

The Problem of Ground in Comparative Philosophy. Quality, Quantity, Intensity

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Abstract

In comparative philosophy, there arises the problem of ground for comparison. Qualitative comparison is based on a certain qualitative ground for comparison, e.g., weight. Quantitative comparison brings more clarity into the qualitative comparison, introducing discrete and homogeneous units: how much does it weigh? How much does it cost? Both qualitative and quantitative comparison start from a ground that is already given and clear; they simply apply it to the case at hand (Is this one heavier than the other? If so, by how much?). In other—and more interesting—cases, the common ground is obscure: we have the feeling that A and B can be compared, but how exactly? The inability to immediately proceed to application creates a tension, and this opens the intensive dimension of comparison. The intensity has two sides: obscure and clear. The obscure side has its articulations, but they interpenetrate each other. Our task is to unfold, unravel, unpack. Then we will bring something to clarity where the elements do not interpenetrate so much but are juxtaposed (in different qualities and quantities). This will give rise to new tensions and new unfolding. The obscure articulations do not resemble the clear ones, and their unfolding is a creative process.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, qualitative comparison, quantitative comparison, tension, intensity, obscure ground, interpenetration, juxtaposition, clarity, re-obscuring, groundlessness

Problem osnove za primerjavo v primerjalni filozofiji: kvaliteta, kvantiteta, intenzivnost

Izvleček

V primerjalni filozofiji se pojavlja problem osnove za primerjavo. Kvalitativna primerjava temelji na določenih kvalitativnih osnovah, npr. teži. Kvantitativna primerjava pa prinaša več jasnosti v kvalitativno primerjavo, saj uvaja ločene in homogene enote: koliko tehta? Koliko stane? Tako kvalitativna kot kvantitativna primerjava izhajata iz že danih in jasnih podlag; preprosto jo uporabijo pri obravnavanem primeru (Ali je ta težji kot drugi? Če je tako, koliko težji?). V drugih – zanimivejših – primerih pa je skupna podlaga nejasna: zdi

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se nam, da lahko primerjamo A in B, a kako točno? Nezmožnost takojšnjega pristopa k izvedbi ustvarja napetost, to pa nadalje odpira intenzivno dimenzijo primerjave. Intenzivnost ima dve plati: nejasno in jasno. Nejasna plat ima svoje artikulacije, ki pa se med sabo prepletajo. Naša naloga je pojasnjevati, razreševati, razpakirati. S tem bomo nekaj razjasnili na mestih, kjer se elementi ne prepletajo toliko, temveč so v jukstapoziciji (v različnih kvalitetah in kvantitetah). To pa bo izzvalo nove napetosti in nova pojasnjevanja. Nejasne artikulacije niso podobne jasnim, njihovo pojasnjevanje pa je ustvarjalen proces.

Ključne besede: komparativna filozofija, kvalitativna primerjava, kvantitativna primerjava, napetost, intenzivnost, nejasna podlaga, medsebojno prepletanje, jukstapozicija, ponovno zastiranje, brezosnovnost

What is Comparison

When we bring together philosophers from different traditions, it is usually called “comparative philosophy”. There is already a lot of comparative philosophy, but there is still little philosophy of comparison, claims Ralph Weber (2014, 151). In his article “Comparative Philosophy and the *Tertium*: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?”, Weber tries to show that every comparison requires a ground of comparison, a “third of comparison”, *tertium comparationis*.¹ He is arguing against the claim that some things are incomparable (e.g. cf. MacIntyre 1991), and his own statement is that “anything can indeed be compared to anything” (Weber 2014, 151), i.e., a comparative ground can be found for any two things or words, if not otherwise, then simply in relation to the fact that both exist in the universe or both are words (ibid., 165, referring to G. E. Moore).

