The self is for Levinas essentially the Same; the self forms an egological culture in which alterity is annulled; this culture of immanence is thus inherently violent towards that what is other. In this egological immanent worldview, we can only evaluate and judge the other from a common denominator; a common ground that secures the *dia-logos* between self and other.

Levinas shows us that we can never fully attest to the otherness of the other when we ground ethics in representation and thinking. Only transcendence as the infinite relation of responsibility can give the ethical orientation that is prior to and precedes representation and thinking. The relation of the infinite conceived as ethics produces a fundamental diachrony in language between the saying and the said and denotes the never-ending status of our utterances. Transcendence is disruption, displacement, an infinite move towards the Other that never can be exhausted, an asymmetrical, non-reciprocal relation that interrupts any logic of identity that connects the cultural other and me.



Intercultural communication is initiating a dialogue with the other without being able to resort to a common ground. The tension between the cultural other as knowable and the cultural other as the radical alterity that interrupts knowledge is the tension between the saying as ethical discourse and the said. Levinas sees true discourse as the saying that is inseparable from the person responding to questions, which to Levinas is an ethical discourse of pure goodness. Levinas reaffirms Plato's idea that the Good is not to be spoken about but is nevertheless the very precondition for language. The Saying is as ethical discourse, the command of the Face, the primordial expression of the first word "Thou shalt not kill," the saying that interrupts and traumatizes my egocentric spontaneity and is at once transformed to the demand for social justice when the third party enters the stage. The saying as ethical discourse is the encounter between self and other in speech, in which any thematization must be "unsaid" for the possibility to begin a dialogue.

It is from the saying that the said is produced, which paradoxically is also the moment that the said erases and betrays the saying by representing, grasping and understanding the other. This however does not mean that the tension between ethical discourse and propositional language is resolved; the saying

always leaves an imprint, a trace, in the said. This is why we cannot refute philosophical skepticism, as skepticism expresses the very tension between the saying and the said. The return of philosophical skepticism indicates that reality consists of a plurality of others who cannot be fully integrated within a particular framework. The transcendence of the Other always overflows each totality that tries to capture the Other.

It is thus the Said as the language that we use to speak about the cultural other that reveals the "beyond Being" and moves us in the direction of the ethical orientation of the Saying, even in betraying it. The ethical orientation moves us to an unknowable, ungraspable future and reveals how the openness to the Other, as an openness to yet unexplored and alternative perspectives, which makes language possible. Meaning comes as such from the Other, because the Other overflows our thinking. The ethical orientation as "sense" or "the Saying" makes it possible to understand and to evaluate the cultural other; an evaluation that concretizes as the infinite task to move beyond that what is said. In line with Robert Cummings, we can say that the task of the comparative philosopher is the never-ending task to "[develop] and [correct] actual comparisons and developing and correcting the categories that constitute the respects in which things are being compared."[350]

Comparative philosophy is the infinite ongoing desire to understand the cultural other by (mis)representing this other. Based on my reading, comparative philosophy entails both becoming responsive to the cultural other and taking the otherness of the cultural other into account, while at the same time bringing the cultural other closer to use by comparing concepts and conceptual schemes. While methodological competence requires us to identify commonalities between disparate cultural philosophical traditions, the ethical relation endlessly questions and resists this logic of identity. Ethical competence as non-competence is the disruption of any identity between meaning and concepts that the comparative philosopher tries to establish. It is a constant tension between giving the cultural other a meaning and the ongoing demand to be questioned in each attempt of categorization and thematization.

Levinas' work offers an important ground for a promising intercultural theory of ethical competence that premises comparative philosophy on the demand for openness and infinite self-transformation that concretizes in language.

[350] Neville, R.C. (2022). "Reflections on Methods of Comparative Philosophy" In: S. Burik, R. Smid & R. Weber (eds), *Comparative Philosophy and Method*, Bloomsbury Academics.

Language bears for Levinas the trace of the relation with pure exteriority, the moment in which the self gains the essential surplus of becoming incessantly preoccupied with the Other. Levinas shows us that apart from the ontological and epistemological aspects of openness towards the cultural other, becoming open to the other is primarily and ethical, personal vocation that will help us to make comparative philosophy more inclusive to alternative understandings and perspectives. While pluralizing the discourse on arguments and methodologies is indispensable for decolonizing philosophy, but we recognize that this pursuit requires self-critical and ethical responsible philosophers.

Levinas' ethical orientation as a relation between singularities is based on a personal vulnerability that cannot be thematized but is a "move towards the other as our neighbor," a move towards transcendence that frees us from being chained to our own perspective. A mere appreciation or tolerance of cultural pluralism is not enough to overcome imperialism and colonization of the other; what is needed is an ethical competence that makes us non-competent, a competence that takes the cultural other as our teacher instead of judging the other from our own cultural, philosophical horizon. The cross-cultural dialogue is the encounter with the otherness of the other who summons me to reflect on the question of whether I have not usurped the place of the other. It is this considering of my tendency to erase differences, my tendency to essentialize and categorize the cultural other that marks a Levinasian notion of ethical competence, a competence that recognizes the infinite incompetence or violence of my statements and propositions.



For Levinas, the said always and necessarily betrays the saying; every attempt to say something about the Other violates his or her otherness and brings him or her to light. But, based on the reading of Chapter Three, we can to some degree formulate a Levinasian position that attests to the saying even though at the same time betraying it. When we want to attest, bear witness, to the saying, we must acknowledge that saying something is always already revealed as a prior ethical vocation or responsiveness to the Other. The openness of being questioned and interrupted by the other requires a specific kind of ethical competence in which we do not take ourselves as the absolute truth but recognize that our activities, ideas and beliefs are provisional, fallible and (sometimes) egocentric. The ethical relation reveals itself in everyday contact and concern for the other, a concern that reveals a prior responsiveness to the other qua other. Speaking involves speaking about others and speaking to them, a tension between grasping and identifying others in my own terms and

at the same time being questioned in my very subjectivity, a being traumatically exposed as a person that already assumes too much.

