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Three Orientations and Four 'Sins' in Comparative Studies

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(3) exaggerated distinction; and (4) blurring assimilation. They, or some of them, are sometimes taken for granted in two senses: first, it is thought that any simplifying the object of study or using external resources to characterize it are doomed to be excessive and thus deserve to be charged with negative 'over'-character; second, it is assumed that the four complaints may be made indiscriminately in evaluating any comparative project without regard to the orientation and methodological strategy of that study. A metaphilosophical examination of the four 'sins' will help to effectively identify the distinct character and objectives of a variety of orientations and their approaches.

1. Historical orientation aiming at historical description

The first orientation under examination aims to give a historical and descriptive account. That is, the primary concern and purpose of this type of comparative study is to accurately describe relevant historical matters of facts and pursue what thinkers in comparison actually thought, what resources were actually used (by them), and what *appear* to be similar and different. The orientation of this type of comparative study thus might be called 'historical orientation,' and its methodological approach aims at accurate description of historical matters of fact. The historical orientation requires its practitioners to cover a vast range of historical data to give such 'factual' description. It seems that this orientation and its corresponding methodological approach are typically taken in Chinese studies or Sinology as the primary approach to Chinese and comparative philosophy; they are also taken by some scholars in the field of philosophy.

There is no wonder that the aforementioned four oft-cited 'sins' would be assumed relevant to those comparative projects with the historical orientation. First, to accurately describe something, it is taken for granted that one should not simplify what is actually complicated; in other words, simplification is always oversimplification: any simplification is guilty of being negatively excessive; and simplification is thus identical with falsification. Second, as for over-use of external resources, any conceptual or explanatory resources which are used to interpret a thinker's idea under examination but were not actually used by the thinker herself are rendered inadequate or excessive: use of external resources is always over-use of external resources. Third, in this approach, exaggerated distinctness often results from over-simplification of one or both parties under comparative examination in the direction of ignoring part(s) in one tradition or account that would share something in common in another tradition or account; in this way, insofar as the sin of over-simplification has been already legitimately charged, the charge of exaggeration of the due distinction (if any) between the two would be appropriate. Fourth, in this approach, blurring assimilation often results from over-use of external resources to interpret one or both parties under comparative examination, especially when the external resources used to characterize one party come from the other party; to this extent, insofar as the sin of over-use of external resources has been already legitimately charged, the resulting assimilation of blurring the distinction between the two would be also adequately charged.

There would be nothing wrong or inadequate with the historical orientation and its methodological approach *per se*, when the orientation/approach is adequately taken as one of a number of alternative orientations/approaches, instead of the exclusive one, and when one can see its limitations in serving other distinct purposes in comparative studies. In view of this, one question would be natural: Are there any

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Without pretending to exhaust all working orientations, I intend to highlight three major orientations and their distinct methodological approaches in comparative studies whose due examination, in my opinion, would be most helpful for a constructive development of comparative philosophy.¹ I plan to do this by discussing the appropriateness of four 'sins' that are oft-cited in critically evaluating a comparative project. The reason that I take this strategy is this: the appropriateness or legitimacy of the four 'sins' depends on the purpose and orientation of a comparative project that would decisively determine which kind of methodological approach should be taken and what kind of expectations are appropriate; the strategy is an effective way to identify how crucial aspects and purposes of those orientations and approaches are distinct and so, in treating one's own comparative project or critically evaluating some other's comparative project, to be more sensitive to its distinct purpose and orientation and thus to what it is appropriate to expect.²

When comparative projects are critically evaluated, there seem to be four sorts of complaint. The alleged 'sins' are these: (1) over-simplification; (2) over-use of external resources;

orientations and approaches other than the historical orientation that would be adequate, and, more importantly, necessary in view of certain purposes in comparative studies? With a positive answer to the question actually being presupposed in the preceding discussion, the question can be phrased in another way: How are other legitimate orientations and methodological approaches possible and necessary? In the following two sections, I will focus on two other orientations and their respective methodological approaches.

