

‘The view from above’: a theory of comparative philosophy

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Abstract: What if doing philosophy across cultures is always implicitly a matter of metaphilosophy – of articulating more clearly the nature of philosophy itself? What if it forces us to ‘stand back’ hermeneutically and map out a ‘view from above’ of the underlying fabric of ideas – in their constitutive concepts, their relations to other ways of thinking, and their potential to be configured in alternative fascinating and fruitful ways?

This article incorporates existing approaches to comparative philosophy within a single scheme of complementary philosophical activities, and a single overarching metaphilosophical project. These approaches are (1) ‘archival’ (exploring parallel but separate philosophical traditions), (2) ‘equivalentist’ (comparing traditions in terms of analogies and contrasts), and (3) ‘problem-solving’ (using multiple traditions to provide philosophical solutions). I situate these within (4) the overarching hermeneutic project of ‘mapping’ concepts and their possibilities. This entails the theory that philosophies drawing on multiple perspectives are always implicitly engaged in mapping out the underlying eidetic structure upon which philosophy does its work, and charting the conceptual possibilities surrounding any idea.

What if juxtaposing multiple approaches to multiple themes can give us a new understanding of philosophy – the view from above of an idea’s untapped possibilities? In his short 1941 story *The Garden of Forking Paths*, the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges envisioned a labyrinth that consists of all possible developments, seen concurrently as a single forking structure:

I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars . . . I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, an abstract perceiver of the world. (Borges (2000), 44)

A self-taught explorer of languages and religions ranging from Scandinavia to China, Borges was obsessed with the unobtainable ideal of comprehending all

possibilities of thinking in a single comprehensive vision – a kind of ‘view from above’ in Hadot’s (1995) terms. Borges’s story has been taken as an inspiration for thoughts about multiverse theories in Quantum Physics (Moran (2012)), the philosophies of fiction (Moulthrop (1991)), hypertext media (Montfort (2003), 29), interpretative variability in statistical analysis of complex datasets (Gelman & Loken (2013)), as well as models of free will (Fischer (1994)). Borges’ fascination with seeing from many perspectives motivates his most famous stories. In *The Library of Babel* he imagines a library of all possible meanings and narratives; in *The Aleph* he describes seeing all spaces and views in one single vision; in *The Immortal* and *The God’s Script* he describes protagonists willing to give up their own individual perspective in favour of a universal one. The seekers in his stories are ‘philosophical’ in that they are willing to sublimate their own particular concerns to a broader picture of the full range of real and possible ideas. More, they are *metaphilosophical* in that they apply the imagination not to a single problem, but to ‘envisioning alternative views and ways of thinking about things’ (Shand (2017), 292).

This article will argue that ‘comparative’, ‘fusion’, ‘cross-cultural’, and other forms of philosophy that draw on culturally diverse traditions¹ must ultimately understand themselves as mapping the labyrinthine structure of possibilities inherent in ideas themselves. If we are to see the value of comparative work, then philosophy’s local tasks must stand under the umbrella of a broader eidetic vision that comprehends the structure, motivations, implications, and alternatives, of each issue. Using examples from the philosophy of religion, I will aim to show how existing approaches to comparative philosophy can serve as aspects of a single epistemological framework comprising:

- (1) a global resource of ideas,
- (2) a method of relating and comparing,
- (3) an application to problems of philosophy,

to which I add:

- (4) a theoretical model of the eidetic structure of ideas as revealed by comparative analysis. This implies a revised conception of philosophical ‘problems’ as triangulated relationships between ideas that lead to issues of incoherence, incompleteness, or implication.

We will see that the very goals of philosophy are at stake in this debate over ‘comparative’ and ‘fusion’ forms of philosophy. For many philosophers, the goal of philosophy is merely to assess and clarify particular problems; the coherence of the divine attributes, for instance. Some philosophers do this by showing coherence or incoherence, others by adducing convincing evidence, others by judging their conditions of empirical verification, or clarifying their semantic structure, or demonstrating explanatory power. But for some, those problems are part of a

broader goal of understanding the whole spread of ideas involved. Here we explore philosophy's capacity to build a broader hermeneutic understanding of the field of concepts that generate each philosophical 'problem', comprehended in their strengths and weaknesses and in relation to alternative configurations – across traditions, periods, and cultures.

