

On Philosophy as Living: *Xinxue* and the Infinity of the Individual

Timo ENNEN*

Abstract

This paper considers what it would mean to conceive of philosophy as living. In the first part, by way of a discussion on intercultural encounter recently taken up by Cora Diamond, I first illustrate why philosophical conflict cannot be resolved within already given modes of thought or self-contained finite philosophical traditions, but instead transcends those. In the second part, I show why this dynamic plays out not only between cultures but also between the individual and that individual's own tradition. I do this by drawing from insights of the two major proponents of *xinxue* 心學 (Learning of the Heart-Mind), Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 and Wang Yangming 王陽明. The way *xinxue* deals with both orthodox and heterodox traditions illuminates how we can understand philosophy as something living. It is neither self-contained and indifferent to its own heritage or to the culturally alien, nor does it consist of the mere accumulation of diverse philosophical contents. The deepening of individuality that *xinxue* introduces into Chinese philosophy consists in the relation of the individual to what has already been conceived. Ultimately, by grasping this dynamic that happens through the individual, we may better grasp why philosophy is not reducible to given modes of thought nor to self-contained finite philosophical traditions, but instead is infinite.

Keywords: intercultural philosophy, comparative philosophy, infinity, individuality, *xinxue*, Lu Jiuyuan, Wang Yangming

O živi filozofiji: *Xinxue* in neskončnost posameznika

Izvleček

Članek pretehtava pomen obravnave filozofije kot žive vede. Prek diskusije o medkulturnem srečevanju, ki jo je pred kratkim odprla Cora Diamond, v prvem delu najprej opisujem, zakaj filozofskih konfliktov ne moremo reševati znotraj že danih načinov mišljenja ali samovsebujočih končnih filozofskih tradicij, saj te presegajo omenjene domene. V drugem delu ponazarjam, zakaj se tovrstna dinamika ne odvija samo med kulturami, ampak tudi med posameznikom in posameznikovo lastno kulturo. Pri tem izhajam iz dognanj dveh najvidnejših zagovornikov nauka *xinxue* 心學 (nauk o srcu-umu), Lu Jiuyana 陸九淵 in

* Timo ENNEN, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.
Email address: timo.ennen@connect.ust.hk



Wang Yangminga 王陽明. Način, na katerega se *xinxue* spoprijema tako z ortodoksnimi kot heterodoksnimi tradicijami, ponazarja, kako je mogoče filozofijo dojemati kot nekaj živega. Tako ni niti vsebujoč zgolj sebe in ravnodušen do svoje dediščine niti ne sestoji zgolj iz kopičenja različnih filozofskih vsebin. Poglobitev individualnosti, ki jo *xinxue* uvaja v kitajsko filozofijo, sestavlja v bistvu odnos posameznika do že ustvarjenega. Prek dojetanja te dinamike, ki se udejanja prek posameznika, lahko na koncu bolje dojamemo, zakaj filozofije ni mogoče zreducirati na že dane oblike mišljenja ali sebevsebujoče končne filozofske tradicije, ampak je filozofija po sebi pravzaprav neskončna.

Ključne besede: medkulturna filozofija, primerjalna filozofija, neskončnost, individualnost, *xinxue*, Lu Jiuyuan, Wang Yangming

Introduction

The original proponents of *xinxue* (Learning of the Heart-Mind) did not have a concept of philosophy, let alone of comparative or intercultural philosophy. Yet the way they engaged with both orthodox and heterodox traditions sheds light on their self-understanding as thinkers who confronted both an authoritative textual transmission and the popularization of practices and outlooks on life that conflicted with parts of this transmission. Ultimately, the deepening of individuality they introduced into Chinese philosophy supplies us with a notion of philosophy as living. It accomplishes this by emphasizing the role of the individual in the dynamic transmission of a philosophical tradition.

To understand what is at stake in such a dynamic conception of philosophy, it is helpful to contrast it with the realist position of Theodore Sider. In a subchapter titled “Against Subjectivity” in his much-discussed monograph *Writing the Book of the World*, he states:

The world is “out there”, and our job is to wrap our minds around it. This picture is perhaps my deepest philosophical conviction. I’ve never questioned it; giving it up would require a reboot too extreme to contemplate; and I have no idea how I’d try to convince somebody who didn’t share it. (Sider 2011, 21)

This quotation expresses a widespread (perhaps commonsensical) view of both past and living philosophers on the relationship between a subject and the reality the subject tries to grasp. In terms of comparative and intercultural philosophy, it would mean that there are given philosophical traditions “out there” and that we comparative and intercultural philosophers somehow have “to wrap our minds” around them. There is something waiting for us, so to speak, which exists and is

comprehensible quite independently from our attempts at making sense of it and of ourselves. In this article, I shall challenge this view by contemplating intercultural encounters, on the one hand, and the relation of the individual to a philosophical tradition as conceived by proponents of *xinxue*, on the other.

