

Heidegger and Asian Thought

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Introduction

The prospects for a thinking that strives to correspond to the essential being of language remain veiled in their vastness. And so I do not yet see whether what I am trying to think as the being of language is *also* adequate to the nature of East Asian language—whether ultimately . . . the thinking experience can be reached by a being of language that would ensure that Western European and East Asian saying can enter into dialogue in such a way that there sings something that wells up from a single source.

“A Dialogue on Language between
a Japanese and an Inquirer”
On the Way to Language

I

Some speculate that Plato or his predecessors had contact with India. It is in any case instructive to compare Plato's understanding of things with ideas in early Hindu and Buddhist thought, comparative philosophy being generally more enlightening between unconnected philosophies. Leibniz's encounter with the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism and also the *I Ching* is the first case of a major Western thinker's seriously engaging Asian philosophy.¹ Interest in Oriental thought developed gradually, until Hegel, commanding a more expansive view of history than any before him, declared his philosophy (not without justification) to be the culmination of Western metaphysics. Eastern thought he considered to have remained in a state of relative immaturity—even though some of its products were worthy of being incorporated into his own system. Schopenhauer, as more Asian texts began to be available in better translations, saw greater depth in those philosophies, and maintained that Western thought had much to learn from the wisdom of the East. Nietzsche considered his “revaluation of all previous values” finally to have overcome the Western metaphysical tradition. His understanding of Indian philosophy appears to have gone deeper than Schopenhauer's, and while his attitude toward Buddhism is ambivalent, he acknowledges parallels between aspects of Buddhist philosophy and his own subversive lines of thought.²

Much of Heidegger's lengthy engagement with Nietzsche is concerned with depicting him as still trapped in the Western metaphysical tradition, and with presenting himself as the first to re-open the question of Being

and thus as the ultimate overcomer of metaphysics in the West. Recently, however, Jacques Derrida has criticized Heidegger's thinking, from a perspective that takes full account of the difference between languages with phonetic and nonphonetic scripts, for being too "logocentric" and thereby still enmeshed in the Western metaphysical tradition. We may therefore have to wait even longer for the last overcoming.

Rather than pursue this issue further, I should like simply to suggest that Heidegger's claim to be the West's first thinker to have overcome the tradition should be taken more seriously if his thought can be brought to resonate deeply with ideas that arose in totally foreign cultural milieus, couched in more or less alien languages, over two millennia ago. (The same applies, naturally, to the radicality of Nietzsche's subversion of the Western tradition.) The question of influence—of Eastern thought on Heidegger's work—while interesting, is of secondary significance in comparison with the independent congruence of ideas. This last contention, and my initial claim that comparative philosophy is most fruitful between unconnected philosophies, perhaps call for some expansion.

"East-West" comparative philosophy is in principle no different from "comparative" philosophizing within a single tradition—and most philosophy practiced with an appropriately historical sensibility involves comparisons. In order to understand, say, Kant's theory of causality, it is clearly helpful, if not indispensable, to know Hume's ideas on the relations between cause and effect. In order fully to appreciate Schopenhauer's views on almost anything, we have to understand Kantian philosophy. But these are perhaps simply examples of doing philosophy in a historically responsible way—in which we try to understand the nature of the problems a thinker takes over from the tradition, what he retains from the answers of his predecessors, and in what ways his responses differ from theirs. The philosophy of Plato in particular can serve as a kind of pattern, or map, to give the student a basic orientation in the cosmos of Western philosophy. It often helps in acquainting oneself with the ideas of subsequent thinkers if one pictures the later philosophy in relation to the structure of Plato's thought.

Perhaps the image of a network of interconnections inscribed on some transparent sheet can be helpful. In drawing a picture of the thought of Plotinus, for example, one can begin by placing the blank transparency on top of the Plato diagram in order to guide the initial sketching in of the broad outlines. The Plato map can then be put aside in order to allow one's readings of Plotinus' texts to fill in the details of the new pattern more freely. When the drawing gets difficult, it can help to pick up the Plato picture again and slip it underneath. And as in the course of time one's understanding of Plato becomes more sophisticated, one can go back and redraw some of the lines on the original transparency.

The comparative approach is equally helpful, though in a somewhat different way, in cases where there is relatively little influence, or where the thinkers are in different but overlapping disciplines. It is illuminating, for example, to compare the ideas of libido and *erōs* in Freud with the notion of *erōs* in Plato. Freud read and revered the latter enough to refer to him as “the divine Plato,” but the context and goals of his inquiry were obviously different. Nevertheless, a thorough comparison of the similarities and divergences between the two conceptions can serve to hone our understanding of both philosophical psychologies.

Then one can compare two ideas across philosophies in the same tradition (which are thereby subject to similar influences), but between which there is no influence either way. Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s understandings of time and eternity are two complex theories of temporality which diverge from traditional treatments in some fascinatingly similar ways. To compare the roles played by the “moment” (Kierkegaard’s *Øjeblikket* and Nietzsche’s *Augenblick*) in their respective theories provides bilateral insights, in spite—or even because—of the fact that neither influenced the other. This is not to deny that the tracing of the influence of one thinker upon another can be an interesting exercise in the history of ideas. The major concern of comparative philosophy, however, is an understanding of the philosophies themselves—and thereby, to a greater or lesser extent, of the world. And the deepening of such understanding can take place independently of a study of influence.

