

# Translation as a Philosophical Method: A Postcomparative Take on the Universality-Particularity Tension

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## Abstract

The article aims for a critical reflection on the practices and methodology of the so-called comparative philosophy. It starts from an observation that the recent successful developments in comparative philosophy nevertheless have a very limited impact outside the discipline. The article argues that a specific universality-particularity tension is to blame. Because “comparison” as a method also inherently displays this tension, and thus cannot overcome it, the article suggests seeing translation as a method of philosophical thinking. It is argued that this constitutes a postcomparative take on universality-particularity tension and a postcomparative response to the need for a more culturally inclusive academic philosophy. The advantages of looking at translation as a core methodological stance in intercultural postcomparative philosophy are suggested.

**Keywords:** postcomparative philosophy, comparison, translation as method, universality, particularity

## Prevajanje kot filozofska metoda: postprimerjalni pogled na napetost med univerzalnostjo in posebnostmi

### Izveleček

Članek obravnava kritičen premislek o praksah in metodologiji tako imenovane primerjalne filozofije. Izhaja iz ugotovitve, da ima nedavni uspešen razvoj primerjalne filozofije kljub vsemu zelo omejen vpliv zunaj discipline. Avtor trdi, da je razlog za to posebna tenzija med univerzalnostjo in partikularnostjo. Ker »primerjalnost« kot metoda sama po sebi izkazuje to napetost in je zato ne more preseči, avtor predlaga, da bi na prevajanje gledali kot na metodo filozofskega mišljenja. To naj bi ustvarjalo postkomparativni pogled na tenzijo med univerzalnostjo in partikularnostjo ter postprimerjalni odgovor na potrebo po bolj kulturni vključitvi akademske filozofije. Predlagane so prednosti gledanja na prevajanje kot na osrednje metodološko stališče v medkulturni postkomparativni filozofiji.

**Ključne besede:** postkomparativna filozofija, primerjava, prevod kot metoda, univerzalnost, partikularnost

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## Introduction

In this paper I want to develop some of the ideas that I have raised in my previous article on this topic, where I was attempting to find an answer to a curious paradox: why, in the West, the success of the academic field of *comparative* philosophy has not yet translated into a significant diversification of the curricula of academic *philosophy*, leaving it almost entirely Eurocentric (Silius 2020)? In that article I looked at various intersections of academic disciplines that might be helpful to overcome the existing monocultural parochialism of academic philosophy in the West. I contended that both academic philosophy and comparative philosophy are contributing to the apparent homogeneity of philosophy departments in the West. Here I want to expand my arguments, mainly directing my attention to a critical self-reflection of scholarly practices and the methodological assumptions of the so-called comparative philosophy. This is an attempt to argue for much-needed changes and improvements that can conveniently be subsumed under the umbrella term of *postcomparative* philosophy.

Instead of directly responding to the invaluable critical amendments and friendly suggestions raised in a reply to my paper by Rošker (2020), I want instead to address the role that philosophy's "universalist thrust" plays in keeping the academic discipline of philosophy a mainly monocultural activity in the West, and why comparative philosophy fails to challenge it. And I want to continue questioning if "comparison" is the most adequate formulation of the method and the goal of philosophical investigations that are undertaken in the field. My main position in this paper can be formulated as two interrelated assertions:

1. At the heart of the continuing monoculturalism of academic philosophy, despite the significant achievements of comparative philosophy, is a poorly articulated and unresolved tension between the *universal* and the *articular*, which results in a cultural parochialism of philosophy and a disciplinary parochialism of comparative philosophy.
2. Both these parochialisms can be addressed with a better understanding and more creative use of the fundamental method of comparative philosophy—that is, *translation*. Consequently, I propose to look at translation as *a method of philosophical thinking*, one that comparative philosophers have all the tools needed to be exceptionally good at.

What I refer to here as a tension between the universal and particular in any type of philosophical analysis (or the "universality-particularity tension"), stems from the unclear procedure and questionable justification of taking up some particular position (idea, concept, category) and treating it—implicitly or explicitly—as a

universal one. In the first section, I will present the problem, explain its weakness and how it manifests. In the second section, I will argue that comparison as a method is itself susceptible to the universality-particularity tension, and therefore cannot overcome it, so translation as a method is suggested instead. In the third section, I spell out the particular understanding of translation that is at the heart of the translation-as-method suggestion. In the last section, translation-as-method is discussed as a unique approach in transcultural postcomparative philosophy, and some advantages of such a meta-methodological stance are suggested.

### The Limited Impact of Comparative Philosophy Outside the Field

As a way to highlight the problematic nature of the current state of the comparative philosophy in the English speaking academia—the limitations that I, admittedly, provocatively call the “disciplinary parochialism” of comparative philosophy—I want to start from an observation on the intersection of related academic disciplines resulting from my research in the field of ethics (moral philosophy).