Ethical competence as responding to the ethical orientation in the cultural encounter is thus the recognition to see comparative philosophy as an ongoing practice of re-saying what is said, an ongoing exposing us to the Other without hope of reaching a conclusion. Language is for Levinas foremost a responding to the Other, in which we attune to the ethical interruption instead of solely focusing on bridging the knower-known relation. For comparative philosophy, this entails that we are never done responding to cultural others and questioning the way we represent and understand them. In other words, there is no final moment of understanding, no method that can overcome the incommensurability between disparate cultural traditions. What is needed is becoming responsive to the ethical relation that calls for hospitality, which is a concrete call to action, a call for a sense of responsibility for the cultural stranger, to respect and learn from the cultural other in an ethical way. Ethical competence can only have significance as a non-knower-known relation, as an attempt to respond to the cultural other who interrupts me.

Comparative philosophy is focused on theory, knowledge and interpretation so that we can understand differences and similarities between disparate cultural philosophical traditions and is driven by the metaphor of vision. Levinas' critique on the vision in which we connect self and other through mediating anonymous concepts raises the question of the link between the logic of identity and the erasure of differences. The ethical orientation highlights the need to reconfigure comparative philosophy as an ethical vocation, a personal relation between self and other in which the self, as the comparative philosopher, is willing to respond to his or her responsibility for the cultural other. Taking ethical competence serious entails seeing language not only as a way to bridge the gap between me and the cultural other but also as an apology, an offering of myself to the Other, which is the "difficult freedom" as Levinas calls it, of conversing through and with the other while bringing that other under our own categories.

Levinas argues that we need Greek language as the Said to be able to hear the ethical calling of the Saying. We have seen that the ethical relation is beyond culture, beyond identity and social characteristics. In §3.10 I have discussed the work of scholars of Sikka, Ma Lin, Drabinski, Caygill and McGettigan that challenges using Levinas as a resource for comparative philosophy, as these scholars argue that Levinas' thinking excludes or neglects the non-European

other. In the next section, I will elaborate on the question of whether Levinas' ethical relation applies to today's postcolonial world.

## §5.4 Comparative Philosophy as the Infinite Task of Moving Beyond Identity

Levinas' thinking revolves around the discovery of the primordial ethical relation to the Other as the very constitution of the subject. The subject is primarily infinite responsibility to the Other and only after that a freedom and autonomous being. True freedom and true autonomy are for Levinas a freedom and autonomy that bear the weight of the command of the Face; a command that questions the self in its egocentric spontaneity. The subject is thus heteronomous; it is both same and Other, both a *being-for-the-Other* and *a being-for-itself.*



The main question in Chapter Three was how to apply Levinas' thinking to the relation to the cultural other. Scholars such as McGettigan, Ma Lin and Drabinksi have rightfully questioned Levinas' troublesome political statement seem to clash with his idea of the ethical relation. In chapter Three I have explored the relation between immanence, transcendence and culture and have shown that the problem for Levinas lies in the violence of an immanent worldview that cannot provide an ethical orientation in which we value the cultural other on their own terms. Levinas' thinking in a sense indeed privileges the Greek-Judeo tradition that has revealed the relation to infinite as the good beyond Being, a relation to pure goodness that signifies the Jewish teachings of the trace of God revealed in one's personal responsibility for one's brothers.

How can we reconcile Levinas' classification of non-European traditions as "exotic" and "mere dance,"[351] with his insistence on transcendence of the Other beyond cultural identity, ethnicity and historicity? There is an inherent paradox in Levinas' statement that the cultural other lacks significance because it has not thought transcendence and the call to take the Other on its own terms. In Chapter Three I have tried to outline why Levinas' thinking is still important to comparative philosophy without erasing Levinas' Eurocentrism. With the help of Derrida and his work on the duty of Europe, I have tried to show what it means to be the privileged tradition. The duty of Europe, and as such, of comparative philosophy as a European discipline of philosophy, is for Derrida the infinite task

[351] Rötzer, F. (1995). *Conversations with French Philosophers*, 63.

to move beyond identity. It is the infinite task to unsay the said and an infinite hospitality to that what cannot be known, grasped or understood.

In Chapter Three I have argued that scholars such as Drabinski and McGettigan who criticize Levinas' Eurocentrism have paid too little attention to Levinas' critique on immanence as a pagan, hostile world. Levinas' belief is that sincerity as taking the other on its own terms is not possible within a pagan, primitive world. Humans are the only ones capable of moving beyond Being, of sacrificing their life for the other, of giving the stranger the bread from one's mouth, an ability that is "sacred" and breaks with the self's egocentric enjoyment of the world. This holiness cannot be found in an immanent, pagan world but comes from pure exteriority. A culture that is wholly immanent, as the Chinese culture primarily is, is seen by Levinas thus as "barbarian," "pagan," and "primitive," a culture that needs to be translated into Greek and the Bible to become ethical.

The paradox in Levinas' thinking that revolves around the idea that a wholly immanent worldview cannot provide an ethics of the Other leads him to evaluate non-Western cultures as lacking significance. We have to note here however that Levinas is not classifying the cultural other as "barbarian," or "primitive," but points to the tendency of cultures to become immanent totalities. Immanent cultures cannot provide us with an ethical orientation to evaluate and judge the cultural other, but only provides us with the esthetical appreciation of the cultural other in which the cultural other becomes a form of idolization.

