

COMMENT AND DISCUSSION

Philosophies versus Philosophy: In Defense of a Flexible Definition

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It is strange that no one has taken up Carine Defoort's clearly formulated and timely argument about the intercultural tensions in interpreting what philosophy is, although the issue deserves at least a roundtable, if not an international conference.¹ I doubt that this is because there is a general consensus that the matter is now settled, and I would therefore like to develop the argument a bit further and offer a few additional factors to consider. It is also obvious that the problem is not limited to the subject of Chinese philosophy alone: all traditions of thought from all over the world, but most notably the Indian, Islamic, and Japanese heritages, are affected by the positions we adopt. As in most debates about the commensurability of cultural traditions, we can find differences when we look for them, and similarities if these are what we would like to see, so the "conflict of sensitivities"² is also a matter of attitudes. My own position is that regardless of what we prefer to call the practice of deeper thought (and 'philosophy' is a very good name), it would be extremely useful for all of its participants, whatever their origin and upbringing, to find a common denominator for them to be able to exchange ideas and mutually enrich each other on its basis. In what follows I shall try to sketch a perspective from which this could, in my opinion, be theoretically grounded.

Four Positions

Defoort has identified four possible points of view on the problem of whether classical Chinese thought could or should be called 'philosophy,' which could be summarized as follows.

1. Chinese classical thought is not philosophy, because it does not satisfy the conditions of philosophy as it is generally and traditionally understood in the West.

2. Chinese classical thought is philosophy, because it reveals the necessary characteristics if analyzed with the help of an appropriate (Western-type) observation language.

3. Chinese classical thought can be called philosophy, but only if we redefine philosophy in order to accommodate some of its nontypical or clearly deviant features.

4. Chinese classical thought should not be called philosophy, because philosophy is a culturally closed Western phenomenon with a limited scope and incapable of understanding fundamentally different modes of thought.

If we dismiss the birthright variety of the first position, we could label it *essentialist*, and its weakest point is certainly that Western philosophy has not remained unchanged during the course of history. It is highly doubtful that Socrates, Diogenes, scholastics, Nietzsche, and Gareth Evans could all be members of the same set if the same strict criteria were applied to all periods and all cultural settings in the same way, and, as Defoort herself stresses,³ the fact that seventeenth-century Jesuits (the basis of whose original worldview, we should think, was much farther from the Chinese than ours) had no problem in calling Chinese thought philosophy should show us that the paradigm shift of the thing called ‘philosophy’ has occurred in the West and is, so to speak, our problem and not theirs.

Now, it is also possible that in some circles even some prominent names in the Western tradition do not qualify as real philosophers, in the sense in which Hegel was treated by Bertrand Russell⁴ and Heidegger was dismissed by Alfred Ayer⁵ in their respective histories of philosophy (while they nevertheless felt compelled to include chapters or passages on them). A definition of philosophy that puts forward such criteria that a considerable number of thinkers would have to remain outside its borders should be labeled *sectarian*—and it can still be met, even if ever less often, in some analytical schools of philosophy. It is my conviction, however, that in our globalizing world any definition that would leave non-European philosophy outside the borders of ‘philosophy proper’ should be considered sectarian in nature. The main problem that I have with Defoort’s family model⁶ is precisely that in it the head of the family, who makes the decisions as to who can be adopted and who cannot, is always Western, and the acceptance criteria are not transparent or equal to all.

The second position is what I would call *postcolonial* and certainly not limited to China alone. In most Asian countries with a strong cultural tradition there arose at some point a discourse that looked upon its proper cultural heritage with a metropolitan gaze while seeking to demonstrate its intrinsic equality. Feng Youlan’s methodology is typologically similar to Nitobe Inazō’s explication of *bushidō* in Christian terms or Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s justification of Indian philosophy. We should note, however, that even if it is no longer possible for us to accept the conceptual premises of these pioneer thinkers, this does not diminish their role in the history of intertraditional communication, and, given both the initial intellectual confusion that must have resulted from their exposure to two relatively closed and self-reliant traditions of thought and the general conditions of the intellectual climate of their times, it is hardly likely that a different and more adequate discourse on the matter could then have been either produced or even understood at all.

The most significant shift that has occurred in the reception history of non-European thought traditions is precisely the opening up of the Western world and the disruption of the positivist and evolutionist schemes of uniform development, so that it is now no longer necessary to prove the right of existence of non-European traditions, and the holders of even the most rigid variety of the first position would not, at least not in public, assert that these traditions are not philosophy because they are in some way inferior. This has also made possible the move from the postcolonial to the third, or *multicultural*, position.

