

What Kinds of Comparison Are Most Useful in the Study of World Philosophies?

Cross-cultural comparisons face several methodological challenges. In an attempt at resolving some such challenges, Nathan Sivin has developed the framework of “cultural manifolds.” This framework includes all the pertinent dimensions of a complex phenomenon and the interactions that make all of these aspects into a single whole. In engaging with this framework, Anna Akasoy illustrates that the phenomena used in comparative approaches to cultural and intellectual history need to be subjected to a continuous change of perspectives. Writing about comparative history, Warwick Anderson directs attention to an articulation between synchronic and diachronic modes of inquiry. In addition, he asks: If comparative studies require a number of collaborators, how does one coordinate the various contributors? And how does one ensure that the comparison is between separate entities, without mutual historical entanglement? Finally, how does comparative history stack up against more dynamic approaches, such as connected, transnational, and postcolonial histories? Gérard Colas, for his part, claims that comparisons cannot allow one to move away from the dominant Euroamerican conceptual framework. Should this indeed be the case, we should search for better ways of facilitating a “mutual pollination” between philosophies. Finally, Edmond Eh first asserts that Sivin fails to recognize the difference between comparisons within cultures and comparisons between cultures. He then argues that the application of generalism is limited to comparisons of historical nature.

Key words: comparative history; cultural manifolds; intellectual history; intra-cultural comparison; inter-cultural comparison; mutual pollination; synchronic; diachronic; connected history; transnational history; postcolonial history

Why Some Comparisons Make More Difference than Others

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Let’s say that you have decided to compare apples and oranges. You might decide to perform this operation on a McIntosh apple with a small brown wormhole in its side and a slightly underripe Valencia orange, both sitting on your kitchen table. On the other hand, what you have in mind might be juxtaposing two artificial essences that represent all oranges and apples at all times and in all places. Once you have made this fateful decision, it is certain that your two comparisons will turn out to be similar in some respects and different in others. If you choose the fruit you can smell and taste—and have to pay for—you will not be able to claim you have discovered something about all apples or oranges. So it goes.

Rather than apples and oranges, you might prefer to compare the *pneuma* as Stoic philosophers described it and *qi* 氣 in the various Chinese syntheses of cosmos, state, and body in the last three centuries BC. That might seem to you a more becoming project for a humanistic scholar. It is less confining than stacking up the *pneuma* of Zeno of Citium against the King of Huainan’s *qi*, and less airy than comparing all the conceptions of *pneuma* in the Greek classics and all

those of *qi* in the Chinese classics. Once you have itemized what is like and what is unlike, you might conclude that the ideas have too much in common to be explained by mere coincidence. That might tempt you to speculate that they are historically related in some way. If that is too unlikely, you might come to believe they are simply local varieties of reasoning of a kind that might emerge in many cultures.

You may or may not ask yourself what effect your conclusions will have on the sum total of useful human knowledge. If this question doesn't occur to you, it may occur to the panelists of the research foundation that you hope will support your project. That is one of several reasons that it is best for it to occur to you.

It is not given to many scholars, no matter what they study, that the outcomes of their research affect the thinking of all educated and open-minded people. Fellowship panels are not at all likely to demand it. But they (or you, if you are realistic) may very well ask whether it is worth a year's work to be remembered by the dozen people in the world who actively care about whether *pneuma* and *qi* are more like than unlike. You might, on the other hand, hope to complicate all Sinologists', or all intelligent people's, convictions about the physical, political, and moral universes. As you know, one small qualification to the conventional wisdom isn't likely to result in noticeably richer understanding.

Complicating humanists' convictions does not come easily or quickly. Comparison has yielded some genuinely useful results. For instance, as a result of many years' labor, and considerable patience, much of the learned world now admits that any book called *A History of Science* needs to pay attention to cultures outside of western Europe. Scholars are gradually recognizing that the goals of alchemy in Alexandria, in Europe, and in East Asia had to do with attaining spiritual perfection rather than with increasing chemical knowledge. Despite rich evidence, most have not yet noticed that the diseases recognized by modern physicians are ethnocentric, and that any ancient system for classifying disease is likely to repay understanding if we analyze it. These examples suggest that comparison can significantly increase understanding.

1 Comparanda

I'm always happy to learn from any comparison between cultures, no matter how narrow or unlikely. But the comparisons that many scholars write about, rather than leading me to think in a new way, turn out to be quite forgettable.

That usually has to do with whether their choice of what to compare is productive. Let me explore this question with a cross-cultural comparison between diseases. The term *re* 熱, as any Chinese-English dictionary of the modern language will tell you, means "fever." But if you are reading medical books written before modern times, you quickly learn that it's not so simple. It turns out that, as a symptom, *re* is the opposite of *han* 寒, "chills." Context will tell you that *both* are likely to describe a body temperature higher than normal, but that's not the point for early doctors. *Han* and *re* were not signs on the outside of the patient's body, but abnormal hot or cold feelings inside—symptoms that the doctor could not read directly, but learned about only if the patient described them.¹ They figure as symptoms in an immense number of diseases.

In addition to *re* as a symptom, there is also *rebing* 熱病, "hot disease." A book called *On the Origins and Symptoms of Diseases*, written by an imperial physician in 610 or 611 CE and authoritative for five centuries, lists twenty-eight varieties of *rebing*. Some of these by modern standards are syndromes, and some are diseases (that is, in addition to a regular combination of symptoms they

have a regular course). As this handbook says, “hot diseases belong to the class of Cold Damage Disorders,” and it describes sixty-seven types of those. There are also thirty-four Warm Disorders and a mere seven Cold-Hot Disorders, in which chills and hot sensations alternate.²

Let me remind you that identifying ancient diseases using modern medical terminology is actually a project in comparison, and not at all a trivial one. Now that we have an idea of how diverse the concept of *re* is, we might expect a modern doctor who has studied all 136 varieties of its syndromes and diseases to conclude that early Chinese doctors were all too successful at hopelessly complicating simple problems. In other words, that kind of comparison tends to end in exasperation rather than illumination.

That often happens when people compare things that have much less in common than they think they do. Comparing ancient medical entities with modern ones is very likely to yield useless results. Medicine before the nineteenth century anywhere had no way to reliably connect the signs and symptoms of disease with what was going on in the living body, and no way to be certain how therapy affected body processes. Therapists’ ability to relieve suffering or make it less serious relied on great ingenuity in getting around these obstacles.

If we want the work of comparison to be fruitful, in other words, we have to pick carefully what we compare, and in what times and places. In this example, the ideal comparandum would be some apparently corresponding seventh-century European disease or disease group. But that would not be a practical choice. It is no longer acceptable to refer to, say, the seventh century in Germany as part of the Dark Ages, but medical knowledge then and there was undeniably dim. Some of it survived from antiquity in Latin texts, but it is very hard to say how many healers could read old books, or lay their hands on them, then or long afterward.