In what follows, I will first draw from a recent discussion of philosophical collision in intercultural encounters by Cora Diamond. Following Diamond, I will show how collision in such encounters cannot be resolved within given modes of thought but necessarily transcends those modes. Philosophical collision thus already hints at a notion of infinity since it cannot be resolved within particular finite philosophical traditions. I will then show how *xinxue* philosophers help us comprehend how this infinite dynamic plays out not only between cultures or philosophical traditions, but also through the individual and that individual's relation to an authoritative textual transmission. Precisely through the emphasis on the individual, *xinxue* does not narrow down the scope of philosophy to the local and particular, but opens it up to infinity.

Infinity through Philosophical Collision

In a recent article, Ralph Weber (2014) rejected the incommensurability of philosophical traditions and defended the project of comparative philosophy. According to Weber, currently popular notions such as “similarity, family resemblance, and analogy are ways of comparison that in some way or other rely on assertions of commonality” (Weber 2014, 156).¹ For Weber, any comparison presupposes a *tertium comparationis* (the point of comparison). This “pre-comparative” (ibid., 162) *tertium* determines what the *comparata* are. However, the establishment of something “pre-comparative” is problematic in that the very space of reasons within which an intercultural encounter takes place is shaped by that encounter itself. In other words, what the encounter is about is not fully determinable in advance but is precisely at stake in the collision of different philosophical traditions.

To clarify, let us look at a specific example of intercultural encounter and philosophical collision. Investigating magical thought among the Zande, an African ethnic group, the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard highlights that what to proponents of modern Western scientific culture (like himself) looks like invalidating Zande beliefs is taken by the Zande themselves as actual support for the coherence of their beliefs. Evans-Pritchard writes:

1 For the notion of analogy, see Wong (2002); for the notion of family resemblance in the context of comparative and intercultural philosophy, see Ma and van Brakel (2016).

Let the reader consider any argument that would utterly demolish all Zande claims for the power of the oracle. If it were translated into Zande modes of thought it would serve to support their entire structure of belief. For their mystical notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience but, instead, experience seems to justify them. The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about his poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom. (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937], 150)

Responding to Evans-Pritchard and agreeing with him on this point, Peter Winch intriguingly suggests that this thought experiment also works the other way round. In an inverted world, and exploring modern Western culture, the Zande visitor would speak of the “European [who] is immersed in a sea of scientific notions, and if he speaks about the Zande poison oracle he must speak in a scientific idiom” (Winch 1964, 313). Drawing from his reading of Wittgenstein, Winch makes the point that the scientific standards used in modern Western culture cannot be extended to unscientific discourse. There is no ground from which we could pass judgment on the Zande’s conception of reality as wrong. Winch does not argue that we could just as well abandon our scientific standards and adopt the magical thought and practices of the Zande. Rather, no standpoint exists from which we could settle this collision of conceptions of reality. To put it another way, to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail, and both the Zande and Western anthropologist exemplify this saying. They are left with an irreconcilable clash without any possibility of a universal discourse to settle it.

Cora Diamond (2013) has recently revived this discussion. She makes the insightful point that the very collision between the two conceptions of reality adds something that was not yet conceived in either the Zande mode of thought or the Western one. Drawing from a passage of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* regarding the encounter with people who consult oracles, Diamond writes:

Wittgenstein speaks here of cases where two principles really meet, principles that cannot be reconciled with each other. The verb translated as “meet” is *treffen*, so the image is of principles that hit each other; they do not miss each other; they do not pass each other by. One might elaborate this in something like the following way: each of the conflicting principles is connected with a system of thought within which we have ways of establishing what is and is not so. But in taking the two principles to *meet*, in taking them to be *irreconcilable*, we are giving a logical shape to

the conflict; we are making a conception of reality, of what is real, that is not internal to either of the two forms of thought that provide the initial understanding of the conflict-situation. That is, we can take the situation here to be one in which what is real is contested; and this idea of *reality as contested* is a different notion of reality from that which is involved in either of the two forms of thought themselves. (Diamond 2013, 119)

The collision between the Zande and the Western visitor gives rise to a tension that was not there before and that has to be taken into account if we are to discuss the very notion of what is real. Diamond thus states that “[t]he real is (among other things) that which we take to be at stake in conflicts, and this means that the concept of *what is real* has a complexity beyond what can be elucidated by examining its role ‘within’ language-games or modes of thought” (ibid., 129). What might resolve this collision, if such a resolution is possible, cannot be something given beforehand. It must develop through the collision itself. Ultimately, the accounts of both Evans-Pritchard and Winch end up in a stalemate since they conceive of the only possible standard as internal to the colliding modes of thought and as already formed prior to the collision. Diamond’s important contribution breaks through this stalemate by bringing out the dynamic and contested nature of the very notion of what is real.