Some 20 years ago anthropologists started the so-called “ethical turn” in their field, which is now a rapidly developing sub-filed of the anthropology of ethics<sup>1</sup>. Some of the central questions in this context are the meaning and definition of the concepts of ethics (or morality), and the role of a theory that it plays in ethical deliberations and actions in the everyday lives of people. It became increasingly apparent, that the mainstream established philosophical categories and frameworks in terms of the “Big 3” of utilitarians, deontologists, and virtue ethics did not fit particularly well and were not very useful, not only in terms of the study of non-Western people, but also in the study of the ordinary, everyday practices of any people, including Westerners (see, for example, Zigon 2008). To my surprise, to date in these discussions of anthropologists I have never seen any *comparative philosophers* or ideas coming from comparative philosophy be explicitly mentioned, despite the many similar concerns and overlapping interests of the two fields. For alternatives in understanding the concept of morality (or ethics), anthropologists have been looking to Hegel, Foucault, and sometimes Nietzsche (largely monocultural philosophers), or trying to redefine the concept of ethics themselves (in addition to Zigon 2008, see Howell 1997; Lambek 2010; Sidnell 2010; Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014). Why have none of the comparative philosophers attracted anthropologists’ attention? Is there something in how comparative philosophers

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1 For a short overview of the ethical turn in anthropology and how it relates to the field of moral philosophy, see Klenk (2019).

see and present themselves and in the way we do our scholarship that makes us virtually invisible to our colleagues outside the field?

It seems that the notable and significant achievements of comparative philosophy have not only so far failed to help the diversification of academic philosophy, but have also had a very limited impact on other related disciplines, at least in the field of ethics. I suggest that at the heart of this problem is a poorly articulated and unresolved tension between the *universal* and the *particular*, which results in a cultural parochialism of philosophy and a disciplinary parochialism of comparative philosophy. I will briefly recount how this tension manifests in philosophy generally, but it will be more important for my current purposes to demonstrate that comparative philosophy is especially susceptible to it.

The “universalist thrust”, as Baggini (2018) puts it, has many merits and yielded many positive results for philosophy, and is justly recognized as a distinctive characteristic of philosophical activity. However, it can only be successful if there is enough acknowledgment and account of multiple *particulars* that exist in the world. Today’s situation, however, is better described, paraphrasing Appiah, as parochialism posing as universalism,<sup>2</sup> when philosopher’s claims to universality come exclusively from within a single cultural or linguistic environment. This means that academic philosophy as a discipline remains in a largely unacknowledged *cultural parochialism*, which stems from the inability—or unwillingness—to see one’s own technical terminology, frameworks, and methodologies as “having a status of a folk model” (Strathern 1992, 119) in a larger setting of world cultures.

There could be at least two ways from within academic philosophy to correct this. A closer connection of academic philosophy with empirical sciences could enhance the possibility of a philosophy student being exposed to a multitude of cultural particulars. Such closer co-operation with empirical sciences can take the form of experimental philosophy (X-Phi), or could perhaps be facilitated by a stronger anthropological component to philosophical education and research. Arguing from anthropologists’ point of view, Strathern says that any researcher naturally draws from her cultural environment. However, “to be an expert in anthropology is to demonstrate simultaneously the cultural origins of one’s analytic constructs and their cross-cultural applicability” (1992, 119). Still, in academic philosophy the cross-cultural applicability of Western analytic constructs is too often assumed, rather than demonstrated.<sup>3</sup> A second way would be to rethink

2 Appiah criticized “Eurocentric hegemony posing as universalism” (1992, 58).

3 For a critical exposition of this point, see, for example, Berniūnas et al. (2021). The complicated disciplinary interrelations between philosophy and anthropology are a good illustration of the universalist-particularist tension that I am referring to. At least in research on ethics, some

the very concept of “universality” that presupposes “essences”. Certainly, a deeper, broader, thinner structure of world phenomena should interest a philosopher, a structure that overcomes the boundaries of a particular instance of any given phenomenon. However, it is entirely possible that other concepts—like “trans-cultural” or some neologisms, such as “homoversal” (Rosemont 2015)—would be more helpful in articulating that thrust of directing our gaze from our own “particular” into other “particulars” and, eventually, outside of any specific particular, without supposing any shared essential unchanging core, not to speak of imposing it as “universal” to everyone at any time.

To be sure, the tradition of addressing this universality-particularity tension from within academic philosophy is long and rich, and is beyond the scope of this paper. For my current purposes is more important to point out that the so-called comparative philosophy is no less vulnerable to problems stemming from the universality-particularity tension, especially when comparison is seen as the methodological axis of such research. For this reason, the ability of comparative philosophy to facilitate diversification of the academic philosophy is very limited. Much of comparative philosophy is either trying to stay strictly within its geographical and cultural limits, basically functioning as “China studies” rather than philosophy. In this way, it is fixating on the *particular*. Weber has pointed out this problem in the practice of what he called inclusionary exclusion, when comparative philosophy stresses “excessively the cultural embedding of the philosophical texts they study” thus doing “a disservice to the philosophical relevance” that most of the comparative philosophy aspires to (Weber 2013, 601). Or it is trying to adapt to questions, frameworks, and concept clusters of the “true” or “proper” philosophy—that is, allegedly, a non-local or a-cultural philosophy—thus unintentionally falling into the trappings of the “universalist thrust”. As a result, comparative philosophy often falls for the lure of only seemingly universal philosophical vocabulary and only seemingly universal categorizations. For example, the concepts of morals, virtues, motivations, or such categorical distinctions as the moral domain *versus* conventional or cultural domain, are mostly treated—without much empirical evidence—as psychological and/or linguistic universals, when they are in actuality fruits of a particular (Western) intellectual culture and tradition. In this way, comparative philosophy also fails to suggest the conceptual and theoretical alternatives needed in anthropology or psychology to

