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

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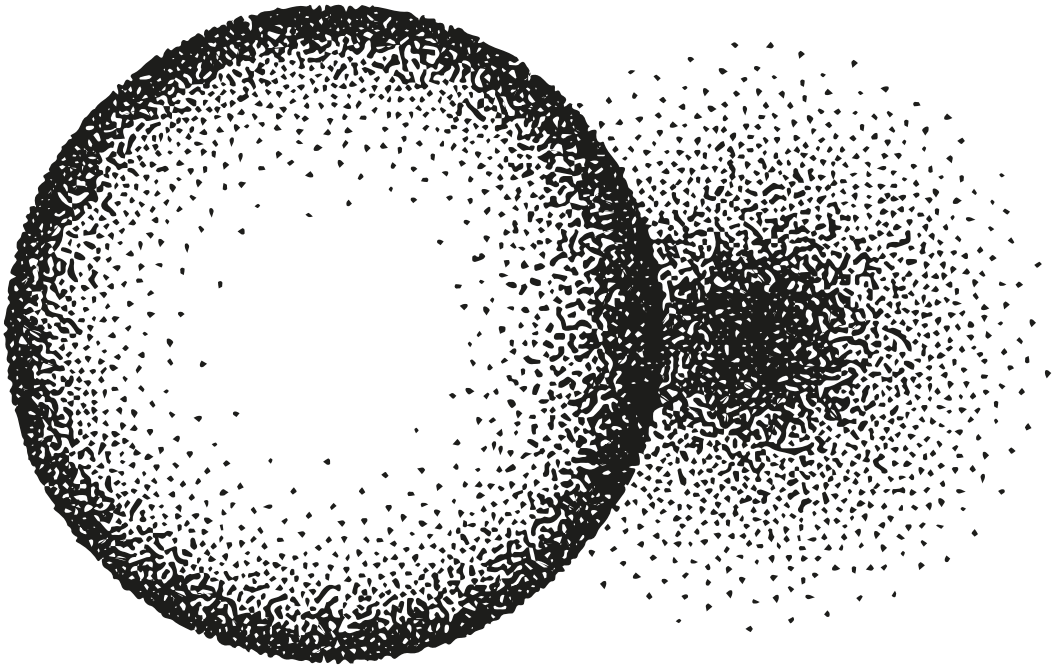

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Ethical Competence and The Self-Other Relation

In this dissertation, I have developed an interpretation of the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s and Levinas' reconfiguration of the self-other relation to provide an alternative conception of comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophy seeks to learn and understand from the cultural other by erasing differences by assertion one or several commonalities between concepts and conceptual schemes of disparate cultural philosophical traditions. I have drawn attention to the fact that comparative philosophy cannot evaluate claims from a neutral vantage point and needs to consider that these claims are always biased by the background and choices of the person doing the comparison.

Comparative philosophy is a discipline that consists of a variety of different perspectives that need to be appreciated. The ability to appreciate a range of alternative perspectives and methodologies requires philosophers to adopt an open, flexible and understanding attitude in which we do not see ourselves as the ultimate truth but recognize that our position is based on certain preferences. I have showed that the person who abides at the pivot will be able to value the other and the other's perspectives and will be trained to celebrate alternative perspectives rather than evaluating them as "right" or "wrong". Abiding at the pivot is a willingness to become open to the other and the other's perspectives, and, from a Levinasian point of view to desire to do justice to the other. For Levinas and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, becoming open to alternative possibilities and the other, is a personal invitation to move beyond identity and to become less egocentric and dogmatic.

Instead of being a discipline that aims for justified arguments and discerning what is "right" or "comparable" and what is not, comparative philosophy should see itself as a discipline that converses with and works together with various voices from various cultural philosophical traditions. Comparative philosophy is thus learning from and conversing with the cultural other, in which the otherness of this other is of concern to us. The question of how to approach the other and the other's perspectives in the best way is conceived in this study as a question of ethical competence which amounts to adopting a critical-transformational discourse. Only when we are willing to critically reflect on our beliefs, preferences and presuppositions are we able to transcend our own confined perspectives.

