ESSAYS

Virūpa, meet Fichte: Uncanny resonances in comparative philosophy

by Alexander Englert and Jonathan Gold

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The conference sought collaboration between German Idealist and Yogācāra Buddhist philosophies on the topic of Representation. Image created with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT and DALL-E tools.

Comparative approaches, especially those couched as "East/West" philosophy, are beset with simplification, projections, and biases, often resulting in narrowness and caricature. It is common to chase dead ends. To avoid this, responsible scholarship grounds itself in the historical and intertextual contexts of its sources. Scholars have rightly developed a deep respect for expertise, which preserves humility and keeps us honest. Yet specialization is hard-won and it is rarely acquired in more than one textual tradition. Few are equipped to venture beyond the narrow borders of their training.

Consequently, many of us feel that our separate disciplines are frustratingly limiting. We often experience resonances with other traditions that we assume, but cannot confirm, are parallel to those we study. Precisely here, we are trained to refrain from any further investigation unless accompanied by a qualified expert, which seldom happens. Thus, while we feel drawn to establish conversations across areas, investigations of resonances between the traditions are stymied by trepidation about speaking out of turn. What is the right way of approaching comparative philosophy given these opposing impulses? And once comparisons are undertaken, how do we interpret any resonances we discover?

When discussing this problem with colleagues in the sciences, it has always seemed trivial to them. Simply collaborate! Indeed, collaboration is the solution. Yet in the sciences the machinists do not need to understand what the programmers do; the field technicians can gather samples without worrying about how the analysts will make sense of them. In the humanities, understanding is shared. How do we collaborate in a way that combines not just our time and effort, but our understanding?

At Princeton University in 2023, we organized an unusual gathering to experiment with a robustly collaborative approach to comparative philosophy. Half a dozen German Idealism scholars and another half dozen specialists in Buddhist philosophy — especially the Yogācāra tradition — spent a day discussing how these traditions explain the nature of mind and reality. We treated our workshop as a laboratory, relying upon experts to lead conversations in their areas and vouchsafe the integrity of analysis. In this space, everyone was encouraged to listen for where genuine resonances might emerge. And indeed, we heard resonances throughout the day, often catching us off guard and pointing out where

interdisciplinary thinking can lead when given the chance. We would like to offer a few reflections on what we learned about the nature of comparison in philosophy, as well as next steps.

Regarding the "right way" of approaching comparative philosophy, we felt a strong need to provide protocols — sticking with the laboratory metaphor — to ensure that our approach was sound and, if not technically replicable, then at least recognizably significant to multiple researchers. The first procedural principle was assembling a diverse group of experts.

With specialists on each side, we could ask questions that were meaningful to our respective interests, without fear of irresponsibly imposing presuppositions. Instead of bumbling from speculation to speculation each time we voiced an interpretive perspective, tradition-specific biases became immediately apparent and were quickly (and politely) noted by an expert. By facilitating an open dialogue with no set agenda, we ensured that each group of experts could ask the exact questions they felt pointed to resonances in arguments of the other side, initiating informed discussions and developing common ground. Moreover, with around six experts on each side, we felt that a balance of perspectives could arise within each discipline, without devolving into an unmanageable group in which distinct voices would be drowned out. In short, we got an inspiring glimpse of what happens when the walls between the cantonments fall. Once assembled, though, how could such experts fruitfully focus their discussion of such complex traditions?

This led us to discern another important procedural principle: we felt it essential to ground our workshop in a set number of specific texts, which we could treat as a contained but salient data set. The motivation for this move was to safeguard against over-generalization and focus on particular arguments from specific thinkers. We reasoned that this would allow a high degree of specificity when comparing these to thinkers in the other tradition. It seemed obvious that only such a focus could allow us to avoid the creation of misshapen cliches about "Buddhist" or "German Idealist" philosophy writ large. This approach worked exceedingly well. However, it suggests that new, diverse fields such as "cognitive science" would have a more difficult time avoiding caricature, unless very specific subtopics are chosen for comparison.

With these and other procedures in place (such as ensuring long enough periods for discussions and concluding reflections), what kind of results emerge from work in the laboratory of comparative research?