Towards the end of his article, Weber also meditates on the question that sometimes this ground for comparison is not clear. For instance, someone feels the need to compare Confucianism and Cicero, but initially they may not know exactly how or in what respect they should be compared (ibid., 166). But even in that case, Weber argues, we can say that there is a ground, namely the interest of the researcher. Weber acknowledges the role of the person and their intentions and interests, in choosing what to bring together and how. The ground of comparison lies in the identity of the researcher. But it may be pointed out that researchers themselves are not sealed off from the object of their research, and the research changes them in turn, just as Gilbert Simondon said that the knowledge of individuation is the individuation of knowledge, i.e., knowledge itself matures and individuates in the

1 A more detailed presentation can be found in Weber and Chakrabarti (2016), where they distinguish five aspects, including a “pre-comparative *tertium*” (2016, 8). For our purposes here, it does not change much.

course of a process of research (Simondon 1989, 34). Indeed, Weber remarks that the researchers may not be themselves aware of their intentions when they initially bring things together, and their ideas may change in this process.

This topic of obscurity of the ground of comparison, that remains quite tangential for Weber's purposes, will be central here in what follows. For the main part of his article, Weber argues around the identity and identification of the ground that he uses to ward off incomparability and hence the rejection of other philosophical traditions (and I completely share Weber's goal²). For my part, I would like to focus on the question of clarity or obscurity of the ground. If the ground for comparison would be always clear from the beginning, there would not be much creativity or philosophical interest involved in a comparison. And it seems that in those considerations where Weber acknowledges a difference, a differentiation, and an obscurity in the one who compares, he comes quite close to the ideas of unfolding and bringing to clarity of obscure articulations that I shall deal with later in this paper.

Ground of Comparison

Let us come to the basics of comparison. Weber argues that for any comparison there must be a ground for comparison, a *tertium comparationis*. That is, since one thing and another thing are in themselves incommensurate, incongruous, incomparable, they need a third one, which would give a common measure to them and through which they can start to communicate.

Money and monetary value are an excellent example. If I want to compare apples and oranges from the perspective of their market value, I note down how much one per kilo costs and how much the other, and then I can compare the numbers. And as we see, it presupposes another common measure, the weight: in order to compare a certain number of apples with a certain number of oranges, I first have to weigh them, in order to say the price per mass unit. I can do it in two different ways, 1) either weighing apples and oranges in relation to each other on a balance scale: if the balance is big enough, so that a sufficiently large number of apples and oranges can be fitted on both sides, I can probably reach a pretty good equilibrium by adding or subtracting fruits on either side; and weight is their common denominator. 2) The other method is to weigh them separately by putting graded

2 The obscure ground involves some incommensurability, but this does not preclude comparison; on the contrary, it warrants multiple comparisons: "The concept of incommensurability is not to be confused with, or reduced to logical incompatibility or incomparability. Incommensurable languages can be compared and rationally evaluated in *multiple* ways. Practically, such comparison and evaluation requires the cultivation of hermeneutical sensitivity and imagination." (Bernstein 1991, 92)

masses on the other plate, or by using a spring scale, and read the number on the display. In this second case there is a further comparison or reduction: I view the weight from the viewpoint of number (summing up the masses on the other plate or reading the numbers on the spring scale); I reduce one ground of comparison, weight, to a more general ground of comparison, number.

All quantitative measures are good examples of *tertium comparationis*. We compare things *as to* the weight, price, speed, length, etc. They serve as the ground of comparison, as the “third”. The comparison is always a two-step process: first, I introduce the kind of measurement that interests me: I reduce the phenomenon to that aspect, I take it from that angle. For instance, I take apples from the aspect of price, or from the aspect of weight (and measurements may be nested: in order to compare the price of a certain number of apples to the price of a certain number of oranges, I also have to weigh them). This is the decisive step, a decision to question the phenomena from a certain viewpoint, with a certain intention (I want to know their price and/or their weight), the introduction of a ground (that makes possible comparisons with other things), a “third” that gives the angle from which to view the two.