Diamond helpfully remarks that one symptom of this stalemate is Winch’s usage of the term “established” when he mentions the “established universe of discourse” (Winch 1964, 309) that Evans-Pritchard’s position (the judgment that the Zande are wrong) would require and that Winch wants to deny. Here, Diamond raises the question of why there has “to be ‘an established universe of discourse?’ Why can one not be making, giving articulation to, a kind of thought about reality *in thinking about the conflict?*” (Diamond 2013, 119). In other words, why would a conception of what is real and unreal have to be a dead one, a conception that is always already decided through reference to language-games, a worldview or a culture? Why can the conception of what is real not be something that lives precisely through such conflicts and our comprehension of them?

Diamond then offers an example of how such comprehension “along the way” would look:

[I]t is helpful to consider the difference between proving a theorem when you have methods of proving exactly such theorems (and you can evaluate against prior standards the validity of the proof) and resolving a mathematical problem by a totally new sort of proof, a new method of proof. The new method of proof is not there to be a standard in advance

of the proof. But this does not mean that the proof does not give us good reasons for accepting the conclusion; it means that what counts here as a reason, what counts as establishing something in this sort of case, is articulated along with the particular reasoning itself. (ibid., 120)

Diamond then goes on to discuss witches and the search for them, and what a possible refutation of such practices might look like. In contrast to Evans-Pritchard's and Winch's accounts, Diamond's point here is that one need not oppose witch-hunting in another culture *a priori* on the basis of its alien mode of thought, that is, its unscientific character. Rather, confronted with a particular case of witch-finding, one may tell a story of one's own culture that itself once embraced a notion of human agency that allowed for witch-hunts and thus highlight how overcoming that notion and ending such practices helped one's community to flourish. As seen from the perspective of a contemporary European, we then might say:

If we find ourselves in the situation of conflict, the picture of human agency that has been an unquestioned part of our world-picture, held in place by everything around it, can be taken to be something for which we have grounds, in its having stood up as it has, in the 300 or so years during which it became and has remained an unquestioned part of our thinking. It has proved itself, we may think, in its having worked well over these centuries. That this would not be taken to be persuasive by the witch-fearing and witch-finding cultures does not mean that it is not reasonable (within the context of our reflection on the conflict) to take it to support the idea that, in this conflict about human agency, we are right and they are wrong. (ibid., 126)

Although Diamond's main question is whether there are "rational grounds' for the criticism of practices and beliefs as different from our own" (ibid., 127), we can apply her considerations of those situations of conflict to the question of how to conceive of philosophy as such. Like Diamond, we "do not depend upon appeal to standards of what counts as rational available independently of and prior to the articulation of thought about conflicting worldviews" (ibid., 129); in fact, comparative and intercultural philosophy does not rely on anything given prior to particular comparisons or encounters. As mentioned above, in defending the *tertium comparationis* as the pre-comparative setting up of the *comparata*, Weber argues that "the determination of the *comparata* at least upon reflection involves the positing or asserting of a point of commonality" (Weber 2014, 162). Unlike Evans-Pritchard and Winch, both Weber and Diamond agree on

the standard not being internal to one of the *comparata* involved. However, Diamond elucidates how the notion of reality is precisely a contested one and how the standard that is supposed to measure it is therefore never pre-comparative. What Diamond's reference both to a new mathematical proof and to a self-assurance by way of looking back to particular cases in history demonstrates is that we cannot give a universal form prior to engaging with particular contents. Such a form would be dead and would prevent comprehension of philosophy as living.

We now may draw some provisional conclusions: Philosophical traditions exceed themselves since what happens in their collision is not merely a clash of two different self-contained worldviews, but the generation of something new. Philosophical collision changes the way we conceive of the entities involved.² What is at stake in philosophical collision cannot be set out in advance. There is more to it than merely the criteria of truth inherent to each mode of thought or philosophical tradition. Yet this must not lead us to the assumption that there is something the philosopher establishes pre-comparatively from the outside, as Weber claims. What in comparative philosophy is called the *tertium comparationis* is likewise determined and challenged by the tension between the *comparata*. It is not an *a priori* form that is there independently of any content. In a sense, such a form would be dead. However, as Diamond shows, the contested notion of reality lives precisely through the collision. This is a way to conceive of philosophy as living.

While Diamond does not use the terminology of the finite and the infinite, infinity is already inherent to Diamond's reflections on an unstable and contested notion of reality. Instead of a mere unresolvable opposition of given particular modes of thought, that is, self-contained finite philosophical traditions, the contested notion of reality living through philosophical collision hints at an infinite self-development. Yet what Diamond leaves out is that the bearers of this infinity are not just colliding philosophical traditions, but the individual human being itself. It is this infinity that plays out between the individual and that individual's relation to orthodox or heterodox traditions that proponents of *xinxue* spotlight.