Finally there is the case of two philosophies from different cultural contexts in which the possibility of influence can be ruled out completely. In lifting the philosophies out of their historical context we do, of course, lose something. But as long as our interpretations of the texts keep the appropriate linguistic and historical contexts in view, and refrain from projecting anachronistic or culturally incongruous meanings on to them, the losses can be outweighed by the gains. More important than the contexts themselves are the situations of the thinkers in relation to their backgrounds. It would be perverse, for example, to compare Nietzsche’s philosophy with the thought of the Legalists in Chou dynasty China. However, though the contexts of Nietzsche and Chuang-tzu are totally disparate, and Nietzsche seems to have known little or nothing about Taoism, their relationships to their respective traditions have enough in common to make a comparison of their philosophies worthwhile.

What are the gains from such comparisons? Let us suppose that we can sketch out some fairly broad morphological congruences between the two philosophies. The lines we draw on the transparencies do not represent anything absolute but rather denote connections among the major ideas of the discourses. We might, for example, find that the representation of the notion of *te* (power, *virtus*) in Chuang-tzu in its relationships

to other major elements of his thought constitutes a pattern that is remarkably similar to that generated by sketching out the notion of *Wille zur Macht* ("will to power") on the Nietzsche slide. These are both difficult and generally poorly understood ideas, and so a careful mapping of each on to the other can first of all serve to dispel major misconceptions about them. Then comes the more interesting part. Looking through both transparencies, given that we see considerable areas of overlap, the places in which one pattern does not have a counterpart in the other will be conspicuous (especially if we imagine them drawn in different colors). Or, put another way: we follow out a particular parallel for some distance until we find that in one pattern the line of thought stops sooner than in the other. This can send us back to the texts and set us thinking: does this idea really have no counterpart in the other pattern? Sometimes the answer will be "no"; but often we may find that there *is* a corresponding feature in the second philosophy which commentators have persistently overlooked. And where there are differences, we can take it upon ourselves to articulate them as clearly as possible. The fruits of these labors consist in a better understanding of both philosophies and of the topic in question.

However, given a comparison which demonstrates congruity between totally unrelated philosophies or systems of thought, there may be a temptation to say something more—perhaps that both thinkers are "saying the same thing about the same thing." Suppose we discern substantial similarities between, say, the Presocratic notion of *logos* and the Taoist understanding of *tao*, would some (part) of us not want to say that these terms refer to the same non-Thing—*das Selbe*, or Being? But Heidegger, though he sometimes speaks of Being as *das Selbe*, would be reluctant to speak of "the same" between languages as different as ancient Greek and classical Chinese. Or one could go further and side with Nietzsche and the Derrideans, who would deny the existence of any "transcendental signified" outside the various realms of discourse.

What prompts us to want to say that in such cases thinkers from disparate traditions are saying the same thing is the desire, when faced with congruent patterns in different discourses, to posit some *ground* for the congruences, to say that the discourses are being patterned by the same thing, or event, or process. But if one is uncomfortable with anything approaching a *Weltgeist*, one could hypostasize less by saying that the patterns reflect underlying similarities in "forms of life," or deeper truths about what it is to be a human being.

There can be a genuine problem concerning the significance of the "and" in titles of books or papers which engage in comparisons, and the question "So what?" can often be posed legitimately as the final page is turned. But ultimately the criteria for the success of a comparative study

of two thinkers from different traditions are no different from those pertaining to a discussion of a single philosopher. The question in both cases is, simply: does the study enhance our understanding of the philosopher's thought, of the problems engaged by it—and of ourselves and the world?

II

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the foremost living thinker among Heidegger's many eminent students, has said that Heidegger studies would do well to pursue seriously comparisons of his work with Asian philosophies.³ This kind of research has, however, been slow to be undertaken—especially in view of Heidegger's considerable interest in Asian thought. The grounds for this relative lack of enthusiasm deserve some consideration.

The major reason is that both Heidegger's thinking and Asian philosophy have been regarded—at least until fairly recently—as quite marginal enterprises by the mainstream of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. For decades Heidegger was dismissed by many eminent analytical philosophers as a hopelessly pompous and muddle-headed obscurantist. It seems now, however, thanks in part to the work of such broader-minded thinkers in the analytic tradition as Richard Rorty, that Heidegger's place in the annals of twentieth-century philosophy as a whole is finally secured. The increasing number of competent translations and greater sophistication in the secondary literature published in the past several years provide further confirmation.

The same kinds of analytical philosophers who dismissed Heidegger have generally been even more dismissive of Asian philosophy, often questioning with blatant chauvinism whether such a thing is not clearly a contradiction in terms. However, as the number of scholars with sufficient training in the appropriate languages and in Western philosophy increases, the field of Asian and comparative philosophy is becoming more firmly established, though full acceptance by the philosophical community at large will presumably take some time.

A major source of resistance to both Heidegger's and Asian thought stems from a complex of prejudices to the effect that: the proper medium for philosophical writing is the treatise rather than any more literary form; philosophy must work with intellectual concepts rather than play with poetic images; in such work reason is primary and imagination secondary, if not downright counter-productive; and rational and logical argumentation is the only appropriate method. If these are taken as criteria for philosophy, then most of Heidegger's writings and the majority of the major texts of Asian thought fail to qualify. Heidegger's claims that his thinking is more rigorous (*strenger*) than the exactness of logical ratiocination fall on deaf ears, as do the warnings of Asian specialists