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Xinli Wang

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INCOMMENSURABILITY AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY



Xinli Wang

Philosophy Department, Juniata College
wang@juniata.edu

1. Introduction

Comparative philosophy between two disparate cultural-philosophic traditions, such as Western and Chinese philosophy, has become a new trend of philosophical fashion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Having learned from the past, contemporary comparative philosophers cautiously safeguard their comparative studies against two potential pitfalls, namely cultural universalism and cultural relativism. The Orientalism that assumed the superiority of the Occidental has become a memory of the past. The historical pendulum has apparently swung to the other extreme. The more recent “reverse Orientalism” has started to reclaim the superiority of the Oriental. We have even been told that the twenty-first century would be the century of Confucianism. However, although cultural relativism is still alive and remains attractive to many philosophers of a variety of persuasions, it has been recently losing its favor among comparative philosophers. In fact, we do reap the fruits of comparative philosophers’ successes over the past three decades. The overwhelming success of many fruitful comparative studies, between Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy for instance, seems to indicate that the magic spell of cultural relativism loses its power in the hands of able comparative philosophers, and it is no longer a threat to comparative philosophy.

Are our comparative philosophers overly optimistic with their newfound success? Does cultural relativist conviction—that is, that there are incommensurable conceptual and cultural schemes through which distinct cultures construct their own worlds and which inevitably lead to cross-cultural communication breakdown—no longer pose a mortal threat to the viability of comparative philosophy? To answer this question, I invite readers to walk with me down a well-worn path to take up an all-too-familiar relativist challenge to comparative philosophy again, in the light of Thomas Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability: a potential impediment of incommensurability between the two cultural-philosophic traditions to cross-cultural comparative studies.

My challenge to the viability of comparative philosophy between two disparate cultural traditions, such as the Western and Chinese philosophical traditions, concerns the two most prevailing forms of comparative philosophy: as cross-cultural philosophic understanding and as cross-cultural philosophic communication, which I will call the Gadamerian model of comparative philosophy (section 4). Based on my presuppositional interpretation of the thesis of incommensurability as cross-

language communication breakdown (section 2), effective cross-cultural language communication between Chinese and Western cultural-language communities (section 3) is inevitably partial due to substantially distinct cultural schemes embedded within both cultural traditions. More precisely, there are two special forms of incommensurability faced by comparative philosophers: the failure of mutual understanding (the radical form of incommensurability) and effective communication breakdown (the modest form of incommensurability). Consequently, a comparative philosophy that predicates on mutual understanding and communication between the two cultural-language communities is severely compromised. Cultural relativism based on the incommensurability thesis continues to impede the effort of comparative philosophy (section 5). However, this does not mean that no meaningful semantic comparison is possible between two distinct cultural-philosophic traditions, as some radical relativists claim. A different kind of comparability, namely the presuppositional comparison at the cultural-schemes level, will be discussed as a promising solution (section 6).

II. Background Review: A Presuppositional Interpretation of Incommensurability

According to Thomas Kuhn, incommensurability is typically regarded as a radical conceptual disparity between two competing scientific languages. Such a lack of conceptual continuity between them, due to some kind of semantic obstruction, explains why their proponents inevitably talk past one another, which leads to a communication breakdown between the language communities. To answer Davidson's challenges to the Quinean notion of conceptual schemes and to further broaden the domain of incommensurability to other related areas, I introduced a notion of presuppositional languages as an alternative to the Quinean notion of conceptual schemes (Wang 2010). A presuppositional language (p-language) is, roughly, a comprehensive language whose core sentences share one or more absolute presuppositions. These absolute presuppositions, which I call metaphysical presuppositions (m-presuppositions), are contingent factual presumptions about the world as perceived and taken for granted by the language community. Scientific languages are paradigmatic p-languages. It is not a novel idea nowadays that a scientific language is loaded with fundamental assumptions, such as the existence of phlogiston within the language of phlogiston theory, or the existence of absolute space and time for Newtonian physics. These fundamental assumptions are *absolute* presuppositions as defined by R. G. Collingwood, which are unquestionable within a certain domain of inquiry and are regarded as universally true when perceived within the language community. The denial of these absolute presuppositions signifies a complete breakdown of informative use of the language.

Based on such a new bearer of incommensurability, I argued that incommensurability is a semantic phenomenon closely related to the problem of how two p-language communities can effectively understand and successfully communicate with one another (Wang 2007). To say that two p-languages are incommensurable is to say that a necessary common measure of some sort is lacking between them,

and that the communication between the two p-language communities breaks down. These necessary common measures between two p-languages turn out to be m-presuppositions of each p-language, not some trans-language meanings, truths, referential relationships, or a common language, as many have believed.

One extreme of the communication breakdown between two p-languages is the failure of cross-language understanding. This is because the comprehension of the m-presuppositions of an alien p-language is necessary for understanding it effectively. However, when an interpreter encounters an alien p-language, for lack of an alternative, she is tempted to approach the other by imposing, reading into, or projecting the categories, beliefs, and mode of reasoning embodied in her own p-language upon the other. This is a form of cultural universalism, the belief that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical, culture-transcendent matrix, or trans-linguistic meanings underlying cultural and philosophical practices to which one can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, intelligibility, truth, reality, and morality (Richard Rorty). Such a projective approach to cross-language understanding is one extreme case of propositional understanding, the most prevailing model of understanding within the analytic tradition since Frege. Propositional understanding is founded on the monological model of meaning, according to which the text to be understood is self-enclosed, its meaning is self-contained, and as such its propositional content is self-determinate, simply there to be discovered independent of the communication process between the author and the interpreter. Accordingly, the aim of propositional understanding is *comprehension* in terms of grasping the fixed propositional contents of a text. When the m-presuppositions of the two p-languages in question are compatible in normal discourse, this projective approach usually would not hinder mutual understanding. But when they are incompatible in abnormal discourse, the would-be communicators will experience a *complete* communication breakdown due to the failure of effective understanding of the other's p-language. Then the two p-languages are *radically* incommensurable.