2 We can neglect, at least theoretically, imaginable cases of comparison where the result is pure identity or where there are only differences. For one, those cases would probably not be a meaningful philosophical encounter to us. Secondly, following Weber, the sheer fact that we pursue such a comparison might at least tell us something about us, if not about the *comparata* involved (Weber 2014, 165–66).

Xinxue and the Infinity of the Individual

Universality, Infinity and Eurocentrism

For Edmund Husserl, any universalization must necessarily amount to a Europeanization. Along these lines, any cultural tradition that aspires to overcome its finite and particular character must at some point adopt the philosophical spirit as it was born and shaped in European civilizations. He writes:

There is something unique that is recognized in us by all other human groups, too, something that, quite apart from all considerations of utility, becomes a motive for them to Europeanize themselves even in their unbroken will to spiritual self-preservation; whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, would never Indianize ourselves, for example. (Husserl 1970, 275)

Regardless of to what extent with such a judgment Husserl is a child of an epoch still heavily informed by imperial domination, or to what extent he offers a genuine expression of his philosophical project, he figures as one further voice that denies non-European civilizations any genuine philosophical self-development, in so far as we understand philosophy as the pursuit of a comprehension of what transcends the finite and particular. For him, Europe or European philosophy stand alone in their significance as an envisioned “ideal shape of life and [...] eternal pole” (ibid., 275). Commenting on Husserl’s idea of Europe’s singularity, Eric S. Nelson writes:

Europe names an infinite and universal horizon that is the proper sense of world history, and its idea is higher than any particular anthropological culture, including the corroded particularities of existing European nations that have lost touch with the scientific spirit and are in desperate need of renewal through reconnecting with the genuine cosmopolitan *telos* and idea of Europe in the West’s internal dialogue with itself. (Nelson 2019, 183)

For Husserl, then, universality and infinity are inextricably entangled with science, that is, theoretical knowledge, in contrast to mere practical considerations. Therewith, he does not just exclude most of Eastern philosophy but much of the philosophical tradition he himself inherited, since the emancipation and prioritization of theoretical knowledge can be seen as a reaction or complement to the scientific revolution and the formation of the modern sciences. Needless to say,

this prioritization has been contested within Western philosophy itself. As Kwok-Ying Lau points out, “if we accept Husserl’s Idea of philosophy as ‘pure *thêoria*’, not only the existence of Indian and Chinese philosophies is denied, [there] would also be ruled out as philosophical works a significant number of important original and influential works of contemporary Western thinkers” (Lau 2016, 6).

In *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding: Toward a New Cultural Flesh*, Lau engages critically with Eurocentric motives in Husserl’s late philosophy (ibid., 3–9, 54–56, 64–66). He emphasizes the “epistemological dimension of interculturality: due to the factually historical character of every life-world upon which a philosophy is born, no philosophical theory born in a single cultural soil can be assured *a priori* of its truth value until it could be testified in and by other cultures” (ibid., 224). However, this statement is problematic in at least two ways. First, it presupposes that the bearers of philosophical truth are cultures, not individuals. Secondly, it presupposes that any philosophy, at least at its beginning, represents a particular, that is, finite, “life-world”. This would mean to deny infinity and universality from the outset, just as Husserl did with respect to non-European traditions, since neither infinity nor universality could be recovered through mere mutual validation between particular finite philosophical traditions. Fortunately, we do not have to give up on infinity, universality and philosophical self-development since they are internal to human self-understanding, as conceived by proponents of *xinxue* or the Learning of the Heart-Mind.

Xinxue, Infinity and the Individual

Many of the major philosophical works of Western modernity deal with the peculiar character of first-person thought and action. Of course, in most cases this is not a move towards the autobiographical, but is rather meant as an expression of universality and an invitation to carry out for oneself what is performed in the text in front of everybody. As long as we read modern philosophy’s most famous proposition as saying that Descartes thinks and therefore *he* is, we are not reading the phrase as it was intended to be read (cf. Haddock 2019, 262–63).³ To understand Descartes’ statement from the inside, rather than observing it from the outside, we need not consider the fact that it was written by a French male early modern philosopher. In other words, Descartes’ *cogito*, Kant’s apperceptive unity of the “I”, Hegel’s “consciousness [which] is for its own self its *concept*” (Hegel 2018, §80) are not memes; that is, they are not units of cultural information, not even very

3 Elisabeth Anscombe thus writes that the “first-person character of Descartes’ argument means that each person must administer it to himself in the first person” (1981 [1975], 21).

general ones. They are self-understanding. While it takes a language and a culture to express this self-understanding, this self-understanding does not denote a mental episode of a particular human being, and it does not denote a particular chapter in someone's autobiography. Such self-understanding is inherent not to a culture, nor to a language game, but to thought as such. It is self-knowledge, that is, knowledge not of a certain human being but knowledge that anyone has by virtue of the first person. To these authors, the conviction that everything can be explained and needs explanation in terms of its cultural grammar would have meant that there is no philosophy.