The second step is to compare two (or more) things. This is usually easier. I already have the common ground for the things, and now I only need to put the things together in this respect (on opposing sides of a balance scale) or compare the numbers read at separate instances of weighing. In the latter case, as discussed above, I compare weights to numbers, I introduce a numerical aspect to the weight, using some units (say, kilograms) which can be divided and added in a uniform way (e.g., in a decimal system, a kilogram can be divided into a thousand grams, and thousand kilograms can be added up and called a ton).

So, in a sense, the “third” (the common ground) comes before the “second” (a thing that differs from the “first” thing). But then again, I could have no quantitative common ground, if there would not be different things. There must always be a “second” in addition to a “first” thing; indeed, we can call something a “first” only if there is also a “second”. “First” and “second” cannot be separated absolutely—they may be relatively separate and distinguished, but their very limit or border requires something outside from them, which delimits them, and at the same time which unites them. And this border may be called the “third”.³ So, “first”, “second” and “third” form an inseparable complex. Number is the most general ground of

3 If we investigate it further, we will find that this border is not separate from the entity but is its own aspect (see Hegel 2010, 95–101). The whole of Hegel’s philosophy can be seen as renewed overcoming of fixed and closed identities and an ever more sophisticated incorporation of otherness. This is another way of comparing without a ground, or of overcoming initial, crude and untrue grounds.

comparison, because any actual thing or process can be quantified in one way or another. A number may represent price, weight, speed, brightness, length, happiness (say, in a happiness index), etc.

Qualitative and Quantitative Comparison

It is useful to make a distinction at this point between quantitative and qualitative comparison.⁴ The former involves the repetition of units (as when we count how many units of grams or kilograms “fit” into the weight of a thing). Qualitative comparison is based on similarity and its basis is a holistic or gestalt-like form. In this sense, the first step described above, e.g., the treatment of a thing from the point of view of weight, would be a qualitative comparison;⁵ and the second step of comparing numerical values, would be quantitative comparison. Qualitative comparison is based, for example, on the weight as a quality of things. And by qualitative comparison, putting apples and oranges on two plates of a balance scale, we can make a qualitative judgment, e.g., when we say that one is “heavier” than the other or that they are “equally” heavy. But when we want to know *how much* heavier, then we would need a repeating unit and we would become involved in a quantitative measurement and comparison.

Qualitative comparison is a basic fact for all living beings. It is the basis for the categories they form in their interactions with the surroundings. A bacterium has a category for food and another for poison. These categories are evidenced by its behaviour, when it moves up the gradient of a substance or against it, towards the food or away from poison. And perhaps we can detect further differences in its behaviour of feeding or fleeing, in function of the different types of food or poison, or of their abundance (and so there may already be an implicit incipient quantitative comparison). Each category subsumes a certain number of occurrences

4 Quantitative methods of science combine qualitative and quantitative aspects, since they take reality from the viewpoint of some qualities, and segment it quantitatively. Qualitative methods straddle qualitative and intensive aspects (the latter is the main topic of the paper, discussed below); they depart from certain properties of reality, but they do not know beforehand how they fit together. Of course, the outcome of quantitative research may also well be that the initial quality is made problematic and obscure, and that a new distribution of qualities may be proposed.

5 When weight is mentioned, we may be tempted to think that it is something quantitative, since we usually encounter weights in an already quantified form. Yet, in itself, weight is a quality, a property of an object, just as velocity or colour are. It is quantifiable, but in itself, can be distinguished from quantity. In quantity, distinctions are made inside the quality; a certain unit is extracted and imposed on other phenomena. I take a standard for weight, e.g., a thing of one kilogram, and observe, how many of those standard units can I fit on the other side of a weighing scale, before the scale equalizes.

or instances; a bacterium may move towards a new gradient of sugar when the old one has been exhausted (it can do it *again*, exhibiting a generalization over time); and it may perhaps exhibit the same behaviour in case of both glucose and fructose—in that case these two would be the same for it, or at least sufficiently similar (again, showing that a generality is involved).