However, it is a mistake to assert that the would-be-communicators of two (radically) incommensurable p-languages cannot understand one another *per se*. The as-of-now communication breakdown only shows us that propositional understanding does not work in abnormal discourse. What we need in abnormal discourse is not the other extreme case of propositional understanding, that is, the adoptive approach to cross-language understanding by "going native to be other." The adoptive approach concedes to radical cultural-relativist belief that there are impassable or uncrossable barriers between diverse cultures because of the alternative incommensurable conceptual schemes through which different cultures see the world.

The thesis of incommensurability does not necessarily lead to radical cultural relativism, as many have believed. We need to go beyond both cultural universalism and radical cultural relativism in the face of the challenge from incommensurability. There is a hermeneutic dimension of the thesis of incommensurability that tends to be ignored, namely how to identify and comprehend the m-presuppositions of a p-language to be understood in order to restore mutual understanding between two competing p-languages. This is what the Gadamerian model of hermeneutic under-

standing attempts to address. Since we are always ontologically situated in a cultural tradition articulated in our own home p-language, when confronting an unfamiliar alien p-language it is natural and unavoidable for us to project the m-presuppositions from our home p-language onto the other. All understanding is projective; we do not need, and are not able, to bracket or forget our own language in order to understand the other's.

Nevertheless, this by no means makes us concede to cultural universalism. We cannot rely blindly on the m-presuppositions of our own p-language. In order to understand an alien p-language, we must make our own m-presuppositions transparent so that we can appreciate precisely the otherness without concealing the proper meaning of the other language by allowing our unelucidated prejudices to distort it. To reveal self-reflectively the m-presuppositions of our own p-language is necessary in order to allow the otherness of an alien p-language to be disclosed. Only in confrontation with an alien p-language and its m-presuppositions can we hope to get beyond the limits of our present horizon. It is precisely through the understanding of an alien p-language or cultural tradition and from a realization of how different others are from our own tradition that we can come to a more sensitive and critical understanding of our own p-language and its m-presuppositions, which may lie hidden from us. Therefore, cross-language understanding in abnormal discourse necessarily involves a constant movement back and forth between our own p-language and the other's in terms of the dialectical interplay of the two sets of m-presuppositions.

The conclusion above derived from the hermeneutic interpretation of incommensurability runs contrary to a prevailing interpretation of the incommensurability thesis according to which incommensurability leads to some form of extreme relativism, either Carnap's Myth of the Framework or Davidson's Myth of Unintelligibility. Although the conceptual distance between two incommensurable p-languages does cause some difficulty in cross-language understanding, it by no means sets insurmountable barriers between both sides. Instead, we should take this challenge as an invitation to genuine understanding, both of others and of ourselves. We can only truly understand ourselves by comparison with others and by testing our own prejudices during the process of understanding others.

Nevertheless, we have to end such an optimistic, spirit-lifting journey along the hermeneutic path with a cautious note about cross-language understanding in abnormal discourse. The claim that mutual hermeneutic understanding is *possible* in abnormal discourse does not entail that a *complete, full* understanding between two incompatible p-languages is *feasible*. Even if hermeneutic understanding can overcome complete communication breakdown due to the failure of mutual understanding, there still exist some much more significant cases of communication breakdowns between two competing p-languages with incompatible m-presuppositions. Understanding is necessary, but not sufficient for successful communication between two incommensurable p-languages; the latter requires much more than mutual understanding. Even in the case that both sides are bilinguals who understand each other's language, they still cannot communicate successfully with each other if the

m-presuppositions of the two languages are incompatible. (For more on this, see section 5.) This is because successful communication between two p-languages requires shared or compatible m-presuppositions. Otherwise an *undistorted full* cross-language communication between two p-languages with two incompatible m-presuppositions cannot be achieved; it is inevitably partial. It is the existence of such partial communication breakdown, that is, a moderate form of incommensurability between two p-languages, that establishes the metaphysical significance of the phenomenon of incommensurability and gives the real theoretical thrust of the thesis of incommensurability as communication breakdown.

III. Illustration: Two Distinct Cultural-Philosophic Languages

It seems natural to regard a philosophical tradition, similar to a scientific tradition, as a p-language. How about a cultural tradition? In what sense is a cultural language a p-language? Based on Geertz' symbolic view of culture (Geertz 1973), we can regard a cultural tradition as a worldview or a whole way of life of a group of people: a shared, internalized, taken-for-granted, learned, arbitrarily assigned symbolic system of meanings, including the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols generally accepted without thinking about them and passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next. Because any symbolic meaning system involves conventional, not essential and universal, relationships between the symbols and what they stand for, different human societies will inevitably agree upon different relationships and meanings that lead to distinct cultural traditions. Cultural symbols formulate and set the limits of cultural thought. Cultural understanding is essentially the understanding of cultural symbols.