Mapping ideas on the eidetic web

Historians of philosophy tend to be implicit comparativists, for in the course of giving the usual detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of specific claims made by a thinker, they must understand the overall theory within which those claims stand, as well as what they add to the prior paradigms, and what alternatives they made available to future development. When we compare Plato and Aristotle's doctrines of form, we see alternative systems for conceptualizing the continuity of properties across diverse instances, leading to a better understanding of what we mean by 'properties' than we would have had by studying Plato alone. The more thoroughly we compare, the deeper the analysis goes, so that 'what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it: it is grasped in its essence' (Gadamer (2004), 100). There is a 'transformation into structure' (*ibid.*). Thus, one can see cultural comparison as an enhanced form of the epistemological processes at the heart of philosophy rather than merely an optional nod to 'globalism'.

This is a view of global philosophy that takes us back to the old idea that philosophy is grounded in wonder: above pragmatic goals, it takes the eidetic fabric of the world's ideas – past, present, *possible* – as the object of a special kind of hermeneutic understanding that incorporates applied problems within a broader speculative frame, that is refined through comparison of radically different approaches. As a linguist compares multiple languages to understand language itself, or a mathematician compares the different kinds of game to understand the structures of rule-governed play, or a musicologist compares Bach's variations on the twenty-one note theme of the *Musical Offering* to understand its musical structure, so a philosopher may compare different cultures' philosophical variations on a theme. It is here, in philosophy as exploration of the 'structure of ideas themselves', that we will see multi-cultural philosophy proving its irreplaceable worth.

Contemporary approaches: global, comparative, fusion, and 'pure' philosophy

Advocacy for a 'global' inclusiveness in philosophy has been building gradually since Anquetil-Duperron first translated the Upaniṣads from Persian into Latin and inspired philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Schelling to praise the untapped potential of India's philosophical heritage. As European translations

slowly but steadily emerged, a smaller swell of actual philosophical work using Indian material eventually followed. A string of twentieth-century scholars have argued for the specifically conceptual value of drawing on multiple cultures (e.g. Masson-Oursel (1926/2000), Smart (1979), Hall & Ames (1987), Sivin (2005), Wildman (2010), Knepper (2013), Schilbrack (2014), Chakrabarti (2016), Frazier (2017)). Recently, rather than competing, one can actually take the major contemporary methodologies, such as those contested so hotly by Siderits and Levine in the recent comparative/fusion philosophy debate (see Siderits (2015) and Levine (2016)), as aspects of a single epistemological framework. Indeed, precisely what has been lacking is an articulation of the way their goals and methods interlink into an overarching picture of philosophy within which they fit.

Philosophy has already long been multi-cultural, uniting Greece with Africa (in Augustine), Christian and Islamic thought (in Aquinas), English pragmatism with German empiricism (in early Analytic Philosophy), Hindu and Buddhist ideas (in Indian Vedānta), Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (in China), etc. Consciously multi-cultural philosophizing is already seen in work that tried to reach beyond Europe's accepted Greek lineage in the 1800s, such as Arthur Schopenhauer's appeal to India in the 1818 *World as Will and Representation*, and Hegel's attempt to incorporate Asia into his 1820s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. In 1926 Paul Masson-Oursel published a book called *Comparative Philosophy* that rode the current wave of positivism, arguing that multi-tradition philosophy should be used as a 'positive method' similar to those of biology or philology:

An objective notion of mental laws is only to be gained by analysis of the productions wherewith thought has been satisfied . . . The elaboration of a positive philosophy requires, then, that thought should study itself in its productions whose objectivity yields in nothing to that of natural phenomena . . . the data of philosophical experience must be sought in geography and history. (Masson-Oursel (1926/2000), 29–30)

Here he takes *all* philosophy as the 'productions' and 'data' of thought; as we will see, in doing so he anticipates some of the most recent scholarly approaches.

Past approaches have tried to (1) narrate different cultural histories of philosophy, (2) draw up points of equivalence between different cultural systems, or (3) harness different cultures to shared philosophical problems. But, far from competing, these separate approaches can be united as essential and mutually complementary aspects of the field, for they offer (1) a resource that (2) can be fruitfully compared (3) in order to reveal alternative solutions to problems. These three aspects of the comparative philosophical method are explored below. But to them we will add a further element: (4) an overall theoretical model of the 'web of ideas' that underlies different conceptual systems. The goal is to integrate these approaches into a broader picture of how comparison functions within the broader project of philosophical understanding.