Levinas' notion of transcendence can help us to adopt a discourse of responsibility that is not based on any assertion of commonality. A Levinasian notion of ethical competence is a personal vocation to openness rather than

closure; it is an infinite exercise in opening ourselves to alternatives. Levinas shows that the ethical dimension of language emerges when we take the relation to the cultural other as our teacher, as our interlocutor and recognize the violence inherent in our essentialization and categorization of the cultural other. Responding to the saying entails that the comparative encounter's outcome is marked by indeterminacy and open-endedness. The Levinasian approach to comparative philosopher emphasizes the personal relation between the comparative philosopher and the cultural other and calls for the need of the comparative philosophers to take the cultural other in their otherness into account.

When we engage in comparative philosophy, we should be committed to learning from and understanding the cultural other, which is a commitment that reveals a love for the other in their otherness as well as a willingness to give up our privileged position. Although we are always culturally situated and we necessarily need to rely on our own cultural horizon to approach the cultural other, the ethical encounter opens up a way in which we can still respond to the cultural other's otherness. In this study I have outlined that this entails that comparative philosophers need to move beyond identity and need to recognize the interconnection between the reliance on commonness, resemblances and identities and cultural hegemony.

Levinasian ethical competence to the cultural other can be translated as a willingness to be questioned by the cultural other, which originates in the re-appreciation of the interdependence of self and other. Comparative philosophers need to embody uncertainty and indeterminacy as ethical competence, through the awareness of the relation between essentialization and categorization and violence. Comparative philosophy is always a mis- or representation of the cultural other, it is always a responding to the alterity of the other by categorizing and grasping that other from our own cultural horizon. This highlights once more the need to become ethically competent as comparative philosophers and try to approach the cultural other and the other's perspectives in the most open, unbiased way.

Ultimately, the Levinasian conception of ethical competence cannot be translated into practical strategies on how we can approach the cultural other and the other's perspectives in an open, unbiased way. While it does define the task of the comparative philosopher to try to move beyond identity, Levinas does not provide us with strategies on how we can embody this task. I have shown

how the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s articulation of finding the pivot of *dào* through the adoption of an empty, wandering and mirroring heart-mind can help us to see what needs to be done in order to become open to the other and the other's perspectives.

The *Zhuāngzǐ*'s sceptical concerns challenge the idea that there is a unique, neutral vantage point and shows how each claim in comparative philosophy is biased and produced by certain emotional commitments. As comparative philosophers, we cannot take an unbiased position in which we can evaluate what is "comparable" or "right," but can only argue what is circumstantially and subjectively "comparable" or "right."

Instead of seeing comparative philosophy as a discipline that tries to discern similarities and differences between disparate cultural philosophical traditions, comparative philosophy can be better seen as a form of intercultural praxis in which we responsibly approach the cultural other in which we keep the space between the same and the other open. Keeping this space open entails that we should recognize that all our arguments and presuppositions are indeterminate and provisional. Most comparative studies rest largely on unquestioned notions of comparison and amount to claims of what is "comparable" and "not comparable," and what is the right methodology or approach and what is not. This attitude prevents us from considering alternatives and moving towards what is other. As we have seen in this study, what is right or comparable can easily change when we focus on a different tertium, and the right methodology might easily become the wrong methodology when we change our perspective. The relation between what is "comparable" and "not comparable," "right and wrong," and "similar and different" is obscured in comparative philosophy and it is only in freeing ourselves of our egocentric preferences and value judgments that we can see how these relations naturally interconnect.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* shows how most scholars are predisposed to understanding the comparative encounter through a fixed epistemological framework. The reliance on such fixed frameworks is the cause of the failure to recognize that self and other are equal in their difference. Instead of being hostile to the claims of others, we should abide at the pivot and actively free ourselves from harmful biases that make us intolerant to the cultural other and the other's perspectives. In contrast to approaching the cultural other as either the negation of us or the affirmation of ourselves, the *Zhuāngzǐ* promotes taking doubt and indeterminacy as our only method. The equanimity of the person in the pivot is grounded in a balance between engaging in comparative philosophy and a detachment of

philosophical disputation. For the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the comparative philosopher who abides at the pivot seeks to act responsively and flexible to each comparative encounter, yet withdraws from the world when confronted with oppressive, racist, and sexist perspectives.