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anthropologists argue they should engage more with philosophers (Zigon 2007, 134). Others seem to suggest that it is the philosophers who need to take anthropologists’ “painstaking accounts of particular cultures, based on particular moral system” more seriously (Douglas 1983, 786). For an opposite view that anthropologists and philosophers don’t have much to learn from each other on the issues of ethics, see Claes (1990).

challenge the mainstream Western positions, when these are questioned within those disciplines.

This limited impact of comparative philosophy both onto *universality*-oriented academic philosophy and to *culturally* sensitive and empirically oriented other disciplines in humanities and social sciences is what I call the relative disciplinary parochialism of comparative philosophy. This disciplinary parochialism is reinforced by the limited ability of comparative philosophy to address and resolve the universality-particularity tension inherent within the discipline. To my mind, it shows that there is a need to rethink the methodological foundations, practices, and self-image of the so-called comparative philosophy.

### Methodological Difficulties in Comparative Philosophy

A strength of comparative philosophy is that it is a kind of cultural and philosophical hermeneutics committed to meeting the stranger, the Other, and it is usually done with an attitude of a “charitable interpretation”. It is most often the case that the comparative philosopher implicitly holds or explicitly promotes the view that such openness can and will enrich the views of her own culture. For example, Rosemont suggests that we must “allow the other their otherness” to be able to “allow for the possibility not only that we don’t have all the answers, but that we may not have been asking all the questions in as universal a vocabulary as has hitherto been presupposed” (2004, 51). The need for and possible advantages of the methodological and conceptual alternatives, and the understanding that these might come from culturally and linguistically very different environments, is also stressed by Rorty (see, for example, 1989b, 337).

However, this strength of the comparativist stance is not yet fully realized. Even when there is no explicit comparison, it is a usual practice in comparative philosophy to start from Western assumptions, concepts, and positions as a common (if not a universal) ground of analysis. This aspect has been discussed and criticized by Shun (2009) as an “asymmetry problem”, and I will not rehearse these arguments here. Instead, I contend that the problems exist not only in practice, but come from a more fundamental self-positioning of a comparative philosopher, that is, from her understanding of what one is doing and how one is doing it. To use Ralph Weber’s words (2013), these problems stem from a “meta-methodological issues” of comparative philosophy. In those cases when comparison is taken as a fundamental part or the method of comparative philosophy, it runs into methodological difficulties, inconsistencies, and contradictions. The use of comparison as the methodological axis of comparative philosophy cannot address nor solve

the inherent universality-particularity tension, because it runs into problems both intra-culturally and inter-culturally.

On the one hand, to compare one has to at least temporarily “freeze” the entities in question (concepts, ideas, texts, thinkers). So even if one agrees that, for example, concepts evolve and change, the process of comparison requires one, at least provisionally, to suspend and withhold (*epoché*) such fluidity. This results in an anachronistic treatment of concepts, ideas, or entire philosophical systems. A similar problem arises in the field of the history of ideas. Quentin Skinner (1969) makes some points about the process of understanding texts within Western culture (philosophy) that are extremely relevant for a comparative philosopher, in as much as the history of ideas is an integral part in formulating the ideas to be compared.

Skinner stresses that the history of thought demonstrates that there are no “timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies” (1969, 53). That by no means diminishes the value of the history of ideas, but rather helps to rearrange the direction of an investigation. As there is no one objectively verifiable unifying meaning of any text, there are no “perennial problems” or “universal truths” (*ibid.*, 50), neither can there be universally describable “timeless concepts” that such ideas could be expressed with. As Skinner insists, “There are only individual answers to individual questions” (*ibid.*). Any statement on the part of the comparer, following Skinner, “is inescapably the embodiment of a particular intention, on a particular occasion, addressed to the solution of a particular problem, and thus specific to its situation in a way that it can only be naive to try to transcend” (*ibid.*). It is thus one of the modes of how the universality-particularity tension manifests itself, this time intra-culturally:<sup>4</sup> which of the particular expressions throughout the history of a concept should one take as some sort of common (universal or unifying) expression to use in comparison?

The implication of this problem for Skinner is not that the history of ideas is not possible. It means that the history of ideas most meaningfully functions not as a recovery of the (previously) established meaning, but as a platform and context for the creation of new meaning. History, in Skinner’s view, “provides a lesson in self-knowledge” (1969, 53). Anticipating our later argument about *translation* as a method of philosophical thinking, we can claim together with Andrew Benjamin

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4 A similar point has been made by Rorty in his critical discussion of inter-cultural comparison: “Everybody who has ever compared a Western with a non-Western writer has done so by reference to a conceptual scheme, one drawn up to reflect his or her particular purposes, according to a principle of individuation tailor-made for those purposes” (1989b, 334).