But it is not only the change in the conditions in intertraditional communication that has given rise to the multicultural value system. It has also been prompted by factors that have matured within the borders of our own tradition, where the multiplicity of points of view, the role of minority voices, and the value of such diversity have more and more been given recognition simultaneously as rigid forms of cultural practices have been challenged by new, innovative trends. The paradigmatic case of redefinition is, of course, contemporary art. Video and performance art, installations, and conceptualism have broadened the borders of what we now call 'art' beyond recognition, and although there are here and there still some voices claiming that 'art proper' is just painting and sculpture, they are clearly a less and less influential conservative minority in the field. If we accept that at each historical moment when such a need is felt we have the right and obligation to redefine our cultural practices so that the definition would include both everything that belongs to their traditions and everything that is produced by them at present, then it is clear that essentialist positions will simply not hold anywhere for long. I find it hard to agree with Defoort's critique of the third position, of which she writes that the "positive alternative is less convincing. . . . An all-too-generous expansion of the term 'philosophy' leads to a concept that encompasses almost everything—and that, therefore, means almost nothing."⁷ The objective of redefining is the abolition not of all criteria but only of the obsolete ones, those into which the practice no longer fits. And constant redefining is necessary precisely in order to escape the critique of the fourth position of (postmodern) *cultural nationalism*: 'philosophy' (of the essentialistically defined kind) is of no interest on the wider scene because it is too narrow in its views and unproductive outside its original context, able only to reproduce itself but not to evolve.

Two Ways to Redefine Philosophy

I hope we can agree that (1) essentialist definitions of cultural practices condemn them to the repetition of a limited set of procedures on a limited field, while constant redefinitions keep them alive and productive, and (2) our current redefinition of 'philosophy' should preferably seek to include such non-European traditions that have claimed to be part of it, while excluding those parts of the Western heritage that have traditionally not been considered philosophy. I would like to propose two complementary approaches to such a definition, which we could call *external* and *internal*. An internal definition would try to characterize philosophy as a mode of thinking—from within, so to say—while an external definition would describe the mechanisms at work in the sociocultural context that assign the status of philosophy to certain texts, authors, or schools of thought.

Such mechanisms have been investigated in depth by Pierre Bourdieu, who has shown them to be developed through the struggles for the monopoly of symbolic violence, that is, for the right to impose one's own definition of 'art' or 'literature' on the whole society.⁸ It is fairly easy to project his views onto the field of philoso-

phy as well. In our world, people are normally called philosophers if they hold a position in a philosophy department of a university, or have at least graduated from one with an academic degree. A significant number of thinkers studied by this discipline do not, however, meet these institutional criteria. The university institution that once promoted philosophy as a counterweight to the stagnating and dogmaticist tendencies in theology and gratefully accepted allies from outside the borders of the institutionally defined, orthodox conceptual universe of those times (Islamic and non-Christian Greek thinkers, for instance) has now fully secured itself the position of determining what should and what should not be called philosophy. It is therefore only to be expected that a part of this institution would resist any movements that put its own practices into question. Indeed, the departments of philosophy all over the world stand little to gain, but a lot to lose: curricula would have to be redesigned, job descriptions would have to be altered and qualification requirements raised, and, worst of all, there would have to be meaningful discussions concerning the very basis of thought technologies that enable the institution to perpetuate itself. In a word, if Indian logic, Chinese ethics, and Japanese theories of the mind were parts of the philosophy paradigm, the current symbolic power structures would, in all likelihood, collapse. And this, I think, is the main reason why this is not happening—Asian philosophies could do the same thing to the Western-type academic philosophical institution that avant-garde art did to the academic art institution in the twentieth century.

However, we can also construct a more abstract external definition that would determine the social status and the role of philosophy vis-à-vis other cultural practices, such as religion, science, or literature. Observing the Western tradition we could put forward such criteria as those listed below.

1. The *individuality* of thoughts is recognized. Views are articulated by identifiable personages, not attributed to divine revelation or received wisdom of folkloric origin (even if the aim of the views would be to explicate these).

2. Whatever symbolic prestige philosophy has, it derives from its alleged *explanatory power*, the capacity to clarify the nature of things on the most abstract level (which is not the case with literature).

3. Philosophy is *dialogical*. A philosophical work addresses others and is addressed by others, and this dialogical character is usually inherent also in the process of transmission of philosophical knowledge, which leads to the formation of schools (such as Neo-Kantianism), which do not strictly correspond to particular institutions (such as Cambridge University).