Qualitative comparison and categorization is behind practically every word of the language: white things include instances of sugar, salt, snow, etc.; “houses” include bigger and smaller houses; “running” includes several different instances and the ways of running of different people and animals; “ouch!” expresses a certain kind of reaction in different people; even “but” or “or” involve some kind of scheme for relating things, behaviours, propositions (“this apple is red, but this orange is orange”, “do you want apples or oranges”). The so-called prototype-based categories, investigated by George Lakoff (1987), also have a certain qualitative image or scheme as their basis. For example, a robin may be at the centre of our bird-category, on the basis of which we compare putative birds and either include or exclude them, and include more centrally (sparrow) or more at the margin (ostrich, penguin). The birds at the margin, by qualitative comparison, depart more from the central image than the more “prototypical” birds. This can again be made to correlate to some quantitative data—e.g., that ostriches and penguins weigh way more than a “prototypical” bird—but it requires first some qualitative basis (e.g., that we recognize them all as birds).

In sum, the ground for qualitative comparison—as well as for quantitative comparison—is some actualized feature of the world.

Intensity

The quantitative and qualitative comparison discussed above proceed without much ado. They may involve technical difficulties (e.g., the invention of scales or money, or agreement on the aspect from which comparison will be made), but at least we know what we are doing.

Yet there is another dimension of comparison. Sometimes I face a situation when I do not know how things fit together, I do not yet know their “what” or “how” or “how much”.⁶ I may have the feeling that “there is something”, but I do not yet know, what it is. I grope in the dark. For instance, I watch a movie, read a book,

6 Outside of the most general determinations that these things or ideas “exist” and that they “have some relation to me” some relevance. But all this remains completely empty, undetermined, and obscure.

look at a painting, and I feel that there is something significant there, something important. But I may not be sure in what way exactly it is important, or how it relates to those other things that I have been doing and investigating—or, in the final account, how it relates to the person I am.⁷

Let us look a little bit further, what does the “groping in the dark” involve, or the feeling that “there is something there”. First of all, it involves a feeling of tension that can be experienced as exciting, disturbing, or uneasy. In any case, it requires that I do something. It concerns me, it is relevant to me, but I do not yet know how it “fits”: how the different elements of the situation fit together, and how it fits together with myself. This is the intensive dimension of comparison.

Although the meaning is obscure, this tension⁸ is not completely indistinct. In all situations there is some articulation. But I always grasp only part of it, and partially. If I delve deeper, I may find out that the true (or truer) articulations are, in fact, different, and I may also see why they appeared in such a way. The Earth seems flat, but after some learning (geography lessons) and/or experience (taking an airplane) I understand that it is curved. I will also understand the reason of the apparent flatness: the curvature is, from a human perspective, too slight to be perceived without some sophisticated intellectual or technical tools. The former articulations need not disappear, but they will be inserted into a wider context of more articulations.

So, when something puzzles me I am already immersed in some articulations, but I feel that further articulations lie hidden and implied (literally, “folded in”), and the tension I feel urges me to find them, to bring them into clarity, to fold them out or explicate them.

This applies both to very sophisticated scientific and philosophical research, as well as to our very first explorations of the world as infants. The basic scheme is

7 The person I am, can be seen as a specific way of relating things and relating to things, a specific way that marks out also what is important and relevant.