Emphasis on the first-person perspective is not absent from Chinese philosophical writing, nor is the occurrence of first-person pronouns. Commenting on the centrepiece of the Learning of the Heart-Mind that Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 calls the original mind (*benxin* 本心) and that Wang Yangming 王陽明 later elaborates as moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知), Zhang Junmai 張君勱 claims it is self-knowledge in which “the knower and the known coincide” (Chang 1962, 88). It is knowledge in virtue of what or how we are. But the original mind is not the *cogito*. Nor is it a form that we apply to certain contents outside of us. Likewise, it does not describe a diversity of given contents out there in the world that we have to find out about. It rather denotes the possibility to authentically express ourselves in a cosmos whose infinite change and meaning are at the same time our own. In this spirit, *xinxue* takes up Mengzi's 孟子 notion of the myriad things within oneself (*wanwu jie bei yu wo* 萬物皆備于我) (Lau 2003, 7A), and Lu Jiuyuan asserts that the Six Classics interpret him just as he interprets them (*liujing zhu wo, wo zhu liujing* 六經注我, 我注六經) (Lu 1980, 399).⁴

We may notice the first-person pronoun in these expressions of Mengzi and Lu, but note that these pronouns do not represent an autobiographical character or the finitude and particularity of these sentences. On the contrary, they open up the possibility of understanding these propositions as not belonging to a particular human being, but as something we can administer to ourselves. Certainly, we may first need to gather particular cultural information in order to be able to actually understand these expressions at all. We have to learn what Mengzi meant by the myriad things and what Lu refers to when he speaks of the Six Classics. But having acquired the necessary background information, no further particular

4 In a recent article, borrowing a term from Amélie O. Rorty, Zheng Zemian speaks of the “epistemological egalitarianism” (Zheng 2021, 337) in the philosophies of Wang Yangming and Descartes. What Zheng labels the “Sino-European juncture of Enlightenment” signifies the emphasis on the “individual's power of judgment” (ibid., 342) in both thinkers. Zheng's observations correspond with the focus on self-knowledge and the first person in modern Western philosophy and *xinxue*, as sketched here.

cultural information will actually enable us to go inside and live through these expressions. Instead, we must administer them to ourselves, and thus comprehend them through the first person.

Needless to say, the mere presence of a first-person pronoun or the mere claim of being philosophically significant is not proof of actual philosophical purport. We could be reading an autobiography or a dictionary, or we could be falling prey to a hoax. Therefore, we usually read both primary and secondary literature thoroughly in order to ascertain if there is something *for us* in a particular text. Yet this does not change one bit the fact that as soon as we come across the philosophical purport of one of these notions, we will ultimately have done so by comprehending them in the first person, not by considering their popularity or the way they were quoted by other philosophers.

Descartes' *cogito*, Kant's apperceptive unity of the "I", Hegel's "consciousness [which] is for its own self its *concept*", Lu's original mind and Wang's *liangzhi* all require the relevant cultural—that is, first and foremost, linguistic—knowledge in order to be so much as recognized as potentially bearing any philosophical purport at all. Nonetheless, no amount of information about a culture or a language will ever bring us to the full comprehension of these notions. In order to reach such comprehension, we have to think these notions not through a cultural context but in the first person. No accumulation of cultural particulars will ever help us in making this final step. It can only be taken by actually comprehending what is conceived in these notions. No biography of Descartes or Wang, no study of their thought, will ever be able to do this for us. First-person thought is not a naïve stance but the medium in which these notions gain their philosophical significance in the first place.

In the introduction to this text, we quoted Theodor Sider's idea of a world "out there". Certainly, his picture fits with empirical knowledge. But the aforementioned philosophical notions are not "out there" like the objects of ordinary experiential knowledge, and "our job" is not "to wrap our minds around" them (Sider 2011, 21). These notions do not represent a bundle of contents that we could explain without at the same time entering ourselves into their efficacy, that is, administering them to ourselves.

Lu's expression about mutual interpretation (*liujing zhu wo, wo zhu liujing* 六經注我, 我注六經) adds an intriguing hermeneutical component to philosophical infinity that remains unmentioned in Diamond's account of philosophical collision. Firstly, it reveals how philosophy is not reducible to certain contents coming from outside that an individual recipient just has to absorb. Otherwise, philosophy would deal with mere aggregates of given information and not be categorically

different from philology. Secondly, it reveals how philosophy is not reducible to the self-contained activity of an individual thinker independently of what has already been conceived, which is why introducing someone to philosophy necessarily includes introducing that person to what has been philosophically thought.