I have argued that this strategy to simply mirror the behaviour of these perspectives, which entails "playing racist with the other when he wants to play the racist," is not suitable for comparative philosophy. Although we should become open to the cultural encounter and take the other's perspectives equally into account, we have the ethical commitment to reject and criticize perspectives that overtly violate the otherness of the cultural other. A Zhuangzian inspired conception of ethical competence originates in embracing indeterminacy and doubt as a way of life, which entails the recognition that our perspective is never free of bias and is circumstantially produced. Abiding at the pivot is a personal commitment to become a *no-self*, a personal commitment to deconstruct rigid patterns of thinking and expectations that might negatively influence the comparative encounter. Learning to engage responsively in comparative philosophy however should also entail that we actively seek to reject perspectives that seek to dehumanize the cultural other and are racist or sexist. Although the *Zhuāngzǐ* seeks to avoid any emotion that disrupts our emotional equanimity, I suggest the need to consider the aptness of anger when confronted with oppressive perspectives. In contrast to the *Zhuāngzǐ*, which argues that our emotional responsiveness to situations should not merely rely on conventions, I argue that the conventional ethical emotional commitment to do justice to the other is needed. This ethical commitment is the necessary form of communication in which the comparative philosopher bears witness to the dehumanization of the other and needs to be seen as a justified convention of a shared negative appreciation of racist, xenophobic, and sexist claims.

To summarize, ethical competence thus entails seeing comparative philosophy as a form of intercultural praxis that requires an ethical responsible position in which we embody indeterminacy and doubt as a way of life and the need to empty ourselves from emotional and cognitive commitments to become open to the cultural other and the other's perspectives. Across many studies and methodological inquiries in comparative philosophy there appears to be a desire to understand and learn from the cultural other, and thus to communicate with that other, but in which the ethical grounds remain unquestioned and undisclosed. Taking the ethical grounds of comparative philosophy into account requires the person doing the comparison to train him- or her to become open

and responsive to a variety of different methodologies and perspectives and to do justice to the otherness of the other. The pivot is the best position for comparative philosophers, because it is a position in which we actively question and deconstruct our beliefs, biases, and presuppositions in which we create a space to be interrupted in the rigidity of our fixed designations.

When we abide at the pivot, we can see how perspectives are just expressions of opinions, produced by different backgrounds, methods, and choices, which enables us to accommodate to a variety of alternative points of views. The pivot is however not a relativist position I which everything goes, and each perspective is justified. Ethical competence also entails being committed to do justice to the otherness of the cultural other, which is the need to reject oppressive claims at all times. The Zhuangzian/Levinasian conception of ethical competence highlights the importance of becoming responsive to the tension between self and other in the comparative process. This conception of ethical competence embodies the personal task to attempt to move beyond identity and endorses open-endedness and indeterminacy as the fundamental nature of comparative philosophy.

The Zhuangzian/Levinasian conception of ethical competence as abiding at the pivot and the ethical concern to do justice to the cultural other as other, entails becoming open to being questioned by the cultural other so that we can lose our unwarranted fixations and become open to alternative meanings, approaches, and methods. This entails that the Zhuangzian/Levinasian conception of ethical competence calls for reconceptualising comparative philosophy. Ethical competence originates in the recognition that amidst competing argumentative claims in which each perspective asserts their own truth, we have no neutral vantage point from which we can decide which perspective is ultimately right. Instead, ethical competence requires us to affirm each of their circumstantial and subjective rightness. Ethical competence originates in valuing a plurality of alternative possibilities, although claims that dehumanize the other, such as racist and sexist claims, are necessarily excluded from being appreciated.

Ethical competence as informed by the thinking of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and Levinas is hospitable to a variety of approaches, methodologies and practices and is as such defined by the infinite attempt to move beyond identity. To maintain the position of the pivot in comparative philosophy, is to learn to appreciate personal responsibility and responsiveness as essential ingredients to evolve in comparative philosophy.

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