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aims to show the limit and relativity, or to expose the amusing false certainty, of one's own consciousness, regardless of which side may be adjudicated right or wrong, superior or inferior, as a result of such comparisons.

In other words, comparative philosophy, as philosophy, is perhaps best conducted by a specialist *of* a foreign culture who not infrequently casts a backward glance at one's own culture, as opposed to by a specialist of *one's own culture* looking out into an exotic foreign culture for similarities and differences that may be used to confirm some preferred transcultural wisdoms or character types. In brief, what comparative philosophy ought to do to philosophy may resemble something like what Michael Taussig's symbolic anthropology has done to anthropology—it teases and criticizes one's own culture, aiming to unself one's own deep-entrenched illusions, to expose the limit of one's consciousness, as opposed to strengthening and expanding it at the expense of the rivals'.

Notes

- 1 – Richard Rorty, "The Ambiguity of Rationality," *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (1996): 78.
- 2 – Richard Rorty, "Philosophers, Novelists, and Intellectual Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), p. 10.
- 3 – *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 4 – Alasdair MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," in Deutsch, *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*, p. 112.
- 5 – *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 6 – *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Comment on "Comparative Philosophy: In Response to Rorty and MacIntyre" by Rui Zhu



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The brief response by Rui Zhu provides an interesting take on the (by now) perennial problem of what comparative philosophy is or should be. While Zhu makes some interesting observations about and suggestions for comparative philosophy, he chooses contributions to the thinking about the possibilities and methodologies of

comparative philosophy that are rather old, though, and my first wonder is: why these two papers, and not more recent contributions to the development of the methodology of comparative philosophy, as can be found in numerous recently published work? Such more recent publications tend to take a more nuanced approach to the idea of (in-)commensurability than the two essays from 1991, given the developments in comparative philosophy in the last twenty-five years.

Zhu first discusses Rorty, and claims that Rorty's ideas amount to "a dismissal of comparative philosophy." This is where my first disagreement arises. The fact that Rorty challenges the dominant style of doing philosophy in the West seems not so much to suggest that he wants to rid us of philosophy, but to me at least can be understood as a positive development for comparative philosophy. The term 'philosophy' has been, especially in the last twenty-five years, a hot topic for thinkers who see themselves as comparative, for multiple reasons. First of all, if one defines philosophers as Rorty does, then it is indeed clear that certain thinkers from non-Western traditions would not fit that bill. This is the reason why many thinkers have a problem with the term, as it is reflective and representative of a tradition of thinking that is indeed essentialist and dualist. Thinkers from other traditions may have put less emphasis on essentialism and dualism, and for some this is a reason to exclude those thinkers from the discourse of philosophy. So I think that Rorty does not want "comparison *sans* philosophy," as Zhu suggests; rather he wants comparative philosophy to not be dominated by the specifically Western understanding of the term, which is a very strict and narrow understanding, and by extension Rorty thinks the specifically Western problems and terminology that have been the concern of Western philosophers throughout the history of Western philosophy, examples being 'truth' and 'rationality', may not be the best candidates when attempting to do comparative philosophy. Many comparative thinkers have argued in the last twenty-five years that such concepts or notions may be absent from other cultures, or may not have had any prominence in the thought of those cultures as they did in Western philosophy.

In my view, it is a definite advancement that recent comparative philosophy is trying to step away from essentialism, the concept of 'essence' not even being prominent in other traditions such as the Chinese in the first place. This means that post-modern thinkers who have actively challenged the dominant Western tradition provide a more fruitful platform for comparison, since they display the kind of openness often lacking in the 'stricter' philosophers.

Second and following up on this, using the term 'philosophy' is problematic for comparative philosophers since by the very nature of our profession we would then have to widen the scope of philosophy, which would inevitably result in disagreements about the limits and boundaries of what philosophy is in general. Yet this does not necessarily mean we need to let go of the term. There is a different understanding of 'philosopher' that may be a bit more humble than Rorty's "ascetic priest." Culture and philosophy will never be considered the same, so we should not argue that any serious contributor to a culture would automatically count as a philosopher. But instead we could easily argue for some minimum criteria that an author or thinker

would need to display to count as a philosopher. One such criterion would be that the thinkers are able at least to distance themselves from their own culture. They are not purely cultural products or participants or even producers of culture, but analyze and criticize aspects of life that others take for granted. Such distancing need not be done as an “ascetic priest,” but can be realized in many other ways. In my view it would be useful to keep such criteria to the minimum so as to promote inclusion of those thinkers who do not fit the strict criteria of ‘Western’ philosophy.

My second criticism of Zhu’s response lies in the fact that Zhu seems to suggest that we need such a “‘priestly’ consciousness” or else there would just be cultural clashes. I think Rorty would reply to this that it may be exactly the “priestly consciousness” with its accompanying presumption of single standards, correct ways of thinking, and ‘universal’ tendencies that provides a fertile field for clashes. It is patently untrue that there are no genuine agreements among different people except Zhu’s suggested “agreement of the weak to be enslaved by the strong.” Although such genuine agreements tend not to make headlines, though, surely any (comparative) philosopher who has spent any extended period of time out of their own culture would see this borne out continuously.

This brings both Zhu and myself to MacIntyre. Zhu argues that MacIntyre’s stance of the rivalry of incommensurable positions itself does not suit the “true nature of philosophical thinking.” I agree with Zhu that nothing in the idea of incommensurability itself seems to suggest winners or losers, and, if anything, such a way of thinking is really not what any comparative philosopher seems to be interested in. Yet the fact that we may not be able to show who is superior according to a set of *neutral* criteria, having questioned the appropriateness of any such set, surely does not mean that we cannot point out any inconsistencies according to the logic of a certain tradition *itself*. This is what MacIntyre really seems to be after, and then surely thinking through what such inconsistencies can teach us might lead us, as it did Zhuangzi, for example, to point out similar (or other) inconsistencies in our own thinking.