We put forward here as hypotheses some frontiers that we stumbled on and that need further testing by other comparative approaches. As always in comparison, much of our discussion first centered on exposing differences despite surface-level similarities. Not only are these distinct traditions with their own concerns and vocabularies, but neither tradition is itself unified. Indeed, the texts' complexity required extensive exposition. We spent hours engaged in focused studies of brief text passages, becoming attuned to the requisite scholarly sensitivities. Despite the differences, however, we arrived at many moments of alternating vitality and hesitation — experiences of a strange marvel that we now refer to as "but then" moments.

We would arrive at a point where there seemed to be a fundamental opposition between seemingly similar approaches — say, on the theme of representation. Both traditions describe reality as being filtered through concepts, and they draw quite different conclusions from this. *But then*, when investigating how they stand opposed, we reached a clearing, a seemingly shared point of reference; what had initially seemed like an unbridgeable gap between two conceptual systems morphed into a disagreement over — possibly — the same territory. There, the Indian tantric master Virūpa might seem to shake Fichte by the shoulders and say, "While ultimate reality is certainly 'all-pervading,

unmoving, and unchanging, like space,' we must leave it at that!" And in reply, Fichte, waving notes from his 1806 lectures on religion, might say: "But *why?* For if 'how it is, is how it has been from all eternity and will remain unchanging in all eternity,' why not call this 'being,' pure and simple?" While they are of course different, we noticed a common ground between them, which required real work to articulate precisely.

Such moments could also lead in the other direction, beginning with similar statements but then falling into differences, separated by chasms of unbridgeable conceptual space. Taken together, these put us in an uncanny interpretive position. The process pointed in different directions at once: on the one hand revealing more or less expected difference while on the other hand circling back to find a startling resonance, agreement, or common ground. Thanks to our procedural methods of having experts on hand and keeping discussion circumscribed by particular texts, we could evoke, trace, and re-evoke such moments. They became effectively "replicable" and invited further investigation. We found many striking "but then" moments, especially around the nature of concepts, the notion of nothingness or emptiness, and the different traditions' emphasis on the practical utility of theory.

For a taste, consider one such resonance concerning the nature of concepts.

Initially, we thought that concepts and their role in experience would reveal non-negotiable differences. Yogācāra Buddhists use rational thought as a means to an end that is explicitly beyond all concepts — that is, nirvana as something ineffable. By contrast, German Idealists work very hard to get their concepts right and argue that concepts explain the possibility of experience. While this seems a point where disagreement is obvious, that impression dissolved when we realized that both sides were highly sensitive to treating concepts with precision but also caution.

For Buddhists, this concern arises from the dangerous attachment that concepts can evoke, even as they are unable to reveal the true essence of reality, since concepts are always tied up with false appearances. As Virūpa states in the *Treasury of Dohas*: "The relative phenomena of the world, however they appear, are without essence, mere names, mere sounds, mere designations." Similarly, Asaṅga, in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, argues that the fluidity of expressions and meanings entails an essential lack of determination for true reality: "the essential nature of all dharmas is inexpressible." Thus, any dependence on concepts keeps one bound in illusion, that is, to an image that does not track the truth underlying the phenomena.

By contrast, Kant, Schelling, Fichte, or Hegel think we possess concepts innately, and that they provide the very structure of experience, without which empirical reality would not obtain. Yet by the same token, for many of the German Idealists (with the possible exception of Hegel), the very act of getting one's concepts right means admitting that our concepts are impotent in the domain of the essential reality, which is to say, *beyond* how things appear. For example, Fichte, in his religious lectures, agrees that concepts, which create a world of appearances, fail to tell us how things really are. Why? Because they take the unified and fundamental source of reality and transform it into an ever-changing manifold that fails to capture its inherent, stable nature:

> And only for the concept and in the concept is there a world as the necessary appearance of life in the concept. Beyond the concept, however, i.e., truly and in itself, there is nothing and will be in all eternity nothing apart from the living God in all its active living.

Is this a Buddhist idea expressed by a theist obsessed with concepts? It was hard here to avoid the conclusion that thinkers from both traditions noticed a common feature of our grasp on reality: its limitedness if undertaken through conceptual avenues of understanding alone, along with the possibility of non-conceptual insight. This led one colleague of Buddhist philosophy to share how "gobsmacked" he was while reading Fichte!