Furthermore, culture is not just symbolic, but primarily linguistic in nature. A cultural tradition is embodied in language, transmitted and handed down linguistically. That is why it is commonly held that a language is a worldview. But we have to be cautious here. It is not by virtue of its linguistic form that a language is a worldview, but rather by virtue of what is embodied in the language. For example, it is not Chinese language *per se*, as a natural language with its unique grammatical structure and lexicon, but rather the Chinese cultural tradition embodied in it, as handed down linguistically by the Chinese language, that constitutes the worldview of the Chinese. The conceptual core of any cultural tradition is constituted by its philosophy and religion, which form the logical, metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical foundations of the tradition. To distinguish a language as the worldview of a culture from its natural language, I will refer to the former as cultural-philosophic language (c-p language). Construed as such, a cultural tradition is sedimented in its c-p language, in its lexicon, in its philosophy, in its underlying cultural premises, and in its way of justification and reasoning.

A c-p language is a typical p-language. Underlying the conceptual core of a c-p language is a set of basic philosophical and religious presuppositions, such as the Yin-Yang cosmology, including the Yin-Yang doctrine, the Five-Element doctrine, the principle of pre-established harmony, and the doctrine of constant transformation

in traditional Chinese cultural-philosophic tradition. These m-presuppositions are absolute presuppositions within a certain cultural tradition, which I will refer to as the culture schemes.

I have argued elsewhere (Wang 2009) that the identification and comprehension of conceptual schemes of a c-p language are necessary for cross-cultural understanding. Similarly, shared or compatible cultural schemes are required for successful cross-cultural communication between two c-p languages. Many comparative philosophers fully realize the essential role of cultural schemes in comparative philosophy. As Henry Rosemont, Roger Ames, David Hall, and many others have emphasized repeatedly, a primary goal of comparative philosophy is to bring about clarification of and emancipation from our own cultural “prejudices”—the cultural schemes—through identification and understanding of the other’s cultural “prejudices.” Eliot Deutsch makes the same point crystal clear:

[O]ne of the enduring aims of comparative or cross-cultural philosophy has been to make evident the basic cognitive and evaluative presuppositions of traditions other than one’s own (historically, mainly Asian), with the expectation that one can then attain greater clarity and understanding about the presuppositions that inform one’s own tradition. (Deutsch 2002, p. 23)

For the purpose of illustration only, with no intention to make this exhaustive, let us focus on two pairs of contrasting cultural schemes underlying both the Chinese c-p language and the Anglo-European c-p language, respectively, as identified by Hall and Ames (1987, 1998). They refer to them as “uncommon assumptions” of classical Chinese and Western cultures; they are unannounced cultural premises or presuppositions dominant in one cultural tradition and constitute a conceptual ground from which philosophic discourse proceeds. Clearly, they mean the cultural schemes of a c-p language.

Transcendentist versus Immanentist Cosmos

It has been a conventional belief among comparative scholars before the 1980s that the dominant Western c-p language is transcendent while Chinese culture commits itself to radical immanence without the notion of transcendence, as the Greco-Hebraic cultural tradition does. However, this transcendence-immanence dichotomy is not only an over-simplification, but also a misinterpretation of the two cultural traditions. What sets the Chinese and the Western cultural traditions apart is not whether one has the notion of transcendence and the other does not, as the current transcendence debate entails. In fact, both cultures subscribe to some notions of transcendence and immanence since all theologies and metaphysical systems that posit an ultimate reality must show its double aspects as both transcendent and immanent, though some emphasize its transcendence aspect and others its immanence aspect.

Transcendentism has been most influential in shaping the character of Western culture in terms of religious, cosmological, aesthetic, ethical, and scientific values and beliefs, and underlies many of its basic philosophical doctrines. Within the

Anglo-European philosophical tradition, an ontological disparity exists between the transcendent and the immanent. As a form of asymmetric metaphysical dualism, the transcendent can exist on its own independently of the immanent, but the latter cannot exist independently of the former and needs the former as its ontological foundation. The transcendent determines the immanent, but not the contrary. Therefore, for the Western cultural tradition, the notion of transcendence is primary, absolute, and ontological while the notion of immanence is secondary, relative, and either ontological or epistemological. In contrast, the most striking feature of the Chinese cultural tradition is the absence of Western dualistic transcendence in the articulation of its metaphysical, spiritual, moral, and social and political sensibilities. According to Chinese non-dualistic thinking, the transcendent and the immanent are interdependent and mutually determinate. One cannot exist without the other. The notion of immanence is primary, absolute, and ontological while the notion of transcendence is relative, secondary, and epistemological. This is why such a notion of transcendence is often called “immanent transcendence.” In essence, it is the dualism/non-dualism distinction behind the two different sets of the notions of transcendence and immanence that sets the two cultural traditions apart and creates a potential impediment to cross-cultural communication.

Western transcendentalism and Chinese immanentism set up basic metaphysical frameworks for other metaphysical notions associated with both cultural traditions. For example, the transcendentalist cosmos entails an ontology of substance—some self-closed, self-sufficient, self-sustained, contextless, discrete entities—as the foundation of reality. The Chinese immanentist cosmos, in contrast, entails an ontology of events or a process ontology in which the basic element of the cosmos consists not of substance, but rather of events or happenings in process. Everything is context-dependent and exists in relationship with others, and nothing is totally self-determinate. Also, recourse to the transcendent principle in the Western tradition inevitably leads to a substance view of the self, that is, an eternal self with a fixed essence, a volitional agent with free will, a subjective autonomous being with self-consciousness, and a single, unitary, separate, unique indivisible self who can exist in isolation from others. From the perspective of event/process ontology, in contrast, a person is characterized in terms of events or process that rejects the unitary self and precludes the consideration of either agency or acting in isolation from others. A person in the Chinese tradition is irreducibly social, contextual, and relational, and has a shared consciousness of one’s roles in a community and relationships with others.

