

The Comparative Philosophies of Mou Zongsan and Nishitani Keiji

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New Confucianism and the philosophy of the Kyoto School are comparative philosophies *par excellence*. They stand or fall with the validity of the comparisons their thinkers have made regarding Western and Asian religious and philosophical systems and conceptions. The thinkers in both schools, while mainly writing for their fellow citizens, constantly and self-consciously take European philosophy as the reference point for their own philosophizing. Just as Asian people cannot afford not to reckon with the Western capitalist market system and liberal democratic politics, neither are they able to ignore Western thought, which has become the universal reference if not the norm in the world market of ideas. Founded on Western theoretical frameworks and conceptions, yet necessarily in constant negotiation with indigenous thought, modern East Asian religious philosophy became comparative in approach. The comparative approach is both a stratagem and a necessity for Asian thought if it wishes to respond to the Western impact.

Yet comparative philosophy and comparative religion in and beyond Asia have recently received criticisms in plentitude. Questions that have been raised include: is it not an essentializing fallacy to take Asian philosophy and religion out of their historical and social contexts and present

them as unchanging entities? Are the across-space-and-time comparisons between Asian and Western philosophy and religion farfetched and forced?

To answer these questions, this paper presents two case studies of the kinds of comparative philosophy in which the New Confucians and the Kyoto School thinkers engage. The first is Mou Zongsan's (1909–1995) comparison of Kantian and Confucian metaphysics. The second is Nishitani Keiji's (1900–1990) comparison of Buddhism and Heidegger. After showcasing the two, at the end of this paper I shall consider the validity of comparative philosophy and its implications for our appraisals of New Confucianism and the Kyoto School in particular.

MOU'S POST-KANTIAN CONFUCIANISM

According to Mou, the difference between ancient Chinese and Western traditions is that the West first sought “the ultimate being” in either Nature or God, while the Chinese looked for it in the Mind (*xin* 心), which is understood as the spiritual aspect of human existence that synthesizes cognitive, emotional, and, most important, moral faculties. The Mind is the “locale” where the world of human spirit and values unfolds. In this world of spirit and values, morality is prioritized over other attributes such as beauty and intellect. Indeed, a distinctive characteristic of Mou's thought is his emphasis on the ontological meaning of morality. To this end, he distinguishes between “metaphysics of morals” and “moral metaphysics.” While the former investigates the nature of morality and corresponds to what is usually termed meta-ethics, the latter is concerned with a metaphysical system that is founded on a uniquely Confucian understanding of morality.

For Mou, the Mind is primarily understood as moral self-consciousness. However, it has multiple levels of meaning to be explored. First of all, it is the self-directing and self-affirming activity that is present in humanity's moral praxis. At this level, it comprises moral intentions, decisions, and actions. On a second level, this Mind as moral self-consciousness is recognized as the essence and nature of all human beings; as such, it is “wired” to Heaven.¹ Finally, the Mind is perceived as *creating*

the “outside world.” The words “outside world” are in quotes because indeed nothing can elude the orbit of the all-encompassing Mind. It is worth pointing out that here Mou is not advocating an epistemological solipsism, alleging that nothing exists but the individual human mind. Indeed, epistemology has never been a major concern for the Confucians, Mou included. The Confucians are concerned with providing an anchorage for human morality, not with pure epistemological purposes. What Mou means by saying that the Mind “creates” is that this Mind imposes moral meanings and moral relations onto the world it touches and therefore transforms it into a human world.

In an attempt to reappropriate Confucianism and to position it as a part of world philosophy, Mou incorporates Western philosophical perspectives on this issue and selects Kant as his dialogue partner. In fact, unlike such German philosophers as Leibniz and Christian Wolff, Kant does not hold Chinese thought in very high regard.² The reason for Mou’s selection of Kant lies in Mou’s belief that Kant represents “modern” philosophy in the spirit of the Enlightenment epoch. Mou’s intention is for Confucianism to speak to modernity.

More specifically, Mou is impressed by Kant’s affirmation of the absoluteness of moral imperatives, and the Kantian effort to reach the transcendent via practical reason, in which Mou sees parallels to the Confucian tradition, which highlights the unity between Heaven and humanity.³ Nevertheless, Mou contends that despite Kant’s worthy intent, he was not successful in reconnecting the transcendent and the immanent. Kant views the human mind only in perceptive and cognitive terms, and as such the mind is not able to reach the *Ding an sich*. Kant makes an insurmountable distinction between noumenon and phenom-

1. The concept of *Tian* 天 (Heaven) had gone through certain metamorphoses in Confucianism. For Mou and his Song-Ming predecessors, Heaven refers to the impersonal transcendent power that is aligned with moral order but dependent upon human agents to actualize its will. See FENG 1983 and RIEGEL 2006.