In Europe, from the twelfth century on, as educating physicians became a main role of universities, therapeutic literature gradually became elaborate. Eventually we can find handbooks that define and classify diseases. That of William Cullen (1769) became as authoritative as the seventh-century Chinese treatise, although not for nearly as long. Even as late as the mid-nineteenth century it is easy to find therapeutic handbooks that itemize a very large number of different diseases they call “fevers.”³ I leave it to you to carry out a comparison of this kind, but it is likely to be fruitful. *After* you have done work of this sort, modern biomedical knowledge can play a productive part in forming your conclusions. But when introduced too early in the project, it is more likely to be a distraction.

Just as we can compare something in two places at the same time, we can also compare a thing in the same place at different times. In that sense all history is comparative, but that does not mean all historians explicitly draw comparisons. Still, it’s not hard to find comparisons that alert us to interesting historical questions. I find fascinating, for example, the old Chinese custom that forbade an official to serve two successive dynasties (*buerchen* 不貳臣). The force of this taboo fluctuates oddly. If we examine instances where one would expect it to hold, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t. Let’s look at two transitions from a Han government to an alien one. When the Mongols conquered North China in the 1240s, they had no difficulty recruiting the experts they needed to plan and carry out a more-or-less Chinese-style administration (not to mention a conquest of the south). Liu Bingzhong 劉秉忠 (1216-1274) eagerly went to work for Khubilai Khan, and recruited many leading administrators, philosophers, astronomers, and others.⁴

But in the transition from the Ming dynasty to the Qing (after 1644), many exceptionally able people refused to accept civil service appointments under the Manchus, even those who had never been Ming officials. Instead a few of them became private teachers of astronomy and mathematics or physicians. Mei Wending 梅文鼎 (1633-1721), Wang Xishan 王錫闡 (1628-1682), and Xue

Fengzuo 薛鳳祚 (ca. 1620-1680), the best astronomers of their time, are examples.⁵ Fu Shan 傅山 (1607-1684), an outstanding medical practitioner and author, equally famous as a calligrapher and painter, was ready to die rather than to accept an appointment that the Qing court pressed upon him.⁶

Here is an explicitly comparative problem. How can we attack it? The difference could be due to a change in political thought, in dominant ideology, in government policy, in prevalent philosophical or religious convictions, even in economics. How do we decide, keeping in mind that each one of these calls for a different historical specialist to do the work? And what if a satisfactory understanding is too complicated for any one of these specializations? Questions of this kind led Geoffrey Lloyd and myself to recommend attention to what we called in *The Way and the Word* “cultural manifolds.”⁷

2 Dimensions of Comparison

The point of cultural manifolds is that history unfolds in one big thing, the past. On the other hand, academia is a confederation of specialties, organized into departments, centers, research institutes, and so on. Despite much change, universities have not yet found a replacement for this model, invented in the new German research universities of the early nineteenth century. The historical profession is an alliance of sub-specialties, which from time to time step on each other’s toes, but tend to be hesitant and apologetic about doing so. If it happens too often, the result is likely to be, in the old German mode, a new interdisciplinary department with a new title, meant to maintain a defensible specialist turf.

City governments in the nineteenth-century German-speaking cultural sphere paid for the faculties of the first research universities. Those who authorized the budgets accepted the idea that, as scientific specialists generated rigorous, confirmable results, higher levels of scholars would weave from them a richly patterned, seamless fabric of knowledge. They expected that the humanities would follow the same pattern, evolving into humanistic sciences.

There were two long-term problems. One was that the humanities never became sciences. Most specialists did not find that goal attractive. The few that found ways to quantify or use experimentation relabeled themselves as social scientists, although the success of their predictions has been poor by the standards of physics or chemistry.

The other difficulty was that hyper-specialization was such a success that ambitious scholars lost interest in becoming generalists. That became the pursuit of a quirky few professors and a certain number of popular authors, many of whom relied on research assistants to read the technical papers. The specialist rank and file tended to concentrate on what their own technical tools could yield with more or less confidence. The rest they considered mere context, which they felt they could speculate freely about.

According to that model, putting whatever one studies in context is a perfectly good thing if you happen to have a taste for it. But if the theme is comparisons, they are often unconvincing or forgettable, because what they compare doesn’t fit neatly into a specialism, and offhand speculations about context don’t put the emphasis where it needs to be.

When Geoffrey Lloyd and I decided to compare the beginnings of science in China and Greece, what we did was to try doing away with the conventional division between foreground and context.⁸ The idea was to begin by examining all the dimensions of a complex phenomenon, and also the interactions that make all of these aspects into a single whole—how people made a living,

their relation to authority, what bonds connected those who did the same work, how they communicated with each other and to outsiders what they understood, and what concepts and assumptions they relied on. We didn't assume that social factors determine thought, nor that ideas determine social change. This turned out to let us comprehend the interactions within each manifold—the sum of all these dimensions—as thinkers responded to institutions and prevalent values, and at the same time influenced them.

In other words, we surveyed all the possible dimensions that occurred to us, found most of them pertinent, and investigated their roles as well as their interactions, from income through politics to theoretical assumptions. We began with some doubts that there would be adequate sources for some of these. We discovered, once we began looking, that there were usually many more than we expected. One outcome that helped us keep going over the dozen years of that project was that we gradually found ourselves looking at China in my case, and Greece in Geoffrey Lloyd's case, in ways we had not anticipated.

As for wider outcomes, of the twenty or so reviews of *The Way and the Word* that appeared in Europe and America, only two even noticed that a new methodology was one of its important features. One of those two reviewers made it clear that in historical writing she considers methodology distasteful. Since then, perhaps a dozen studies have used cultural manifolds in the U.S., one in Europe (without mentioning it),⁹ and a number of them in China. Some of these have led to breakthroughs of one sort or another, but change on a larger scale will be neither quick nor easy.

To tell the truth, like most methodologies, cultural manifolds is not really new. In essence it is a way to remind oneself that there are good reasons to step outside the limits of specialism and be guided by what the problem demands. In other words, when understanding calls for it, one can learn to be a generalist.

One's willingness to do that, I submit, is why some comparisons make more difference than others.

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¹ When early physicians referred to fever, in the premodern sense of abnormally high body heat that the doctor read directly by touch, they normally used the compound *fare* 發熱

² On *rebing*, see *Zhu bing yuan hou lun* 諸病源候論, 9: 57a-60a; Cold Damage (*shanghan* 傷寒) occupies the whole of *juan* 7 and 8; Warm Disorders (*wenbing* 瘟病), 10: 61-4; and Cold-Hot Disorders (*lengrebing* 冷熱病), 12: 72-4.

