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Reply to Xiao Ouyang



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The recent upsurge of interest in discussions of methodology in comparative philosophy illustrates an increasing professionalization in the discipline. Only rarely do we see today the sort of general overview with rough and ready juxtaposition of different

philosophies, let alone distinct mindsets—Indian, Japanese, Chinese, et cetera—that characterized an earlier phase of the discipline. While the best of that work was tremendously important in pointing attention to non-European philosophy and introducing the various sources, debates, and historiographies, it seems to me that we are seeing in recent decades many more fine-grained studies that operate well under the radar of civilizational discourse. Also, today there are, of course, more scholars in the field and ever more Ph.D. and postdocs trying to build a career in comparative philosophy as their main field of specialization. This is a global reality, regardless of the many institutional obstacles that are still in place and the opposition of those who hold steadfastly to the view that only European philosophy is truly philosophy. Since civilizational discourse still often functions as a more or less articulated background assumption in specialized studies of comparative philosophy, it is a most welcome feature of discussions about methodology that they question the units of comparison and openly debate the manifold aims that comparative philosophers are pursuing.

I read Xiao Ouyang's comments on "Rethinking Comparative Philosophical Methodology" as a contribution to these important discussions in methodology and particularly regarding the aims of comparative philosophy. That he has chosen my work on comparison and criticism of comparative philosophy as a springboard to articulate these larger issues honors me, and I shall of course take the opportunity to clarify some of my views and respond to some of the criticism from Ouyang's side. Nonetheless, I should also like to engage with some of the more encompassing thoughts offered by Ouyang. There is much that he writes that I can agree with, and I am especially thankful for his revisiting the early methodological debates published in the first few volumes of *Philosophy East and West*. These earlier contributions to comparative philosophy are important not only in terms of what they have to say, but also in terms of raising awareness that there is a history to the discipline. Critical reflections on the history of comparative philosophy, as well as other aspects, are in my view still fundamentally lacking. Further professionalization of the discipline would mean that we start writing local and global histories of the discipline, posing questions pertaining to the sociology of comparative philosophy and investigating the broader intellectual and political contexts that have influenced the formation and development of the discipline. Many key figures featured in the first volumes of *Philosophy East and West* and writing about methodology spoke out firmly in favor of a plurality of approaches, which is as sound an intellectual position as it is necessary for the flourishing of any discipline.

Today, I think it is fair to say that there are many different and competing approaches pursued in the field. My own work on comparison is in no way meant to favor any one approach over all others. The purpose of my "analytical tool," for which Ouyang takes me to task, is simply to offer a way of questioning the resulting comparison of any given approach for its assumptions, units of comparison, level of abstraction, and political pretexts. Most of all, it helps us understand what comparison has actually been performed. Distinguishing different elements of a comparison makes this task much easier. Ouyang believes that "questioning what are the

elements that make a standard comparison” is a “reductionist perspective” and that “the benefits of these kinds of questions are limited” (endnote 13). I must submit that I tend to agree—but I would want to add that reductionism and limitedness are constitutive features, if not virtues, of any good analytical tool. This is exactly the reason why I prefer to speak of a “tool” and not of an “approach.”

In fact, if I read Ouyang’s argument correctly, then his central point revolves around the difficult question whether comparative philosophy is a specific domain of philosophy or whether all philosophy is comparative philosophy while the specific domain is more aptly called intercultural philosophy. Ouyang argues for intercultural philosophy, and this leads him to what in my view is a rather interesting line of reasoning. Since comparison is not exclusively confined to comparative philosophy but fundamental to all philosophy (as he tries to demonstrate with the example of syllogism), I am simply wrong to analyze comparative philosophy *qua* intercultural philosophy for the elements that make up the comparison. The point is that comparative philosophy as intercultural philosophy cannot be reduced to the idea of comparison. This is certainly true, if only for the mentioned background assumption in the discipline that its main units of comparison are civilizations or cultures. As Ouyang concedes, my work has been trying to bring precisely this aspect into fuller view. But, for all of that, it seems to me, nothing warrants the conclusion that therefore reflection on comparison can or should be dropped. Quite to the contrary: the conclusion should be that such reflection is necessary but not sufficient. Paying attention exclusively to comparison is reductionist, no more than a tool for a certain but limited purpose, and likely unfit to do full justice to those who understand comparative philosophy as intercultural philosophy with an emphasis on culture—all of which, I repeat myself, I readily concede. But to drop reflection of comparison altogether—which if fundamental to all philosophy is surely also fundamental to intercultural philosophy—would seem misguided.