The 'library': curatorial multi-tradition history of philosophy

One way of doing comparative philosophy simply adds new histories to the standard European–American one, thereby amassing philosophies in a wide-reaching archive of culturally diverse insights, conceptual tools, and overall philosophical value. This approach narrates the genealogy of debates as they have been handed down text to text, carrying forward the same insights *within* a single tradition. Such philosophy serves a number of purposes. The ideas come easily to the mind because one works with the most easily mastered of all mental tools: familiar indigenous concepts. Even though we do not really know what matter, being, identity, causality, logic, or goodness *are* in a detailed and unambiguous way, they form a useful starting point because we are familiar with the historical language game that has generated them. It is this 'philosophy as footnotes to Plato' approach that allows the West to speak of its 'Aristotelian' and 'Platonic' traditions, its 'Cartesian' heritage, and the 'Omni-God' of classical theism. Many Oriental Studies faculties do this – Near Eastern, Asian, and other cultures' philosophies are meticulously explored alongside, but without any reference to, each other.

Yet there are problems with staying within a single tradition: implicit assumptions are handed down with each concept and debate, and these can limit the scope for improvement. Indeed, the famous 'footnotes to Plato' description of Western philosophy was originally used by Alfred North Whitehead in the 1929 work *Process and Reality* where he attempted to replace the Greek conceptions of reality with a new one repudiating 'prevalent habits of thought' (Whitehead (1929/1978), viii). One could argue that the 'western' tradition really marks its progress towards maturity by key moments of *revolution against* those very concepts it takes as canonical starting points; we see this in Aristotle's response to Plato, in Scholastic translations of theology into metaphysics, the Enlightenment's scepticism, Phenomenological traditions' redefining of mind and Being, and so on. Staying within the tradition, then, can be a limitation that prevents, or slows, one's arrival at better theories. Comparison helps remove 'conceptual lumber' because the sources do not share 'the same organisational assumptions' (Warren (2016), 566).

Multi-tradition histories of philosophy offer the resource of *multiple* genealogies and philosophical languages, each of which holds a revealing mirror to the others. The proliferation of histories of philosophy in the early twentieth century (e.g. Surendranath Dasgupta's *History of Indian Philosophy* (1922–1955), Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (1945/2004) and Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1934)) reflected the greater self-awareness of philosophy as a global multi-tradition phenomenon. Peter Adamson's recent grand project, *A History of Philosophy without Any Gaps* (2010–), is the first fully global attempt to tell a history of philosophy for humanity as a whole, taking into account Greek, Mediterranean, Byzantine, Islamic, Indian, and African philosophies; and it's still growing.

This approach is not explicitly comparative, and it can engender ‘exoticism’ (Sen (2005)), and ‘culture-tourism’ (Chakrabarti (2016), 11). It often arbitrarily decides the boundaries of traditions, generating its own problematic narratives of ‘West’ and ‘East’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Indian’, ‘European’, ‘Analytic’, ‘Continental’, ‘Platonic’, ‘African’, etc. But it increases the resource of philosophical ideas on which the working philosopher can draw. Further, in telling the tale of a particular philosophical culture’s unfolding, it trains audiences to make the hermeneutic leap to an insider understanding of different philosophical outlooks. As Müller noted, unfamiliar traditions

can never be judged from without, they can only be judged from within. We need not become Brahmans, or Buddhists or Taosze altogether, but we must for a time, if we wish to understand, and still more, if we are bold enough to undertake to translate their doctrines. (Müller (1879), xxxvii)

Analytic philosophers are often unused to making the leap from outsider to insider. But historians of philosophy do so far more often, shifting from the terminology of a Plato to an Aristotle, or a Hegel to a Kant, for instance. This is an easier leap because of the shared reference to texts and terms. Yet a historical appreciation of substance in Spinoza inevitably involves teasing out precisely how he innovates on the Aristotelian, Thomist, or Cartesian uses of the term – something that can only be constructed out of the context of his whole exposition. Thus the experience familiar to classicists and intellectual historians, scholars of religion, anthropologists, cultural studies – of gradually entering a different world-view – reveals the contingent character of familiar notions. The process of newly comprehending an idea is difficult, but it can also be exhilarating as one comes to see the world transform into something ‘rich and strange’.