Exclusive Duality (Dualism) versus Inclusive Duality (Conceptual Polarity)

We have seen that what is behind Western transcendentalism is its dualistic mode of thinking, which can manifest itself as a form of metaphysical dualism (God versus the world, being versus non-being, mind versus body, reality versus appearance), epistemological dualism (subject versus object, truth versus justified beliefs, reason versus experience), or ethical dualism (good versus evil). Such a dualism commits to

a relation of exclusive duality between two entities, elements, or concepts; at least one side of the duality can exist or subsist without the other. If both sides can exist on their own, we have a symmetric dualism like Cartesian dualism; or if one side can exist on its own independent of the other but the other cannot, then we have an asymmetric dualism like the relations between the transcendent and the immanent in the Western religious tradition. Such a dualistic thinking encourages an essentialistic outlook on reality in which the components of the world are characterized by discreteness and independence—so we have Western substance ontology and transcendentalism.

In contrast, the ubiquity of the concept of immanent transcendence in the Chinese tradition reveals a non-dualistic mode of thinking, that is, duality without dualism. Although in any comprehensive philosophical system, especially any metaphysical framework of ultimate reality, a form of duality is inescapable. It does not have to be exclusive duality. It could be inclusive duality: each side of a duality, as two separate domains, cannot exist or subsist alone without the other; they exist or subsist interdependently. The thinking and explanation based on inclusive duality requires a contextual outlook on the world that does not consist of discrete, independent elements like ontological substance or substantial self, and in which events are strictly interdependent. Consequently, we have an immanent cosmos that requires that the pairs of entities, elements, or concepts significantly related be, in fact, *symmetrically* related such that each requires the other for adequate articulation and as a necessary condition for being what it is.

The above-mentioned two contrasting pairs of cultural schemes underlying Western and Chinese c-p languages show us that both languages operate under apparently overlapping but substantially different philosophical taxonomies. As Thomas Kuhn has argued, different taxonomic structures gain conceptual access to different worlds. When the taxonomic structures of two cultural-philosophic languages are substantially mismatched, the two language communities perceive two different worlds. Not only are the Western dualistic taxonomy (dualistic transcendence and radical immanence) mentioned above inappropriate to the orientation of Chinese cultural schemes, such as polar taxonomy and polar metaphysics, but they can be a source of distorted cross-cultural understanding and communication.

IV. A Gadamerian Model of Comparative Philosophy

In general, comparative philosophy means philosophizing across two or more philosophical schools, systems, or traditions. Today, by “comparative philosophy” we typically mean comparative studies across two distinct philosophic traditions embedded within two disparate cultural traditions, such as comparative philosophy between Western philosophy and classical Chinese philosophy, which is our primary focus here. Among many different models or methodologies of comparative philosophy proposed by comparative philosophers, the two most prevalent models to be discussed here stand out as closely relevant to the viability of comparative philosophy.

First Model: Comparative Philosophy as Cross-cultural Philosophic Understanding

As early as the first East-West Philosophers Conference at the University of Hawai'i in 1939, the enterprise of comparative philosophy was set to lead to a global village characterized by peaceful co-existence based on cross-cultural understanding rather than conflict due to mutual misunderstanding and intolerance. To achieve genuine cross-cultural philosophic understanding has been one of the primary goals of many comparative philosophers ever since. More precisely, according to this most popular model of comparative philosophy, it aims to understand an alien philosophical tradition (such as Chinese philosophy) embedded within a *disparate* cultural tradition (Chinese culture) *from the standpoint of* another philosophical tradition (such as Western philosophy) embedded within its own cultural tradition (Western culture).

To avoid the antithetical poles of cultural universalism and radical relativism implied by the projective and adaptive approaches to cross-cultural understanding, most comparative philosophers today realize that cross-cultural philosophic understanding is essentially hermeneutic, not propositional. In contrast to the monologue model of meaning underlying propositional understanding, cross-cultural hermeneutic understanding subscribes to the Gadamerian dialogue model of meaning: the meaning of a text can only be determined and contextualized through a dynamic interaction and transaction between the text and the reader's participation through the process of understanding. Understanding must be conceived as a part of the process of *the coming into being of meaning*. To comprehend an alien c-p language involves the interpreter's participation in the reformation and enrichment of its meanings, the engagement between the speaker's and the interpreter's cultural schemes, the assimilating of what is said to the point that it becomes the interpreter's own, and ultimately a dialogue between the interpreter and the speaker.

Gadamer's dialogue model of meaning has a direct impact on the role of the interpreter's own cultural schemes in cross-cultural philosophic understanding. Hermeneutic understanding involves the dialectical interplay between the interpreter's cultural schemes and that of the alien culture to be understood. On the one hand, although the interpreter has to rely on her cultural schemes in any understanding, she must be on guard against arbitrary projection of her own schemes onto the other, which leads to misunderstanding; she must be open-minded, listening, sharing, and participating with the other tradition so that it can "speak to" her. On the other hand, openness and receptiveness to an alien cultural tradition are possible only in terms of "*justified* cultural schemes" that open and guide her to the other's cultural tradition. This requires the interpreter to be able to identify unjustified cultural schemes, revise them, and replace them with "more suitable ones." Therefore, hermeneutic understanding involves constant movement from less suitable cultural schemes to more suitable ones.