2. Leibniz saw an affinity between medieval Confucianism and his own philosophy. Wolff was banished from Prussia partly because of his sympathy to “atheist” Chinese thought. See ROETZ 1984, 5–8.

3. Interestingly, Mao Zedong also sees an affinity between medieval Confucianism and Kantian philosophy (LI 1985, 220).

enon, that is, that which can be the object of empirical knowledge and that which cannot. Any attempt to gain certain knowledge about the fundamentally unknowable is bound to fail.

Mou argues against Kant that this noumenon is not a lofty *Ding an sich* indifferent to the human world. Rather, it is what the Confucians traditionally called the Way of Heaven which brings moral meaning and moral values into being. Mou believes that reaching the noumenon is humanly possible for the following reason: both Kant and Confucianism agree that moral commands are unconditional. Hence the giver of moral commands should be unconditional. Moreover, such a giver cannot be God—moral laws given to humans by an Other are conditioned by this Other. If God is the author of moral obligation, then ethical obligation is unconditional but humans are not free. Humans can only be morally free if the moral imperative is self-imposed. Therefore, moral commands must be given by the human Mind. Since unconditional things cannot be given by something conditioned, the human Mind must be unconditional too. The next step is that since (a) the human Mind and the Way of Heaven are both unconditional, and (b) there cannot be two things that are both unconditional, the two must, as a result, be one (MOU 1971). If the above argument smacks of the ontological argument of Anselm that has been criticized by Kant, we need to note that Mou philosophizes not in order to interpret Kant but in order to improve upon and move beyond Kant. As such, Mou tries to sublimate Kant and other philosophies, including the thought-forms that Kant had deemed invalid.⁴

Based on the argument above, the Mind elevated by perfect moral exertion must be both human and transhuman because the Mind is radically identical with the Way of Heaven. As such, the Mind itself is noumenon, and there would be no difficulty in its self-understanding and self-realization. Thus Mou believes that ancient Chinese thought already had the answer to the dilemma Kant discovered in his critique of human reason. The problem for Mou rather lies in how it could be possible

4. It is still an open question whether or not Kant successfully dismantled the ontological argument. For a theological defense for Anselm, see e.g. BARTH 1985. For some recent discussions, see SWINBURNE 1984 and PLANTINGA 1990.

for his transcendent Mind to engage the phenomenal world. Here Mou borrows the notion from the Buddhist text, the *Dacheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論 [The Awakening of Faith] that the worlds of nirvāna and samsāra both arise from the same original Buddha Mind. In Mou's system, the selfsame Mind is able to act in both noumenal and phenomenal spheres, but in different ways. While the Mind understands and embraces the Way of Heaven as a form of self-understanding and self-realization, for it to grapple with phenomena the Mind would have to voluntarily impose limitations on itself and thus change itself into a limited agent of intellect, with its synthetic moral character being transmuted to a purely cognitive quality. This self-restraint is not in any sense a process of degeneration but an act of "self-emptying," and a necessary step for the possibility of empirical knowledge.

TIME AND BEING IN HEIDEGGER AND BUDDHISM,
AS SEEN BY NISHITANI

Nishitani's philosophy is existential through and through. For him, the fundamental problem of philosophy is the question of the self (NISHITANI 1990, 1). In other words, the first order of things in any philosophical query is to ask: "Where are we from, what do we do, and where are we going?" The lurking threat of death and negativity behind the self reveals the hypocrisy of a purely intellectual approach to philosophy. Therefore, nihilism that is brought about by the constant negation of life has to be confronted by philosophers. Nihilism in this sense, unlike what the common usage suggests, has little to do with moral cynicism and decadence. Rather, nihilism is an honest appraisal of human conditions and a brave embrace of each and every aspect of life, including its negation. Thus "one strives resolutely to be oneself and to seek the ground of one's actual existence" (NISHITANI 1990, 2). In this sense, nihilism transcends the limits of time and space and reaches to the core of human existence. On the other hand, nihilism is a historical phenomenon, which has been highlighted and aggravated in the modern era of Europe: "Nihilism is a sign of the collapse of social order externally and of spiritual decay internally—and as such signifies a time of

great upheaval” (NISHITANI 1990, 3). In particular, nihilism in Europe has been symbiotic with the rise of “historical consciousness.” As the traditional notion of transcendence, be it the Platonic Idea or Christian God, was eclipsed by the impact of modern humanism and rationalism, human history became the foundation of values. It turns out, however, that historicity without a transhistorical dimension is unable to stand the weight and collapses. As a result, human values are also in shambles. This, according to Nishitani, is the origin of European nihilism. According to Nishitani, it is Heidegger who turns nihilism from a profound understanding of nihility into a sophisticated metaphysics that promises an authentic human existence (NISHITANI 1990, 157).