The reason that Levinas dismisses the significance of non-European cultures is the same reason for his rejection of multiculturalism and his critique on the Western tradition that is anti-Platonic: all these critiques originate in his belief that an immanent world is pagan and primitive. What we have to conclude is that transcendence as conceived by Levinas is not a European invention, but transcendence is however revealed in the European tradition. The privilege consists not in the supremacy of the geographical, ethnocentric place of Europe but in its thinking tradition that has opened up to transcendence. Only the thought of infinite can break up the thinking cogito, can interrupt the realm of being without negating or destroying it and his conviction is that only the Greek, Judeo-Christian tradition has articulated the relation to infinity as transcendence.

Unconditional hospitality is a theme in both Levinas' as in Derrida's work. Derrida even calls *Totalité et Infini* "an immense treatise of hospitality."[352] Derrida seems to interpret transcendence also as unconditional hospitality, something that becomes apparent in Derrida's work on the duty of Europe. Derrida reminds us that Levinas' thinking is motivated by the inhumane and horrific treatment of the stranger, the refugee and of the immigrants[353]; even amidst his alleged Eurocentrism and racism he was deeply concerned with the Western failure to protect human lives.

In Levinas work' Europe is thus the privileged tradition that has articulated transcendence as the relation to infinity that suspends the thinking cogito, but at the same time it has failed to respond to this revelation; it has failed its duty to become infinitely responsible to each and every human other. Levinas and Derrida articulate a hospitality that unconditionally opens the door to the radical stranger, to be hospitable and to give all my words and my possession to the Other without expecting anything in return. Peace as goodness exists in an *I* that has given up its enjoyment of the world for the sake of the Other. The ethical relation is a relation in which the Other as my master transforms my embodied existence and gives my entire subjectivity a new meaning. A meaning that is however ungraspable, unknowable and a movement towards infinite transcendence.



It is precisely from this framework of infinite hospitality towards the unknown, and unthematizable future that informs Derrida's thinking of the duty of Europe. The duty of Europe is for Derrida the infinite move beyond identity, an infinite task to doubt and to unsay what has been said. Ethical competence is responding to the call for self-recognition and self-reflection that is embodying that my responsiveness is mistaken, is betraying the Other; it is as such the infinite task to deconstruct any identity, any reliance on a common ground. If the European tradition is privileged, it can only mean that it has to respond to the call of the Other and to become infinite hospitality to a future that is *non-European*. This entails that any Eurocentrism has to be unsaid, has to move towards the openness of the Other.

I have tried to synthesize Derrida's work on the duty of Europe and Levinas articulation of ethical culture to outline the task of comparative philosophy as

[352] Derrida, J. (1999). Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas. Transl P.A. Brault & M. Naas, Stanford University Press, 59

[353] Ibid., 64

an infinite self-questioning discipline. Comparative philosophy has thus the task to infinitely move beyond identity and to move towards the openness of the (cultural) Other as a non-European future. A future, perhaps in which Levinas' own statements such as that other cultures need to be translated needs to be unsaid and needs to move to other alternatives and possibilities. Hearing the call of the Other is an embodied responsiveness, an incarnated vulnerability that cannot be thematized or grasped, an infinite openness toward that what it is not, or not yet. But above all, comparative philosophy as a branch of European philosophy is always an attempt to become non-European. Comparative philosophy will become ethically borderless, or, better said, the comparative philosopher has the ethical vocation to become borderless and to become non-European.

To summarize, Levinas' phenomenology shows us the need for self-transformation when we want to become open to the cultural other as the other whose otherness is of concern to us. Levinas argues that the self is constituted and fulfilled in its human capacity by the proximity of the Other. The transcendence of the Other as the relation to the infinite takes primacy over the self's ontological enjoyment of the world. Based on my reading of Levinas' work, I have outlined how ethical competence originates from the embodied personal relation between self and the cultural other in which the proximity of the Other interrupts the self's egocentric concerns. Ethical competence is responding to the call of the Other, which entails that we are called to infinitely question and reflect upon our tendency to essentialize and thematize the cultural other. Levinas criticizes the essentialist conception of knowledge and calls for the need to take the ethical dimension of the self-other relation into account. In Levinas' thinking (cultural) knowledge is not associated with truth, but with erasing differences and the theoretical colonization of what is other. Knowledge thus becomes an ethical question; the question of whether I do not assume too much.

Intercultural communication is important to comparative philosophy because every comparison is initiated by someone whose emotional commitments, beliefs, and cultural background influence how philosophers approach the cultural other. In engaging with a disparate cultural philosophical tradition, we are broadening our horizon and as such the scope of our philosophical community. The challenge is how comparative philosophy can train its participants to become responsive to the ethical relation. Levinas maintains that the Other cannot be known and thematized, which raises the question of whether we can train and teach (future) comparative philosophers to respond

to the otherness of the other. To be competent, even if I have classified Levinas' conception of competence as a kind of non-competence, because competence will be an infinite attempt, involves the infinite move towards the unknown, unthematizable Other.

The most important insight of Levinas' thinking is his critique on the egocentric self that reduces everything to the same and fails to consider the otherness of the other. This insight is strengthened by the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s emphasis on self-transformation and the need to overcome the opposition between self and other. Instead of alienation ourselves from the other and the other's perspectives, the *Zhuāngzǐ* urges us to respond to reality as it is and to celebrate the variety of different expressions.