Second Model: Comparative Philosophy as Cross-cultural Philosophic Communication

Comparative philosophy should focus not just on cross-cultural philosophic understanding, although this is a necessary first step. It has to be comparative in nature,

that is, to compare and contrast the similarities and dissimilarities of the two cross-cultural philosophical traditions. (I will have more to say on the comparability of comparative philosophy in section 6.) Furthermore, it should do more than just compare. It should post mutual challenge, reach consensus, or seek possible integration. To think beyond comparative philosophy merely as cross-cultural understanding and comparison, we should ask ourselves: what do we want to gain from comparative philosophy? What can one hope to gain from a comparison of, for example, Daoism and Western metaphysics?—To understand each other better, of course, one may answer. But what does understanding one another enable us to do? The answer cannot be that we want to understand simply for the virtue of understanding. We have at least as much interest in learning from one another and coordinating our actions in a social setting through understanding.

Robert Neville's normative approach to comparative philosophy makes the same point (Neville 2001, p. 2). Comparative philosophy is undertaken by living philosophers with the primary concern of addressing contemporary philosophy problems. They look to other cultural-philosophic traditions as "resources for contemporary thinking, bringing them into comparative perspective against the contemporary background" to see how both sides could jointly and constructively contribute to resolving some philosophic issues of common concern. For example, Chung-ying Cheng's onto-hermeneutics aims to bring together valuable elements in the Chinese and Western philosophical traditions and integrate them into a cogent and coherent philosophical program. For such a purpose, comparative philosophers need to treat a source tradition as "alive," self-creative, developing, and dialectic; to engage in constructive dialogue with it; and to reconstruct and reinterpret the tradition, all in order to retrieve necessary philosophical thinking, categories, and assumptions from the tradition. We need to hammer out disagreement, make contrast, and hopefully reach consensus. To do this, only passively understanding one another by passing on information is not good enough; it requires *critical constructive engagement* between two sides: to respond effectively to the other side's requests, to exchange thoughts effectively, and to engage in *constructive dialogue and argumentation* with one another, that is, to *communicate* with one another effectively, not simply to aim for sympathetic *understanding* of one another.

To see the point of Gadamerian communication as constructive engagement rather than merely mutual understanding and comparison, we had better distinguish two popular philosophical models of linguistic communication pertaining directly to cross-cultural communication. One is the transmission model, and the other is what I shall call the dialogue model. The transmission model is the standard model of linguistic communication adopted by most analytical philosophers since the linguistic turn. According to it, cross-language communication is essentially a process of transmitting thoughts from one side to the other (the act of communicating) and having the other understand them (the act of understanding). Since both the act of communicating and the act of understanding are in essence a one-way linear transmission of message, the act of communicating could be reduced to the act of understanding. The former is only the means to the latter. Communication is thus reduced to mutual

understanding. This is because, like propositional understanding, the transmission model predicates on the monologue model of meaning, which reduces the act of communication, which is supposed to be an “alive,” interactive, dialectic process, to a “dead,” static act of propositional understanding. Thus, the crucial aspect of comparative philosophy, that is, constructive engagement and dialogue, is missing from the transmission model. Thence, we need to move beyond this model. For this, we turn to Gadamer’s dialogue model.

For Gadamer, the concept of communication no longer refers to a linear, two-way transmission of some self-contained units of meanings as if meanings could travel intact. Since the term “communication” had been so heavily associated with the transmission model, always appearing alongside terms such as “sender,” “receiver,” “encode,” “decode,” and “transmission,” Gadamer prefers to discuss communication using a much different set of terms, such as “understanding,” “interpretation,” and “conversation.” Cross-language communication turns out to be a process of *reaching or coming to* an understanding through conversation. We can reach understanding only through conversation or communication, and to communicate is to understand through conversation. A conversation interlocutor does not receive completed meanings from another interlocutor. Meanings are co-created and refined as both interlocutors immerse and engage in conversation through questioning and answering.

Furthermore, what is the primary purpose of conversation? What does conversation enable us to achieve? For Gadamer, it is to reach a substantial agreement with one another on some subject matter, not just a sympathetic understanding of the other. Genuine conversation is not assimilation, nor is it to make the other like one nor to make one like the other. In both cases, one has stopped trying to reach a genuine agreement between *one another*. The process of reaching an agreement is what Gadamer calls the process of fusing horizons: a fusion between the horizons of two parties through conversation, whereby one party’s horizon is enlarged and enriched in terms of the engagement with the horizon of the other’s, not *replaced* by the other’s. We thus have what I will call the communication model of comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophy aims at effective communication across two distinct philosophic traditions (such as between Western and Chinese philosophic traditions) embedded within two disparate cultures (Western and Chinese cultures).

To conclude, we have emphasized that comparative philosophy should aim at both cross-cultural philosophic understanding and communication; and effective cross-cultural understanding and communication are hermeneutic, not propositional. Furthermore, thinking along the line of hermeneutic understanding and dialogical communication, the process of cross-language mutual understanding and that of communication are intertwined, co-dependent, and even essentially the same process. I call both cross-cultural understanding and communication as specified above a Gadamerian model of comparative philosophy, which is arguably one of the more commonly adopted methodologies of comparative philosophy in recent practice.