Heidegger does so by revealing nothingness as the ground of existence. Dasein, as Heidegger terms human existence, is permeated with a nullity that is discovered in death. Once this nullity is revealed, the world in which Dasein exists surrenders all its pretended significance, for the world stands against the backdrop of the immense silence of the “nothing.” Paradoxically, the groundlessness of existence that the anticipation of death uncovers also gives Dasein freedom to look back at the possibility of his ownmost potentiality-for-Being. That is, although Dasein finds himself thrown in the world in such a way that he is already “abandoned” and “delivered over” to the power of his death, in the thrownness Dasein is released to exercise the power of his finite yet inalienable freedom. In this moment Dasein is freed from all illusions and stands alone by himself, overwhelmed with joy.

Now Heidegger’s concepts of human existence as guilt and nullity, according to Nishitani, corroborate the Buddhist teaching about the emptiness and no-self of all existence. In fact, the quagmire of European nihilism serves to remind the Japanese who are obsessed with Westernization that their own tradition may have in store solutions for modern times. The Buddhist notion of emptiness or nothingness carries real potential to support and surpass the “creative nihilism” of Heidegger (NISHITANI 1990, 179). With all the differences there may be, the above statement of Heidegger’s does call to mind the Buddhist notion of blissful enlightenment, which also validates the prominence of non-Being: the enlightened mind sees that nullity is the true aspect of the world and thereby transforms itself into nirvanic awareness.

From nothingness as the ground of existence we get a sense of ontological anguish at the universality and inevitability of loss. However, transience can be interpreted both negatively as a source of suffering, grief and despair, and positively as a celebration of the promise of renewal and a symbol of awakening. Buddhism at once encompasses and transcends human emotions of sorrow and grief concerning the transience of nature (NISHITANI 1990, 15 and 58). One is liberated only when he has realized the permanence in impermanence. Nishitani concludes that Buddhism and Heidegger find the answer to life and death in an aesthetically and ecstatically enveloping confirmation of impermanent existence.

The use of Heidegger in Nishitani's critical appraisal of Buddhism certainly does not mean that the former is in any sense more transparent than, or adequate in explaining, the latter. In the spirit of Buddhist parables, the attempt is analogous to a blind, crippled person wandering in darkness. When this person tries to move forward, he has to put the weight of his body on his stick, even if he is not completely certain—and there is no way to make certain—that the stick is on solid ground.⁵

NISHITANI AND MOU

What are the connections between Mou's and Nishitani's comparative philosophies? First of all, both of them are self-conscious efforts to reposition their respective traditions in the face of modern Western thought. Theirs can be seen as part of the gigantic Asian effort at modernizing itself. There is certainly dispute about the origin, nature, and outlook of modernization. For the purpose of this paper, I will consider certain aspects of modernization, namely, the influences of the post-industrial European West on Asia since the nineteenth century, i.e., a dominant discourse of science and progress; imported Western social and political systems; individualism and liberal democratic values; and a theologically sophisticated Christianity. I proceed with the awareness that neither "modernity" nor the "West" is a static, given entity.

5. Losing one's direction can have a positive meaning in Zen. See POLLACK 1985, 25.

Rather, both have multiple layers and facets; moreover, it is precisely in the interaction with the “old world” and “non-West” that they constantly assume new identities and are redefined. Predating Edward Said, Takeuchi Yoshimi pointed out that European identity had been shaped by the expansion of its colonialism (TAKEUCHI 2005). On the other hand, the New Confucians and the Kyoto thinkers have also deployed the ideas of modernity and the West for the purpose of seeking out and defining their own self-identity.

It is against this background that we consider the comparative thought of Mou and Nishitani. As Nishitani pointed out, while European philosophers and religious thinkers could proceed with their speculative enterprise without bothering with Asian thought, it was not possible for their Chinese and Japanese colleagues to work without referring to European traditions. Founded on Western theoretical frameworks and conceptions, yet necessarily in constant negotiation with indigenous thought, modern East Asian philosophy became comparative in approach. While Kant is the most indispensable figure in modern philosophy, Heidegger is modernity’s profound critic. The New Confucians and the Kyoto School thinkers use said philosophers not for the sake of mere curiosity or innovation, but to tackle the issue of modernity and also to negotiate a place for their traditions in the global gallery of ideas.