(1989, 60) that the “practice of history involves translation because it concerns the re-expression of that which is past in the language of the present”.

On the other hand, once the object of comparison is set, there is also a need to set a common ground regarding the two positions (cultures or traditions) that are compared. Arguing from a political science perspective, Behr and Roesh point out that in intercultural comparisons there is a “need of initial and hence necessarily universalized epistemological categories to start with” (2010, 73). They note that, according to Aristotle, we need a *tertium comparationis*, “a third component of comparison which comprises those elements which the phenomena to compare have in common”, and which “thus founds the comparative method and guarantees comparability” (ibid., 76n1). At the same time, they point out that Aristotle “reminds us in Book I of his *Politics* (*Politeia*) that every research has to start with what is familiar and knowable to the researcher” (ibid., 75). Thus, Behr and Roesh seem to suggest that intercultural comparison already runs the risk of “epistemological imperialism” at the level of the methodology of comparison, because we have to start from a universalization that *ab initio* is only an expression of the limited viewpoint of the particular comparer.

Ralph Weber has also discussed methodological issues of comparison as a problem of *tertium comparationis*, or, in his words “the third of comparison” which helps to determine and conceptualize “what we compare with what, and in what respect it is done” (2014, 151; also see 2013). According to Weber, this denotes a point of commonality, the necessity of which in comparative studies “is usually taken for granted” (2014, 153). However, the theoretical grounds or the procedure of choice of such *tertium comparationis* is far from obvious. Even if one abandons ambition or doesn’t even claim the necessity of a completely objective and neutral way of doing that, the comparison framework does not seem to have a way to explain what is the nature of the relationship between the two particular positions to be compared (the *comparata*), and the third position (the *tertium comparationis*). As Weber’s analysis has convincingly shown, the common position has to be pre-assumed by the comparer (Weber called it a *pre-comparative tertium comparationis* (2014, 162)). This leaves comparison open to the criticism that the procedure for choosing the *tertium* is not explicit but is subjective, and therefore the results are open to manipulation and lack legitimacy. In a way, one can claim that the process of *pre-comparative tertium* and the results of comparison constitute circular reasoning that depends on the comparer, whose role, intentions, intuitions, and so on are not integrally accounted or sufficiently explicated within the field of comparative philosophy. The concept of *pre-comparative tertium* has helped Weber to argue against incomparability, but the problem of taking a particular as “universal” remains.



These critical reflections and an apparent dissatisfaction with “comparativism” as a meta-methodological stance highlight the necessity of rethinking the methodology of comparative philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Any philosophy or any way of thinking is indeed comparative in some sense, and thus the problems raised by Weber and others are important for all philosophical activity. But the extent of historical, cultural, and linguistic differences among distant cultures make it obvious that the theoretical and methodological issues with “comparison” hit comparative—that is, intercultural—philosophy harder than the monocultural version. One might argue that clinging to comparison as a meta-methodological stance weakens rather than strengthens comparative philosophy. It fails to give a solid ground and methodological clarity for intercultural philosophy, one that takes as its object of investigation sources from culturally and linguistically very distant cultures.

Despite some theoretical and methodological suggestions that philosophical comparison does not depend on “having some common measure or standard between and above the compared parts” (Zhang Xianglong, quoted from Weber 2014, 154n8), the opposite view is a much more widely held position. Rošker emphasizes that the “methodological problems within the general socio-political epistemology” are especially acute when one is dealing with the understanding of “terms and concepts, which have been raised in ‘alien’ cultures”, at which point “people are always confronted with a need for objectivity that could allow them to establish universally valid valuation criteria” (Rošker 2012, 29). However, Rorty bluntly states that we have to abandon the idea that what we call “philosophizing” should aspire at getting at “our common humanity” (Rorty 1989b, 337). Even less, it seems, can we hope to justify our understanding or comparison on anything objective or universal in any workable sense of these terms that wouldn’t be so abstractly and thinly framed as to make them “foolishly and needlessly naive”, as Skinner has put it (1969, 50). Rorty maintained that the most productive way would be to see “the people who read puzzling books in exotic languages” as those who are “occasionally and unpredictably *coming up* with suggestions about how to *renew* our sense of wonder and novelty” (1989b, 337; emphasis added). Thus, the question should be—is there an epistemological framework that requires us to listen to the culturally Other in our philosophical aspirations for the “tiny enlargements of our current horizon” (ibid.)—as comparative studies do—without first necessarily assuming any commonality (universality, objectivity), as the inner logic of comparison seems to require?