8 The psychological tension corresponds to some intensity in the world. Intensity expresses various tendencies of things, both in relation to their inner articulations, and to external things. If a kettle is heated from below, a heat difference is created and the water inside it will tend to move upwards. And this intensive situation may be expressed in different solutions: calm diffusion, regular convection cells, and violent boiling (see DeLanda 2002). In mental problems, the psychological tension may become quite decoupled from the objective intensities, but this separation can never become complete. A distinction can be made in the mode of actualization of intensities. Where cognition becomes decoupled from reality, the tension cannot unfold in cooperation with other beings, and its operation will remain repetitive, tedious. For more on this, see below, in next section, where two intensive movements are described. The intensity is intended to correspond to Deleuze’s intensive actualization and spatio-temporal dynamisms (see Deleuze 1994, chapter 5). Of course, the notion of intensity has also been criticized (e.g. Garcia 2018).

the same: feeling of tension, implied obscure articulation, effort to explicate it and to bring it to clarity, new situation with new tensions, and the cycle repeats itself.

It is useful to bear in mind the very first steps of developing knowledge, because if we immediately start to consider the most sophisticated expressions of knowledge we may lose sight of the fact that they are part of an already very unfolded understanding that has required very many subsequent steps of unfolding, a maturation process. By going back to the initial stages, we can better appreciate how fundamental this kind of intensity is.

Obscure and Clear Sides

What aspects can we distinguish in this tension and unfolding? Most simply, we could distinguish between two sides, the clear and obscure. Some articulations of the situation are clear, and others lay in obscurity. We should avoid the temptation of imagining the obscure side to be in the likeness of the clear side. They do not differ in degree (as the metaphor of light/darkness would suggest, where adding more lumens will add more clarity, at least up to a point), but they differ in nature. Why is the obscure side obscure? Because its articulations are not juxtaposed, unfolded, or explicated, but interpenetrating, folded, implicated. The mature (unfolded) plant is not already there in the seed (the folded phase). The capacity of the seed to develop into an unfolded plant lies in obscurity. The seed does not follow some “idea”, a kind of a picture of the mature plant (with its juxtaposed parts)⁹ but unfolds its folded articulations in an intensive process that takes time or rather that creates temporality, since “time” is nothing but the sum total of all the different actualization processes combined. Of course, the obscure and folded side will not disappear when the plant reaches maturity—it still goes on living, adapting to the situation, unfolding its capacities, relying on the articulations of its obscure ground.¹⁰

This tension does not have to be felt in the psychological sense, and it characterizes any situation, involving also inanimate entities. A physical system also tends towards some state—not in the sense that it would represent this state as a goal,

9 With the discovery of DNA, the old preformist ideas have become popular again, the idea that in the genes the mature unfolded organism is “already there”. But it is “already there” only for the external observer who projects his expectations onto the organism. The organism itself is in some phase of unfolding its capacities, and the DNA serves for it the same purpose as lecture notes for the lecturer, so: that things would not go off the rails. DNA is only one component or tool (inherited from our ancestors) in the unfolding process, and its effectively 2D structure does not give in advance the mature 3D form.

10 I have developed these ideas in a couple of articles, see Ott (2019; 2020; 2021).

but this state will simply occur as an outcome of the process itself, as the explication of its implicit articulations. Manuel DeLanda (2002) has discussed the interpenetrating side of the physical systems with great clarity and persuasion, claiming that it is what is meant when the *n*-dimensional phase space of a system is described, where each dimension represents a meaningful way that a system can change.¹¹ So that the phase space represents the capacities of a system, the ways it can affect other things and can be affected by them in turn.¹² This is then unfolded in a certain actualization process that draws a phase portrait in that space.

So, on the obscure side the distinctions and differences are still there, it is just that they interpenetrate each other, are wrapped up or folded in. Both the processes of understanding and of living in general are processes of unfolding such obscure interpenetrating articulations and creating the clear side with juxtaposed ideas or bodily parts.

The other side—that of clarity and juxtaposition—is easy to grasp. This is the realm of measurable time and space: the moments and positions that are relatively homogeneous, so that one part of them can be extracted and used as a unit to measure the others. I take “one second” and measure time in seconds; I take a “yard” and use it as a yardstick to measure spatial distances; I take a “character” and measure the length of a text. There are moments and positions clearly outside each other: a moment is before or after another, a position is in front or in back, left or right, above or below, characters are to one or the other side of each other. With a unit we can measure how distant is the moment or position from another. This is the metrical spacetime¹³ that permits quantitative comparison.