V. *The Communication Breakdown in Comparative Philosophy*

We have seen, based on our Gadamerian model of comparative philosophy, that the viability of comparative philosophy predicates on the conceptual and practical feasibility of effective cross-cultural-philosophic communication. The relevance of my presuppositional interpretation of incommensurability as communication breakdown to comparative philosophy is palpable. The issue of incommensurability is an unavoidable methodological concern for comparative philosophy. We need to know whether full communication is possible between two distinct c-p languages with incompatible cultural schemes in abnormal discourse. Alternatively, put the same question in a Kantian style: is full cross-language communication possible in abnormal discourse? To seek an answer, let us start with the case of bilinguals on the boundary of the two disparate cultural traditions.

The Communication Breakdown I: Bilinguals in Cross-cultural Communication

Gadamer tries to distinguish his dialogical communication, which he calls “authentic dialogue,” from “inauthentic dialogue,” such as cross-language dialogue via translation. The primary aim of dialogical communication is not merely to know others, but to reach genuine agreement on *some subject matters* through a fusion of horizons. This is the experience of what many comparative philosophers who are bilinguals of the two c-p languages face repeatedly. Although those able philosophers who reside across two distinct cultural traditions can master the language of the other, they still cannot engage in an authentic dialogue—the interactive dialectic interplay of question and answer, objection and rebuttal, argumentation and persuasion—in order to reach agreement and reconciliation, or at least effectively to pin down the exact disagreement. Why is this so?

The intellectual life of our bilingual who walks the thin line between two incompatible c-p language communities is not an “easy” one. A *bi*-lingual who masters two c-p languages separately is not a *meta*-lingual who can speak a meta-language or common language with the two c-p languages as its sub-languages. The lack of a common measure, especially shared cultural schemes, between two substantially different c-p languages (such as the Chinese and the Western traditions) often puts our bilinguals in an awkward situation. It is impossible for a bilingual to commit herself fully to the two incompatible c-p languages since one cannot be incorporated into the other, nor can they coexist peacefully. She cannot think in terms of both c-p languages at the same time. She might not be able to adopt the premodern Chinese way of thinking. If she could, then she has to dissociate herself from the Western c-p language.

One might ask why our bilingual has to commit herself to one of the two competing c-p languages. Could she suspend her judgment and hold onto both languages without committing to either? This is fine if she does not need to communicate with the other side. The trouble emerges when she attempts to communicate the ideas of the Western c-p language to the Chinese, or vice versa. These ideas are intelligible

to the Chinese only if the underlying cultural schemes are comprehensible to them. This requires that our bilingual emerge from the way of thinking embedded in the Western c-p language and interpret the ideas in the way that the Chinese can understand. Therefore, a bilingual who inhabits a certain type of frontier situation between two rival c-p languages always faces a choice between immersing and emerging: to immerse into an adopted alien c-p language is effectively to understand it or to emerge from one's own native c-p language to successfully communicate with the speaker of the alien language. Such frequent switches between immersing into and emerging from a c-p language very often put our bilingual in a predicament where she is confused about which language community the discourse is occurring in. The use of one philosophic taxonomy to make assertions to the speaker, who uses the other incompatible one, makes understanding problematic and thus places communication at risk. For example, one cannot interpret Western c-p language to the Chinese-language community while using the projectable kind-terms of Western c-p language, such as "truth," "self," "substance," "God," or "transcendent." Bilinguals are forced to remind themselves at all times which language is in play and within which language community the discourse is occurring to avoid improper use of a kind-term of one language in the other language community. The inability to use one way of thinking embodied in one c-p language in order to understand the other language makes full communication between two substantially different c-p languages problematic.

Of course, it is possible for our bilingual to understand Chinese c-p language but not commit herself to it. She might identify and comprehend very well the pre-modern Chinese way of thinking and the corresponding categorical framework while rejecting them as either illegitimate or unsuitable. In this case, she actually becomes a *spectator*, not a participant, and therefore not an *engaged* conversation partner and communicator.

What we have learned so far is not only that cross-language understanding is only necessary, not sufficient, for cross-language communication in abnormal discourse, but also that cross-language understanding is actually necessary for our realization of partial cross-language communication breakdown. Communication breakdown between two c-p language communities with incompatible cultural schemes arises not just from one side's inability to understand the other side (a *complete* communication breakdown), but also precisely from those discourses in which one side is able to understand and see how different the other's beliefs, philosophical taxonomy, and mode of reasoning are from their own (a *partial* communication breakdown). Two bilinguals from two different c-p language communities cannot engage in a constructive dialogue with one another, not because the other's beliefs appear bizarre, but because each can understand how the other is tied to a different intellectual tradition. Ironically, it is precisely our ability to understand the other language that reveals the inability to communicate successfully with the other. In this sense, a bilingual can only make one aware of and appreciate the occurrence of partial communication breakdowns in abnormal discourse, but is unable to provide a solution to restore full communication.

The Communication Breakdown II: Common Language Requirement

To see how Gadamer would answer our concern about whether full cross-language communication is possible between two disparate c-p languages like the Chinese and Western traditions, we need to specify a significant necessary condition of cross-language communication. To Gadamer, the goal of conversation is to come to an agreement and consensus on some subject matter. But what is the precondition for reaching agreement on some subject matter between the speakers of two distinct c-p languages? For Gadamer, what makes conversation on any subject matter possible has to be a common language:

Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer 1989, pp. 378–379)

To Gadamer, a common language cannot be something fixed, given, or pre-existing in advance before the conversation. It cannot be established by any explicit agreement or "social contract" that could be negotiated before conversation takes place or by any purely psychological processes of "empathy" or "sympathy." Moreover, one side cannot simply accommodate the other side by adopting the other's language, nor can one side force one's own language onto the other. For Gadamer, a common language can only emerge or be "worked out" during the process of the conversation itself. The process of working out a common language during a conversation is the very process of "fusion of horizons,"¹ a fusion between two initially distinct horizons when one or both horizons undergo a shift such that a horizon is extended and enriched to make room for the elements of the other horizon. Thus, Gadamer's "common language" required for successful cross-language conversation turns out to be a "common horizon." We have thus identified a significant necessary condition for full cross-language communication: an *undistorted full* cross-language communication is possible only if a common language can be formed through a fusion of horizons.