The ‘bridge’: ‘equivalentist’ conceptual comparison and contrast

The next approach (which can also function as a second step that follows careful study of individual traditions) involves bringing traditions together within a single process of comparative analysis. Such approaches map out similarities across historically and geographically disparate cultures. In many ways, this comparativism was part of modernity’s aspiration to global unity – an aspiration tied up with pre-war imperial agendas, post-war initiatives towards global co-operation, and world-historical ideals of cultural unity. Typical of this is the rhetoric of deconstructing borders:

Comparative philosophy is all about the erecting, detecting, smudging, and tearing down of borders, borders between philosophical traditions coming from different parts of the world . . . and even within a single period and pedigree, between opposite or at least distinguishable persuasions. (Chakrabarti (2016), 2)

As the global world expands beyond the hegemony of European and American traditions it has become important to remap philosophy itself. Garfield and Van Norden’s protest in favour of an expanded remit for philosophy has been

particularly influential in promoting both the social value of global collaboration, and the epistemological weakness of a position of ‘White Privilege’ in which a scholar ‘knows absolutely nothing about the history of Chinese philosophy . . . [but] nonetheless she or he feels perfectly comfortable pontificating about it in public’ (Garfield (2017), xiii). Comparison can create a Socratic community of conversation about some shared topic.

But in its methodologically weakest form this approach privileges agreement over difference, and often explains apparent similarities by reference to some causal origin such as the human mind (Freud, Jung), the basic bio-existential situation of human beings in the environment (Frazer, Boyer, Eliade), or some perennial religious experience to which humans are prone (Otto, Hick, James). It can end up being supercessionist or ‘magisterial’ as Sen termed it (Sen (2005), 142), since starting with one culture’s puzzles means it is *that* culture that seems most clearly engaged with the relevant issues, and furthest along in solving them. Relatedly, one can never establish a point of equivalence without importing elements of one’s own perspective – thus the axis of comparison is always itself biased. But as Gadamer explained in *Truth and Method*, this problem is no different from any other area of understanding persons, genres, languages, cultures, etc. All ‘bridge’ concepts are understood differently by all participants in the conversation for there are always individual contexts between which a shared reference point must be negotiated.

Nevertheless, the threat of scholarship that reduces traditions to a bland and artificial sameness has led some to reject what they call ‘comparison’. One example is Garfield’s and Siderits’s arguments for moving beyond the kind of ‘comparative philosophy’ that is concerned only with similarities, towards ‘fusion philosophy’ that is focused on solving problems:

we needed comparative philosophy at an earlier stage of cultural globalization when it was necessary to juxtapose different philosophical traditions in order to gain an entrée . . . But now we can safely say, ‘been there; done that.’ I therefore take it for granted that the days when ‘comparative philosophy’ was the task are over and a different methodology is necessary at this stage of philosophical practice. (Garfield (2015), 3)

Yet comparativism has an important epistemic function that means it is not as outdated as Garfield suggests. Shorn of its prejudices, the basic mechanism of comparison is actually universal and *necessary* to analysis itself. Any comparison must set up a hermeneutical crux, a concept that appears to have relevance to both conceptual languages. Arindam Chakrabarti calls this the ‘tertium’ (Chakrabarti (2016), 6–7) between the comparanda and the comparandum. We can call it the conceptual bridge. This bridge enables comparison insofar as it identifies something that can be found – differently yet analogically – in both contexts. So one can identify something (and usually more than one thing) functioning as ethics in the Taoist Way, Hindu Dharma, and the Hebrew Commandments; here the bridge is ethics as guidance-for-action. Any claim that it is unambiguously

‘the same’ in all cases would be misconceived, failing to understand the nature of comparison and translation. It is better to explore the differing forms that the bridge idea can take – this clarifies what constitutively defines the idea of guidance-for-action in its essence, as well as what it is *not*. Thus comparison helps to clarify the bridge and the bridged concepts; i.e. rightly undertaken, it performs an analytic role of its own – as we will see in greater detail.

The ‘construction’: problem-solving, interlocutory approaches

Seeking new materials with which to repair the holes in our philosophical approach to the world, many take the goal to be applied problem-solving. On this account comparative philosophy must be first and foremost *philosophy*, and thus primarily motivated not by social, ethical, theological, or other concerns, but by engagement in philosophy’s own practice of clarifying ideas and solving conceptual puzzles. As Spivak puts it, non-western traditions of philosophy should be used as ‘an instrument for philosophising’, and not merely as a ‘cultural artefact’ (Spivak (1997), 372). Thus rather than merely ‘curatorial’ or ‘equivalentist’, this approach is *interlocutory* (Perrett (1998), 27), *integrative* (Neville (1991)), *contributive* (Garfield (2015), 3), and *problem-solving* (Siderits (2003), xi) in that it harnesses philosophies, regardless of culture, to the task of answering precise philosophical questions. It assumes that ‘all theory, made accessible, adds to the shared resource of ways of thinking – and that Europe has too long dominated that resource’ (Frazier (2017), 3).