4. Philosophy is *cumulative*. If a work has entered the corpus of philosophy, it will also stay there and may be considered productive regardless of paradigm changes (which is not really the case with science).

5. The guild of philosophers normally claims *independence* from worldly powers and even a certain superiority to them, at least the right to advise and criticize, which is again derived from their allegedly deeper understanding of the nature of things.

6. Philosophy is *socially tolerant*. Even though it may strive to attain what we think of as the philosophical truth, a variance in views does not invite institutional punishment (which is not the case with religion). Philosophers have been burned at the stake—but not by other philosophers.

These six criteria leave open all the factors that have varied during the course of development of Western philosophy, such as the institutional procedures that initiate a person to the guild, or typical career trajectories. The definition also makes no assumptions concerning the nature of the views that can be held as philosophical. It is nevertheless easy to see that the Western philosophical tradition meets these conditions in its entirety, while phenomena that are not considered part of it do not.

If we now turn to the tradition of Chinese thought, we can see that it satisfies this external definition similarly well. Even if we are in doubt about the factual existence of some of the masters, they are nevertheless considered individual people, and it should be noted that the thought of some Western philosophers has also reached us through sources with complicated textual histories. We may wonder that the Chinese were concerned about some questions but considered less relevant others that have intrigued Westerners, but it is nevertheless clear that what the masters accomplished were efforts at clarifying the nature of things as they saw fit. They were also dialogically inclined—some, such as Mengzi, more than others—but hardly indifferent to the opinions of others. Their tradition was just as cumulative as that of the West. Most certainly Confucian thinkers were willing to teach rulers how to rule, whenever asked, and the disdain for politics characteristic of Daoist Bohemians was also indicative of a strong independence sentiment. Finally, differences of opinion were normally settled in argument in China as well, and the practice of hunting for heretics of thought was, if anything, generally much more alien to East Asian thought than to the Western tradition.

It could be said, of course, that this external definition necessarily remains too superficial to prove anything, which is why we should now look for a complementary internal definition. Defoort mentions, in passing, a few criteria that should characterize philosophy in the view of the holders of the first position: “philosophy must give the appearance of systematicity, reflection, and rationality; it must differ from science and religion; and it must be divisible into various subdisciplines such as metaphysics, logic, and epistemology.”⁹ It is true that such demands are not met by a large proportion of Chinese thought, but it remains unclear why they should be. If we agree that a definition like ‘philosophy is what Western philosophers do’ is external to the extreme, then surely its divisibility into metaphysics, logic, et cetera—in other words a description of the thing that Western philosophers do—is just as external as well. As for the other proposed criteria, there are major figures in Western philosophy who should be disqualified on the basis of these criteria, and therefore they are not really acceptable. Another ‘difficult’ characteristic, pointed out by Anthony Cua, is the construction of grand systems, although there is at least one such in China, that of Zhu Xi,¹⁰ and we should note that one of the strongest con-

cerns of late twentieth-century philosophy has been to show the limits of grand theories and thereby to disassociate the discipline from them.¹¹

Preferably, an internal definition should somehow point to the very core of philosophical thought, to what unites all philosophers of all times and places. If there is no such common denominator, then an internal definition is not possible, and, accordingly, the external one is all we can go by. However, we need not be so pessimistic. If we look at the reflections on philosophy in the works of some major twentieth-century thinkers, there is an insight that keeps reappearing in slightly different form in quite a few of them and that bridges the views of philosophers from various schools and persuasions. For instance, we find Wittgenstein saying that “philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language”¹² (the ambiguity is also there in the original German). Deleuze and Guattari define philosophy as “the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts”; “the object of philosophy is to create concepts that are always new,”¹³ where concepts are meaningful crossroads of various, often heterogeneous streams of thought that resonate together and, from this interaction, acquire this explanatory power that gives philosophy its sociocultural status. The ambiguous sentence by Wittgenstein (philosophy fights, with the help of language, the bewitchment of our intelligence, which is also achieved through language) and the Deleuzian theory of concepts converge on a horizon to which different statements of pragmatist, analytical, Heideggerian, and various other kinds of thinkers also point: philosophy is a conscious attempt to reconfigure language in order to enhance its explanatory power, so that it can accommodate, express, explain, and test meta-level abstractions that would otherwise remain beyond its grasp. The radical dismissal of natural languages by some analytical philosophers can thus be subsumed under this definition alongside with Heideggerian concept-creating etymologies—and so could everything in between these two extremes.