In short, philosophy can neither be introduced by abstracting from concrete philosophical contents nor by abstracting from how the individual shapes these contents through that individual's first-person comprehension of them. Philosophy is living in the sense that form and content do not exist independently from each other. Strictly speaking, isolating a philosophical form or a philosophical content would mean to conceive of philosophy as dead, as an object of mere historical or philological interest. In other words, there are no self-standing given finite contents out there. Otherwise, we would think of philosophy only through the idea of dead philosophical traditions and neglect the individual who administers philosophical thought to itself, that is, interprets it, shapes it, determines it, just as, following Lu, the individual is interpreted, shaped and determined by that tradition. Conceiving of philosophy as living means to conceive of philosophy through this interplay of the individual and its own or alien traditions. This dynamic, however, cannot be put into terms of a particular, finite content. Philosophy is neither a given objective content out there nor a mere subjective form we give to the world. This is the way in which philosophy is infinite.

One objection might be that while Descartes, Kant and Hegel had the universal "I" in mind, *xinxue* thinks of the original mind and *liangzhi* in terms of certain psychological reactions, that is, a finite content. To narrow the scope of *xinxue* down to claims about certain psychological reactions is, however, misleading. *Li-angzhi* is not a set of psychological or anthropological facts up for investigation by cognitive science. Mencius' idea of innate moral impulses has been a crucial point of departure for the proponents of *xinxue*. Yet the universality of such impulses has not only been thematized by *xinxue*. More importantly, this idea of innate moral impulses does not exhaust the meaning of Lu's original mind or Wang's *liangzhi*.

Wittgenstein mentions "a primitive reaction to take care of, to treat, the place that hurts when someone else is in pain and not merely when one is so oneself—[...] a primitive reaction to attend to the pain-behaviour of another" (Wittgenstein 1980, §915). By using the idea of the primitive, Wittgenstein did not speak condescendingly but meant "that the mode of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language game is based *on it*: that it is the prototype of a mode of thought and not the result of thought" (ibid., §916). The universality of such impulses lies therefore in their pre-linguistic character. However, if *liangzhi* only denoted the universality

of certain psychological reactions, we could indeed delegate its verification to psychological experiment. There would be no need to consult *xinxue* texts at all. There would not even be the need for the term *liangzhi*, since we could just speak of this and that impulse in its stead.

Wang introduces the idea of *liangzhi* as not being determined by anything other than itself. Thus, seeking “the highest good (the abiding point) in individual events and things is to regard righteousness as external” (Wang 1963, 6), a view which Mencius had already rejected in his dialogue with Gaozi (*Mencius* 6A). Yet, at the same time, the good “is not separated from events and things” (Wang 1963, 7). Wang follows Lu in conjoining the heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理) of the entire cosmos with (the original state of) the heart-mind (*xinzhibenti* 心之本體). *Liangzhi* signifies our irreducible moral existence and entails that morality is infinite by existing “in no fixed place” and not being “exhaustible” (*ibid.*, 28). It denotes an infinity of situations within a cosmos that is characterized by infinite creation (*shengsheng buxi* 生生不息) and that in each moment requires an individual authentic response by us. Along these lines, Chang Tzu-li speaks of *liangzhi* as our moral agency, as our moral creativity, which cannot be reduced to adherence to a finite set of moral principles, facts or sentiments (Chang 2015). Zhang Xuezhi renders *liangzhi* even in terms of the transcendental, namely, as a “transcendental moral consciousness” (Zhang 2021, 145). Famously, Wang remarked how he would even overrule the words of Confucius himself if he found that they contradicted his own moral sense.⁵ Hence, for Wang, ultimately, philosophical truth cannot be codified in a set of classics, even if written or authorized by the sages themselves.

When speaking of the original mind or *liangzhi*, neither Lu nor Wang were recounting mere autobiographical episodes or describing a finite lifeform within a particular anthropological culture or a past philosophical tradition. As such, Lu emphasizes that the “substance of the mind is infinite” and that “[t]here is only one mind. My mind, my friends’ mind, the mind of the sages thousands of years ago, and the mind of the sages thousands of years to come are all the same” (Chan 2008, 585). What is more, “[o]ver the four seas sages appear. They share this mind” (*ibid.*, 580). Lu and Wang could know this without empirically investigating all extinct, existing, and future human societies since they express self-knowledge of the good

5 The passage reads: “The important thing in learning is to acquire learning through the exercise of the mind. If words are examined in the mind and found to be wrong, although they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not to accept them as correct. How much less those from people inferior to Confucius! If words are examined in the mind and found to be correct, although they have come from the mouth of ordinary people, I dare not regard them as wrong. How much less those of Confucius!” (Wang 1963, 159)

that has infinity and universality not by accident, but built into it from the outset. In short, there are no temporal nor local nor cultural restrictions on the efficacy of these philosophical notions. Moreover, there is infinite self-development, in that with each individual and that individual's comprehension of the philosophical tradition, that tradition will be determined anew, just as the already conceived conversely determines that individual and that individual's comprehension.⁶

Given the infinity and universality of these notions, then, why have different philosophical traditions come up with different notions and outlooks on life at all? Here, it will be illuminating to look at how Wang Yangming apprehended these notions in relation to the traditions of Daoism and Buddhism that were of great influence and appeal during his lifetime.