Presumably, whether cross-language communication between two disparate c-p languages is possible depends upon whether a common language formed through a fusion of horizons is possible. However, speaking of "a common language" through "a fusion of horizons" in such a loose way does not help us much. We need to be more specific about the degree of fusion of horizons in order to grasp the full meaning of the common language required.

Any language is an open linguistic system, open to possible modification, expansion, and evolution both syntactically and semantically. This makes a fusion of horizons possible. In addition, for human contact between two distinct languages to be possible, some kind of *point of contact* or overlap between them has to be established. This makes a fusion of horizons desirable. Nevertheless, all these points only show that a *partial fusion* of horizons between two distinct c-p languages is not only

possible and beneficial, but also feasible. But the real question at stake is this: can two radically disparate horizons determined by two incompatible c-p languages be *fully* fused into a *common language* in which both sides can agree to talk, in an undistorted way, with each other? Gadamer apparently believes that it is possible. He is so convinced that

[w]hen our historical consciousness transposes itself into historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute *the one great horizon* that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by *a single historical horizon*. (Gadamer 1989, p. 304; my italics)

Unlike Donald Davidson, who attempts to establish the possibility of universal communication—especially communication between alleged incommensurables or two radically distinct conceptual schemes, if any—through an outright rejection of the idea of a conceptual scheme, Gadamer takes a more moderate road by admitting the existence of radically distinct conceptual schemes, horizons, traditions, or language views. Nevertheless, this is as far as Gadamer is willing to go with conceptual relativism. As I see it, Gadamer’s attitude toward cultural relativism is of two minds. On the one hand, being sympathetic to conceptual relativism, he believes in conceptual diversity and novelty. On the other hand, in line with objectivism, Gadamer is still dreaming of an Archimedean point, an overarching common language shared between two radically distinct c-p languages or traditions. For Gadamer, cross-language communication in abnormal discourse will involve a much more delicate dialectic interplay and back-and-forth negotiation between two c-p languages (the hermeneutic circle), and eventually reach “the one great horizon” embraced by the two distinct horizons. No matter how difficult it is, Gadamer is somewhat convinced, but not well argued, that such a common ground is attainable. Essentially, Gadamer reaches a conclusion similar to Davidson’s: the universality of cross-language communication.

We have been following Gadamer closely so far, but we have to part from him here. I agree with Gadamer that a common language is indeed necessary for a full, undistorted cross-language communication, if not for other reasons, then at least for the following logical reason. If the primary goal of communication is to “reach a substantive agreement” through the art of conversation—argument, question and answer, objection and refutation—I do not know how two interlocutors can engage in constructive back-and-forth argumentation without first agreeing on some fundamental rules of inquiry or the rules of a language game, including logical rules and modes of justification, such as what are legitimate questions and acceptable answers, and what are legitimate justifications, and so on. Furthermore, reaching a substantive agreement entails that both sides, at end, have to agree on the truth claims put forward by the other side, or at least agree on the fact that the other side has said or asserted something to be either true or false. Therefore, a common linguistic framework consisting of those common beliefs on truth, logic, and justification has to be

in place in order to carry out Gadamer's full communication as defined. But these are exactly what is missing between two disparate c-p languages such as the Chinese and Western cultural traditions.

It could be argued that there would never be a full fusion of horizons between two incompatible c-p languages. Based on Gadamer's dialogical model of meaning, meaning is always coming into being through the "happening" of conversation, and conversation always happens within certain contexts. This determines that hermeneutic conversation is an open-ended process, which can never achieve finality. Accordingly, a so-called common horizon is a moving target, the ideal goal of an authentic conversation. Like conversation, a fusion of horizons is an open-ended process, which evolves with the back-and-forth interplay between the horizon of the interpreter and that of the interpreted. A fully fused horizon may never be truly actualized. But, Gadamerians would claim, this only means that a common horizon is not feasible, and not impossible in principle.

To me, a common language through a full fusion of the horizons of two incompatible c-p languages is neither feasible nor possible *in principle*. There is a certain limit as to how far one horizon can be extended to accommodate another disparate horizon without losing its own identity. For example, can the horizon of Western c-p language be enriched by the Yin-Yang cosmology, immanent transcendence, and field-self underlying Chinese c-p language? The cultural schemes of both c-p languages are logically incompatible. They cannot be woven into one coherent theoretical framework. There is no common language possible between them. Moreover, whenever one tries to understand others in a conversation, as Gadamer argues convincingly, one always carries his/her own tradition along. No matter how much one's own horizon, such as Chinese cultural-philosophic tradition H_C , is fused with the other distinct horizon, such as Western cultural-philosophic tradition H_W , the new horizon $H_C(H_W)$ is always a horizon affected by one's own tradition. The same happens to the interlocutors. The new fused horizon formed by them, $H_W(H_C)$, is a horizon affected by their tradition. No matter how closely the two fused horizons move toward one another, $H_C(H_W)$ is not $H_W(H_C)$. They can never merge into one common horizon $H(H_C \& H_W)$ with the two original horizons as its sub-horizons. Thus, a common language through full fusion of two distinct horizons of two incompatible c-p languages is another modern myth, whose fate is not much better than the common language dreamed of by logical positivism.