2. Interpretation-concerned orientation aiming at understanding and elaborating

The second orientation in comparative studies is concerned with interpretation⁴ through elaborating a thinker's ideas under examination; the primary concern, or purpose, of this orientation is to enhance our understanding of a thinker's ideas via some effective conceptual and explanatory resources, whether or not those resources were actually used by the thinker herself. It is clear that a purely historical approach does not fit here: To elaborate and understand the thinker does not amount to figuring out exactly how the thinker actually thought; instead, such interpretation and understanding might include the interpreter's elaboration of the implications of the thinker's point, which might not have been considered by the thinker herself, or the interpreter's representation of the thinker's point in clearer and more coherent terms or in a more philosophically interesting way, which the thinker herself might have not actually adopted. In both cases, given a thinker's ideas (in one tradition or account) under interpretation, some effective conceptual and explanatory resources well developed in another tradition or account are consciously used to enhance our understanding of, and elaborate, the thinker's ideas; those resources used are thus tacitly and implicitly, but constructively, in comparison and contrast to those original resources by means of which the insight or vision was somehow delivered, insofar as such comparison of the two distinct sorts of resources is not expressly and directly conducted. The term 'constructively' here means such tacit comparative approach intrinsically involves how the interpreter of the thinker's ideas could learn from another tradition or account regarding resources to enhance the interpreter's understanding of the thinker's ideas; therefore, some constructive philosophical engagement between distinct resources in different traditions is tacitly involved in this orientation and its corresponding methodological approach.⁵

In this way, the so-called over-use of external resources is not necessarily a sin but might really enhance our understanding of a thinker's ideas or clarify some original unclear or confusing expression of her ideas. Consequently, the endeavor *per se* of using external resources in this orientation is not automatically inappropriate and thus is not doomed to be a sin, as it would be in the historical orientation. As indicated in discussing the historical orientation, 'blurring' assimilation might result from 'over'-use of external resources when interpreting one or both parties under comparative examination, especially when the external resources used to characterize one party come from the other party. But, for the purpose of interpretation, the resulting assimilation is not necessarily a sin but might illuminate the essential connection and common points between the assimilated ideas at the fundamental level so as to enhance our understanding of those ideas.

It is clear that a comparative project with the interpretation-concerned orientation, instead of the historical orientation, is free or tends to be focusing on, and elaborating,

a certain aspect, layer or dimension of a thinker's ideas based on the purpose of the project, the reflective interest of the person who carries out the project, etc. Indeed, instead of a comprehensive coverage of all aspects or dimensions of the object of study, focusing on one aspect or dimension is a kind of simplification. Now the question is this: Is any simplification *per se* doomed to be indiscriminately a sin of *over-simplification*? It should be clear that, if the purpose of a comparative project is to focus on interpreting or elaborating one aspect or dimension instead of pretending to give a comprehensive historical description, charging the practitioner of this project with *over-simplification* or doing something excessive in simplifying the coverage into one aspect or dimension would be both unfair and miss the point.

Let us agree that a comparative project should be guided by some comprehensive understanding. But a comparative project taking a certain methodological perspective through focusing on one aspect of the object of study is not incompatible with a comprehensive understanding. At this point, what needs to be recognized is an important distinction between a methodological perspective as working approach and the methodological guiding principle that an agent presupposes when taking the methodological perspective and that would be used by the agent to guide or regulate how the perspective would be applied and evaluated. One's reflective practice *per se* of taking a certain methodological perspective amounts to neither reflectively rejecting some other relevant methodological perspective(s) nor presupposing an inadequate methodological guiding principle which would render irrelevant other relevant methodological perspectives (if any).⁶