Wang Yangming and the Three Teachings

In the words of Wing-Tsit Chan, while Wang's "attitude toward Buddhism was not as hostile as that of other Neo-Confucians, his criticism of it is nonetheless severe" (Wang 1963, xxxvii). Yet it is noteworthy how Wang's criticism is structured. In brief, Wang thinks of the Buddhists and the Daoists as misunderstanding themselves. He does not conceive of them as different cultural or philosophical traditions which have their own content and their own notions to grasp that content. Instead, he thinks of these "heterodox" traditions as speaking to the very same fundamental reality to which he is speaking.

As he remarks:

The Taoist talk about vacuity is motivated by a desire for nourishing everlasting life, and the Buddhist talk about non-being is motivated by the desire to escape from the sorrowful sea of life and death. In both cases certain selfish ideas have been added to the original substance [of the mind], which thereby loses the true character of vacuity and is obstructed. (ibid., sec. 269)

6 In an insightful paper, Zhao Dongming (2015) has addressed infinity as a paradigmatic motive of and interpretive key to *xinxue*. Contrasting with the notion of infinity I propose here, Zhao understands infinity in *xinxue* through a sort of decisionism by virtue of which some eminent individual "chooses to be determined by a certain aspect of her being" in her striving for the infinite (Zhao 2015, 78). For Zhao, the infinite moral mind is ultimately a projection of *xinxue* philosophers and of performative significance: "Yet the real subject of *xinxue* is not what the Neo-Confucians of the Lu-Wang school believed it to be, i.e. the infinite mind, but rather is revealed in their inauguration of the discourse of *xinxue* and its various discursive activities, and in the subsequent moral practice brought about by this discourse" (ibid., 93).

Wang stresses that “[t]here is but one innate knowledge (*liangzhi*)”. The “two methods”, his “extension of knowledge (*zhizhi*)” and “what the Buddhists called ‘Be always alert,’ that is, always preserve one’s original state” are “[i]n broad outline [...] about the same”. Yet “[i]f we already understand clearly what innate knowledge is, there is no longer any need of recognizing one’s original state as the Buddhists have advocated” (*ibid.*, sec. 162).

At the end of the day, Wang is a Confucian, and there will thus necessarily be disagreement or collision with the Buddhist and Daoist perspectives. This is not the interesting point, which is that he does not think of these perspectives as particular finite philosophical traditions that stand incommensurably next to each other. On the contrary, they are colliding precisely in that they speak to the same fundamental reality, and this we can acknowledge even from within the Confucian perspective. Hence, even without agreeing with Wang on the superiority of his teaching, we can still take up the insight that the object and standard of philosophical truth is one, since it will irreducibly be the one attained and expressed by an individual. Yet this individual perspective must deal with perspectives other than its own. It does this not by giving them the status of self-contained finite particular philosophical traditions that can be put to the side and not bothered with, as this would be to deal with them as something dead. Rather, the individual will understand these perspectives as perspectives on one and the same reality. As such, it is unsurprising that one will necessarily find moments of one’s own thought in the other and moments of the other’s thought in one’s own. For Wang, Daoist “vacuity [of the mind]” and Buddhist “non-being [of the mind]” (*ibid.*, sec. 269) are not given contents existing out there, separate from his teaching of *liangzhi*. That is to say, *liangzhi* lives through them. It is just that, for Wang, Daoists and Buddhists have not reached full comprehension of what they themselves are already proposing.

The idea that Wang’s teaching lives through Daoist and Buddhist notions and is not separate from them comes out in his rejection of the metaphor of the tripartite hall and his embrace of the shared all-encompassing hall that appear in his *nianpu* 年譜 (chronological biography). This illustrative imagery implies that these traditions are not self-contained finite contents that could be placed independently next to each other. Wang replies to a disciple that the practices of the Daoists and the Buddhists are entailed by his own practice (*er shi zhi yong, jie wo zhi yong* 二氏之用，皆我之用), and that it was only later Confucians who did not comprehend the learning of the sage to its full extent and thus regard Daoism and Buddhism to be opposing views (*dan houshi ruzhe bujian sheng xue zhi quan, gu yu er shi cheng er jian er* 但後世儒者不見聖學之全，故與二氏成二見耳). Thus, contrasting with later scholarship on Neo-Confucianism, Wang

himself did not think of the impact of Buddhism on his own tradition as a crucial turning point. Rather, to think of Buddhism as an entirely alien and separate philosophical content from what was already conceived in the Confucian tradition is a misunderstanding put forward by later proponents of that tradition.