I propose that such an epistemological framework is *translation*. Consequently, I propose to look at translation *as a method of philosophical thinking*, a method that

5 On the other hand, Weber points out that not all comparativists see the need for theoretical explication of comparison and that “comparative philosophy” has thus far shown little concern for the notion of ‘comparison’ (2014, 154n8).

is unique to comparative philosophy as its basic meta-methodological stance. In other words, I suggest seeing everything that we do in comparative philosophy as a *translation*. For the theoretical basis for seeing *translation as a method*, I will now turn to the views on translation, thought, philosophy, and intersections of these, in the texts of Schleiermacher (2012 [1813]), Walter Benjamin (1997 [1923]), Steiner (1975), and Ricoeur (2006).<sup>6</sup>

## Translation as a Progressive Transformational Creation of Meaning

Translation is a familiar practice in humanities in general, and in academic philosophy in particular, especially for those who come from cultures with smaller languages. Most philosophers do (and publish) translations of texts, or translate quotes and concepts to cite in their academic writings. Even more so, translation is so fundamental, so basic for any comparative philosopher in the West, that we rarely—if ever—notice that translation is not only something that we *do* but also the way of *how* we do what we do (as philosophers, we think and argue). I thus suggest seeing translation not only as a technical act of rendition of a particular text from a source to a target language but rather see “translation” *as a method of philosophical thinking*. Such a view implies that any study, research, interpretation, elucidation is—in the heart of it—a process of *translation*. There is a certain mode of thinking and speaking (in words or writing) that is necessarily present in the process of translation of texts. A conscious application of this mode would be a helpful methodological attitude in what we usually call comparative philosophy (and by extension any philosophy). I am also certain that at least some of the practical techniques of translation studies would be useful adaptations in philosophical thinking. While I completely agree with a common claim that every translation is an interpretation, here I want to explicate the idea that every interpretation (in terms of analysis or explanation) is a translation.

Note that I do not suggest any brand new methodology here. Rather, I suggest a somewhat novel explication of what we are already doing, as a different meta-methodological stance of comparative philosophy, one that is especially strongly felt in its postcomparative approach. If as philosophers we want to better grasp a human condition, to see our process of *Verstehen* and *Erklären* in terms of translation, could give us great advantages, an important—but not the only—part of which would be its ability to resolve the aforementioned universality-particularity

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<sup>6</sup> A similar suggestion to see “translation as method” has been recently made by Diagne (2022) in a volume that was not yet available at the time of finalizing this paper. I was not yet able to study Diagne’s arguments, but it seems that we using a different set of authors to support our views.

tension. As we are already doing it, we should do it more consciously, more consistently, and more assertively.

As the understanding of translation (in theory and practice) has gone through many different phases, we first have to lay out some particular understanding of it that would be fitting as a meta-methodological stance in the postcomparative practice of intercultural philosophy.

In the most general terms, translation is a transposition of ideas from their given native intellectual environment to any other environment. This is very well captured in the German term for translation itself, *Übersetzung*, which literally means “positioning across” or “beyond”, but also means “transformation”. As Steiner (1975) puts it, “The schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process”. We usually think of this schemata as involving two different mutually unintelligible languages. However, as Steiner notes, “the same model—and this is what is rarely stressed—is operative within a single language” (ibid.). Whyatt cites a seminal division of translation by Jakobson into three kinds: interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic, pointing out that it “showed the extremely wide scope of reformulating meaning into different forms and for different receivers” (Whyatt 2017, 176). Translation is a constant and ever-present mode of human cognition. It is essentially a type of activity that all academic philosophers and other academic scholars in the humanities and social sciences engage even in their intralingual exchanges when we use “reformulation, rewording, or paraphrasing” (ibid.).

This all-encompassing nature of translation as a mode of cognition is clearly stated by Walter Benjamin when he notes that “translation is a mode” (*Übersetzung ist eine Form* (Benjamin 1997, 152)). Benjamin does not explicate that concept of *mode* (*Form*), but we can gather, he means a *mode of existence* of a text (or of a thought, an idea, a concept). It is the existence that is marked by transformations, it survives because of transformations, and it aspires for transformation.<sup>7</sup> Translation is thus a mode of thinking, and we do and have to do it daily, even if we do not meet any foreigners. Schleiermacher notes this ever-present need for translation when he exclaims: “Yea, are we not often compelled to translate for ourselves the utterances of another who, though our compeer, is of different opinions and sensibility?” (2012, 43) Moreover, even when we do not meet any people there is a translation process involved when we rethink our previous thoughts, to “make them truly our own again” (ibid.). As such translation as a cognitive mode

7 For Benjamin, one sense of the question about work’s translatability is whether “it *allows* itself to be translated, and hence—in accord with the meaning of this mode—also *calls* for translation” (1997, 152; emphasis added).

is so universal that it is present not only in dialogue with others but even in our subjective thought process when a *particular* idea that forms in *my* consciousness (thinking) is translated into a discourse of *shared* meanings in my speech or writing. As George Steiner said: to “understand is to translate” (1975).