The idea of this approach – that philosophy ongoingly crafts (and repairs) ideas designed to best serve our life in the world – is aptly expressed by Isaiah Berlin’s ideal of philosophy as a kind of ‘optimisation’ of life:

The perennial task of philosophers is to examine . . . categories, concepts, models, ways of thinking or acting, and particularly ways in which they clash with one another, with a view to constructing other, less internally contradictory and (though this can never be fully attained) less pervertible metaphors, images, symbols and systems of categories . . . (Berlin (1962/1999), 14)

Philosophers have always crossed traditions to achieve this (one thinks of Plato and his peers from other Greek cities, of Hindu and Buddhist mutual borrowing, of medieval Abrahamic scholasticism); as Neville notes, ‘Thomas Aquinas dealt with Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, and Islamic themes, none of which fitted neatly together under the aegis of his new constructions’ (Neville (1991), 4). B. K. Matilal was one of the first to interweave European and Indian tradition *explicitly*, hoping that one day Sanskrit technical ‘terms like dharma, pākṣa and sādhyā will be as much tolerated [in philosophy] as certain Greek words’ (Matilal (1986), xii). A generation of scholars, some his students, took up the challenge of harvesting India’s most useful philosophical insights; for instance Jonardon Ganeri (2007; 2017), Mark Siderits (2003), Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad (2018), Gavin Flood (2013),

Christian Coseru (2012), Evan Thompson (2015) and others have worked to improve models of consciousness and personal identity by applying Indian materials.

Here one seeks 'innovative ways of conceiving the erstwhile concerns while also bringing new sets of questions and responses, methodologically also from more imaginative and critical sources of thinking' (Bilimoria & Hemmingson (2016), i). This also has the appeal of assuming a *philosophical* meritocracy between different traditions, judging them only insofar as they address a given issue that is relative to the task at hand, not the culture. Ultimately, this involves 'doing philosophy as one thinks fit for getting to the truth about an issue or set of issues, by appropriating elements from all philosophical views and traditions one knows of' (Chakrabarti (2016), 22). At this point Chakrabarti holds that one could drop the epithet 'comparative' as redundant (for it is already methodologically implied within the process): global philosophy would be simply *pure philosophy*.

Global, comparative, fusion philosophy as *metaphilosophy*

If these three existing approaches help us learn philosophies, compare and apply them, then the model that I am advocating here adds an overarching theoretical model that reconceives the practice of philosophy, and the nature of philosophical problems. When comparing different philosophies reveals the contingency of each structure of belief, this can be destabilizing and lead us to feel that what was self-evidently worthy or true has been undermined by comparison. But in what follows we try to re-establish the sense that the ground comes back again, if only one can articulate more clearly one's concerns, commitments, and criteria – the roots of one's philosophical inquiry.

The 'view from above': the hermeneutic web of ideas

What is the ultimate goal of philosophy? Certainly it can be used to solve specific conceptual and linguistic problems. Historically it also built models for understanding the world. But is that all? What is the fabric, the medium or ontological *nature* of a philosophical problem? This is, of course, a metaphilosophical problem, and it is worth noting that we see that nature better if we can see not one but *many* problems. Comparison reveals an underlying structure, actual and potential, of the concepts that constitute each philosophical idea or problem. It does this by analysing the conceptual relations of (i) equivalence, (ii) contrast, (iii) entailment, (iv) implication, (v) structures of coherence, (vi) premises and hidden assumptions, (vii) goals and motivation woven into every philosophical position.

Arindam Chakrabarti makes this point in *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, where he hints that comparison is a universal epistemological function involved in all cases of understanding. Citing the Indian philosopher Bhoja he

argues that ‘all means of knowledge including direct perception are, indeed, at heart forms of comparison’ (Chakrabarti (2016), 3). According to Bhoja (as cited by Chakrabarti):

‘For a word to be mastered, at the time of first grasping its meaning, a particular sample or set of the meant entity or process has to be presented. Every subsequent application of that word/phrase works (arouses the awareness of its meaning) by means of a resemblance or similarity with the original instances perceived at the time of acquisition of the vocabulary. Thus how can we deny that every perception is a case of comparison?’ (*ibid.*)

Chakrabarti, via Bhoja, suggests that there is a sifting of similarities and dissimilarities in all reflection, such that we learn not only ideas (e.g. fruit) but also their hermeneutical constitution through alternative potential formations (orange, apple) and their contrasts (vegetables, elephants, time, imaginary fruit, colours, numbers, etc.). Neville has noted that all philosophy involves the formation of abstractions out of that range of potential, so there is a selection, but also (ideally) an understanding of the surrounding possibilities, and the criteria in virtue of which we highlighted some rather than others:

Philosophy of religion [is] defined here as the study of how abstractions both gain something on and lose something from that from which we abstract. Comparisons are an obvious type of the use of abstractions to gain comparative knowledge while leaving behind the incomparable elements as unregistered. The very formation of theological concepts, however is a type of abstraction . . . Philosophy of religion studies all kinds of relations between the abstract and concrete in religion. The aim of the study is to understand how value is gained and lost. (Neville (1991), 4)

He notes that comparative philosophy of religion undertakes a no more selective abstraction than the original theological conceptualization itself. It adds to understanding of a concept’s possible alternative formulations. It also involves seeing what kinds of ‘value’ (coherence, explanatory power, empirical evidence, pertinence to human experience, etc.) adhere to each proposition; and it is this that enables us to arbitrate between them.

We can imagine undertaking analysis of a problem with the help of multiple culturally diverse examples. Let us take a common form of the problem of evil as exemplified in the critiques of philosophers from Epicurus and David Hume, to J. L. Mackie and William Rowe, and as combatted by theodicies such as Hick’s version of the Irenaean defence. This form effectively argues that a deity able to prevent suffering of which it is aware, but which allows the suffering nevertheless, is malevolent or indifferent at best, but certainly not morally ‘Good’. This version ascribes moral goodness to God and it is to defend this attribute that ‘greater good’ arguments tend to be put forward. We may decide to compare it with analogous Hindu cases, but there is nothing *very* similar because Hindu gods are not generally expected to be omnibenevolent in the sense of wishing to prevent all suffering and maximize happiness. So, drawing a rough analogy, I assess similarities to and differences from the Indian philosopher Rāmānuja’s concern that the divine

should not possess the flaws of its worldly creation, despite the fact that it emanates, sustains, and pervades the world.

What emerges is a multi-levelled mapping of the issues generated by juxtaposing divinity with the negative features in the world. It will have levels:

- (a) *The original ideas, selected from a wider lived cultural discourse:* e.g. the idea of an omnibenevolent divine creator and moral agent, and Rāmānuja's notion of a divine source of reality that is flawless and free of negative qualities.
- (b) *The focus on an underlying idea that spans and bridges them:* e.g. both 'problems of evil' here share the contrast between a perfect source and its flawed creation. Both then concern models of creation, and the possibility of a reverse attribution of negative qualities from creation to creator. At this level we may see a broader unclarity in the notion of 'creation' about the *qualitative* relation between the source and the product.
- (c) *Identification of contrasting approaches to the bridge idea:* In this light, we can now consider the contrasts: God in Hume's, Mackie's, and Rowe's theistic models is a personal designer god. Thus the focus falls on *intentional* culpability for rationally causing a situation known to create pain. This is profoundly different from the way the divine *Brahman* in Rāmānuja's thought *becomes* or *manifests* a world that contains pain. Here the emphasis is ontological: how could a perfect, transience-and-suffering-less reality acquire a transient and suffering aspect? Of these different forms of causality one concerns moral intention, and the other ontological emergence of new characteristics.
- (d) *Insights into the bridge concept: a central issue is whether the desired divine attributes are coherent with the emergence of new qualities through will or intransitive change.* Can the timeless divine will cause that which it cannot forewill (e.g. freely willed evil)? Can the divine, as material cause, acquire new features? There is a shared assumption that a sovereign divine cause must pre-contain its effects, showing continuity (in knowledge or material). Thus we see that Problems of Evil are partly problems about whether the attributes that constitute 'divinity' can go along with genuine *change*.
- (e) *Sifting out potential 'repairs' for the problem:* one might claim that (i) the potential emergence of new qualities is precisely what is entailed in the notion of creation (i.e. the possibility of suffering is implied in the creation of free will, while plurality, finitude, and contingency are entailed in any divinity that becomes the 'world'), or (ii) the created qualities existed in the source (e.g. as a plan or quality possessed *in potentia*), but their nature is context-dependent so that after creation

they become ‘problematic’. For instance, in the all-containing mind of God possible suffering may be morally assimilated to broader plans, or in the infinite potentiality of the divine being, the qualities of transience and suffering may contribute to a richness of Being. This solution leans heavily on the notion that qualities can be sublated into others, becoming thereby changed in *quality* and *value*.

We can continue, building a multi-levelled map of the issues. Each level of the map falls deeper into basic conceptions that underpin the levels above; in this sense the shift of levels performs an analysis revealing different ideas of divine goodness and creation.