³ E.g., I have found useful Barclay (1857).

⁴ Sivin (2009: 153-6).

⁵ Sivin (1995: chapter 5, and chapter 7: 63-4).

⁶ Bai (2003).

⁷ See also Sivin (2005).

⁸ Lloyd, and Sivin (2002).

⁹ Cullen (2017).

Cultural Complexity and Comparisons: What Exactly is It that We Compare

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Why do some comparisons make more difference than others? Nathan Sivin's (2018a) well-posed question can be usefully amended: why do some comparisons make more difference in respect to what? Or make more difference to what end? Why indeed, we might ask, do we compare at all? Commonplace wisdom in the literature about comparative methods is that one should not compare for the sake of comparison alone. In some fields, such methodological discussions are not widely conducted. Comparisons are common in Islamic intellectual history, for example, either explicitly or in the form of analyses against the backdrop of an assumed western European norm, but detailed debates about comparative methods are much rarer. In his usefully focused and wide-ranging assessment, however, Andrew March (2009)—expressing somewhat parallel concerns—asked, “What is comparative political theory?” and concluded that it involved the philosophically productive comparative analysis of political thought from different cultural contexts. Contrasting “scholarly” and “engaged” approaches, he emphasized that the former were regularly and convincingly comparative in nature, whereas the latter were often inconsistent because they refrained from a normative evaluation of non-western ideas. To qualify as genuinely comparative, March argued, political theory should not merely identify similarities, but also focus on irreducible differences, especially those rooted in religious convictions and sources of authority.

As Sivin points out, the selection of examples in a comparative exercise inevitably determines which similarities and differences we identify and what we do with them, although I do not take him to suggest that there are not some differences which are more persistent and perhaps even essential. While March's insistence on irreducible and significant differences is a welcome one, it is worth surveying Sivin's own choice of apples and oranges. March operates with a binary that sets western political theory apart from non-western traditions. While the distinction between “the west” and “the rest” is in and of itself questionable, the examples of political thought are even more problematic. For while the medieval authors al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) are chosen as non-western apples, March's western oranges are typically embodied by the likes of John Rawls and Hannah Arendt. (March also refers to the tenth-century philosopher al-Farabi who has been assimilated by Straussians as part of the Platonic and hence presumably western tradition.) The choice of authors for comparison makes the sharp contrast between western political thought, here implicitly assumed to be secular, and non-western thought, here implicitly religious, more plausible, but the binary does not stand the test of critical examination. The political ideas of “western” thinkers who were contemporaries of al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya tend to be equally rooted in religious convictions as the examples of “Islamic” political thought. Likewise, religious roots can be easily recognized in the principles of modern US civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. Furthermore, the latter illustrates that a simple divide between “western” and “Islamic” political thought relies on a monolithic rather than diverse understanding of the “west.”

Scholars of Islamic history would also have a good case in challenging March's portrayal of Ibn Taymiyya as a representative of Islamic “mainstream theology and jurisprudence,” not least given that one of his contemporaries infamously insinuated that there was something profoundly wrong with the scholar.¹ Indeed, Islamicists might point to the pitfalls of assuming that there even is an Islamic orthodoxy.² Sivin, however, is right to stress the perils of hyper-specialization in the

humanities that might inspire such objections against analytical shortcuts and generalizations involved in many comparative exercises. Despite these objections regarding the selection of specific apples and oranges, March's framework for comparative exercises is useful because intercultural conflict cannot be solved by disregarding profound differences in political thought, especially regarding the individual's responsibility to the state or to a smaller community, or dogmatic commitments that might clash with state policy. Religious dialogue that limits itself to celebrating similarities, for example, notoriously fails on that score.

Comparisons are useful because they allow us to examine unchallenged assumptions about cultural frameworks—to put it in Sivin's words, to complicate humanistic convictions. The assumed differences between a “western” culture which unfolds as secular modernity and an “Islamic” intellectual history, which remains timelessly rooted in religious maximalism, is such a humanistic conviction which deserves complication.

The relationship between sample and larger category, however, is more intricate still. I take Sivin's case for reconsidering the relationship between foreground and background in such a way. Take the example of literature. The tale of Layla and Majnun is often classified as a love story that sits alongside Romeo and Juliet or Vis and Ramin. By classifying it in such a way, we emphasize the fact that it speaks to universal human interests. The same is true of certain ideas in philosophy, ideas of human nature or of the workings of political power, for instance. Al-Farabi's ideas can be classified as such, as March illustrates. Then again, we can focus on the particular. Layla and Majnun reflects the particular historical circumstances of Nizami's twelfth-century Iran, or al-Farabi those of tenth-century Iraq. Moreover, what may start as an exercise conceived as contextualizing and accounting for differences may lead to the reverse perspective. Thus, for scholars of medieval Islamic history, certain cultural and political constellations constitute the universal while the branch of knowledge (philosophy) or literature (love stories) might be the particular.

If we compare apples and oranges, the individual fruit are meant to exemplify apples and oranges in a generic sense. As just illustrated, however, intellectual historians are dealing with products of complex cultural, social, political, and material constellations. What these constellations constitute is not as obvious as in the case of apples and oranges. They are subject to more deliberate and ambiguous framings. Comparisons can indeed help to establish to which categories our objects for comparison belong.

Sivin also reminds us that similarities observed as a result of comparison may point to connections that we might otherwise not assume to exist. It can be prior knowledge of such connections that initially inspires the comparison, such as in the case of the reception of Aristotle, Plato, Galen, and other great authorities of Greek antiquity across premodern Eurasia. The great scholar of Arabic literature and Islamic thought, Franz Rosenthal (1914-2003), took Aristotle to be part of the classical heritage and devoted an entire book to the survey of such and similar classical traditions in the Islamic world.³ Rosenthal's approach in this book reflected not only his personal style, more anthological than interpretive, but also the strong philological orientation of German Orientalism, denounced by later critics as positivism or antiquarianism. Remaining close to the texts, scholars did not so much treat them as sources to identify and solve research problems, but rather let them speak for themselves.