This brings me to the final paragraph of Zhu’s discussion, where he indeed suggests that this is exactly what comparative philosophy should be: an “object-centered self-reflection” that ironically through the study of other cultures points to us our own shortcomings. While this may indeed be one of the more amusing facets of doing comparative philosophy, and surely a very important feature of comparative thought,¹ whether the true nature of comparative philosophy can be exhausted by seeing it as cultivating irony through an object-centered self-reflection remains doubtful. First of all because we may well begin to wonder at this point if there is such a thing as the “true nature” of (comparative) philosophy, having questioned what philosophy is or should be, and as comparative thinkers constantly arguing for at least a certain expansion of the thinking practices that should count as philosophy.

Second, because one of the dangers that more recent comparative philosophy is always warning us about seems to be exactly such a one-sided view of comparative philosophy. Heidegger, for example, whose work is often used in comparative philos-

ophy, was himself (at least initially) really only interested in non-Western thought to further his own ideas. Now Heidegger was by no means a specialist in classical Chinese culture or thought, but he did use his knowledge of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* for some self-reflection. But such self-reflection does not really do justice to the other culture as other, as both critics and proponents of Heidegger's place in comparative philosophy have pointed out. And if the object of the encounter is indeed a form of self-reflection, then we may question whether being a specialist of a foreign culture will help us more in such self-reflection than being a specialist of one's own culture.

But we may first wonder if this is really what Zhu means by "object-centered." Is what is central the object of comparison, that is, the other culture and its ways of thought, or is it really about what that other culture can teach our own, in which case the center is the self-reflection? To put this in the context of Zhu's response, I do not think that being a "specialist of a foreign culture" (*italics in original*) is inherently an advantage over being a specialist of one's own culture. In fact I would argue that in comparative philosophy both these qualities are needed equally, and even further that one really cannot even be one of these without also being the other. In fact even MacIntyre suggests so much in the volume under discussion, where he says (with regard to translation): "Inhabiting both standpoints [those of one's own and of the foreign language], only such persons will be able to recognize what is translatable and what is untranslatable in the transition from one such language to the other" (Deutsch 1991, p. 111). I am quite confident that Zhu will agree with me that the last thing we want in comparative philosophy is the idea of a foreign specialist of your culture telling you that she knows better what you are thinking than you yourself do. But maybe the "object-centered" part of Zhu's position of an "object-centered self-reflection" may function to diminish this criticism, if Zhu means that the object that is used to make us "self-reflect" is really the center of the whole process. But this seems unclear in both the response and in how one could possibly have the other culture as well as the self-reflection both being central, and I would welcome Zhu's reflections on this.

I now come to my third and last question regarding Zhu's idea of comparative philosophy as object-centered self-reflection: does not the very notion of a specialist of a foreign culture seem to imply that one can be or often is already a specialist of one's own culture? It may be true that in a certain way being a specialist of one's own culture is not conducive to a full understanding of another culture, but it may also be true that only specialists of one's own culture can have a deep appreciation of another culture, exactly because they understand the presuppositions and prejudices of their own culture. And it is not at all clear to me that being a specialist of a foreign culture gives you the right or acumen to provide judgments about the perceived prejudices of one's own culture, and neither is it always the case that specialists of their own culture are always out to "confirm some preferred transcultural wisdoms or character types." It thus seems to me that thinking in these terms of specialization may be confusing and misleading rather than helpful.

Instead, I would venture an opposite (and maybe equally indefensible) position: are not all of us comparative philosophers rather outsiders when it comes to most of the cultures we are trying to compare? I personally try to compare Heidegger, Derrida, and classical Daoism, but am an insider of none of these “cultures.” Although Heidegger and Derrida are obviously closer to home for me, I do not for one moment think that I can arrive at the same understanding of German or French culture that Heidegger and Derrida must have had, not least because I think that they had very specific views and ideas of what these cultures are or were. And as for the culture of the Chinese classics, as well as that of the ancient Greek classics, I would also consider all of us to be more outsiders than insiders to such cultures, assuming we can even consider these cultures as identifiable entities. A “specialist of one’s own culture,” just as much as a “specialist of a foreign culture,” sounds too essentialist for my taste. It seems to suggest that there are such things as “one’s own culture” and “a foreign culture” that are identifiable, learnable entities, and that one can consider oneself an insider or outsider of such identifiable entities. I would prefer to not work with such categories of insider and outsider, and would hope that comparative philosophy is exactly the discipline that challenges and questions such dichotomies.

To wrap up, it seems to me that the view of comparative philosophy espoused here by Zhu is limited in its scope. It may be that Zhu is a believer of such limitation, and sincerely thinks that object-centered self-reflection is the only possibility given the incommensurability of different cultures. But then I would think that many more recent contributions to comparative philosophy have shown that MacIntyre’s strong incommensurability thesis is not really defensible. In fact, already in the same volume under discussion (Deutsch 1991), the chapter by Richard J. Bernstein seems to question such strong notions of incommensurability. And in the twenty-five years that have passed there have been numerous attempts at defining the goals and methodology of comparative philosophy (not surprisingly in different ways!). One example of this is the idea that comparative philosophy should really be “fusion” philosophy. I wonder if Zhu’s suggestions would be able to account for or incorporate these recent diverse views of what comparative philosophy is or should be.

Note

1 – In fact this specific aspect of comparative philosophy was already pointed out in the same volume (Deutsch 1991) that Zhu discusses, by Richard J. Bernstein, who suggests that it is “in our genuine encounters with what is other and alien that we can further our own self-understanding” (p. 93).

Reference

Deutsch, Eliot, ed. 1991. *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.