An important part of thinking about translation as a method of philosophical thinking for our purposes has to be the possibility to avoid relying on some *pre-assumed* universals, or essences and shared meanings, as these can only be our own and thus particular. That would immediately throw us back into the universality-particularity tension. And indeed, the traditional theory of translation would make a similar assumption about the existence of some essence of the original text that the translation is supposed to recover.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, it is argued that some universal conceptual scheme has to be assumed to explain how translation—from seemingly one conceptual scheme to a seemingly completely different one—is at all possible. Davidson (1973), for example, seems to be compelled to assume the existence of such a common system to make sense of the fact that we are translating each others’ ideas across languages and cultures. But, as Andrew Benjamin notes, such an assumption of a foundational commonality (universality) is also driven by a rejection of relativism as supposedly the only alternative: “relativism is only avoided because the assumption of some type of universality precludes such an eventuality” (1989, 80). However, Andrew Benjamin is right when he points out that such a position runs into problems similar to those that we already saw in Skinner’s critical assessment of the history of ideas. This is done at the expense of abstraction to the point of impracticality, which Skinner called “foolishly and needlessly naive” (1969, 50). In Andrew Benjamin’s words: “universality in Davidson’s system has the same mode of existence as nature in Kant’s. The mode is the groundless ground” (1989, 80). Moreover, such a conception of universality grows “increasingly abstract as problems are posed for it” (*ibid.*, 81). Thus, such a traditional theory of translation cannot serve our needs for translation-as-method, as it is also an expression of the universality-particularity tension.

Walter Benjamin suggests an alternative and very different vision of what is strived for and achieved in translation. He agrees that translation is “essential to certain works” (1997, 153), but on his account this translatability is not inherent in some essential meaning expressed in the original work, and it is not granted by any universal conceptual scheme that precedes the very act of translation. Instead, translatability is the function of a “specific significance inherent in the original

8 Walter Benjamin calls such traditional view a “dead theory of translation” (1997, 155–56). For a more in-depth critical discussion, also see Andrew Benjamin (1989, especially Ch. 1 and 3).

texts” (ibid.). That “significance” (*Bedeutung*)<sup>9</sup> is the vitality and openness to transformations grasped in the great works. Benjamin captures that vitality and openness in a neologism of his, the concept of *Fortleben*, or the “continuing life” of the text (or a thought, or an idea, or a concept).<sup>10</sup> Benjamin explicitly states that when he talks about the life and continuing life (*Leben und Fortleben*) of works of art, he does so “with completely unmetaphorical objectivity” (ibid.). This basically means that in translation meanings are not recovered and re-expressed with the utmost fidelity to an original, but instead that meanings are reformulated, extended, and, thus, created.

Moreover, the extension and reformulation of the meanings do not only come down in the form of translation, that is, in a newly produced text. This process also affects, in the most literal and straightforward sense, the original itself that precedes the translation (in some cases) by centuries or even millennia. In Benjamin’s words,

No translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity to the original. For in its continuing life [*Fortleben*], which could not be so called if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the *original is changed*. (Benjamin 1997, 155; emphasis added)

For Benjamin, the great texts do not *survive* by staying intact (*Überleben*), but rather continue their forward development, maintain their meaning-generating capabilities in their *Fortleben*, that assures and produces changes and transformations both in source, and in target languages: “translation is, of all modes, precisely the one called upon to mark the after-ripening [*Nachreife*] of the alien word, and the birth pangs of its own” (ibid., 156). There is always some indeterminacy and potency in the original. And the original text can keep changing and generating new meanings, because “Meaning is not *in* symbols. Meaning is in people”, as the view from contemporary cognitive science attests (Alves and Jakobsen 2020, 7).<sup>11</sup>

9 This also means importance, relevance, and meaning in German.

10 See Disler (2011) for a critical assessment of a previously common “mistranslation”, as she puts it, of Benjamin’s *Fortleben* in terms of “afterlife”. I follow Steven Rendall’s translation of the term as “continuing life”.

11 The same idea is expressed by Ricoeur: “each of our words has more than one meaning, as we see in the dictionaries. We call that *polysemy*. The meaning is thus defined each time *through usage*” (2006, 26; the latter emphasis added). A similar notion is also formulated in other areas of psychology and cognitive sciences. For example, Feldman Barrett (2017) suggests that emotions are constructed each time at each instance of sensing, rather than being built-in, universal, and triggered, as the classical view of emotion has suggested.

Such a dynamic and progressive nature of translation, one that is seen as the creation of new meanings, expansion of language and mind, is also attested by others. Andrew Benjamin starts his book about the relationship between translation and philosophy with the following succinct statement: “Translation is an act. It is also an enactment” (1989, 1). As such, translation is a deeply philosophical activity that strives to understand and explain, and through this translation also *creates*. As Walter Benjamin notes, good translations are more than “transmissions of a message” (1997, 154). In a way, they are “creative conjectures” (Steiner 1975) that we should boldly and enthusiastically embrace. For this reason, “Even the greatest translation is destined to be taken up into the growth of its language and perish as a result of its renewal” (Benjamin 1997, 156). But that allows us a constant expansion not only of our linguistic expressions but also of our understanding of ourselves and the world. As Alves and Jakobsen note

Thinking about translation takes us to the core of some of the toughest philosophical questions about how we experience and know the world, how we build the assumptions by which we interact with other people and our environment, how we develop cognitive skills like communicating and speaking, and how we manage to understand each other across language barriers and cultural and personal differences by means of translation. (Alves and Jakobsen 2020, 5)

This is precisely the understanding of translation which is at the heart of my suggestion to see translation as a philosophical method<sup>12</sup>: an active, dynamic, and progressive change of form in formulation and expansion of the new meaning that doesn’t have to assume any pre-given *universal* (essential, common) core, but rather openly commits to the creation of new *particular* meanings.