As it turns out, however, the roots of Rosenthal's anthological survey are much deeper. They pre-date the rise of German Orientalism by a whole millennium and more. After some prolegomena on the history of the transmission of classical knowledge from Greek into Arabic, the bulk of Rosenthal's selection reads like one of those classifications of the sciences which are so familiar to any student of medieval philosophy and which became popular in Arabic from the tenth century

onwards. Rosenthal's final section on literature and art, which has no precedent in pre-modern classifications, appears as an afterthought in the survey. There are other differences to medieval classifications too, notably the categories of religious knowledge that appear in the tenth-century classifications only, but this does not disguise the remarkable similarities. Rosenthal did not merely mimic original tenth-century texts. Al-Farabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences* was inspired by late antique divisions of philosophical knowledge that relied at least in part on the division of Aristotle's books. Rosenthal's anthological survey of the classical heritage in Islam thus forms part of the same heritage. Aristotle still cast his long shadow in 1965 as the Greek philosopher's works became coterminous with the classical heritage for the Orientalist Rosenthal, at least as far as the study of the Islamic world is concerned.

Classical Greece enjoyed the status of a prestige culture in the medieval Islamic world, in Renaissance Europe, and in modern Europe as well, but this classical heritage was the subject of selective rather than comprehensive claims. If compared to early modern Western Europe, three "omissions" are particularly remarkable in the contemporaneous Islamic world.

The first is Latin. Petrarch's interest in Cicero stands at the beginning of the Renaissance, but translations from Latin into Arabic were very few indeed and the "classical heritage" of Rosenthal's book is basically Greek. In western Europe, Latin and the Romans served in many ways as connecting points to classical Greece, historically, culturally, linguistically. They did not constitute a comparable catalyst in the Islamic world or a prestige culture in its own right. We find the second omission in literature. Among things Greek, literature—in the sense of drama, epic, and poetry—was not adopted in the Islamic world in any significant way. Poetry was sometimes deemed untranslatable, and while Aristotle's philosophical arguments could effectively claim some universality, the references to ancient Greek dramatic traditions were fairly cryptic to the Arabic translators in the eighth to tenth centuries. The third omission is myth. Zeus and Athena, Achilles and Prometheus—by and large the Greek pantheon and its accompanying humans—remained unknown to readers in the medieval Islamic world. We find fragments such as the legend of the Pillars of Hercules at the Strait of Gibraltar, but these are few and far between.

The celebration of Latin, of Greek poetry and prose, and of classical myth were hallmarks of Renaissance literature and art. Why were they not equally attractive to those who produced elite culture in the medieval Islamic world? Why was their corpus of the classical heritage narrower, even if we take Rosenthal's survey to be selective? Difficulties of cultural translation are part of the explanation. In part, the answer is also function. Arabic poetry predates the rise of Islam and has remained a lively, high-prestige, and enormously popular tradition for centuries. Persian too experienced a literary resurgence. Why add what were bound to be inelegant translations of Greek poetry to this? There is also the question of availability. Syriac Christians served as invaluable intermediaries between ancient Greek philosophy and science and the Abbasid caliphs. Earlier Christian interests had a crucial impact on the Arabic-Islamic reception. To provide another example of a Christian intermediary, long before the translation movement, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (reg. 610-641) led crusades against the Sassanians as a new Alexander, which might explain how the Macedonian conqueror ended up in the Qur'an as a quasi-prophetic figure. It was also Byzantine visual culture which influenced Umayyad palatial decoration. Latin did not enjoy any popularity among those intermediaries, and neither did Homer.

To my mind, it remains unclear what this means for the way elites in the medieval Islamic world thought about the classical heritage: did they only adopt knowledge in very particular areas, or was ancient Greece a prestige culture in a comprehensive sense? Were elements associated with ancient Greece intrinsically valuable because of that association?

Adaptations of the classical heritage in the Islamic world have been portrayed as inadequate compared to a western European ideal, but we may equally regard them as a specific instantiation, directed by specific cultural conditions. Another instantiation can be adduced. In his pioneering study of Gandharan art, the art historian of the *Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*, Alfred Foucher, established that the anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha from around the beginnings of the Common Era were subject to Graeco-Roman influences. Other classical elements too in Buddhist sacred sites such as scenes from mythology warrant the category “Graeco-Buddhist art.” (The most conspicuous case is probably the Buddhist character Vajrapani, whose representation in panels with scenes from the life of the Buddha sometimes follows the iconography of Hercules.) More recently, scholars have also argued for Indian adaptations of Greek theatre or for substantial philosophical exchanges between Greeks and Buddhists that left a lasting legacy in western Eurasia.⁴ To what extent these individual theories are going to persuade the larger academic community is a different matter, but there can be no doubt that east of the Islamic world too a significant body of classical culture was adopted into local traditions. The study of the classical heritage in the Islamic world has been conducted separately from that of Central Asian and Indian trajectories of Graeco-Roman culture, even though these worlds were eventually going to overlap. This is but one example where comparative studies can make a lot of difference.

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¹ See: Little (1975).

² See: Knysh (1993).

³ Rosenthal (1975 [1965]).

⁴ See, for example, Beckwith (2015); Brancaccio, and Liu (2009).

Comparison Redux

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In *The Way and the Word* (2002), an ambitious, groundbreaking study of modes of reasoning in early China and Greece, G.E.R. Lloyd and Nathan Sivin explored the interpretive capacities of comparative history (Lloyd and Sivin 2002). What makes a comparative method especially telling? As Shigehisa Kuriyama (2004: 202; see also 1999) put it in a perceptive review of their book: “to foster a genuine sense of pluralism, of viable, alternative styles of knowledge, the authors needed to invent a new comparative frame.” That is, Lloyd and Sivin proposed a comparison of “cultural manifolds,” by which they meant dynamic and complex assemblages of a problem’s (or the comparable objects’) multiple dimensions, whether philosophical, cultural, political, technical, economic, or literary, and so on. They were not suggesting merely adding further context. “Cultural manifolds,” Sivin (2005a: 10) later explained, “include not only the various dimensions of a complex phenomenon, but also the interactions that make all of these aspects into a single whole.” Of course, contemporary scholarly specialization makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize and handle such elaborate composites. No surprise, then, that Sivin has felt it necessary to reissue his challenge to revitalize and empower comparative methods in historical inquiry. “If we want the work of comparison to be fruitful,” he writes here, “we have to pick carefully what we compare.” Some comparisons “make more difference than others,” he argues—but how in practice might we assess the value of such sociologically complex comparisons?