# Part II: Abiding At The Pivot: A Zhuangzian Perspective Of Ethical Competence

## §5.5 Abiding at the Pivot: Dissolving the Self-Other Dichotomy

Levinas' thinking has shown the need for transcendence as the ethical orientation that gives each person the surplus of being infinite responsible for the Other. We can only think about cultural others due to a prior responsiveness in which we are hospitable to their otherness. While Levinas shows us why we are indebted to the ethical discourse that concretizes as the critical-transformational discourse of becoming responsible for each and every other human being, Levinas gives us little insight in which concrete strategies we can adopt to become more responsive to our ethical vocation. In contrast to Levinas' thinking that primarily gives us insight in the phenomenology of the self-other relation, the *Zhuāngzǐ* can teach us practical strategies to harmonize the self-other relation by means of self-transformation. Essential to the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s philosophy is restoring the natural connections between perspectives.

The *Zhuāngzǐ*' shows that the egocentric self who usurps the world and violates the otherness of the other, is a perverted self that fails to see how the self is naturally embedded in nature that consists of various expressions and interdependent relations. To genuinely become "oneself" is to become responsive to the continuous context of alternative expressions and experiences

and to attune to the specific circumstances that produces these expressions and experiences.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* provides a convincing critique of why certain cultural convictions and emotional commitments can become oppressive and can make us blind to appreciate and recognize alternative expressions and possibilities. We especially constrain ourselves and alienate ourselves from genuinely appreciating alternative perspectives when we take our own perspective as the absolute truth. In the introduction of *Comparative Philosophy and Method* (2022) the authors state that "debates [in comparative philosophy] are often undertaken for the purpose of demonstrating the superiority of (one's) own opinion,"[354] an insight that strongly resonates with the Zhuangzian concern to overcome *shìfēi*-debates. We can easily see how comparative philosophy can slip into emotional quarrels in which persons no longer try to understand and learn from each other, but only hatefully oppose to and try to defy the other. The *Zhuāngzǐ* challenges philosophical debates in which philosophers debate about what is comparable or not comparable, what is right (justified) or wrong. These debates originate in the failure to recognize how all perspectives exist in an interdependent web of relationship.

In this study I have addressed the need to interpret comparative philosophy as a collective enterprise that consists of different perspectives that all can be seen as circumscribed opinions of what is comparable to what and in what respect. In other words: the perspectives in comparative philosophy are all singular affairs and are dependent upon certain circumstances, personal beliefs, and commitments. I suggest seeing the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s articulation of abiding at the "pivot of *dào*" as a form of ethical competence in which comparative philosophers respond from a position in which they recognize that their assertions are dependent upon their subjective point of view and in which they embody doubt and indeterminacy as a way of life. This entails that to become ethically competent; comparative philosophers need to train themselves to become free of harmful emotional commitments and biases that prevent them from approaching cultural others on their own terms. Instead of clinging to a particular content or methodology, the *Zhuāngzǐ* focuses on the suitability of a perspective to its circumstances, eschewing debates on what is correct and incorrect, comparable, or incomparable.

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[354] S. Burik, R. Smid & R. Weber, *Comparative Philosophy and Method*, 15.

The position of ethical competence entails that we are at rest (emotionally undisturbed, disinterestedly engaged) in the middle of the pivot, so that we can respond limitlessly to the different views expressed in comparative philosophy, including the perspectives that take themselves as the ultimate truth. The ethical ability to respond to situations in their indeterminate character will prevent us from colonizing the other and the other's perspectives and will help us to open ourselves to an endless range of alternative understandings and possibilities.

From the pivot, we can equalize the different, often incompatible perspectives by dissolving the self-other relation and see the fundamental unity of these perspectives. This entails seeing that each perspective is dependent upon a specific background, on specific methodological choices, on preferences and value judgments that produce the outcome of what is "comparable" and what is "not comparable," which leads to Jullien's claim that China is the "absolute other," who can help us in a Heideggerian way to retrieve our own origin or can lead to the claim that "there is only one correct translation of the *Zhuāngzǐ,*" which is Billeter's approach.[355] From the pivot, we can see that these perspectives are both limited, we can respond to the perspectives from a concern with *this* (*shì*, 是) aspect (e.g. from Jullien's perspective), and see it as *this*-aspect, or we can attune to the perspectives from a concern with *that* (*fēi*, 非) aspect (e.g. Billeter's perspective) and respond from a concern of *that*-aspect. In the middle of the pivot, we can see that these *this/that*-perspectives are mere opinions appropriate from the points of view of those who assert them. Furthermore, we can also see them as equal in their difference: they both express a limited and underdetermined perspective and necessarily reflect differently on reality.



The *Zhuāngzǐ* particularly highlights the interconnection between rigid patterns of thinking, emotional commitments, and violence. Disputes are often characterized by anger and an inability to take the other's perspectives into account. The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s rejection of philosophical disputation and its articulation of a more positive, life-affirming position can provide us with a conception of comparative philosophy that is more inclusive and more open to the (cultural) other and the other's perspectives. We need to approach the cultural other and the other's perspectives in a non-coercive way. This entails that we should respond to the uniqueness of the variety of different perspectives and appreciate the open-endedness and indeterminate nature of comparative philosophy.

[355] Billeter, J.F. (2006). *Contre François Jullien*, Allia, 45 ; Billeter, Jean-François (2018). *Quatre essais sur la traduction*, Ombres Blanches, 23.