Hence, I insist that my analytical tool is helpful even to comparative philosophy *qua* intercultural philosophy (which, by the way, I am not in principle opposed to), for instance in order to understand how cultures may or may not be implicated in a given advanced philosophical argument (or whatever else it is that the philosopher seeks to achieve with his or her writings), say, as essentially constitutive or merely as a heuristic device.

Ouyang further claims that by pluralizing the ways in which the *tertium comparationis* can be conceptualized, I am “undermin[ing] the current dominant yet ‘unwarranted’ cultural approach of comparative philosophy,” I am “eventually cancel[ing] out the very idea of comparison,” and I am “eliminating the justification of the very need of an analytical tool for such a peculiar sub-discipline as comparative philosophy.” The reasoning here is very fast and difficult to follow. I believe that at least three separate issues are getting confused: one dealing with the dominant culturalist assumption (which usually plays a role in what I call the pre-comparative *tertium*), one having to do with ways of how to conceptualize the *tertium comparationis* (I argue that any comparison must involve a *tertium comparationis* of some sort and try to investigate different sorts in a variety of ways), and one concerned with the

operation that the *tertium comparationis* performs in comparisons but also in other operations of reason.

Let me focus on the last issue because Ouyang's point, in brief, seems to be similar to the one just mentioned and goes as follows: since my analytical tool can be applied to a syllogism-turned-into-a-comparison, somehow everything and therefore nothing at all becomes a comparison, which cancels out the very idea of a comparison. But there are important differences between a comparison and a syllogism. Although a syllogism can be said to involve a comparison in doing what it is supposed to do in the sense that, for instance, both Socrates and humans in general come to be compared with respect to mortality, a syllogism cannot be reduced to a comparison. A syllogism goes beyond comparison by drawing a logically necessary conclusion, namely that Socrates is mortal, which is not a comparative assertion. The same, by the way, is true, say, for the practice of counting. Counting might involve comparative operations when determining whether something is to be counted or not, but it would be absurd to say that all one has done when counting something was comparing. The common issue here has to do with abstraction, which is the crucial feature of comparison that the *tertium comparationis* highlights. How exactly abstraction plays into comparison is still little understood. I have recently come to believe that the level of abstraction adopted for a comparison has a direct bearing on the result of that comparison, for example on such a fundamental matter as whether in a given case we end up asserting a difference or a commonality.

This brings me to the two further points that Ouyang raises in his comments with regard to my "five variables." He is right that I sometimes might give the impression that only a "plurality of things" can be compared, particularly when I give quick examples. But there is really no disagreement here. I prefer to speak of "comparata" (by now I distinguish between "comparanda," referring to that which one is about to compare, and "comparata," referring to that which one has ended up comparing) precisely because "things" might be misleading. When I emphasize that a comparison must always compare two or more *comparanda*, then the point is simply to underline that a comparison of "the same thing," of a thing with itself, is fruitless if sameness is to convey absolute identity in the classical sense, as, say, in Leibniz' law. If it is not absolute identity, then we are warranted to talk about two different things as much as about the one same thing. This comes out nicely when Ouyang gives the examples of "different phases of the same thing," which can be understood as two or more phases of the same thing or as simply two or more things (as probably a Buddhist would hold). In both scenarios, one would be comparing a plurality of phases or of things, respectively.

The final point Ouyang makes is a very interesting one. In my usage, it is true that I always end up searching for some commonality, that is, the *tertium* (irrespective of my distinction between the pre-comparative *tertium* and the *tertium comparationis*). Ouyang sees in this an unhelpful "potential implicative inclination" for commonality and *against* difference. Here I should want to clarify the matter as I understand it. A comparison often yields commonalities and differences (or similarities and dissimilarities). In both cases, we can—and we should—ask "common in what respect?" or

“different in what respect?” since without this crucial piece of information we are not asserting anything much at all. That respect has to be common, and it has to be so in a more abstract sense to both *comparata*. It is what the *tertium* is all about. This more abstract commonality expressed by the *tertium* in fact grounds both commonalities and differences. Referring to a “commonality” here and there might be unfortunate and give rise to misunderstanding, but I hope that it is now clear that there is no “potential implicative inclination” involved in thinking of the *tertium* as expressing a commonality rather than a difference.