To conclude, if a common language through a full fusion of horizons between two disparate c-p languages is required by undistorted full communication or conversation, as it should be, then cross-language communication in abnormal discourse is inevitably partial; the same applies to cross-cultural philosophic communication between two disparate cultural traditions. Consequently, these c-p languages or traditions are incommensurable. More precisely, there are two special forms of incommensurability faced by comparative philosophers: the failure of mutual understanding and partial communication breakdown. Since the 1990s, the first kind of incommensurability has been properly recognized and cautiously guarded against among comparative philosophers. However, the second kind of incommensurability tends to be

ignored. As a result, incommensurability continues to impede the efforts of comparative philosophy. The cultural-relativist challenges to comparative philosophy remain under different disguises and still post a potential threat to the viability of comparative philosophy.

VI. Final Reflection: Comparability of Comparative Philosophy

What does all of this mean to the very comparability of two distinct cultural-philosophic traditions? If two distinct c-p languages are incommensurable, comparative study between them is compromised such that rational philosophical comparison between them is problematic, difficult, and even in some measure unattainable. One needs to proceed with extreme caution. However, does this mean that meaningful comparison between the two c-p languages is impossible? Presumably, comparison between two incommensurable c-p languages differs from and is more problematic than that between commensurable ones. Systematic comparison, which requires the existence of a common language into which both languages to be compared can be translated without loss, cannot proceed in the case of incommensurability. Similarly, classical content-comparison based on the sameness of meaning/reference cannot be carried out between two incommensurable c-p languages. Even so, this certainly does not mean that meaningful comparison between two incommensurable c-p languages is impossible.

The controversy arises regarding whether *semantic comparison* between two incommensurable cultural-philosophic languages is *possible*. By semantic comparison, I mean the rational comparison between *semantic contents* of the two c-p languages involved. Both systematic comparison and content comparison are two classical types of semantic comparison. But the concept of semantic comparison I adopt here is broader than these two. The semantic contents to be compared in semantic comparison not only include meaning/reference-related contents at the theoretical level, such as the normative notions of "transcendent," "immanent," or "self" in the comparative study of Western and Chinese c-p languages, but also include comparison at the *meta-theoretical level*, namely the comparison between distinct sets of cultural schemes, such as transcendentalism versus immanentism and exclusive duality versus inclusive duality, as we have discussed earlier. Semantic comparison is in principle possible if there is a certain semantic relationship, whatever it is, holding between the c-p languages to be compared. There is nothing in principle that prevents pooling together all the potential semantic resources of two competing c-p languages, no matter how disparate they are, so as to bring them into some semantic relation.

What kind of semantic relationship is needed for semantic comparison between two distinct c-p languages? Presumably semantic incompatibility is this kind of relationship. If two c-p languages are semantically incompatible, then we can identify a situation or a possible world in which they cannot both be true. In such a case, it is possible to make a rational comparison about their relative merits based on some commonly accepted criteria of comparison. There are at least two types of semantic

incompatibility of concern here. One is what I call *truth-theoretical incompatibility*; the other is what I call *presuppositional incompatibility*. I have argued elsewhere that the truth-theoretical incompatibility relation is not available between two incommensurable c-p languages (Wang 2007). This is why the semantic comparison based on truth-theoretical incompatibility, which I call truth-theoretical comparison, is impossible. Alternatively, it is the truth-value functional relation between two incommensurable c-p languages, instead of the meaning-referential relation, that constitutes the dominant semantic relation between two incommensurable c-p languages. The disagreement between two incommensurable c-p languages is not on what counts as truth, but rather on what counts as truth-or-falsity. This is in turn determined by the cultural schemes underlying each language. When the cultural schemes of two distinct c-p languages are incompatible, the two languages are incommensurable. Since the presuppositional incompatibility relation exists between two incommensurable c-p languages, semantic comparison based on it is possible. I call such comparison *presuppositional comparison*.

One effective way of comparing two distinct c-p languages is to compare and contrast the cultural schemes underlying the two c-p languages, as David Hall and Roger Ames (1987, 1998) and others have done in their comparative studies of the Western philosophical tradition and the premodern Chinese philosophical tradition. The virtues of such a presuppositional comparison are obvious. Compared with the much stronger requirements of logical or quasi-logical comparison, presuppositional comparison asks much less. It does not require that there exist a neutral language into which both languages can be translated without loss. It does not require that there exist a unitary truth theory accepted by both languages. It does not require sameness or overlap of meaning or reference. Actually, it sidesteps many problems caused by meaning, reference, and translation. As long as we can show that the cultural schemes of two incommensurable c-p languages cannot both be held to be true when considered within the context of one language, we know that they are semantically incompatible, which makes semantic comparison between the two languages possible. Unlike truth-theoretical comparison, which focuses on the contents of corresponding statements of two incommensurable c-p languages, presuppositional comparison starts from the bottom up, that is, comparing and evaluating the incompatible cultural schemes of two incommensurable c-p languages at the meta-theoretical level. The most effective way of pooling together two incommensurable c-p languages is to bridge the ontological gap caused by incompatible cultural schemes, which is what presuppositional comparison is designed to achieve.

Note

- 1 – Gadamer's notion of horizon is as broad as his notion of tradition: one's particular point of view formed by one's culture, language, and history, or ultimately one's whole lifeworld. Actually, horizon is Gadamer's equivalent of our c-p language.

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