Wang's criticism goes precisely against those who think of these philosophical traditions as entirely separable. They do not see that "these three parts form one single hall together" (*san jian gong wei yi ting* 三間共為一廳). Those "Confucians do not know that he is using all of them" (*ru zhe buzhi jie wo suoyong* 儒者不知皆我所用). They only conceive of "the Buddha's teaching [for itself] and then cut out the part on the left and give it to it" (*jian fo shi ze ge zuobian yi jian yu zhi* 見佛氏則割左邊一間與之). Likewise, they conceive of "Laozi's teaching [for itself] and then cut out the part on the right and give it to it" (*jian lao shi ze ge youbian yi jian yu zhi* 見老氏則割右邊一間與之). Moreover, "they themselves reside in the middle" (*er ji ze zi chu zhongjian* 而已則自處中間). Thereby, "they elevate one thing and discard a hundred others" (*jie ju yi er fei bai ye* 皆舉一而廢百也). It is this fragmentation that a notion of philosophy as living cannot accept.

Above, we saw Wang criticizing the Daoist and Buddhist lack of comprehension. Yet this does not prevent him from conceiving of "sages, heaven and earth, people and things as one body" (*shengren yu tiandi min wu tong ti* 聖人與天地民物同體) and from using Confucian teachings along with those by the Buddhists, Laozi and Zhuangzi (*ru, fo, lao, zhuang jie wu zhi yong* 儒、佛、老、莊皆吾之用). For Wang, "this is called the Great Way" (*shi zhi wei dadao* 是之謂大道). To narrowly look only at one's own tradition would precisely repeat the mistake that Wang sees these "heterodox" traditions as making. Even though Buddhism came to China from outside and arrived after Confucianism and Daoism had emerged, none of these teachings are self-contained contents alien to each other. Instead, each brings something out that has in one way or the other to some extent already been conceived in the other teachings. Strictly speaking, there is no heterodoxy. For him, "the Buddhist and the Daoist selfishly occupy themselves [only] with themselves" (*er shi zi si qi shen* 二氏自私其身). This attitude with regard to thinking of one's own teaching as self-contained and opposed to others he calls "the petty way" (*xiaodao* 小道) (Wang 1992, vol. 35, 1289). Hence, for Wang it is not so much that Buddhists, Daoists and some of his Confucian predecessors look at the wrong parts of the cosmos or have come up with the wrong notions. It is rather that they lack self-comprehension. In other words, they lack comprehension of what is implied in what they propose.

How do we enter this hall Wang describes? To stick to the metaphor, the key to a house is actually a key to the door, not to the house. We certainly cannot begin

with grasping the whole, but will necessarily first always occupy ourselves with a particular teaching, with something that is near to us. Yet the key is outside the house, otherwise it would not be the key. It cannot be some particular content of the transmission within the house that lets us enter it. For both Lu and Wang, the key is the individual, that is, we ourselves are the key. It is only through ourselves that we can enter the house. This focus on the individual does not describe the parochial character of living philosophy, but its opening up to infinity. Individuality and infinity are not opposites, but each is precisely only comprehensible through the other.

To sum up, for Lu in his remark on interpretation—and for Wang, in dealing with different philosophical traditions, be they our own or alien to us—we do not just accumulate knowledge about self-contained finite contents. We are not containers of philosophical knowledge. Rather, as individuals, we take part in an infinite process of the self-development and comprehension of philosophical truth happening within the collision and convergence of those traditions.

Conclusion

These reflections have aimed to give shape to a comprehension of philosophy as living. Firstly, they expound on the dynamic taking place with the collision among philosophical traditions, as recently illuminated by Diamond's contribution to a discussion on intercultural encounters. Diamond helpfully explains why the very notion of what is real is a contested one, and that there is no standard of philosophical truth outside of particular philosophical collisions in which that notion of what is real is at stake. The notion of what is real and the standard of philosophical truth live or move through such collisions of philosophical traditions. Hence, this dynamic is infinite in the sense of not being reducible to particular modes of thought or self-contained finite philosophical traditions. This infinite movement of living philosophy, this "process of creating something new", is perhaps best described by a notion of "sublation" which entails the moments of "arising, eliminating, and preserving" (Rošker 2021, 123–24). Secondly, by drawing from *xinxue*, it was shown how this dynamic extends even to the individual and its relation to philosophical transmission. The emphasis on the individual in *xinxue* is precisely not a turn towards the parochial, but an opening up to infinity.

Let me close with just one implication of the considerations propounded here. What comparative and intercultural philosophy can do is precisely not to judge the degree of universality by demonstrating mutual validation or exclusion among particular, finite philosophical traditions, but rather to show where and how philosophy originating in various cultures is already infinite, universal and

self-developing. To some, this might be tantamount to neglecting the very idea of the intercultural. In my view, however, the notion of philosophy as living proposed here is still intercultural in that it lives precisely through the collision and convergence of different philosophical traditions. Yet it is already transcultural in that the standard of philosophical truth in this dynamic goes precisely beyond particular modes of thought and self-contained finite philosophical traditions.

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