Even in 1925, French *Annaliste* Marc Bloch—perhaps following the lead of Max Weber—was thinking about the proper units of comparative history, though he was equivocal on the subject. Bloch saw comparative historical analysis as usefully establishing explanatory relationships between things, usually big things like nations, states, and societies, though certainly not exclusively so. Much later, labor historian William H. Sewell, Jr. (1967: 213), following Bloch, insisted that “comparisons must be between different *social systems*” (original emphasis). Sewell regarded comparative history, with its testing of hypotheses, as the hybrid progeny of sociology—or the social sciences more generally—and history. Thus, one needs to fix whatever one is comparing and subject it to a synchronic or sociological gaze, but this “synchronic moment should be dialectically related to an equally necessary diachronic moment” (Sewell 1997: 37). In practice, the process of inquiry obliges us to suspend a “block of time” in order to work out the complex structure of the historical moment. Sewell came to champion the practical import of Clifford Geertz’s (1973) notions of “thick description” and “cultural systems” for comparative historians. Such knowledge of how “symbols and practices mutually sustain each other as an integrated whole” might assist in describing the *form* in trans-form, what is being worked upon in historical transformation, the configuration in chronology (Sewell 1997: 39). I suspect Sivin’s cultural manifolds differ somehow from Geertz’s cultural systems, but I cannot be sure. In any case, I wonder if Sivin perceives a similar interplay between synchronic and diachronic analysis in his proposal to reframe comparative history? Another way of addressing this issue, using the formulation of historians Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman (2006), is to ask how comparative history, based on cultural manifolds, might articulate “between an essentially synchronic analytic logic and historically constituted objects”?

Lloyd and Sivin seem to value comparative history heuristically and analytically—or diagnostically and etiologically, in the sense that it can draw attention to signs one might otherwise miss, and it allows discussion of underlying causes. Comparison, as a form of multivariate analysis,

might lead to new historical explanations, or it could find historical limits to sweeping assumptions or theories. Nonetheless, comparative history has some stumbling blocks that even cultural manifolds or systems may not permit us to sidestep (Kocka 2003). Indeed, more complex and comprehensive comparisons demand ever more collaborators, experts in various aspects of the problem in different societies, often with diverse language fluencies. This makes such studies difficult to organize, coordinate, fund, and sustain. Another problem, as I see it, is the supposition that comparison must be between two separate entities, or systems, or cultural manifolds, brought together analytically but free from any actual historical entanglements. This may be so in the cases considered by Lloyd and Sivin, but the situation rarely applies in modern history. Additionally, we need to be more critical and reflective in choosing what to compare—not just how we compare—as the criteria for selection are not always self-evident. In making comparisons, even of cultural manifolds, we inevitably are disembedding and decontextualizing something, based on an inference of resemblance, a perceived likeness, to another thing we want to investigate. A comparative perspective is never the view from nowhere; it implicates us in one culture or another, in one set of arguments or another. We should not pretend otherwise. Of course, I am simply adducing here a few generic problems of comparative historical inquiry, but I would like to know if Sivin's postulated cultural manifolds might obviate or invalidate them—or will they compound the difficulties?

Comparative approaches became popular in the 1970s and 1980s in association with rising enthusiasm for using sociological methods in historical analysis. However, since the 1990s, many historians have turned towards studies of transfer, transaction, and transmission, favoring connected or entangled or other transnational histories, which may imply widely dispersed reciprocal relations or, in postcolonial mode, imbalances in exchange (Subrahmanyam 1997; Werner and Zimmerman 2006). Such styles of inquiry perhaps reflect how we historians like to see ourselves now, after the Cold War: cosmopolitan, questing, dynamically engaged. More static genres or techniques, often requiring deep immersion in a particular culture—such as area studies and comparative history—lack the appeal, or the dash and agility, of contemporary *histoire croisée*. Thus, it seems timely that Sivin is urging us to reconsider, to reevaluate soberly and sympathetically, comparative history, reframed and refreshed. As he demonstrates, we might still learn much from scholarly comparison, done well.

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Remarks on Nathan Sivin's Observations about Comparatism

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Comparison is unavoidable. A means of evaluating things, people, oneself, etc., comparison plays a significant role in human daily life. When an academic or traditional scholar studies a topic, he operates within his natural language and with acquired intellectual techniques; his writing style and vocabulary, conforming to his culture, count as conscious and unconscious comparatism. This inherent comparatism appears to be more conspicuous when a western scholar studies a non-western (for instance, Indian or Chinese) cultural object. He/she transfers alien notions into his/her linguistic and presentational medium, thereby establishing approximate equivalences, contrasting, comparing and sometimes criticizing earlier interpretations. Western terminology in some cases may not have adequate equivalences for eastern notions. For example, Nathan Sivin mentions how the usual English translation “fever” of Chinese *re* fails to reproduce the diversity of the Chinese term. And conversely, a western approach may sometimes put a name to non-western notions not expressed in their own language. Sanskrit for instance, does not have specific terms for deism and theism, even though some Sanskrit metaphysical works show this difference. One may utilize western terms as a working tool for reading ancient Sanskrit works provided the terms are clearly defined and not contaminated with anachronism. Naming an originally unnamed conception can be rewarding.

Sometimes a scholarly discipline, when hampered by its own tradition, does not seriously take alien doctrines into account. Some decades ago, academic “philosophy” in France refused to recognize the very existence of Indian “philosophy.” Has the situation progressed much today? Conversely, the twenty-first-century traditional Indian pundits writing on metaphysical and other theoretical topics operate in a vacuum. Neither their conventional language nor their intellectualization can accommodate western philosophical concepts. The eighteenth-century French Jesuits attempted to transfer Thomist concepts into Sanskrit (without loanwords from European languages), but their Sanskrit works did not leave any trace of influence in Indian Sanskrit debates. I am not aware of the situation in the Chinese field. Thus, language and discipline may also prevent or dissuade any deliberate comparatism.

How far is the compared object appropriated by the comparatist's language and how does it penetrate his/her intellectualization? Modern poets are certainly more apt than academics to see uncommon links because their imagination is not bound by conventions. Paul Eluard wrote: “the earth is blue like an orange.” In the academic perspective, a fortuitous reading by an Indologist could reveal unexpected elements of comparison. For instance, the *Vie de Jésus* of Ernest Renan (1823) may throw new light on the study of miracles in Hindu religion; the *Naturalis Historia* of Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79) may enrich one's understanding of what “science,” “technique,” and “encyclopædism” may have meant in ancient India. But an academic—declared comparatist or not—has to adopt protocols or procedures of legitimation for comparison or demonstration because he has to convince fellow scholars. The “cultural manifold” approach of *The Way and the Word* is thought-provoking and to some extent new, but the succession in its chapters is based on the distinction between “social and instrumental framework” and “fundamental issues,” which suggests a determinist link. Academic writings conceive ancient texts and facts from the viewpoint of twenty-first-century grid and parlance. Like the entomologist pinning an insect on a board, the translator-researcher deprives his/her object of study of its original live organization, encoding and fixing it

“on” his/her own ideology and learned practices. The 3D archeological restitution of an ancient Hindu temple, for example, does not reproduce the perception of that temple by the devotees who worshipped in it at that epoch, or their sentiments. The aim of restituting a cultural continuum can only be utopian. Since cultural and mental signposting are a part of human consciousness, the cultural manifold model inevitably introduces contemporary conceptual signposts into the field under study. Can or should one use the same conceptual signposts for ancient Greek and ancient Chinese cultures? Does the proposed cultural manifold model, said to be different from the conventional cause-effect approach (originally Greek, then “western”), borrow from the correlation-oriented Chinese model?¹ If this is the case, it is a felicitous step away from the common approach of causality in humanities.² The causal relation, in combination with the notion of history, is today an important instrument for humanities to distantiate themselves from their objects of study, both western and non-western.

