The Challenges of Incommensurability to Comparative Philosophy

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The talk is intended to show that the issue of incommensurability of two scientific languages / theories as discussed by Thomas Kuhn and others in the philosophy of science can be fruitfully applied to and shed light on comparative philosophy.

Comparative study between Western and Chinese philosophy has become a new trend of philosophical fashion of 21st century. The recent success of many fruitful comparative studies between Western Philosophy and Chinese philosophy seems, for many comparative philosophers, has put the threat of cultural relativism to the viability of comparative philosophy to rest. Does cultural relativist conviction--that is, there are incommensurable conceptual and cultural schemes through which distinct cultures construct their own worlds and which inevitably lead to the cross-cultural communication breakdown between them--no longer pose a mortal threat to the viability of comparative philosophy? I tend to believe otherwise and intend to show here that the incommensurability between the two cultural/intellectual traditions continues to impede the effort of comparative philosophy.

My suspension with the viability of comparative philosophy between two radically distinct cultural/intellectual traditions, like Western and Chinese philosophy, starts with the unavailability of two semantic foundations of comparative philosophy: one is effective cross-cultural communication between two cultural-languages communities, the other the semantic comparability of two cultural-languages. Based on my presuppositional interpretation of the thesis of incommensurability as cross-(scientific) language communication breakdown, effective cross-language communication between Chinese and Western cultural-language communities is inevitably partial due to substantially distinct cultural schemes embedded within both cultural traditions. More precisely, there are two special forms of incommensurability faced by those comparative philosophers, namely, the failure of mutual understanding and effective communication breakdown. Consequently, comparative philosophy between two radically distinct cultural-language communities is severely compromised. Rational comparison between them is problematic, difficult, and even seems in some measure unattainable.

Does this mean that rational comparison between the two radically distinct cultural-languages is impossible? In contrast with semantic comparison between commensurable languages, I have argued elsewhere that the dominant semantic relation between two incommensurable cultural-languages is the truth-value functional. When the cultural schemes of two competing
cultural-languages are incompatible, the two languages are incommensurable. Nevertheless, it is exactly this incompatibility between the cultural-schemes of two cultural-languages that sets a foundation for presuppositional comparison needed for comparative philosophy.

**Kuhnian Turn in Scientific Rationality**

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Kuhn was critical about the once-mainstream formal approaches to theory evaluation, particularly logical empiricists' probabilistic confirmation theories and Popper's falsification theory. Alternatively, he offered a procedure of theory choice based on scientific values, and took one of its main merits to be that it allows for rational disagreement among scientists in theory choice. However, his values-based mechanism for theory choice tends to imply that any theory choice made by scientists be taken to be rational. I call this radical implication the problem of excessive methodological liberalism. Another difficulty with Kuhn's values-based mechanism of theory choice is that it seems to have a hard time in answering the question of how scientists can and do converge in their theory choice throughout scientific revolutions. I call this difficulty the consensus problem. My diagnosis is that the lack of methodological constraints on individual scientists' practicing scientific values is mainly responsible for both problems. To deal with these problems, I argue for a revisionary reading of Kuhn's values-based mechanism for theory choice. In my revisionary reading, I suggest that the strategies of methodological divergence or convergence and their associated tactics of adjusting the weightings of scientific values need to be adopted in due time as methodological constraints, and those strategies and tactics will contribute to resolving the problem of excessive methodological liberalism and the consensus problem, while maintaining the advantage of Kuhn's original view in handling the problem of producing rational disagreement in theory choice. Further I lay out two important implications such revisionary reading seems to have on the nature of scientific rationality and in turn of scientific methodology. One is that the rationality of scientific community in theory choice is prior to that of individual scientists. And the other is that what I call a soft methodology results from my revisionary reading.

**Progress across revolutionary change in science**

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Since the demise of logical empiricism in the 1970s, it has remained unclear what is preserved through major theoretical changes in science, and whether there is anything like scientific progress. There are two arguments for this conclusion. One is the pessimistic
induction that all theories in the past have been found to be false, so it is likely that our current theories are also false. There other argument is that there is no possibility of comparison of theoretical content across major conceptual changes. I have previously argued that the second argument can be resolved by recognizing that the comparison of theoretical content is a pragmatic issue that can be resolved by pragmatic means. Here I will argue, by analogy to my arguments for progress in biological evolution, that conceptual progress is possible in terms of an increase of information about the world, rather than as an increase in truth content. I will show that this fits happily with the pragmatic approach to conceptual comparison.

Why the Function of Concepts Matters

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To understand scientific practices of developing and working with concepts, it is required to take the function of concepts seriously. The function of a concept plays descriptive, normative, and explanatory roles: first, it tells us what scientists aim to achieve with the concept; second, it provides the norm against which the uses of the concept are evaluated; third, it helps to explain the rationality of conceptual changes and variations. Despite its significance, little philosophical attention has been given to the function of concepts. One notable exception is Ingo Brigandt (2010), who suggests incorporating the epistemic goal pursued with the concept’s use as one of semantic properties of concepts along with the concept’s reference and its inferential role. It is argued, however, that his suggestion has two limitations. First, it is hardly justified to regard the epistemic goals associated with the concepts as a “semantic” property (Misplacement Problem). Second, he fails to provide the independent reason for the suggestions, depending exclusively on the ability to account for the rationality of semantic change (Independence Problem). To remedy the predicaments, I suggest taking concepts as cognitive entities rather as merely linguistic ones. By doing so, we find an independent, empirical evidence showing that functional information affects on our cognitive processes. Such consideration casts a new light on the Misplacement Problem. It is claimed that the function of concepts is not a semantic property but a type of meta-information regulating a body of concept-constitutive information.