The pivot enables comparative philosophers to see how different perspectives are produced by assumptions that are mistakenly taken as indubitable foundations. Because comparative philosophers in the pivot embody the method "of drift and doubt" (*gùyízhī*, 故疑之耀), they can value pluralism and do not take the variety of different perspectives (or *shìfēi*-judgments) as incommensurable. Each perspective sheds a small light on the ambiguous and complex flux of reality, and is circumstantially produced by *shìfēi*-judgments and emotional commitment. The claim that the *Zhuāngzǐ* is comparable to Levinas because they both are committed to a non-being self, is a perspective produced by the belief that their notions of the self are similar enough to be comparable, which is a subjective evaluation, and can be evaluated as "right". There are indeed some similarities between the two thinkers that make it interesting to compare these two thinkers. Nevertheless, a person who argues that the *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas are not comparable because they do not share the same notion of the self is equally right. There are some significant differences between the two thinkers that make them incomparable. Levinas is, for example, committed to the relation to infinity as pure goodness, while the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s primarily aim is to nourish life as it is, and to promote longevity and social harmony.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* challenges the ability of comparative philosophy to generate absolute claims on what is "comparable" or "right." It raises the question that we cannot rely on an objective standard that can ground our assertions; our assertions are subjective opinions that nevertheless bring something of the cultural other to light. What we bring to light is however not fixed, it is circumstantially produced and might also be wrong. This is why the *Zhuāngzǐ* urges us to use only doubt and indeterminacy as our method, which does not mean that we should become philosophical sceptics, but entails that we should be open to the possibility that we might be wrong and recognize that there are many alternative interpretations that are equally valid.

We need to see *shìfēi*-distinctions as mere instrument to shed light on the cultural other, but when we have freed ourselves from rigid patterns of thinking and dogmatic expectations, we are more able take the cultural other on its own terms. The insight into the nature of debate and knowledge produced in the field, the comparative philosopher who responds infinitely by alternating endlessly between the various rights and wrongs is not prone to pursue a blind universalism in which we colonize the other and the other's perspectives. Genuine openness toward the other and the other's perspectives is characterized by the willingness to abide at the pivot in which we assess the

different perspectives without having a fixed point of view. Ethical competence as the ability to value the cultural other on its own terms is in the *Zhuāngzǐ* related to having "greater knowledge" (*dàzhī*, 大知). Abiding at the pivot improves our epistemic situation, as the deconstruction of our conflated sense of self-identity enables us to appreciate rather than to affirm or deny the other and the other's perspectives. David Sturgeon (2015) particularly illuminates how greater knowledge originates in the person's willingness to become open to the other and the other's perspectives. Greater knowledge is not gained by studying texts or gaining knowledge of the cultural other, but consists in our willingness to *change ourselves*:

> *This appears to explicitly link greater knowledge to appreciation of a form of perspectivism – in particular, to the agent's willingness to explore different perspectives on the matter under consideration, and also to the range of available perspectives, including those which might at first appear contradictory or counter intuitive.*[356]



Ethical competence is thus a personal commitment, a desire to approach the other and the other's perspectives as equally valuable. In the pivot, comparative philosophers are able to "walk two roads simultaneously," indicating that they accommodate with the different perspectives by asserting the rightness of each perspective while simultaneously not seeing any of these perspectives as ultimate right or wrong. The position of the pivot is thus not a perspective in which comparative philosophers are indifferent to or radically sceptical of the endless range of roads that can be walked on, but a position in which they do not cling to any self-identity and can therefore identify with anyone and anything.

While Levinas offers a way to interrogate and question egological culture that neglects the Other, the *Zhuāngzǐ* offers us specific strategies for dealing with an egocentric culture that is based on reducing that what is other to the same. It is from the tension between Levinas' distinction between the Saying and the Said and Derrida's thinking on the duty of Europe that we can define ethical competence as the vocation to critique our own assertions and biases and open ourselves to a heterogeneous, unknown future. This is essentially also what the *Zhuāngzǐ* aims for, though for distinct reasons. While Levinas emphasize the uneasiness and restlessness of the self in the encounter with the Face, the

[356] Sturgeon, D. (2015). "Zhuangzi, Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge" In *Philosophy East & West*, 65 No3, 897.

*Zhuāngzǐ* focus on wandering with ease in the world and adopting a flexible, playful attitude towards life.

Both thinkers however offer us a way to consider the uniqueness or singularity of the cultural other. They both see how the egocentric self is the cause of violence and instead of empowering the self, both Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* decenter the self so that the non-allergic or harmonious relation between self and other can become known. When comparative philosophy wants to avoid the theoretical colonization of the cultural other, it needs to invest in a position that allows comparative philosophers to see that their assertions, arguments and methodologies can be structured differently.

In order to become genuinely open to the other and the other's perspectives, - an openness that is crucial to doing philosophy comparatively-, philosophers need to become aware of their motives and interests and how their emotional investment leads to asserting a certain belief of what is comparable and which methods should be used. When we want to approach the other cultural philosophical tradition as equally different to our own tradition, it is important to give up our self-contained identity and embrace a heterogenous self in which the self is always already other.

Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* both show how comparative philosophy requires an openness to thinking that is not simply recognizing that there are different perspectives possible, but they also alert us to the fact that these different perspectives form our thinking. Genuinely valuing the cultural other *as other* is not merely identifying differences and similarities between our own tradition and the other cultural tradition but requires the ethical competence of wanting to think otherwise. Moving beyond identity calls for a willingness to adopt a critical-transformational discourse in which we are willing to give up our confined perspective and our implicit or explicit egocentrism.

The *Zhuāngzǐ*'argues that the self-other relation becomes conflictual when the self holds on to a certain identity and becomes clogged with fixations, which leads to dogmatism, prejudices and biases. The pivot of *dào* is as a guiding strategy is important to comparative philosophy because it takes bias seriously and sees it as the culprit of a troublesome self-other relation. The *Zhuāngzǐ*'observes that we become closed-up dogmatic entities when we think that language, logic, value judgments and preferences are able to capture the truth. This is partly due to social institutions such as universities that teach their

students the right way or the only (Western) way to do philosophy, confining them rather than liberating them from a clogged heart-mind. The need to decolonize and to open academia up to the (cultural) other and the other's perspectives is not only essential for doing justice to the (cultural) other, but also vital to liberating ourselves from artificial constraints.