Although, if we take a closer look, we will find that this clear juxtaposition is the result of an effort by our understanding. The immediate experience has been conceptually overwritten and developed much further towards clarity and juxtaposition than what we find in our lived experience. Our experience is always somewhat interpenetrating, our duration is never momentary, but is spread over a specious present. The same applies to perception of space that is not composed of indifferent pixels next to each other but is made up of continuous chunks of things that furthermore are in continuity with our behaviour: they elicit action,

11 These kinds of models would be heuristic tools to explore the interpenetrating. See also DeLanda (2011, 18–20).

12 Of course, in each system some internal regulation also sets in, i.e., how the system affects itself. Not everything is compossible, as Leibniz would say.

13 A metrical spacetime is one where the distances between points or moments remain fixed. This is distinguished from different topological spaces where the distances can change, but the neighbourhoods of points remain the same. That is, spacetime can be squeezed or stretched (cf. DeLanda 2002, 15 sqq.).

afford it, inhibit it. We usually don't perceive an individual letter, but we see whole words, where characters already blend into each other, and even we do not see the words, but we "see" the meaning through them, so that the physical form of characters is absorbed by the meaning they convey.

In sum, our understanding has pushed a natural tendency towards juxtaposition further in that direction, taking it beyond our experience, and producing the idea of metrical spacetime with completely homogeneous parts.¹⁴

Two Movements: Unfolding and Refolding

The movement between clear and obscure, interpenetrating and juxtaposed, is always bidirectional. On the one hand, ideas or things are brought to clarity and made to juxtapose each other, but on the other hand, they still (also) interpenetrate each other, so that part of the situation is always obscure. And when we bring more to clarity, new tensions are formed, new obscurities are folded in and require renewed unfolding. This unfolding will be more nuanced since more folds are involved.

Explication and unfolding always take place in a situation, in an environment, in interactions with other beings and processes. When an infant is born, it continues to unfold itself, using food for this purpose, integrating parts of the food to its organism. And from the very beginning there are also other kinds of interactions and integrations: with the caregiver, toys, surfaces (crawling), etc. Through trial and error, the child finds certain patterns that work. From the tension of an obscure situation, it brings to clarity certain forms of relating and acting. They become its property, just as its own body becomes its property, in the sense that these competences are now at its disposal and can be used for new actualizations, new unfolding.

New encounters may re-obscure and re-problematize acquired knowledge and habits, creating new tensions, and requiring new actualizations. Sometimes we need to "melt down" some rigid knowledge (both know-what and know-how), to take a juxtaposed actual system and make it interpenetrating and problematic again. And then find new solutions, new forms. Often this reworking is harder than the original actualization because old attractors can be very strong.

In a sense, anything can indeed be compared with any other thing (Weber 2014, 168). But, as Weber says, this does not mean that "anything can be compared

14 Science has since gone beyond such metric spacetime in non-Euclidean geometries, that have given us, among other things, the Einsteinian relativistic spacetime.

valuably with anything” (ibid.). The difference comes out in the process of comparison: in a “valuable” comparison, the resolution of tension changes the initial state in an important way, and the outcome is that more things can be related in more ways. A conspiracy theory can also take in more and more material, but the scheme of interpretation remains the same, so that the new material does not make any meaningful change in the form of thought itself. The “news” has new content every day, but the form of the news remains the same and unaffected by that new content. In a valuable comparison, on the other hand, the form of thought itself is affected. If Confucius and Cicero are brought together then both acquire a new context, and the comparison transforms their inner articulations, forming a new field of intensities, changing or modifying our initial intuitions. There is an indelible objectivity in valuable comparison, both in terms of the material involved, and in terms of feedback from peers. In short, for comparison, anything goes—but not everything goes well.