The second connection between Mou and Nishitani is the existential trait present in their comparative philosophy. Borrowing from Steven Collins, by “existential” I mean “an intellectualist attempt to find a reflective, rationalized ordering of life, and death, as a conceptual and imaginary whole, and to prescribe some means of definitively (if only imaginatively, so far as a non-believer can tell) escaping suffering and death” (COLLINS 1998, 22). As Zheng Jiadong, a leading scholar of New Confucianism, noted, Mou’s existential concerns are particularly strong, and are rather noteworthy since a traditional Confucian is typically portrayed as being in harmony with nature and society and thus “worry free.” The same existential concerns are even more salient in Nishitani. Mou’s use of Kant is an effort to establish a moral subjectivity as a response to human existential conditions, while an important part of Heidegger’s appeal to Nishitani is his existential consideration for death.

Levinas remarked that humans have two ways to access the outside world, namely, by vision and by contact. Thus in our language, we metaphorically say that we “see” or “grasp” the truth. We find an example of the philosophy of vision in Plato when he famously compares the human world to an arena (THILLY 1957, 17). The least worthy people in the arena are the peddlers who try to make a profit. Better than the first group are the athletes competing for prizes and honor. But the worthiest among all people are the spectators who observe and reflect without participating. In real life, the best people are the philosophers who observe life without active participation.⁶ On the other hand, we could argue that Buddhism and Confucianism are philosophies of contact. They are always in contact with human life and its concerns. Confucian and Buddhist practitioners demand a total commitment and expect a complete intellectual and spiritual transformation for themselves. The goal for Confucians is “to combine the unfathomable truth with daily life.” In Buddhism, theories that cannot be put into practice are considered a mere “play of words” (*prapañca*). Mou’s and Nishitani’s philosophies for life are well placed in the Confucian and Buddhist traditions.

Indeed, for Mou and Nishitani, the challenge of modernity and existential concerns are interconnected. With the dawn of modernity in Asia, as the traditional value worlds were crippled, and traditional means of spiritual consolation brought into question by the inroads of Western thought, the New Confucians and the Kyoto School thinkers experienced a devastating sense of spiritual dislocation. Moreover, I want to point out that their personal spiritual struggles were not detached from their concerns for their countries and cultures. A paradox exists in the core of New Confucianism and Kyoto School philosophy: the thinkers of both schools believed that their philosophies were carried out “for the sake of oneself,” that is, for one’s own moral perfection or enlightenment. For instance, Langdon Gilkey points out that Nishitani’s philosophy is “individualistic” in this regard (GILKEY 1989, 49).

6. I do not intend to pigeonhole Western philosophy as merely being observant. Pierre Hadot has pointed out that classical Greek philosophy was a way of life, and it was not until the time of the Roman Empire that philosophy began to become a profession of professors (HADOT 1995).

At the same time, they seemed to believe that the sum total of the self-motivated, individual effort at moral and religious self-cultivation would lead to the renewal of cultural life and the prosperity of their nations. This belief carried political/ideological implications because it diametrically opposed the vision that the human situation could be changed only by manipulating social and political arrangements. This belief helped to explain the personal political involvement, or lack thereof, of these thinkers and their political philosophy vis-à-vis the surging Marxism and statism of twentieth-century Japan and China.

If Marxism historicizes and politicizes existential concerns, then the New Confucians and the Kyoto School thinkers existentialize history and politics.⁷ On this account, Nishitani critiqued Marxism:

Matters like the meaning of life and death, or the impermanence of all things, simply cannot be reduced without remainder to a matter of economic self-alienation. These are questions of much broader and deeper reach, indeed questions essential for human being. (NISHITANI 1990, 183–4)

To Mou, the political chaos in his lifetime was nothing but a symptom of the ambiguity of human existence. This prioritizing of existential concerns is most pointed in Nishida's statement that no one, except perhaps for the mentally challenged, would care only about material interests.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Our discussion inevitably involves a bigger issue of the meaning and validity of comparative studies in general. There have been friendly worries about the comparative method. Roger Ames praises Mou for continuing “the Confucian lineage by translating and in fact transforming their strongest rival, who is by intention exclusive and imperialis-

7. An example of the Marxist stand is Bruce Lincoln's argument that death should not be considered as a universal human concern. Instead, he says, we have to take into account class divisions to correctly understand death as a social and political phenomenon (LINCOLN 1991).