The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s articulation of the pivot of *dào* calls for the need to redefine philosophy. Instead of defining it as the practice that generates rational arguments that solves philosophical problems and raises new issue (see §1.4), we should see it as the discipline that is infinite hospitable to a variety of different approaches, methods, and practices. Comparative philosophy is a personal assignment, an ethical competence in which comparative philosophers attempt to liberate themselves from rigid patterns of thinking, of clinging to fixed evaluative standards so that they can become genuinely open to the other and the other's perspectives. In the pivot, comparative philosophers have attained a position of emotional detachment and sees the self-other relation as "equal in their difference," revealing that in the pivot philosophers are able to listen to the other and the other's perspectives and converse and work together with them.



I think however that we have to adapt the *Zhuāngzǐ* on one important point. While the *Zhuāngzǐ* urges us to eschew debates, I would like to highlight the positive contributions of philosophical debates. Being confronted with the other and the other's perspectives helps comparative philosophers to become aware of their biases and is such a vital aspect of becoming ethically competent. Comparative philosophers should however avoid becoming entangled in emotional discussions in which they respond to the other from their own emotional commitments. The *Zhuāngzǐ* uses the metaphor of the mirror to highlight the detached, preferred position: the person in the pivot responds to the situation without storing or possessing. The Sage in the pivot responds to the other but does not seek to cling or promote any shìfēi-distinction and while this is not an easy position, the position of the pivot does provide us with a way to approach the other and the other's perspectives with the most clarity and equality.

We should wander at ease in comparative philosophy by practicing emotional equanimity and letting go of any assumptions and beliefs that interfere with seeing the other and the other's perspectives as equal in their difference, but we should also hold on to the ethical vocation of responsibility in which we concern ourselves with the question of social justice. Ethical competence entails that comparative philosophers should not confine themselves to one way of doing

philosophy, nor commit themselves to one particular method, yet it also includes the responsibility to object to any perspective that is excludes and dehumanizes the (cultural) other. Comparative philosophy should not be seen as the discipline in which "anything goes," and in which ethical competence is the mere celebration of the variety of roads that can be taken. While I do agree with the benefits of embracing indeterminacy and doubts and the attempt to overcome clinging to preferences and outcomes, I do think that there are some emotional commitments that we should not get rid of. I do not think that overt racist and sexist perspectives are part of comparative philosophy and while philosophers in the pivot have freed themselves from any of these harmful commitments, I think it is necessary for philosophers in the pivot to be emotionally committed to resist and fight any form of sexism and racism or other forms of dehumanization. Taking the need for philosophy to decolonize serious entails that we should reject and deny the rightness of any claim that dehumanizes the other. In the next section, I will take up on this problem and will concentrate on how we can quell expectations and disputations by bringing clarity (*míng*, 明).

## §5.6 Quelling Expectations and Disputations

We have seen that, in the pivot, the comparative philosopher has transcended the self-other dichotomy and embraces an objective perspectivism in which the philosopher affirms the rightness of each perspective, but at the same time sees these perspectives as finite points of view influenced by our own preferences for action and thinking. Abiding at the pivot of *dào* entails responding spontaneously to the current situation by following the rightness of each perspective without allowing personal biases to influence the situation. In this section, I will outline how the comparative philosopher is able to bring clarity (*míng,* 明) and can quell expectations and disputations. I will concentrate on what knowledge comparative philosophers in the pivot use and how they can learn to remain at rest in the centre of the pivot. I will also demonstrate why the resistance of perspectives that dehumanize the other need not to be seen as a form of bias that we should get rid of, but provides us with the necessary ethical commitment to practice comparative philosophy. In other words: the Zhuangzian conception of ethical competence thus needs the surplus of the ethical orientation as the attempt to do justice to the Other.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* argues that a person in the pivot does not discuss knowledge extensively, particularly not the knowledge that transcends human capability.

Rather than reason, the *Zhuāngzǐ* seems to endorse action guided by intuitive knowledge, although it is clear from the passage of Cook Ding that this intuitive knowledge needs to be learnt. The story of Cook Ding shows that intuitive knowledge is performative; it is a skilful engagement with the world that is characterized by an unbiased openness to the different things that are presented to us. In the pivot, we have thus trained ourselves to respond to all possible and existing roads that can be taken, which gives the us the freedom, as Jiang argues, to create and discover new possibilities and to navigate constraints in novel ways.357 This personal freedom, which is at the same time an ethical competence to become open to the cultural other, is however a creativity unrestrained but nonetheless a trained capability not to be disturbed by emotions, a skill that cannot be taught by the transmission of verbal knowledge but needs to be individually performed.



Persons in the pivot is at rest because they have trained themselves extensively to keep his or her heart-mind empty, wandering and mirroring. The responsibility to abide at the pivot is entirely placed on the shoulders of the individual; finding the pivot is not a matter of following a set of rules but is an infinite exercise of restraining ourselves for the purpose of affirming life as it is. The centre of the pivot corresponds to the stability of the person's heart-mind, it is a position of emptiness in which the person does not hold on to any expectation or preference and is therefore in the best position to see the perspectives as they are. This means that observation of us and of our environment in a detached way is very important to shed light on the situation. Bringing clarity relates to knowledge and action and the alignment between self and other through rigorous self-transformation and adaptation. The desire for self-transformation seems to rely in the love for life as it is, a willingness to accept the various contingencies of life and remain within the limits of our natural capabilities.