In sum, every situation has two aspects: an obscure, interpenetrating, folded side, and a clear, juxtaposed, unfolded side. They are the two poles of the ontological tension that drives movement in two directions. First, the drive to bring things into clarity, to unfold or actualize them. One felt that there was something, and after some experimentation and investigation, one sees what it was. Second, there is a drive to re-obscure or re-fold a situation. The situation was not as simple as one thought. There is something different, something more. New tensions and obscurities are formed that require unfolding.

Groundlessness

We sometimes deal with a ground that is obscure and that has its interpenetrating articulations. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that from my perspective there is, in fact, no ground, and that rather it is groundless. There is “something” in the situation, in certain things and ideas, but they are not (yet) grounded. They float “in the air”. And I am searching for how they could fit together and make sense. But since I do not know how they fit together and how I could compare them, I cannot use any precise method either. Or if I can use a precise method for solving the perplexity, then the obscurity was not really so thick, and it was a rather easy question or involved merely technical difficulties. But sometimes the obscurity is indeed thick, and no method can be used, other than some general practical advice like “Persist!”, “Keep on searching!” or “Alternate between searching and letting go, between work and leisure!” In case of truly obscure situations, nothing more precise can be said. And this general advice may indeed

work, so that simply by being in contact with the situation or the problem, by trying to intuit it, feeling it, the situation may start to sort itself out, to unravel itself. It may happen by a sudden illumination or by a gradual unfolding, or by a series of illuminations. But there is really no methodology here, no pre-given ground—from my perspective I could even say that it requires that I “abandon” myself to this groundlessness.¹⁵ This is no small task, because this kind of situation may make one feel uneasy, uncomfortable, at loss. It may be despairing to feel that I don’t know how it all fits together—and I may have the feeling that I myself am falling apart. I may not withstand the tension. Or it may feel exciting, empowering, and I may experience how this excitement makes certain demands from me, drags me along, just as the promise of a good discourse or dialogue pushed Socrates to take a walk.

Ultimately all those illuminations and solutions will still remain partial, as it is impossible to bring everything to clarity. Because most fundamentally I always differ from myself, I stretch ahead in duration and extension, I leave behind the old time and place and grasp for the next one. My very existence is based on a “cut”, on a non-ground.¹⁶ Taking this into account, we may say that it is not so that the main mode would be grounded comparisons and that the lack of a ground would be an exception (to be resolved, sooner or later, with the discovery of a ground). It could be as well said that it is the other way around, that the main mode is being un-grounded and that from this unground or obscure ground we pull out some things that we try to fit together to form a ground upon which we can proceed with qualitative and quantitative comparisons. We have one foot on the ground and the other foot in the air. Things cannot become completely clear to ourselves, and even we ourselves cannot become completely clear and transparent to ourselves.

Yet this should not be seen as a shortcoming, but as a condition of existence and understanding.¹⁷ As particular beings, we do indeed value clarity (when we know “how” and “how much”), but we should also learn to appreciate the obscurity, the groundlessness that lies at our very heart.

15 This is an important topic in the German mysticism of Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme, the *Gelassenheit*, that inspired also Søren Kierkegaard (see Kangas 2007). Stephen Houlgate (2006) repeatedly emphasizes the importance of this notion for Hegel.

16 Cf. Kierkegaard’s *Afgrund* (1962, 158) and Heidegger’s *Abgrund* (2012, 27, 299–306). Cf. also the blog entry “Cut” in <https://dechanter.blogspot.com/2018/11/cut.html>.