Different problems are configured within this map: the problem of how unproductive evil might be assimilated into a higher value that ‘revalues’ it; or the question of whether emergent properties entailed by ‘creation’ go against what we think of as an eternally, immutably, sovereign, and perfect divine nature. The problem of evil is thus not one problem but many possibilities of problems, leading to many alternative formulations of the idea under investigation, each of which has value relative to one’s conceptual priorities. Yet this ‘relativity’ is not some all-dissolving Derridean dissemination in which ‘nothing is objectively true’. Here there *are* objective truths relative to each context. It is in this sense that all comparisons and all solutions are really *triangulations* in relation to the criteria that define the inquiry. We can choose the framework, but within each framework only certain things can be right – philosophy thus stays robustly committed to real problems and real solutions. It just has to be more explicit about its expectations.

In fact, this idea of conceptual structure, as a potentiality for all meaningfulness that is constrained in each case by particular assumptions and criteria, has already been described in the theory of understanding that is now standard throughout the humanities: philosophical hermeneutics. Largely associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the main principles are outlined in the essays published in English in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, and a detailed genealogy is given in Gadamer’s more well-known *Truth and Method*. The basic hermeneutic theory of linguistic conceptuality is that it is intrinsically complex and its meaning is relative to each particular orienting framework of ideas and values. Each word has

an inner dimension of multiplication: every word breaks forth as if from a center and is related to a whole . . . every word causes the language to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. (Gadamer (2004), 454)

It is our history and immanent concern that constrains the whole in each case. Counter-intuitive though it may seem to draw on Socrates as an exemplar of ‘comparative philosophy’, Plato’s later theory of forms was one of Gadamer’s sources for this model of conceptual plurality – the web of possible ideas and the relativity of meaning to specific frames. In the *Republic* the realm of ideas had seemed

discrete and clear. But Gadamer (2008) in his hermeneutic readings of Plato interpreted dialogues such as the *Parmenides* as essaying a kind of metaphilosophy of the nature of concepts. When Plato tried to map the structure of ideas more closely by comparing them in relations of analogy and contrast (as in his discussion of tall men, and taller or shorter men in the *Parmenides*), he was compelled to acknowledge their ultimate relativity to context, and their uncontainable range of possibilities. On this later Platonic model, each individual idea is multiple insofar as it involves (a) the inter-relationality of conceptual entailment (dog is an instance of mammal, object, furriness, etc.), (b) the inter-relationality of conceptual contrast ('dog' is defined in contrast to cat, minerals, the colour blue, etc.), (c) the internal or intra-relational complexity of each idea (the idea of one's dog is made up of an almost infinite and always changing cluster of other ideas – varied past memories, specific dogs, plus more abstract features such as aliveness, domestication, etc.). The view that the forms are discrete conceptual 'objects' became labelled as Platonism, but works such as the *Parmenides* revealed how ideas participate (*methexis*) in and are separated (*chorismos*) from each other in such a way that they are both 'one and many'.

This comes out in *Truth and Method's* historical placing of the *Parmenides* as the text in which Plato realized thought's dialectic of similarity and difference, and as the text lying at the root of Hegel's view of thought as something that moves through the implications of an idea towards its broadest systematic outline:

That things change and become their opposite as one consistently thinks them through, that thought acquires the power, of 'testing what follows from contraries, without knowing the what,' is the experience of thought Hegel appeals to when he conceives of method as the self-unfolding of pure thought to become the systematic whole of truth. (Gadamer (2004), 480)

Thus all understanding of the structures that constitute an idea's actual and possible meanings has the 'back and forth movement' that Gadamer likens to forms of play, but that is also the nature of comparison.

Where Plato used philosophical dialogues to compare his interlocutors' different theories, global philosophy ultimately uses 'philosophical plurilogues' (Frazier (2019)) to map many possible formulations of each idea or problem onto each other, abstracting core or overarching truths. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) description of truth as having a *rhizomatic* form² provides a particularly powerful schematic image of the complex and many-knotted conceptual fabric of ideas. They drew on the notion of a rhizome – something that grows in a network of many multiply connected points – to express 'principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be' (*ibid.*, 7). Gilles Deleuze's (2001) subsequent lone development of a 'virtual' model of thought emphasized the constant possibility of change and new development in rhizomatic structures. The virtuality of a theory consists not in its being untrue, but in its emergence as a particular theory against the background of many other 'virtual' possibilities for how it could be actualized as an

idea: 'What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality, but something that is engaged in a process of actualisation following the plane that gives it its particular reality' (Deleuze (2001), 31). On this model, the history of thought appears as a field of multiple 'virtual' possibilities constantly being made concrete through the 'event' of one theory or problem being articulated in place of another. So philosophy is always a process of articulating actual criteria-based theories out of the underlying web of virtual ideas.