The dialectical relation between self and other unfolds within the events of self-loss, finding the pivot of *dào* and endlessly responding to the transformation of things (*wùhuà*, 物化), which indicates that the first step is to deconstruct the egocentric self that sees its own preferences and perspective as the ultimate truth. The clogged heart-mind is the reason why disputation arises and is as such also the reason for the non-harmonious relation between self and other. Only when we have liberated ourselves and have lost ourselves, we are able to take the holistic point of view of *dào* which is seen by the *Zhuāngzǐ* as the great

[357] Jiang, T. *Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China*, 292.

equalizer of things, since the pivot simultaneously affirms the rightness of a particular perspective and denies its rightness as the all-encompassing truth.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* endorses a self-other relation that is harmonious because self and other are seen as unique expressions that are equally valuable. When we become aware that we are emotionally invested in the comparative study we undertake and adopt the transcending view of the pivot, we can see that our perspective, in which we claim that x is comparable to y in respect to z, is the result of preference (e.g. preferring to compare x to y instead of b to y) that originates in value judgments (judging x to be more relevant to compare to y than b).

Confronted with an opposing perspective, we can easily see, as we are not committed to our own perspective that another perspective is equally right in comparing b to y in respect to z, as we can see that both perspectives are equally the result of certain preferences that originate in value judgments. What I prefer and value is different to what the other values and prefers, but both are equally different in the sense that in the pivot I can see that when both the self and the other claim to be right, it reveals that both self and other are simultaneously also wrong.

Perspectives produced in comparative philosophy are subject-dependent, they are the result of positioning ourselves in a certain way, which indicates that we can position ourselves differently and become practically position-less in the pivot. This practically entails that methodologically constraining ourselves and forcing comparative philosophy in a particular direction is unwarranted and counterproductive. Unwarranted because any commitment on how to do comparative philosophy leads to more and not less bias; counterproductive because it confines us to a particular perspective and prevents us to approach the cultural other on its own terms and to learn from a variety of methods, approaches, and practices.

There is however one challenge that we have to tackle which is how we should respond to perspectives that dehumanize the other and are racist or sexist. While we can affirm the rightness of perspectives that claim A to be comparable to B simultaneously with perspectives that claim that A is not comparable to B, it would be unwarranted for comparative philosophers to assert the rightness of perspectives that are ethically troublesome. Instead of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, which promotes an ethically neutral position, I think it is necessary to hold on in the pivot to the ethical commitment to oppose to any perspective that is racist or

sexist or dehumanizes cultures or persons. In other words, we should hold on to the ethical commitment to do justice to the Other and the stranger as the one whose otherness is not considered. I reject therefore the Zhuangzian strategy, as discussed on pages 164 and 165, to mirror the behaviour and preferences of the oppressor. The emotional commitment to see racism, imperialism, sexism, and theoretical colonization as ultimately wrong and not as circumstantially wrong is a necessary and vital characteristic for any comparative philosopher and should not be seen as a bias that prevents us from becoming open to the other and the other's perspectives. The *Zhuāngzǐ* sees anger as a counterproductive, artificial emotion that emerges from a clogged heart-mind (*chéngxīn*, 成心). However, anger might be an apt emotional response to a moral violation and a justified way of bearing witness to the dehumanization of others. Uma Narayan (1988) and Alison Jaggar (1989) both argue that anger can even be epistemologically productive and can give us insight in unrecognized forms of injustice.



The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s central concern is to illuminate the limitations of personal points of views, which is an epistemological and not an ethical concern. The text is responding to philosophical disputation (*biàn*, 辯) that concentrated on which *shìfēi*-evaluations were right or wrong, beneficial or harmful. The *Zhuāngzǐ*'attacks this conception of philosophy because imposing categorizations in a fixed way does not agree with the way things are. Instead of imposing fixed standards and distinctions on things, we should use *shìfēi*-evaluations in a more fluid or fitting (*yí*, 宜) way. Becoming open to a variety of perspectives broadens our understanding of the world and helps us to better respond to alternative possibilities. At this point, the *Zhuāngzǐ* gives us insight in how becoming open to the cultural other has epistemological benefits for ourselves and enriches our understanding.

We also have to consider that philosophical disputation in the Warring States Period was also a risky endeavour in which Masters sometimes were executed for expressing their political views. The *Zhuāngzǐ* therefore argues that mirroring the needs of the oppressor is an effective strategy to prevent execution. Debates in comparative philosophy often tend to result in arguments that claim to have the best or right comparison; arguments that indeed are futile as these arguments cannot be objectively right nor do they correspond to how cultural reality, which is ambiguous and heterogeneous, really is. Furthermore, perspectives in comparative philosophy are subjective expressions that shed a particular light on the relation between concepts and conceptual schemes between two distinct cultural philosophical traditions; these perspectives are produced by certain

distinctions of what is comparable and which methods is "right," or "relevant." The Zhuangzian articulation of the pivot of *dào* can help us to make comparative philosophy more inclusive and less a practice that tends to rely on a primarily Western notion of what it means to do philosophy. Nevertheless, comparative philosophy should not be an "all-inclusive" discipline; its core commitment, and the emotional commitment of the comparative philosophy should be aimed at approaching and value the cultural other in its otherness.