## Translation-as-Method in Postcomparative Philosophy

Throughout the paper, I have suggested looking at translation as *a* unique method of comparative philosophy or, rather, what I then—after adopting such (self) identification—would like to call *postcomparative* philosophy. However, it is not a claim that translation is exclusively characteristic of postcomparative thought. The uniqueness of translation-as-method in such a postcomparative take on philosophy comes not from being employed only by the so-called comparative philosophers. After all, both translation and comparison permeate all philosophical

12 For a position similar in spirit, but somewhat different in its objectives, suggesting that we adopt translation as a method in philosophy education, see Saito (2007) and Ruitenbergh (2009).

activity, as these are basic cognitive functions. Its uniqueness comes from a particular way in which comparative philosophers stand in relation to translation. Rorty has noted that

interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things. (Rorty 1989a, 9)

A “comparative” philosopher is especially exposed to the pressures of such a contest of vocabularies, and the need and difficulty of translation, as she is dealing with vastly different concepts (or traditions) that often do not have any (significant) shared cultural or linguistic background. In other words, so-called comparative philosophy is by definition multilingual, just as a comparative philosopher is a multilingual philosopher.

Schleiermacher remarked that the further languages are removed from one another in

etymology and years, the more it will be seen that not a single word in one language will correspond perfectly to a word in another, nor does any pattern of declensions in the one contain precisely the same multiplicity of relationships as in another. (Schleiermacher 2012, 46)

This point is quite obvious and (probably) widely accepted in comparative philosophy. The comparativists are those who—by the nature of their object of study—are among those philosophers who are the most exposed to the inescapable nature of translation (or the primacy of translation). As Ricoeur notes, “The pretensions to self-sufficiency, the refusal to allow the foreign mediate, have secretly nourished numerous linguistic ethnocentrism” (2006, 4). The same can be said about much of academic philosophy in the West, as maintaining a sort of philosophical “ethnocentrism” in the form of Eurocentric philosophy well into the 21st century. Comparative philosophy in this regard is more akin to anthropology, which makes the aforementioned virtual invisibility between the two disciplines even more bizarre. As Macdonald points out,

Anthropology, as a discourse of disparate cultural communities, has always been concerned with translating the minds and behaviors of individuals and collectives within one culture, across to those from another context. (Macdonald 2020, 91)

Translation that is done by comparativists—compared to that done by monolingual and monocultural philosophers—requires more rigor, as most often there is no shared etymology or inherited common tradition between the philosophical terminologies in question. Thus, even if we have not yet explicitly formulated how translation *as* method works, comparativists inherently have their ideas and practices that could be potentially spelled out and generalized (to a certain reasonable extent) as a method of postcomparative philosophical thinking. I cannot flesh out the translation-as-method idea in practical details here—this is an objective for other time and place—but I will now turn to the formulation of the possible advantages of doing so.

First of all, translation-as-method has a way to reconceptualize and reframe the relation between the universal and particular, possibly relieving at least some of the aforementioned universality-particularity tension, something that comparison-as-method cannot. As *tertium comparationis* analysis has shown, comparison's inner logic requires the third part—the common ground on the basis of which we compare—to be assumed in advance. It cannot explain how (and with what justification) that third that is just another *particular* perspective could reliably claim the status of the *universal*. The classical theory of translation, on the one hand, has its version of the pre-assumed “third” in the form of essential meanings, timeless concepts, or universal conceptual schemes. On the other hand, translation theory has demonstrated methodological resources to eliminate the need for such assumptions. Translation does not have to assume commonality to exist *before* the act of translation. It didn't merely explain away or avoid the methodological and theoretical problem of the third. It fundamentally changed the direction of the thought process. Translation, understood in terms of Schleiermacher, Walter Benjamin, Steiner, and Ricoeur, is a method of thought that doesn't have to assume commonality to exist *before* the act of translation. Translation explains and facilitates transcending the *particular*, turning one *particular* into another *particular*, but one that creatively encompasses the previous, thus overstepping its limits and *constitutes* the shared—or the common, the transcultural, if not a “universal”—that did not necessarily exist before.

This is also true on the intercultural level, as seen when Chen Shaoming (2015) talks about Yan Fu's impact on developing contemporary Chinese philosophy and stresses his ground-breaking work in translating famous works and fundamental categories of Western science. In this context, Chen presents an interesting idea that he does not develop further, but which is very important in thinking in terms of translation-as-method. Particularly, he points at translation's role in implementing philosophy's universalist thrust—that is, the quest for transcending the limitations of one time and place, the limitations of particularity. As Chen writes of Yan



Fu: “The impact of his work is far-reaching. In the end, what probably was only a *particular* form of Western learning (西学) he turned into a form of knowledge and methodology with a *universal* significance”<sup>13</sup> (2015, 46; emphasis added).