We have discussed three 'sins' (i.e., 'over-simplification,' 'over-use of external resources,' and 'blurring assimilation') that might be charged against a comparative project with the interpretation-concerned orientation. How about the other one, the sin of 'exaggerated distinction'? This case is more complicated than it may appear. This sin, as discussed before, is connected with the sin of over-simplification when the comparative project assumes the historical orientation. But when a comparative project takes the interpretation-concerned orientation and does 'simplify' the object of study by focusing on one aspect of the object of study, is it automatically guilty of the sin of 'exaggerated distinction'? The preceding distinction between the methodological perspective and the methodological guiding principle is helpful here again. What is at issue is whether the interpreter has assumed an adequate methodological guiding principle to guide and regulate how to look at the relation between the current methodological perspective used as a working perspective and other relevant methodological perspective(s) that would point to other aspects of the object of study. Consequently, when one evaluates a comparative project, what really matters is for one to look at what kind of methodological guiding principle is presupposed behind the working perspective; only when this is examined can the charge of 'exaggerated distinction' be adequately evaluated.

3. Philosophical-issue-concerned orientation aiming at joint contribution

The primary purpose of this orientation in comparative studies is to see how both sides under comparative examination could jointly and constructively contribute to some commonly concerned issues of philosophy,⁷ rather than to focus on providing a historical account of each or on interpreting some ideas historically developed in a certain tradition or account. Typically, in comparatively addressing a certain commonly

concerned issue of philosophy, some substantial ideas historically developed in distinct philosophical traditions or accounts are explicitly and directly compared with the aim of showing how they could jointly contribute to the common concern in complementary ways.⁸ Insofar as constructive engagement in dealing with various common concerns and issues of philosophy is most philosophically interesting, this comparative orientation and its methodological strategy directly, explicitly and constructively conducts philosophical engagement and is thus considered to be most philosophically interesting. To highlight the characteristic features of a comparative project with this primary orientation, let us examine the appropriateness of three charges, among the aforementioned four, that have been sometimes or even often brought against comparative projects with this orientation, that is, the 'sin' of oversimplification, the 'sin' of over-use of external resources, and the 'sin' of blurring assimilation.

A typical procedure of conducting a philosophical engagement in such comparative projects could be both conceptually and practically divided into three phases: (i) the pre-engagement phase in which certain ideas in different traditions or accounts that are *relevant* to the common concern under examination and thus to the purpose of the project are focused on and identified; (ii) the engagement phase in which those ideas *internally* engage with each other in view of that common concern and the purpose to be served; and (iii) the post-engagement phase in which those distinct ideas from different sources are now absorbed or assimilated into a new approach to the common concern under examination. The three 'sins' aforementioned may be considered to be typically associated with different phases. The 'sin' of oversimplification regarding a certain idea identified from a certain tradition may be typically associated with reflective efforts in the pre-engagement phase; the 'sin' of over-use of external resources regarding elaborating a certain idea from a certain tradition may be typically associated with reflective efforts in the engagement phase; and the 'sin' of blurring assimilation may be typically associated with reflective efforts in the post-engagement phase. Now let me briefly evaluate the appropriateness of the three 'sins' respectively in the corresponding three phases; looking at the 'sins' in this way will help to highlight features of comparative projects primarily with the philosophical-issue-concerned orientation.

(1) In the pre-engagement phase, it might be not only legitimate but also adequate or even necessary to have simplification and abstraction of some ideas in one tradition or account into such a perspective: this perspective *per se* is presented in most relevant terms to the common concern addressed, and the purpose served in an issue-concerned comparative project, while without involving those irrelevant elements in the tradition or account from which such a perspective comes, though those irrelevant elements in that tradition might be relevant to figuring out the point of those ideas. The reasons are these. First, the primary concern of the project is not with how such an idea is related to the other elements in the source tradition or account but with how it is relevant to approaching the commonly concerned philosophical issue. Second, while one needs to understand the point of an idea in the context in which it was raised, once one understands the point (either through employing data provided by projects with the first two orientations or through one's own background project with one of the first two orientations), there would be no present purpose served by discussing background. Third, it is clear that such an approach *per se* does not imply denying the social and historical integrity of the idea in the source tradition; the point is that the existence

of such integrity cannot automatically guarantee an indiscriminate priority or even relevance of expressly addressing it in any comparative projects without regard to their orientations and purposes.

