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

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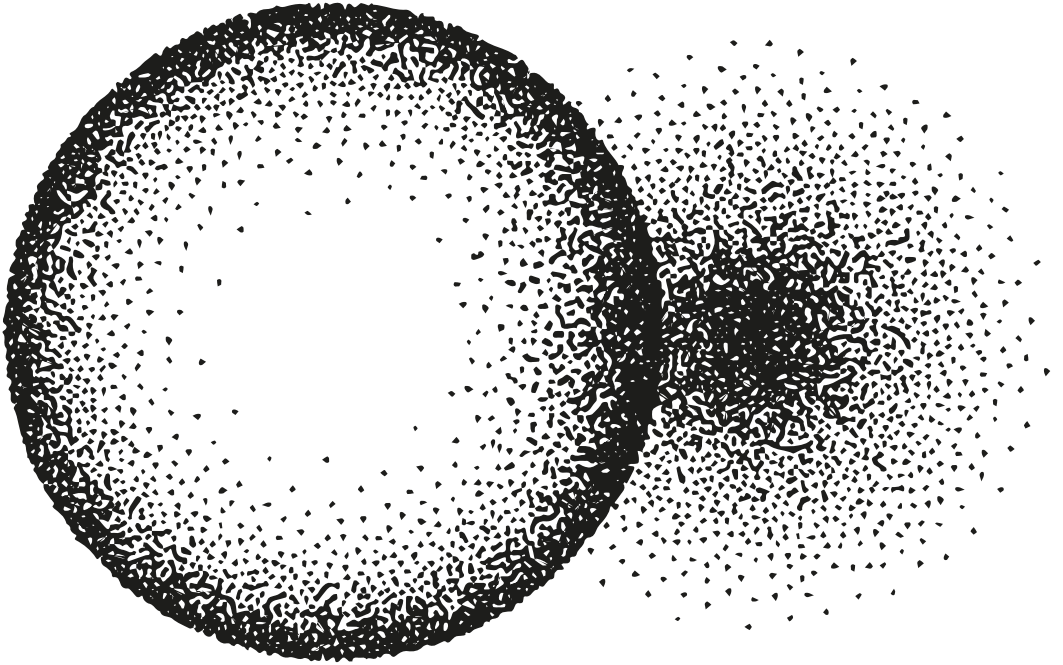
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Appendix

Summary

Samenvatting

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Propositions

Summary

This study aims to show the relevance of the work of Emmanuel Levinas and the proto-Daoist text the *Zhuāngzǐ* for comparative philosophy. The question that is at the heart of comparative philosophy is how we can approach another cultural philosophical tradition in its otherness, while at the same time bringing this other tradition closer to us through familiar philosophical concepts. The study argues that current methodologies and practices in comparative philosophy are too much aimed at overcoming incommensurable differences between cultural traditions. Comparative philosophy requires an openness of thinking in which comparative philosophers are willing to be interrupted and questioned in our assumptions and emotional commitments. This study shows how Levinas' ethical relation to the Other and the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s emphasis on finding the pivot of *dào* (*dàoshū*, 道樞) can help to formulate a notion of ethical competence in which comparative philosophers can approach the other and the other's perspectives in an open, less biased way and do not try to close the space between same and other.

The problem of epistemic injustice and the theoretical colonization of another cultural philosophical tradition is one of the most pressing challenges of the intercultural encounter. Comparative philosophers tend to understand and grasp the cultural other by finding resemblances and similarities, which as a practice has the consequence that differences between self and other are ignored or erased. Current methodologies in comparative philosophy are all based on the assertion of commonality, which raises the question of whether these methodologies are equipped to take the otherness of the other into account. While comparative philosophers can never adopt a neutral point of view, they can reflect on and minimize bias, which will help them to be able to encounter cultural others on their own terms. This study claims that it is important for comparative philosophers to train themselves to become open towards what is other and to exercise the ability of critical reflection on and a letting-go of their presuppositions, beliefs, and value judgments.