Secondly, the translation-as-method approach facilitates the conscious creation of new philosophical positions out of the ideas or concepts under comparison, which I have been associating with a postcomparative (or fusion philosophy, transcultural philosophy) stance (see Silius 2020, 267–72), while also retaining the openness to the cultural and linguistic Other. Translation-as-method gives a good framework of how a multilingual, multicultural philosopher can contribute to the process of formulating questions that have not been formulated before or proposing solutions to the problems that have not been solved. Whereas comparison is a closed-ended activity in that it is retrospective, translation is open-ended and prospective. The tendency to essentialize the living nature of language by dealing with concepts and ideas (at least for the purpose of comparison) as relatively static and historically settled (the *comparanda*), is transformed in a translation-as-method approach into an instigation to reformulate and create new vocabularies better fitting a new reality. If comparison-as-method has to rely on the assumed commonality (*tertium comparationis*), translation-as-method openly admits to *creating* commonality by expanding the limits of language and mind. This idea is akin to what Macdonald called reasoning *towards* generalizations:

Translation in this discussion has been used to illustrate the implausibility of the universalist approach that takes its standards for categorizing phenomena from a limited collection of linguacultures. Yet, by the same token, the attentive description of languages enables reasoning towards more general principles that do make certain translation options more suitable than others for a given target audience context. (Macdonald 2020, 98)

When Ricoeur, following in the steps of Schleiermacher and Walter Benjamin, rejects the idea that translatability between the two texts must be granted by some allegedly pre-existent (but in reality non-existent) common “third” text, he points out that to overcome that seeming paradox and daunting trappings of radical and toxic relativism, one has simply to turn to the creative powers of people and to rely on their creativity: “there is only one recourse, i.e. the critical reading of a few, if not polyglot then at least bilingual, specialists” (Ricoeur 2006, 7). Postcomparative philosophy could mark that area of philosophical thinking where this polyglot

13 其工作的后果影响深远，最终是把原本可能只是特殊形态的西学，变成具有普遍意义的知识与方法。

expertise is taken to formulate positions about the human condition that would have transcultural validity. In a way, it makes a postcomparative philosophy just that—just philosophy. But a just philosophy has to be *just* to the cultural and linguistic variety of this world, and can only be so in as much as it is global and inclusive.<sup>14</sup>

Comparative philosophy has always set as its goal the ability to foster and maintain openness to the Other. And the translation-as-method approach of postcomparative philosopher retains this openness. As Benjamin notes, translation is “a preliminary way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages to each other” (1997, 157). This can be done by producing and retaining that ideal state of the translator’s mind, in which, according to Schleiermacher’s view “the spirit remains receptive even to what is most unlike itself” (2012, 44). At the same time, translation also fosters a self-critical stance towards one’s language and culture. Walter Benjamin favourably cites Rudolf Pannwitz, who claims that a translator “must broaden and deepen his own language through the foreign one” (1997, 164). This sentiment is echoed in Ricoeur when he argues for “the ambition of de-provincializing the mother tongue, which is invited to think of itself as one language amongst others, ultimately to see itself as foreign” (2006, 9).

Thirdly, looking at translation as a method of philosophical postcomparative thinking opens up rich resources of translation studies for rigorous explication and refinement of methods in intercultural postcomparative philosophy. One of the problems that Weber (2013; 2014) points out is that there is no philosophy of comparison. So there is a lack of study and understanding of what comparison is and how it functions, and what is achievable with it. Weber critiques “the frequent but mistaken assumption that “what comparison is’ is sufficiently obvious that it requires little further attention” (2013, 599). In contrast, translation studies is a wide and diverse field that might be immensely helpful in trying to come to terms, paraphrasing Hans P. Krings, with “what goes on in comparative philosophers’ head?” (in Chesterman 2020, 25).

To sum up, looking at translation as a crucial and fundamental philosophical method of postcomparative philosophy does not require abolishing comparison as an important and, in fact, integral part of the field. Translation is fundamental because we have to translate before we can compare. On the other hand, translation is fundamental, because it fully integrates whatever comparison is as a method (or, rather, an instrument). Translation, in this sense, is a fruitful comparison.

I would like to close with a short comment on the term postcomparative itself,

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14 I have borrowed this idea about the double meaning of “just philosophy” from Chakrabarti and Weber (2022).

which is still a contested term within the comparativist field. I believe that this term has its place—not that so as marking a historical overcoming, and definitely not as a rejection of comparative philosophy (or comparison in general). Rather, I see it as indicating a certain web of specific attitudes, approaches, and methods, to work past comparison of seemingly discrete particulars (Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy, Aristotle and Kongzi, and so on) and to construct new comparables, that is, new philosophical positions oriented at the present issues and challenges. Comparative philosophy has had such postcomparative thinkers before (Graham, Fingarette, Rosemont, etc.), and has them now. Thus, the term postcomparative is not a call to arms and revolution, but rather an invitation to the discipline to engage in self-reflection, to strive for a better understanding of the particular strengths of the discipline, and the wider impact on a truly transcultural philosophical quest for realization of the human condition. So I see the term postcomparative as sort of a mnemonic device to remind oneself of a direction or to locate within the existing field that which seems to me as *philosophically* the most productive positions.

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