(2) In the engagement phase, relevant perspectives from different source traditions would constructively engage each other. From each party's point of view, the other party is something external without; but, from a more broadly philosophical vantage point and in view of the commonly concerned issue, the distinct views may be complementary within. In this context, the term 'external' would miss the point in regard to the purpose here: the pivotal point is not this or that distinct perspective but the issue (and its comprehensive approach) to whose various aspects those perspectives point; in view of the issue, all those perspectives are internal in the sense that they would be complementary and indispensable to a comprehensive understanding.

(3) In the post-engagement phase, some sort of assimilation typically results from the preceding constructive engagement; that is, such assimilation would adjust, blur and absorb different perspectives into one new approach as a whole; this would be what is really expected in this sort of constructive engagement in comparative studies, instead of a sin.

It should be noted that, if a comparative project that explicitly has one of the preceding orientations is considered as a project-simplex in comparative studies, a comparative project in philosophical practice might be a complex that goes with a combination of two or more orientations.⁹ For example, a comparative project concerned with an historical figure often consists of such a combination. Recognition of the characteristic features of the above three distinct comparative orientations and their respective methodological approaches would help us discriminatively treat different stages or parts of a comparative project-complex.

4. Due emphasis on philosophical engagement in comparative studies

Traditionally, to my knowledge, comparative projects with the above third and second orientations (especially when resorting to contemporary development and resources of philosophy) have yet to receive due emphasis for some reasons. First, as far as comparative projects regarding Chinese and Western philosophies are concerned, a comparative project tends to be taken as a mere by-product or extension of studies of the classical Chinese philosophy which itself sometimes tends to be taken largely as merely historical studies of the history of (the classical) Chinese philosophy. Second, on the other hand, comparative approach as a methodological approach has not yet been considered primarily as an effective approach to doing philosophy *per se*. Third, the aforementioned four 'sins' (especially, those of 'oversimplification,' 'over-use of external resources' and 'blurring-assimilation') have been more or less considered as some taken-for-granted 'sins' and have thus discouraged reflective efforts in the direction of the third orientation (or even the second orientation) which would often unavoidably but appropriately commit those 'sins' in many cases. Fourth, most importantly, Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy (especially its mainstream traditions) are sometimes taken as being essentially alien to one another; this kind of mentality would undermine or preempt any serious reflective efforts in comparative projects with the third orientation and, in my opinion, negatively contribute to prejudice. Western philosophers as well as some scholars in studies of Chinese and comparative philosophy may assume that Chinese philosophy is not philosophy in the sense of the

term ‘philosophy’ that is intrinsically related to a series of fundamental concerns and issues as addressed in Western philosophy (especially its mainstream traditions).

Now, as more and more philosophers in the fields of Chinese and comparative philosophy have a holistic understanding of Western philosophy (both its past and its contemporary development, both its appearance and its deep concerns, and both its distinct working perspectives and its guiding principles at a deep level) and become constructively engaged with Western philosophy on a series of fundamental common concerns and issues, it is more widely agreed among philosophers who are familiar with both Chinese and Western philosophies that they are not essentially alien to one another: they have common concerns with a series of fundamental issues in philosophy and have taken their characteristic approaches to them. They thus could learn from each other and jointly contribute to the common philosophical enterprise through constructive dialogue and engagement. Consequently, there is serious need to emphasize comparative projects of the third and second orientations, though this emphasis certainly would not deny the legitimacy or value of the first orientation as one effective approach but stress its constructive compatibility with the other orientations.^{10, 11}