tic, into a vocabulary consistent with their own premises” (AMES 2001, 84). He nevertheless worries that by overstating the similarity between Western and Asian thought, we could end up underappreciating Chinese philosophy as a real alternative to Western thinking (AMES 2001, 94). On the other end of the spectrum, critics such as Bernard Faure dismiss the philosophical affinity between Asia and the West discovered by comparativists as superficial and ideologically motivated.⁸ They often imply that comparativists are methodologically naïve in that the latter take both Asian and Western concepts at face value and readily pick up on superficial similarities. Moreover, it is suggested that such comparisons, by focusing on the world of ideas stripped of social and political realities, ideologically reinforce the status quo. By their own account, these methodologically sophisticated anti-comparativists would rescue Asian thought from the shrouds of myth and ideology and restore the real, historical facts about those traditions. This methodological overconfidence calls to mind Nishitani’s critique of Eurocentrism. Nishitani observed that Christianity propagated a totally undeserved divine love, by virtue of which the Christian “sinners” became the holders of an absolute religion. Similarly, today’s anti-comparativists claim to be critics of Western military and cultural imperialism, as well as critics of unjust social reality. By virtue of their claims to being “critical” and ideology free, they give themselves a privileged position.

Most recently, we have witnessed in some scholars a zealous drive to deconstruct and to debunk, which is, of course, by no means limited to the field of Asian philosophy and religions.⁹ The relevance of this

8. Faure talks about the Kyoto thinkers with sarcasm. He puts quotation marks on Nishitani’s “philosophy,” suggesting that Nishitani is not a serious philosopher, and asserts that Nishitani’s comparison between Heidegger and Zen is sterile without carefully looking into either Nishitani or Heidegger (FAURE 1995, 256, 249ff.).

9. Lionel Jensen argues that “Confucianism” was a fabrication of the Jesuits who came to China for missionary purposes in the sixteenth century. An early parallel is the German philosopher F.W.J. Schelling. Schelling contended that China had had no advanced philosophy, and the positive reports of Chinese thought by Jesuits were motivated by the latter’s plan to change China into an overseas Catholic stronghold. See QIN 1993, 141.

deconstruction fever to comparative studies is that such deconstruction supposedly pulls the ground from under the comparative approach. A comparison of two “manufactured” systems is unwarranted and even ludicrous—in Buddhist terms, “a dream in a dream.” Several factors contribute to this deconstruction phenomenon. First of all, historians of ideas have always been self-reflective and self-correcting. The constant (re)writing of the history of Asian philosophy is no exception. Some of the deconstruction and reconstruction is part of the routine of scholarly practice. Second, we have to note the pressure on scholars to break new ground under the current academic administrative system. We all know too well that we need publications to survive in academe, and new publications supposedly take new ideas. For this purpose, we need to make currently circulating ideas outdated. Finally and perhaps most importantly, this overzealous dismantling is of a positivist bent. The positivistic tendency not only doubts received history and traditions, but goes to the extreme view that whatever is not preserved in extant writings or inscriptions did not happen at all. This calls to mind King Milinda’s questions to Nāgasena:

“Have you seen the Buddha?”

“No, Sire.”

“Then have your teachers seen the Buddha?”

“No, Sire.”

“Then, Venerable Nāgasena, there is no Buddha.”

(quoted in RHYS DAVIDS 1963, 109)

The positivistic attitude, however, does not take into account, say, the randomness of the preservation of ancient documents that have had to survive all sorts of natural and human damage in history, and the possibilities of future archeological discoveries. Second, this radical positivism is self-defeating. It pulls the ground from underneath everybody, and loses a place on which it itself might stand. Husserl expressed his concern regarding historicism and positivism in the first half of the twentieth century: “Historicism, if pushed to its logical extreme, will become radical skepticism and subjectivism” (HUSSERL 1965, 51). Radical skepticism, according to Wittgenstein, “is a sign of a kind of deadening of the

world, an unwillingness to allow things to speak to us as well as a denial of our need to listen” (quoted in MINAR 2001, 43).

Above we have first discussed the comparative philosophies of New Confucianism and the Kyoto School, showcasing Mou Zongsan and Nishitani. In assessing these comparisons, the issue was not how accurate a picture Mou and Nishitani have painted of Eastern and Western traditions; rather my intention was to examine the reasons for and purposes of their comparisons. Thus we have pointed out that the background against which such comparisons emerged was the impact and challenge of the West and modernity. Contrary to the critics of the comparative method, I conclude that the New Confucians and the Kyoto School thinkers should be commended for their philosophical sophistication, sincere concern for humanity, and vigilance to recent developments in the Western intellectual world. For Mou Zongsan and Nishitani, the foremost significance of comparative studies is the acknowledgement of diversity in culture and human thinking. In the final analysis, comparative studies is a mind open to new ideas and new possibilities.

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