Distantiation has gradually become a major token of scientific legitimacy for modern western humanities. For instance, present academic philosophy is mainly a history of philosophy and excludes ancient sources from its way of thinking: there does not seem to be a “Platonist” philosophical viewpoint asserted today in university teaching. But distantiation has not always been a fundamental value in modern humanities. Plato continually inspired Christian theology and western philosophy up to the nineteenth century, from the Catechetical school of Alexandria to Hegel. Montaigne (sixteenth century) nourished his thoughts with ancient Greek and Latin literature. His *Essais* remain a source of reflection and contentment to sympathetic twenty-first-century French readers if not to academic philosophy. Post-twelfth-century Hindu scholastic writers continued to criticize Buddhist systems even after Buddhism had disappeared from their material surroundings. The eighth-century monistic metaphysician Śāṅkara is still a living source of inspiration in India today. Some academic authors try to show that Buddhism is philosophy or part of the discipline named “philosophy.”³ A growing number of non-academics, on the other hand, adopt Buddhist meditational and ethical practices, thus keeping them alive, incidentally reorienting Buddhism from a religion to a spiritual and ethical set of guidelines for daily life.

However, the indiscriminate application of western categories to those of the east may lead to lasting disasters in academia, especially when the authors do not define them beforehand. This often occurs when scholars equate certain ancient or even modern intellectual phenomena of the east with those of the modern world, or assume that everything can be forced into a so-called global perspective—which is not so global because it is limited to specific milieus, circumstances, and grids. For example, some western Indologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries claim that ancient Indian doctrinal systems knew “Reason” at a given point of their history. They perhaps confuse western philosophical “Reason” with the technical notion of “reason” (*betu* in Sanskrit) that is a part of syllogism. In fact there is no equivalent to the concept of “Reason” in the ancient Indian systems of knowledge. Not that one *should not* employ this term in this context, but it could become a source of misunderstanding and, for example, lead to an anachronistic partition of ancient doctrines into rational and religious (implying the religious to be anti-rational). To take another instance, some Indian Indologists in the early twentieth century were eager to show that fourteenth-century India was conversant with “textual criticism.” Such biased nationalistic contention (to prove equal to a western intellectual model) reduces all chances of grasping the specificity of textual transmission in ancient Vedic and Hindu India. More extravagantly, several Indian academics today assert that Vedic “science” had developed airplanes and the atom bomb. Similar claims prevent objective discussion and mutual enrichment between east and west. Can an idea, merely because it is new, be called a “scientific discovery” if it is not directly connected with the specific economic and cultural

development of modern science? It often remains as an idea among others with no particular or dynamic value for the society. Āryabhaṭa in the fifth or sixth century hypothesized the rotation of the earth on itself (as did several Greek philosophers before our era). Brahmagupta in the sixth century opposed this hypothesis, which also remained without “scientific” descendants and was no more significant than any other theory. The same Brahmagupta defined the number zero as “void,” and his innovation came to be developed only centuries later in Europe.

The unreflective use of such broad categories as “philosophy,” “science,” or “Reason” could lead to distortions even though applying a taxonomy is expected to facilitate comparison and integration. It often prevents an in-depth mutual pollination between non-western traditional intellectual practices and academic perspectives. All things considered, an academically defined cultural field—whether civilization, society, or literary period—becomes in the academic practice a distinct semantic grid with its own nexuses and viewpoints. Is such an unmeasurable object comparable? Mutual pollination, on the other hand, could be more useful to humanities (and humanity) than comparison by means of transparencies that merely bring out similarities and differences, all the while remaining west-centered.⁴ An experimental and dialectical method, by resorting to particular notions specific to each side without ignoring differences, could be fruitful. For instance, the use of clearly defined Indian concepts (like the Indian notion of suggestion [*dhvani*] for poetics) could be introduced as tools in western philosophy as well as in other humanities. Conversely, one might experiment with using western concepts, for example, to solve hermeneutical problems that arise in dealing with Indian knowledge systems (like the distinction between deism and theism mentioned earlier), provided the range and limits of these concepts are redefined in accordance with the Indian context. These prerequisites could help to refine and develop comparatism. Including alien cultures and languages in the common curriculum of all humanities could be another promising imperative in this quest.

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¹ See Lloyd (1996: 93-117).

² The term “humanities” seems to me preferable to “human sciences.”

³ One problem is what their definition of philosophy is or what philosophy *should* be. For instance, see D. Seyfort Rugg’s (1995) excellent article; James B. Apple’s (2010) contribution, on the other hand, contrasts Pierre Hadot’s definition of *philosophia* (in Greco-Latin antiquity and early Christianity) with modern philosophy. See also the Symposium (2017) conducted in the pages of this journal.

⁴ In 1988, Wilhelm Halbfass, considering the “westernization” of the whole world as inevitable, wondered about the “universality” involved in this phenomenon and pondered on possible ways of transcending the division between eastern and western scholarship. However, his suggestion of hermeneutics that could surpass ancient disciplinary taxonomy remained abstract. See Halbfass (1988: 164-70). On these questions, see also  milie Aussant & G rard Colas (forthcoming).

The Limits of Generalism in Comparisons: Response to Sivin

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1 Introduction

In his opening statement, Nathan Sivin (2018a) argues that there is a decisive factor as to why some comparative studies make more difference than others. This lies in the willingness of the specialist to gain improved understanding by becoming a generalist in one's research. To do this, he advocates using the concept of "cultural manifolds" in comparative methodology. The purpose of the cultural manifold is to systematically take into account the multiple and relevant dimensions of a phenomenon chosen for study. Lloyd and Sivin (2002) first introduced the term in their comparative study of science and medicine in classical Greece and China. Subsequently, Sivin (2010) utilizes the cultural manifold in his study of the season-granting system within the context of astronomical reform in China. He considers five dimensions, namely the bureaucratic, cultural, personal, political, and technical.¹ This important notion has already been studied in regards to its epistemological and axiological aspects (see He 2010).