Notes

1. By ‘comparative philosophy’ I mean not merely comparative studies of different philosophical traditions but any comparative investigation concerning distinct modes of thinking, methodological approaches (perspectives, guiding principles or instruments) or substantial points of view in different traditions or within the same tradition, though I sometimes cite philosophical traditions to illustrate relevant points.
2. Because of space limitation, I cannot give detailed examples in the text to illustrate my theoretical points regarding those orientations and methodological approaches under discussion; instead, in the endnotes, I will refer the reader to my relevant writings in comparative studies that either illustrate my points here or provide more explanations.
3. By ‘external resources’ I mean those resources that were not actually used by the ancient thinker under discussion when the resources are identified from the historical point of view or with the historical orientation. Nevertheless, as I explain later, using the very term ‘external’ in some situations would simply miss the point in regard to the purpose of the third orientation to be discussed.
4. In this article, I use the term ‘interpretation’ in a narrow or straightforward sense as specified here (in terms of elaborating and understanding) rather than in a broad or implicit sense in which all the three orientations discussed here could be somehow identified as ‘interpretation-concerned’.
5. For example, one can interpret the point of the *Yin-Yang* way of thinking delivered in the *Yi-Jing* text or the point of the opening passage of the *Dao-De-Jing* by taking such a comparative approach and consciously employing some conceptual and explanatory resources of contemporary philosophy to interpret some central message of the *Yi-Jing* text or Lao Zi’s central message in the opening passage of the *Dao-De-Jing*. For my own interpretations of both taking this kind of comparative approach, which illustrate points in this paper, see Bo Mou, “Werden-Sein Komplementarität: Die *Yin-Yang*-Metaphysische Sicht des *Yijing*,” *Polylog: Zeitschrift für interkulturelles Philosophieren*, 7 (2001), pp. 42-51 and Bo Mou, “Ultimate Concerns and Language Engagement: A Re-Examination of the Opening Message of the *Dao-De-Jing*,” *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 27, no. 4 (2000), pp. 429-39. [A substantial expansion of the latter article, “Eternal *Dao*, Constant Names, and Language Engagement,” appears in Bo Mou, ed. *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002)].
6. For a detailed and systematic discussion of the distinction between the methodological perspective and the methodological guiding principle and its implications, see Bo Mou, “An Analysis of the Structure of Philosophical Methodology—in View of Comparative Philosophy,”

in Bo Mou ed. *Two Roads to Wisdom?—Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), pp.337-64.

7. It is arguably right that many issues that were traditionally identified as ‘unique’ issues in different traditions have turned out to be concerned primarily with different aspects, layers or dimensions of some commonly concerned, more general issues of philosophy, especially from a more broadly philosophical vantage point. This is one point that I have endeavored to make and illustrate in my several writings mentioned in the endnotes.

8. For example, we can examine how, say, Dewey and Laozi could jointly contribute to the issue of the nature and function of moral rules and the related issue of the nature and function of moral experience in certain complementary ways. For a detailed discussion of this to illustrate points advanced in this paper, see Bo Mou, “Moral Rules and Moral Experience: A comparative analysis of Dewey and Laozi on morality,” *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 11, no. 3 (2001), pp. 161-78.

9. For an illustration of what I mean by ‘a comparative project-complex,’ interested readers might look at my article “The Structure of Chinese Language and Ontological Insights: A Collective-Noun Hypothesis” (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1999), pp. 45-62) in which the three orientations under examination are combined together and interplay.

10. As a collective effort to meet such need, the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (ISCWP) has been recently established. With its general purpose of promoting comparative studies of Chinese and Western philosophy and facilitating academic contact and exchange of ideas and information among interested scholars, the ISCWP (i) emphasizes (but is not limited to) the constructive engagement between Chinese philosophy and Western mainstream philosophy (analytic and continental traditions in their broad senses), (ii) stresses the sensitivity of such comparative studies to contemporary development and resources of philosophy and their mutual advancement, and (iii) through the characteristic path of comparative studies of Chinese and Western philosophy, strives to contribute to philosophy as common human wealth as well as to respective studies of Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy. As one effort in this direction, an ISCWP international conference “Philosophical Engagement: Davidson’s Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy” will be held (for details, see “Call for Papers” for this conference on the APA website, www.apa.udel.edu/apa/opportunities/conferences/2003/jul/iscwp.html).

11. I am grateful to Chad Hansen, Douglas Heenslee, Chen-yang Li, You-zheng Li and Xiang-long Zhang for their helpful comments and criticism of an early version of this article.