## §5.7 Wandering and Clarifying

The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s questions debates and offers some practical strategies for dealing with debates. The text argues that aligning oneself with any side in a debate will lead to continued conflict and emotional disturbances. In the pivot, persons align themselves with the various perspectives that are expressed. The text advises us to particular pay attention to how each perspective expresses an alternative point of view and how these perspectives can enrich our understanding of life. Instead of aiming to win an argument or to be right, the *Zhuāngzǐ* advises us to choose for contentment and harmony by realizing that our point of view is a personal preference rather than the absolute truth.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* sees debates as a failure to understand each other and as a failure to accept that comparative philosophy consists of a variety of different alternative perspectives. Debates in comparative philosophy are centred around what is "comparable to what" and "what is not comparable," which methods are "right", and which ones are "wrong" to compare disparate cultural philosophical traditions. These debates are as such nothing more than scholars attacking and criticizing each other's perspectives; perspectives of what is "so" (*shì*, 是) and "not so" (*fēi*, 非). The *Zhuāngzǐ* shows us that these perspectives are just expressions of situated opinions; opinions that are presented as the absolute truth by clinging to these particular patterns and standards. Knowledge in comparative philosophy is a product of limited perspectives that can only represent and convey a part of reality and that are dependent upon particular interpretations formed in relation to other perspectives. Each comparison is the result of different starting points that produce different ways of looking at a text.

Instead of pondering over what is "comparable" and "not comparable," and bickering over what methods we should use and should not use, we are able to see how all these assertions are the outcome of particular preferences and

circumstances. The person at the pivot recognizes the equal validity of these two perspectives while at the same time also recognizes their difference and limitations. The tendency to treat these perspectives as either/or alternatives, fails to shed light on something: it is a failure to see that these alternatives are both the same and not the same. The *Zhuāngzǐ* shows us that there are no objective criteria available for claiming that certain distinctions or evaluations are universally generalizable. In other words: each perspective is contaminated by subjective bias and is open to being questioned.

Comparative philosophy should not only concentrate on bridging the gap between cultural distinct concepts and conceptual schemes but should also take the position of the persons who do the comparison into account and how they approach the other and the other's perspectives. While we cannot compare without making assertions, we can however train ourselves to become ethically competent. We can only transcend our own confined perspective when we have liberated ourselves from a calculative heart-mind and acquire an understanding of the way our interpretation and responses are affected by our emotions and our clinging to specific methods and ways of seeing things. Committing ourselves beforehand to a specific definition of comparative philosophy and a specific methodology diminishes our openness towards the (cultural) other and the other's perspectives and diminishes our ability to draw distinctions in a flexible and creative way. The *Zhuāngzǐ* furthermore shows us that disagreement is a constructive moment in which we learn novel ways of seeing the comparative project, a moment of understanding and learning as long as we do not see the other and other's perspectives as opponents. In the pivot we no longer act like a judge but as a peer and can assess a given perspective based on its relevance and coherence.



In conclusion, ethical competence from a Zhuangzian point of view entails that we should familiarize ourselves with a variety of methodologies and approaches and see comparative philosophy as a practice that shows its relevance in the comparative praxis. I agree with Burik (2022) who argues that we should not believe in the inherent value of building a philosophical system or taking a systematic approach to comparative philosophy. Instead, we should commit ourselves to become free of bias and respond to every possibility. Detaching ourselves of emotional and cognitive biases requires training and effort. It took Cook Ding for example three years to "go along with things," (*yīnshì*, 因是) and to wander carefree (*xiāoyáoyóu*, 逍遙遊).

While embracing indeterminacy and doubt as our only map will help us to see many more alternatives and possible interpretations, we still have to make philosophical choices about how to approach the cultural other and how to respond to other's who do take themselves as the mediators of what is "so" and "not so." At this point we can see that in the pivot we are responding to the other as other which entails responding to the tension between the *saying* and *the said*. While we have detached ourselves in the pivot from emotional and cognitive biases, we still have to approach the cultural other by making use of our own linguistic and philosophical frameworks. Nevertheless, we personally embrace the infinite task to move beyond identity, as we do not claim to be right nor reject possible alternatives, which changes our approach to language. Meaning and words are in the pivot not fixed and can change under different circumstances. Furthermore, in the pivot we respond to what the cultural other takes their needs to be, which implies that we take their socio-historical, cultural, and linguistic context into account and are aware of the limitations of our comparisons.

Remaining ethically open is similar to staying in the pivot as it urges us to minimize the violence of the otherness of the other by, for example, falling back on our privileged conception of what philosophy should be or taking our perspective as what is objectively "so" or "not so". Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ* both see the need to deconstruct the egocentric self, a self that does harm to what is other but that remains also confined to its own perspective. The egocentric self that clings to its own rules and standards is never able to evolve, since overcoming one's perspective requires the capability to understand and accept the standards and rules used by the other. Being able to shift between different perspectives, methodologies, standards, and rules frees us of bias and makes us better able to engage in comparative philosophy.

To summarize, I have called the position of the pivot as described in the *Zhuāngzǐ* as ethical competence, despite the fact that the *Zhuāngzǐ* is not concerned with ethics but sees the pivot as the natural position in which we are able to follow our own self-so-ness and complete our natural life span. Being in the pivot requires an ethical vocation to do justice to the Other, a desire to want to think otherwise. In the pivot we have the flexibility to shift between different perspectives and see their acceptability while at the same time acknowledging their limitations, which is the best position available to comparative philosophers. Nevertheless, attuning to our duty to become ethically competent as being at rest in the pivot can only be motivated by the faith of the person(s) involved, and their

love for comparative philosophy as a constructive endeavour, which entails that we should be emotionally committed to reject and criticize any claim that dehumanize the other and are sexist or racist. Comparative philosophy as a discipline that consists of an endless variety of perspectives, including the cultural relativist one, but it is also a discipline with an ethical orientation that is committed to doing justice to the otherness of the other.