This response is based on a different position. Stephen Angle (2010) observes that there are two distinct but related dimensions of successful comparisons. The first dimension involves *interpretation*, which uses vocabulary from one culture to understand another culture. The interpretive dimension is mainly based on texts or traditions. On this account, a comparison is successful when it results in an improved understanding of the text or tradition being studied. The second dimension involves *construction*, which seeks to enrich an area of research by engaging across cultures. The constructive dimension is primarily based on solving problems and finding new ideas. On this account, a comparison is successful when it brings about substantial development or innovation in a certain field of study. Thus comparative studies become successful due to their interpretive and constructive value. The *interpretive* value of a comparison can be recognized in its production of a better understanding of the knowledge from the past. The *constructive* value of a comparison is seen in its ability to create new knowledge for the future.

2 Intra-Cultural versus Inter-Cultural Comparisons

For the purposes of this paper, I shall first introduce two broad types of comparisons, namely, *intra*-cultural comparison and *inter*-cultural comparison. This is because comparisons do not necessarily have to be cross-cultural in order to be interesting or informative. For instance, Dominic Scott (2015) has produced an intra-cultural comparative study between two ancient Greek thinkers. He finds that studying Plato and Aristotle comparatively can produce new perspectives on their texts and a better understanding of their methodologies of argument. In addition, David Yount has produced two works that can be described as intra-cultural comparisons. In the first work (Yount 2014), he compares Plato and Plotinus in order to show that their metaphysical theories are really the same in essence. In the second work (Yount 2017), he further argues that Plato and Plotinus should both be understood as mystics and that they do not differ essentially in their views on epistemology and

ethics. The examples above are meant to show that intra-cultural comparative studies can indeed be fruitful in terms of their interpretive and constructive value.

Does it make sense to compare apples and oranges, as Sivin (2018a) does? After all, apples are a type of pome while oranges are a type of citrus. He suggests that one might consider comparing a McIntosh apple with a Valencia orange. But it might make more sense to compare an apple with another apple or an orange with another orange. For example, one might compare a Gala apple with a Fuji apple in terms of their sweetness. Then one would probably find out that the Fuji is slightly sweeter. Or one might compare a Gala with a Fuji in terms of their suitability to be made into applesauce. In that case, one could find out that the Gala apple is a bit better for sauce. Kirloskar-Steinbach, Ramana, and Maffie remind us that the choice of items for comparison needs to be governed by a set of criteria, which in turn is guided by a methodological framework:

For a comparison to be viable, it needs to be, one would say, undergirded by a standard of comparison such that the latter can explain why certain ideas, views, etc. were selected from the whole panoply of philosophical positions. Furthermore, one should hold that the standard itself results from a perspicuous, coherent, and cogent methodology. A felicitous comparison of philosophies, in other words, depends on a viable philosophy of comparison (Kirloskar-Steinbach et al. 2014: 9).

Sivin (2018a) says that we can “compare something in two places at the same time.” This could refer to an exercise such as comparing the same type of fruit from different locations. Using the above example, a Gala apple (which originates from New Zealand) could be compared with a Fuji apple (which originates from Japan). This would be an example of inter-cultural comparison. Alternatively, Sivin (2018a) tells us that we can “compare a thing in the same place at different times.”² This could refer to an exercise such as tracking how a certain apple has changed over time in a certain country. For instance, the Gala apple as it was introduced in the United States in the 1970s can be compared with the Gala apple as it is found locally grown in the 2010s. This would be an example of intra-cultural comparison. I hold that the division between the two types of comparisons is rather important, as it is widely believed that inter-cultural comparisons have greater potential than intra-cultural comparisons of yielding results of high interpretive and constructive value.

Sivin is certainly correct that the success of a comparative study largely depends on the items chosen for comparison. Moreover, this choice involves considering the time and place that the items belong to. Something worth noting is that Sivin seems to presume he is only discussing comparisons of an inter-cultural nature: “I’m always happy to learn from any comparison between cultures, no matter how narrow or unlikely” (2018a). He does not appear to be aware that he actually introduces different types of comparisons in the examples he uses. On the one hand, the comparison between Chao Yuanfang’s (巢元方) *Zhubing yuanhou lun* (諸病源候論) and William Cullen’s *Synopsis Nosologiae Methodicae* should clearly be classified as an inter-cultural comparison. This is because Chao’s text is of Chinese origin while Cullen’s text is of Scottish origin. On the other hand, the case of studying the various applications of *buerchen* (不二臣) must be classified as an intra-cultural comparison. This is because a comparison between the transition from the Song to the Yuan dynasties (in the thirteenth century) and the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties (in the seventeenth century) takes place within the same context of China.

This brings me to a first question for Professor Sivin: Does he see any significant differences in applying the cultural manifold in the case of intra-cultural comparison as opposed to the case of inter-cultural comparison?

3 Historical versus Philosophical Comparisons

Again Sivin is surely right that studying something comparatively can greatly improve our understanding of it. However, there is an important difference between historical comparisons that result in a better understanding of *events* and philosophical comparisons that result in a better understanding of *ideas*. Consider the three proposed comparative projects he describes:

You might prefer to compare the *pneuma* as Stoic philosophers described it and *qi* 氣 in the various Chinese syntheses of cosmos, state, and body in the last three centuries BC. That might seem to you a more becoming project for a humanistic scholar. It is less confining than stacking up the *pneuma* of Zeno of Citium against the King of Huainan's *qi*, and less airy than comparing all the conceptions of *pneuma* in the Greek classics and all those of *qi* in the Chinese classics (2018a).

Sivin's point that the focus of the second proposal is rather narrow while the focus of the third proposal is rather broad is quite reasonable. But there is something else worth noticing here. I would argue that the first and third proposals are more related to the discipline of *history*. On this account, history is primarily about studying the events of the past. The first is a comparative study between the Stoic views of *pneuma* and the Chinese presentations of *qi* roughly during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). This examines the development of particular concepts within certain schools of thought. The third is a comparative study between the same two concepts as they appear in the classical literature of the Greek and Chinese traditions. This examines the development of particular concepts within certain cultural traditions. Both studies are historical in the sense that their objective is to trace ideas as they evolved over a specified period of time. This is because the process of evolution is treated as a past event. Conversely, I would argue that the second proposal is more connected to the discipline of *philosophy*. On this account, philosophy is mainly about studying the fundamental nature of knowledge and reality. A study of Zeno's notion of *pneuma* in relation to Liu An's (劉安) notion of *qi* is philosophical in the sense that it deals directly and only with the basic concepts that have to do with the nature of existence.³ This study should thus be properly classified as comparative metaphysics.