In this study, I will present Levinas as the philosopher who reconfigures the self-other relation as a personal embodied relation of contact in which the self is summoned to take the otherness of the other into account. Levinas attacks the anti-Platonic tendency of modern philosophy and seeks to overcome the primitivism of a wholly immanent worldview. In this study, I will relate Levinas' critique on an immanent worldview to the problem of culture and cultural

identity. Immanence is for Levinas the tendency to approach the cultural other as the same or by a purely aesthetic appreciation of the cultural other. The ethical relation as the infinite transcendence of the Other is presented as a surplus that gives the intercultural relation its necessary ethical orientation which is grounded in the personal unconditional responsibility of the comparative philosopher.

Nevertheless, Levinas' work on the transcendence of the Other cannot be uncritically accepted. Several scholars such as McGettigan (2006) and Drabinski (2013) raise the question of whether Levinas' thinking does not exclude non-Western others who do not share the Judaeo-Greek foundation which Levinas' thinking relies on. In response to these critiques, I investigate the relation between culture, transcendence, and immanence, in which try to show how Levinas' troublesome political statements need to be traced back to his rejection of a wholly immanent worldview. Instead of dismissing Levinas' thinking as Eurocentric, I will answer the question of what the privileged position of the European tradition consists in. Drawing on the work of Derrida, I will argue that the infinite duty of Europe and of comparative philosophy, is to move beyond identity, which calls for the need to become open to being questioned in our categorizations and essentializations of the cultural other.

A Levinasian conception of ethical competence entails responding to the tension between sameness and radical alterity and recognizing that the other is always my interlocutor whose otherness affects me. As comparative philosophers we should attune to the tension between the saying, our ethical vocation to do justice to the otherness of the other, and the said as the inevitable grasping of that other in common concepts and ideas. Ethical competence is the willingness to be questioned in our assumptions, beliefs, and claims; a willingness to take alternative voices into account. While this task can be distilled from the work of Levinas and Derrida, their thinking does not provide us with practical strategies on the best way to approach the cultural other on their own terms while simultaneously ignoring differences by bringing the cultural other under our own categories. The *Zhuāngzǐ* is introduced as a necessary correction to Levinas' thinking which will help us to define a position in which we can respond to the otherness of the cultural other and can reconceptualise comparative philosophy as a discipline that is hospitable to an endless range of possible methods, approaches, and practices. The *Zhuāngzǐ* articulates a position in



which we can harmonize seemingly opposed perspectives and can gain clarity on the nature of comparative philosophy. The central claim of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is that one can harmonize different perspectives when one has dissolved the self-other relation and no longer clings to knowledge, language, and logic. Instead of the other Masters who all articulated the Course in terms of what is “so” (*shì*, 是) and “not so” (*fēi*, 非) the *Zhuāngzǐ* questions this form of philosophy as debate (*biàn*, 辯) and articulates a position in which we see how these debates between conflicting perspectives are deluded. This self-enclosed perspective prevents us from responding adequately to the other and the other’s perspectives.

I will argue that a Zhuangzian conception of ethical competence entails that comparative philosophers need to embrace the perspective found at the centre of what the *Zhuāngzǐ* calls “the pivot,” a position in which we have freed ourselves from clinging to any preferences or standard of what is “so” or “not so” and can respond to the other and the other’s perspectives from a position of emotional equanimity. This position is the perspective in which we approach the other and the other’s perspectives in the most open and least biased way and it is therefore a position that can help us to become ethical competent as comparative philosophers. Based on the reading of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, ethical competence is the requirement of inner transformation and the willingness to put the heart-mind on a diet. These are in this study seen as necessary steps for comparative philosophers to gain clarity and to recognize the connection between different perspectives.

As comparison is dependent upon the perspective of the interpretive comparer, it is not only important to rely on methods that are able to connect concepts and conceptual schemes from disparate cultural philosophical tradition, but also to invest in ethical competence. This study concludes that abiding to the pivot, by means of repetitive and extensive self-adaptation and transformation is an ethical competence that can help comparative philosophy to resolve several issues and challenges. Instead of focusing on one way of doing comparative philosophy or focusing only on one possible method, comparative philosophers should familiarize themselves with a variety of methodologies, approaches, and practices in which they always have to justify any choice in the light of their ethical commitment to do justice to the cultural other. While comparative philosophers necessarily need to rely on family resemblance or quasi-universal concepts to initiate the intercultural comparison, they should always initiate the intercultural dialogue from a position of ethical competence in which they take responsibility for their assertions, beliefs, comportments, and emotions.