I want to end by thanking Xiao Ouyang for his engaged comments and add a few reactions to his own proposed vision of where comparative philosophy should be heading. His goal of a comparative philosophy that is based on “a thorough analysis of the philosophical material from various spatiotemporal origins, with an incorporation of the collective effort of participants from different corners of the world,” is reminiscent of the Comtean positivist approach of Paul Masson-Oursel, and I find no fault with it. But I would be concerned whether this is enough to build the sort of “philosophy of the world” that Ouyang also wants to achieve. Personally, I am not even persuaded that we need such a philosophy. While I appreciate Ouyang’s noble motives, I am worried by the idealism that seems to inform his vision. In a way, he reiterates the historical step from Masson-Oursel’s positivism to the later programmatic statements in the first volumes of *Philosophy East and West* (Ouyang refers to Kwee Swan Liat explicitly for his advocacy of “a world philosophy”). Against the backdrop of the two World Wars and the beginning of the Cold War, it is all too easy to understand why they would emphasize world peace as a goal of comparative philosophy. This is precisely one of the historical aspects of comparative philosophy that in my view awaits further sociological and philosophical scrutiny, since the goal of world peace continues to be motivating many comparative philosophers today as I think it does motivate Ouyang. To be sure, I, too, would love peace throughout the world, but I do not think that comparative philosophy can be of much help toward achieving this goal.

In my assessment, Ouyang’s vision of comparative philosophy is not yet sufficiently taking into account the question of power and real politics. Of course, not all comparative philosophy has to offer detailed views on global politics and its role in it. But if the goal of comparative philosophy is stated in relation to “the process of globalization” and issues such as “climate change,” then I believe that such reflection is mandatory. In short, I would disagree with the thought of understanding “colonialism” in the “general context of transcultural communication” and would also object to the claim that “inclusionary exclusion” becomes a non-issue in times of globalization since “everyone is included.” Ouyang’s view of “intercultural comparison” as a “practical and efficient way of reaching agreement among different people” and invested with a “historical legitimacy by functioning as a transcultural communication or conversation in the age of globalization” strikes me as highly idealistic in hypostasizing agreement and also communication (a “world philosophy . . . persuasive to all people”) when disagreement and struggle are at least as defining of the contemporary situation. While we might deplore this state of affairs with re-

gard to the world at large, disagreement and sometimes even active struggle have proven to be a most wonderful thing for the flourishing of philosophy, and so it must be with comparative philosophy however understood. In this sense, I hope we shall all continue to disagree.

Rejoinder to Ralph Weber



Xiao Ouyang

Ralph Weber's reply to my comment, as we have come to expect from his writing, is both well articulated and instructive. His clarification has helped me to further grasp the consideration that underpins his methodological criticism. I am also encouraged to find agreement on the worth of a historical study of comparative philosophy as an established sub-discipline. In addition, Weber's attitude toward "disagreement" is thought-provoking. However, I would like to suggest that disagreement is positive and meaningful if and only if (1) it is not based on misunderstanding, and moreover if (2) disagreement itself should not be regarded as the purpose. The ideal intellectual exchange should be able to encompass both (1) the aim and endeavor to achieve a potential agreement, and (2) the possibility for an ongoing dialogue and disputation. In this spirit, I will now respond to some points raised by Weber in his reply to my comment.

1. I do not doubt the merit of Weber's analytical tool for comparison (ATC) in providing a criterion of "meaningful" comparison "in the rationalistic way." My criticism is not of its "wrong[ness]." My first-order criticism is on "the general applicability" of Weber's ATC and "its potentially unbridled use," which can lead to a conflict between its own legitimacy and the legitimacy of comparative philosophy as a *sui generis* sub-discipline of philosophy. My reflection on the ATC's constitutive limitedness—as Weber puts it—is a second-order derivation. The Daoist notion that "the reversal is the movement of the Dao" sheds light on my inference here: Weber's ATC is limited precisely because it tends to be too encompassing, as illustrated by Weber's "many different ways of conceptualizing the *tertium comparationis*." My criticism of ATC is also informed by Chinese *Yin-Yang* thinking. A major difference between *Yin-Yang* and Western-logical dichotomy is that the latter is qualitative (i.e., either true or false) while the former is both qualitative and quantitative: junior *Yin/Yang* and senior *Yin/Yang* have distinct numerical quantities that define their responses or tendencies toward their opposites. In spite of my criticism of the ATC, the primary motivation of my comment is to take up the "burden"—as Weber prescribes to those who pursue comparative philosophy as intercultural philosophy—to justify