To my best knowledge, Sivin's own discussions of the cultural manifold are limited to the sphere of historical comparisons.⁴ Subsequent applications of this generalist approach are also historical in nature, including topics like medical history, mathematical history, and cultural history.⁵ In contrast, the most successful philosophical comparisons tend to adopt the specialist approach. They are successful in the sense that they manifest high interpretive and constructive value. Some of the best known examples include cross-cultural studies in ethical theory, and they single out individual philosophers and specific virtues for analysis.⁶ Therefore, I conclude that a generalist approach tends to favor the historical discipline, while a specialist approach tends to bear greater fruit in the philosophical discipline as far as comparisons are concerned.

This leads me to pose a second question to Professor Sivin: Does he detect any important differences in applying the cultural manifold to historical comparisons as opposed to philosophical

comparisons? There is abundant evidence that the cultural manifold has been quite fruitful when applied to cases of historical comparison. In other words, it is fairly clear that being a generalist is indeed very useful when one is dealing with history. However there seems to be a lack of evidence that the cultural manifold has yielded much fruit when applied to cases of philosophical comparison.⁷ Rather, the evidence seems to suggest that being a specialist is far more relevant when one is dealing with philosophy.⁸

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¹ See also: Sivin (2011).

² See also: Sivin (2010). He considers the case of receptions of the same idea in different places and the case of receptions of the same idea at different times. Both cases are considered within the context of the same culture.

³ Liu An held the title of King of Huainan (淮南王) from 177-122 BCE.

⁴ Examples include: Sivin (2005a, 2005b).

⁵ See: Yi (2009); Liu and Xu (2013); He and Gong (2015).

⁶ Examples include: Yearly (1990); Sim (2007), Yu (2007); and Hudak Klancer (2015).

⁷ After conducting a search of the relevant literature, I have not found any attempts to apply the cultural manifold approach to philosophical comparison.

⁸ I am very grateful to the editors for their critical comments, which greatly helped to improve the paper.

Responses

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It is cheering to learn that such a learned and varied group of intellectuals has found the idea of cultural manifolds worth thinking about. Professor Akasoy (2018) has reminded us of one of its perennial competitors, “the strong philological orientation of German Orientalism,” which is devoted to explicating what texts said, rarely using them to solve problems. That tradition is still very much alive, and not only in Germany.

Anderson (2018) observes that making comparisons inevitably ignores context, for it “implicates us in one culture or another, in one set of arguments or another.” That, in fact, is true of all scholarship, whether concerned with one culture or several, one’s own culture or other people’s, historical or philosophical. He then asks if “Sivin’s postulated cultural manifolds might obviate or invalidate [such generic problems of comparative historical inquiry]—or will they compound the difficulties?” It seems to me that, in any inquiry, its breadth may or may not cause trouble. That is a matter of how far the inquirer is aware of, and admits, her own biases.

He is also concerned about how practical it is to organize—and fund—comparative projects in which specialists cooperate. I have no experience from which to reply. Geoffrey Lloyd and I were not organized. We undertook the project because when we met, we found that we both were concerned about the fallacies common in comparisons, and wanted to work together. Experience on the grant panels of foundations convinces me that projects that involve comparison are equally approved if the proposal and the investigator’s other work are of high quality, and if the plan is likely to deliver what it promises.

Colas (2018) asks, “Does the proposed cultural manifold model [...] borrow from the correlation-oriented Chinese model? If this is the case, it is a felicitous step away from the common approach of causality in humanities. The causal relation, in combination with the notion of history, is today an important instrument for humanities to distantiate themselves from their objects of study, both western and non-western.” I do not comprehend the last sentence, but the answer to the first question is “very little.” Correlation is a central method of reasoning in Chinese metaphysics and cosmology, but causality carries the weight in explicating their past.

Professor Eh’s (2018) comments I also find difficult to grasp. He says that “the interpretive value of a comparison can be recognized in its production of a better understanding of the knowledge from the past. The constructive value of a comparison is seen in its ability to create new knowledge for the future.” I am unable to comprehend why he does not expect better understanding of past knowledge to engender new knowledge. In fact I tend to strive not for more knowledge but for better understanding.

His charge that I think I discuss only comparisons between cultures, and seem unaware that I “introduce different types of comparisons in the examples” I use, is his conclusion from my statement that “I’m always happy to learn from any comparison between cultures, no matter how narrow or unlikely.” That is not precisely a logical deduction.

He goes on to pose two questions for me to answer: First, do I “see any significant differences in applying the cultural manifold in the case of intra-cultural comparison as opposed to the case of inter-cultural comparison?” Second, do I “detect any important differences in applying the cultural manifold to historical comparisons as opposed to philosophical comparisons?” He

answers the latter: “there seems to be a lack of evidence that the cultural manifold has yielded much fruit when applied to cases of philosophical comparison. Rather the evidence seems to suggest that being a specialist is far more relevant when one is dealing with philosophy.”

With regard to the first question, there are significant differences in establishing any comparison. Which aspects of a manifold are pertinent depends on the comparanda. The ways colleagues communicate with each other, or how they make a living, may be crucial in one project and irrelevant in another. The only way to make such judgments is by investigating the question. The role of language in looking at two instances of a Greek phenomenon a century apart may or may not be significant, but it is hardly likely to be insignificant in comparing some aspect of Macedonian and Roman cultures. As for the second question, if we are to study any philosophic thought, I fail to see why historical comparisons are opposed to philosophic comparisons. Many of the comparisons in *The Way and the Word* are of concepts. Because they are explained in social *as well as* intellectual terms, does that mean they are not philosophical? Some contemporary historians of philosophy, at least, seem to think that studies like *The Way and the Word* have been fruitful.

To say that philosophy is better off done by specialists misses another point. The kind of generalist research that I have proposed can hardly be done by people who do not deeply understand what they are comparing. When I speak of generalists, I simply mean people who understand as much as specialists are expected to, but about more than one field.

I suspect that the issue behind Professor Eh’s second question is really turf. When we compare today’s philosophers with historians, we do not ordinarily have in mind sages who make original assertions about the fundamental nature of reality and our knowledge of it. It is an accident of institutional history that philosophy departments are staffed less by philosophers than by people who study the philosophies of others. A professor of philosophy who spends her career studying Plato or Leibniz may or may not think of herself as a historian of philosophy. Many such pundits, philologists in the tradition that Professor Akasoy mentioned, may have no interest at all in any question beyond what texts actually say. They may be justifiably proud of the purity of their interests, and quite satisfied with their lack of curiosity about the society that the sage they study lived in. In that case, however, they can hardly be surprised that their comparisons are soon forgotten except by a handful of fellow specialists. That, and not the endless distinctions one can draw about cultural manifolds, is what my essay is about.

In other words, I argue that the kinds of comparison most useful in the study of world philosophies are—like those for other disciplines—those least hamstrung by specialist narrowness.

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