A similar reversal from the Buddhist side emerged after noting that Buddhists deny that concepts refer to ultimate reality, but still speak of Buddhahood, nirvana, the *dharmadhātu,* or the essential Buddha-nature within each of us (the *tathāgatagarbha*). The fact that philosophers in the Mahāyāna traditions (including Yogācāra) generally criticize the notion that such ideas represent "ultimate reality" only underlines that they are being used as guides to conduct, practice, and understanding. As guides, they may not need to reference something in order to remain essential tools for seeking enlightenment. The common ground thereby re-emerges: concepts, if treated with care, while structuring experience, encourage us to look beyond appearances for the sake of a flourishing life.

The invigorating humanism of comparison emerges, as in these "but then" moments, when we find each side having already embedded an awareness of the positions of the other — positions that we might have thought were unconceived. We just had to learn to see it. Like Dorothy in Oz, we, and they, were wearing the red slippers all along. Repeatedly revealed in the ostensible separateness of distinct conceptual systems is the vanity of each system's claim to be truly unique — or, rather, not so much the fact of the vanity (which is perennial), but the ways humans have found to make it appear.

We think our workshop is a proof of concept for a collaborative approach to comparative philosophy and interdisciplinary thinking, which takes an important step past where most attempts typically end. In our initial sensitivity to historical and intellectual particularities, we had worried that we could not even begin to speak about these disparate traditions together. We certainly did not arrive at definitive conclusions. But we did begin to bring them together. They don't exactly fit. Indeed, how could they? Yet their proximity revealed some unexpected magnetic fields. It was a fascinating experiment that we plan to continue and that we encourage others to replicate.

Buddhism collaboration comparative philosophy German Idealism philosophy

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3 COMMENTS

Charles Bakker
August 2, 2024 at 3:42 pm

This is great! A colleague of mine and I have been interested in what seem to us to be possible parallels between Ernst Mach, William James, and the Radical Empiricists/New Realists in the West and Nāgārjuna's "Mulamadhyamakakārikā" in the East. There might also be a connection here to Carlo Rovelli's Relational interpretation of quantum mechanics.

John Anthony Balla
August 3, 2024 at 10:30 am

Thank you for your work in this field and presenting it in such an accessible format. I am not an academic and my experience in philosophical thought is woefully shallow, yet I read this essay from beginning to end and found deep personal relevance, partly because I was raised in a multi-cultural household with one parent from Hungary and the other from Brazil. My background may explain how I see the applicability of your work to other disciplines as our world continues to face increasing uncertainty and volatility. As you say – you did not arrive at definitive conclusions, but you began to bring them together. But their proximity revealed some unexpected magnetic fields.

I happen to be in the middle of a much-overdue holiday and I'm reconnecting with my extended family in Hungary – itself a nation and culture long at crossroads between East and West. By coincidence, I have spent the most time on this trip with two of my nephews, who are half-Romany and we've traveled together to our various other aunties and cousins scattered throughout the countryside. They are now young adults and I am here alone speaking only in Hungarian, so as I hear their music and we've been able to discuss their traditions, I've gained depth and nuance from their perspectives I've never before gotten.

And again – I am not an academic, and my vacation has by no means had the benefit of expert perspectives, but those "unexpected magnetic fields," which simultaneously attract and repel? That's what else I found uncanny as I read about your work. That's a fitting term for the simultaneous friction & embrace that Hungarians exhibit when exposed to Romany music, cuisine, social norms and rituals. And I've seen similar unexpected magnetic field themes show up in a political/socio-economic context, again cast as a kind of East-West issue as a debate regarding the state of the European Union and how the "average Hungarian" has fared.

These musings may extend beyond the scope of how you'd envisioned interdisciplinary thinking, but these were the connections I made as I read your essay. Please keep up your work and I hope you inspire others to join you!

Kalyani Unkule
August 16, 2024 at 8:21 am

I enjoyed reading this and appreciated the effort. When we bring two traditions together, I believe we should also make room for ways of knowing in both. Alongside intellectual engagement, meditation, reflection on lived experience, and embodied knowing might be part of the mix here. Having said that, my own work has often led me to question the limits of conceptualising to understand the world and nature of existence and I was pleased to see that being a key shared concern here.