Philosophical truths on a global scale

But what of the classic problems in philosophy? For Gadamer's hermeneutics the goal is not to arrive at a single definitive account of an idea, but to map out the way certain ideas relate to each other. It is conceptual coherence with a given set of criteria that matters, rather than universal finalizable certainties. A concise and responsible account of an idea, then, requires what Burley (2018) and Knepper (2013) have called 'thick description', specifically at the philosophical level: one must clarify the context as fully as possible. This thickly described version of philosophical ideas, theories or problems can be seen as a the triangulation of 'cultural manifolds' (Sivin (2005), (2011)) into a particular pattern of relations (e.g. of selected divine attributes that accord and conflict in specific ways), creating a framework that 'includes all the pertinent dimensions of a complex phenomenon and the interactions that make all of these aspects into a single whole' (Akasoy et al. (2018), 75).

This triangulation is essential to a hermeneutic model of philosophical truths. On this account it can seem that one does not 'solve' problems; one just analyses the entailments of their entailments, and compares them with alternatives *ad infinitum*. The 'web of ideas' model can appear to imply that philosophy finds no solutions and 'makes no progress' (Shand (2017)). But this reading misunderstands the situation. Gadamer's first major critic was Emilio Betti, a philosopher of law who was concerned that Hermeneutics would banish universal truths and therefore all possibility of legal rulings. But using the metaphor of a game or 'play' of forms in which there is a 'transformation into structure' of all the person, parts, or movements (Gadamer (2004), 102–118), Gadamer explained that a proposition's truth, a theory's coherence, and a judgement's validity are based on the 'rules' by which they are to be judged. There is no single right or wrong, but Gadamer might rather put it that for every idea or theory, artwork or problem there are formulations that will preserve the greatest 'harmony' with given criteria – a harmony that is not itself negotiable.

Philosophical progress is thus concretely possible *relative to the given criteria*. In this sense, as Shand (2017) implies, the same 'semantic ambiguity' that prevents philosophy from achieving the kinds of resolution we see in mathematics, actually shapes the conditions for philosophical problems. Like Gadamer, Shand concludes that questions about meaning, understanding, and truth are better

modelled by art than mathematics, for it is about seeing ‘how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’ (Shand (2017), 369; quoting Sellars). He goes on to point out that ‘like art, philosophy involves a high degree of imagination (something not always fully appreciated even by its practitioners), involving envisioning alternative views and ways of thinking about things’ (*ibid.*, 292). Finally, we come full circle as philosophy naturally returns, at the metaphilosophical level, to the language of multiple alternatives and multiple views:

Philosophy presents to us . . . various internally, as far as possible, coherent ways of thinking about ourselves, the world, their epistemic and metaphysical relation, how we might live . . . The value of philosophy – its point – is to give the full array of alternatives, to lay them out with a serious determination that nothing is beyond question, showing the rational consequences of adopting one view rather than another. (*ibid.*, 292)

As we have seen, philosophy from multiple sources and cultural systems helps bring to light this broader fabric of alternative ways of thinking. Rather than seeing only one philosophical idea, what comes to light is the nature of philosophical ideas around a particular theme – and philosophical ideas *per se*. It should not be a surprise that comparative reflection on multiple philosophies yields metaphilosophical insights into the *conceptual fabric* of philosophy itself. In comparativism we navigate thought’s ‘garden of forking paths’. In that garden we may navigate towards a particular location, or like Borges’s heroes we can ‘stand back’ to marvel at the possibilities it contains.

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Notes

1. There has been extensive debate about whether 'comparative', 'global', 'cross-cultural', 'multi-cultural', or some other term best suits the development of this field. I will generally use 'comparative philosophy', partly because despite Garfield and Van Norden's concerns it is still widely used, and also because of the basic 'comparative' processes on which I will be focusing in this article. I do *not* agree with the claim made by some that 'comparative' philosophy only seeks to draw out similarities, while 'fusion philosophy' (or some other term) focuses on actual philosophizing. The word 'comparative' has been used to refer to a range of scholarly goals and it is thus artificial - and often polemically motivated - to constrain it in this way.
2. Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of rhizome seems to have developed partly as a constructive critique of the way that Hegelian dialectical thought can appear as an 'arborescent' tree progressing towards the heights. By contrast, here there is no hierarchy that determines overall progress towards a determinate truth; instead there are local frames according to which more and less coherent structures can be judged.