17 “Incommensurability, it turns out, does not after all preclude rational debate and encounter.” (MacIntyre 1991, 118)

Some Consequences for Comparative Philosophy

Philosophy is a field where the obscure articulations are captured in concepts; the intensive unfolding is the movement of thought; and the unfolded actual forms are expressed in texts and discourses. It has its ineliminable illusions: when concepts are considered to be the same as words of common speech; where movement of thought is reduced to a mechanics of thought where from one actual form another actual form can be produced (as in syllogistic reasoning, for example, or the Chinese five-phase scheme); where philosophical texts and discourses are evaluated with scientific, religious, or artistic criteria.¹⁸

But when these illusions are avoided and a philosophical text or discourse is taken in a strong sense, it can blend into your own obscure articulations, redistributing them; its intensities can resonate with you, giving you force; its actual juxtaposed form can initiate a process of melting up and recasting your own actual forms.

Comparative philosophy does not differ essentially from “ordinary” philosophy, but it still has its peculiarities due to the fact that it discusses sources from different traditions. This makes the discrepancies all the more visible, and communalities all the more intriguing. Therefore, the feeling of groping in the dark may be even more impelling, as well as the need to melt down existing juxtaposed actualized forms in both traditions. This can produce intense pleasure.¹⁹

Conclusion

The starting point of this paper was Ralph Weber’s (2014) affirmation that all comparison requires a ground of comparison. I proceeded to distinguish first, a qualitative ground: the mode of being as to which two or more things are compared, e.g., weight, or price. And second, the quantitative ground: a discrete unit that is used to measure a given quality, e.g., kilo or euro. This qualitative and quantitative comparison apply when it is already clear what and how to compare.

But there are other cases where it is not clear what or how to compare. When we do not yet know how things fit together and we grope in the dark. When the ground of comparison is obscure, and we are struggling to shed some light to it.

18 Of course, texts can be treated from different viewpoints: a philosophy may be extracted from a poem, a religious text, or even some common advertisement; and a philosophical text may be treated from poetic, scientific or other viewpoint. The question is to keep these different attitudes apart, at least temporarily.

19 Weber and Chakrabarti (2016, 10) also speak of “philosophical pleasure”. I shall leave it to the next occasion to unfold more thoroughly the consequences hinted to in this subsection.

This was called intensive comparison. The tension is created between the obscure and clear sides. On the obscure side, the articulations interpenetrate each other, and in the process of understanding they are unfolded, brought into the clarity of juxtaposition where one idea is next to another. Together with this unfolding we also re-fold the obscure side that is transformed by the very process of unfolding it. My obscurity of before is not my obscurity of today. And now other things can be unfolded from it.

The clear examples of comparison, discussed at the beginning of this paper (qualitative and quantitative comparison), end up being just one side of the intensity of comparison, its “clear” side that is in tension with its “obscure” side. It is this tension that drives creative comparisons and can be understood as an unfolding of interpenetrating obscure articulations and bringing them to clear juxtaposition, where one thing, idea, or phase is next to another.

For example, I want to know how to bring together Confucianism and Cicero (an example mentioned by Weber). Initially, I grope in the dark. Articulations are there, but they are obscure, stuck together, interpenetrating. During the investigation process they are gradually unfolded, brought to clarity. I can now state, elaborate on how they fit together, what are the commonalities and what are the differences.

Weber’s goal was to show that anything can be compared with anything. This is indeed so, but now we can make some distinctions. Qualitative and quantitative comparisons are of low intensity and trivial. Intensity in comparison is not trivial, but there is no guarantee that it will work out. It is always risky. Sometimes the intensity wears off. There was nothing there, after all. But sometimes the intensity stays and generates something interesting. From unfolded bits and pieces, a ground is formed that can be treaded upon, although it floats above an irreducible groundlessness or obscurity.

Especially in the field of comparative philosophy, there is still so much unused potential energy resulting from the differences among philosophical traditions that waits to unleash its kinetic energy in a renewed movement of thought. No *a priori* limitations can be set on it, and it can create its justification only by itself: how interesting is that castle in the air and how much intensity can it provide for further explorations.

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