

Comparative Philosophy: In Reply to Rorty and MacIntyre

Comparative philosophy, as a self-conscious form of intercultural studies, may imply either a general comparative gaze that happens to be directed at philosophy or a branch of philosophy, or doing philosophy, characterized by its comparative methodology, or subject matter, or both. Even though comparing philosophies and philosophizing through comparisons are inevitably entangled, the difference between the two is sufficiently strong so as to justify their separation here, not least for the sake of making what I believe an important theoretical point.

Comparing philosophies of possibly incommensurable traditions, as both MacIntyre and Rorty have argued from their distinctive vantage points, can be, albeit tricky or difficult, fruitfully done. According to Rorty, as long as we drop such context-independent, universalist, essentialist conceptions of “truth” and “rationality,” and proceed within the context of globalization, or in his own words, “the fusion of horizons,” “which inevitably occurs when two rather different individuals or communities meet and create a new context by formulating a cooperative project” (R. 1, 78), significant agreements may be reached between peoples, without their having to worry about which of their traditions is right or wrong, true or false. According to Rorty, such comparisons, best done through comparing, not theory to theory, but theory to anti-theory (such as literature, R. 2, 10), or simply through the free flowing of news reports, mutual understanding and agreements “about what to believe and do among ever larger and more various sorts of people” can be found. Optimistic as it may seem, Rorty’s view actually amounts to a dismissal of comparative philosophy. He wants comparison *sans* philosophy. For him, philosophy is a distraction from real comparisons, since if we focus on a philosopher, the ascetic priest who “wants to set himself apart from his fellow humans by making contact with what he calls his ‘true self’ or ‘Being’ or ‘Brahman’ or ‘Nothingness,’” it “may turn out that we are really comparing nothing more than the adaptations of a single transcultural type to different environments” (R. 2, 8).

Rorty’s sanguine outlook concerning the fusion of horizons, which by itself, presumably, and without the guidance of any criterion of truth and rationality, can lead to the desired “cooperative activities,” is borne out neither by history nor by careful reflection. Without the pendulum swing of the “priestly” consciousness leading the way, cultural clashes are often no more than what they actually are, cultural clashes, and no genuine agreements except for the agreement of the weak to be enslaved and dominated by the strong were ever found in those vast swaths of human history of cultural encounters. As MacIntyre correctly emphasizes, when two incompatible or incommensurable traditions meet, there would be an inevitable rivalry and “the adherents of each standpoint,” even if “they can now in some sense understand what it is that they reject,” “must reject it,” “for what is now presented to them within the framework of their own standpoint as an alternative to their own theorizing on some particular subject matter will inescapably be judged false by the standards informing that framework” (M. 112). Had Rorty been more restrained in his blithe indifference to “truth” and “rationality,” standards almost always subscribed to by each cultural adherent, Rorty’s focus on the Jamesian “live, forced, momentous” experiences of peoples might have been charitably interpreted as suggesting a plausible bottom-up, empiricist methodology for comparing concrete problem-solving strategies in real situations, through which a new philosophy, with its own thick, context-dependent standards of reason and argumentation, may or may not emerge.

By contrast, MacIntyre's sensitivity to rationality, thick or thin, and the entailed possibility of incommensurability has prompted him to suggest a doubly comparative "rational encounter" by way of comparing comparisons. In other words, per MacIntyre, adherents of rival traditions such as Confucianism and Aristotelianism need to "provide for themselves a history of the other, written from that other's point of view and employing the standards of rational success or failure internal to that other's point of view;" and by comparing "Confucian comparisons of Confucianism and Aristotelianism with Aristotelian comparisons of Confucianism and Aristotelianism" (M. 121), one shall be able to use the rival theory's resource to explain the success or failure of one's own theory according to one's own standards. In MacIntyre's view, when originally incommensurable theories are compared this way, they may eventually become commensurable and allegiance can be rationally switched by adherents from one theory to the other.

MacIntyre's Darwinian competition between cultures, with the adherents of each culture trying to borrow hermeneutic resources from rival cultures to problematize as much as possible their own viewpoint so as to improve upon it and eventually defeat the rival's, compared to Rorty's "smorgasbord," to borrow a line from MacIntyre, "of [different views] laid out before a clientele of metaphysical and moral consumers"(M, 116), might have indeed presented a superior, or even accurate, sociological picture of cultural exchanges; but such picture has failed to capture the true nature of philosophical thinking, or so it seems.

In my view, comparative philosophy, done either through the comparison of life experiences or through the comparison of comparisons, in order to be genuinely philosophical, must cultivate irony, especially an insider's irony. The point of comparison lies neither in the search for mutual understanding or a common ground, which may or may not be found, nor in the final adjudication of winners and losers, which, though happening all the time, shall never constitute a proper philosophical concern. Instead, comparative philosophy, conducted with a uniquely alert intercultural consciousness, not aimed at striking a dialogue or taking still shots of various comparable historical answers to satisfy curiosity, may represent an object-centered self-reflection. Such reflection, whose gist partially evidenced in but not confined to MacIntyre's Confucianist History Book of Aristotelianism based on the Aristotelian logic or the Aristotelian History Book of Confucianism based on the Confucian logic, aims to show the limit and relativity, or to expose the amusing false certainty, of one's own consciousness, regardless which side may be adjudicated right or wrong, superior or inferior, as a result of such comparisons.

In other words, comparative philosophy, as philosophy, is perhaps best conducted by a specialist *of* a foreign culture who not infrequently casts a back-glance at one's own culture, as opposed to by a specialist of *one's own culture* looking out into an exotic foreign culture for similarities and differences that may be used to confirm some preferred transcultural wisdoms or character types. In brief, what comparative philosophy ought to do to philosophy may resemble something like what Michael Taussig's symbolic anthropology has done to anthropology - it teases and criticizes one's own culture, aiming to unself one's own deep-entrenched illusions, to expose the limit of one's consciousness, as opposed to strengthen and expand it at the expense of the rivals'.

1. Rorty, R. The Ambiguity of Rationality. In *Constellations*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Blackwell, 1996.
2. Rorty, R. Philosophers, Novelists, and Intellectual Comparisons: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens. In *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*. Ed. Eliot Deutsch. University of Hawaii Press, 1991.
3. MacIntyre, A. Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues. In *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophical Perspectives*. Ed. Eliot Deutsch. University of Hawaii Press, 1991.