There is not and cannot be any uniform recipes to accomplish this task even within one particular culture, and even more so on a global scale, because not only are languages different in structure, but their relation to the world is always contextual and contingent on other cultural conditions. However, the most dangerous thing for it to do would be to alienate different varieties of such endeavor from each other by creating artificial barriers between them.

If we now look at this internally defined common ground of contemporary Western philosophy, we can see that it accommodates classical Chinese thought just as well as its own heritage. The discussions of the rectification of names; the system of Confucian virtues; Daoist deconstructions of the speakable; the continuous redefinitions of *dao*, *qi*, *li*, and a vast multitude of other concepts; Chan attacks on language; and Neo-Confucian speculations about the methodology of correct interpretation—these are just the explicit moments of the continuous toil to create and reshape concepts that could be and were put to both theoretical and practical use in Chinese culture. It is not my concern here to analyze why and how the predominant forms of the practice differ in the West and in China, India, Japan, or elsewhere. However,

I do think that this multiplicity is not an obstacle to dialogue, but a richness, which makes philosophy both more interesting and better equipped to approach the ever more complicated and continuously changing reality where we are.

Concluding Remarks

What I hope to have shown here is, first, that the problem of whether non-Western thought is philosophy or something else is reducible to the problem of whether the definition of philosophy is rigid or flexible; second, that an essentialist definition of philosophy would seriously limit the scope of the discipline to the point of depriving it of the potential to evolve; and finally, that there are possible ways of defining philosophy so that all of the Western tradition would fit in and other practices would be left out, while such a definition would also be satisfied by Chinese as well as other non-Western thought traditions. I am convinced that this should be in the best interests of philosophy as a living discipline, because it would help to create a common ground of dialogue between these heterogeneous traditions and help them enrich each other on equal terms, instead of closing all of them onto themselves. In the long run, it should also be in the best interests of the academic institutions that have, in our world, become guardians of the discipline, because they also need challenges to keep them from stale self-reproduction. After all, if we go back to the argument that philosophy is only what originated in Greece, we find one of its first formulations in the *Lives of Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius: "Those who attribute such achievements to barbarians forget that not only philosophy, but the whole human race began with the Greeks."¹⁴ Since we do not abide by the second half of the argument, why should we cling to the first?

Notes

- 1 – Carine Defoort, "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate," *Philosophy East and West* 51 (3) (July 2001): 393–413.
- 2 – Ibid., p. 406.
- 3 – Ibid., p. 401.
- 4 – Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946).
- 5 – Alfred Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).
- 6 – Defoort, "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy?" pp. 408–409.
- 7 – Ibid., p. 406.
- 8 – See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 101–102, 120–125.
- 9 – Defoort, "Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy?" p. 396.

- 10 – Anthony S. Cua, “Emergence of the History of Chinese Philosophy,” in *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bo Mou (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 5.
- 11 – See, for example, J. F. Lyotard, *The Differend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), esp. pp. 128–138.
- 12 – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), p. 47.
- 13 – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Verso), pp. 2, 5.
- 14 – Diogenes Laertius, *Diogenous Laertiou bioi kai gnōmai tōn en filosofiai egdokimēsantōn*, I.3.

Is “Chinese Philosophy” a Proper Name? A Response to Rein Raud

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In the preface to his *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, Hu Shi wrote: “Today, the two main branches of philosophy meet and influence each other. Whether or not in fifty years or one hundred a sort of world philosophy will finally arise cannot yet be ascertained.”¹ Although uncertain, Hu was still hopeful, since he believed that the two major traditions of modern world philosophy, founded in Europe and China, had finally met. That was in 1919. Now, almost a century later, we can respond to Hu’s speculation with relative certainty: a world philosophy has not arisen and is not on the rise. In fact, the situation is much worse: Chinese ancient thought is not even considered “philosophy” by most Western specialists in the field.

For Feng Youlan, Hu’s contemporary, this lack of recognition had become a major frustration by the end of his life. Feng earnestly felt that “parts of classical Chinese philosophy have a contribution to make to the elevating of man’s spiritual sphere and in solving universal problems in human life.”² But on the last page of the last volume of his *New Edition of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, completed a few weeks before his death in November 1990, Feng concluded that Western philosophers had not even begun to consider ancient Chinese thought to be worthy of their attention: “Chinese traditional philosophy has always been regarded as a part of sinological studies and is considered as having no relation to philosophy.”³ Feng’s sentiment is still widely shared today; for instance, in the *Yearbook of Chinese Philosophy* for 2001, Zheng Jiadong remarks that “in the West, especially in Europe, the legitimacy of ‘Chinese philosophy’ has always been questioned; ‘Chinese philoso-

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