

How to Look at Distinct Approaches: *Universal or Situational Approaches?*

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An Outline

From the vantage point of comparative philosophy

In one (philosophically interesting and engaging) way, comparative philosophy is to take care of two fronts of philosophical inquiry:

<1> How, generally (theoretically) speaking, the constructive engagement of distinct approaches (from different philosophical traditions) is possible;

<2> How, specifically speaking (regarding particular cases), the constructive engagement of distinct approaches is possible.

Constructive-engagement strategy in comparative philosophy

To inquire into how, via reflective criticism/self-criticism and argumentation, distinct approaches (modes of thinking, methodological approaches, visions, insights, substantial points of view, or conceptual and explanatory resources) from different philosophical traditions (covering both culture/region-associated and style/orientation-associated philosophical traditions) can learn from each other and jointly contribute to our understanding and treatment of a range of issue or topics of philosophical value/significance, which can be jointly concerned through appropriate philosophical interpretation and from a broader philosophical vantage point. [Mou 2010]

Universal or Situational Approaches?

Question:

- Given an object of study (or an issue under concern), are they necessarily opposed or can constructively engage and complement each other?
- Methodological speaking, what are their methodological status and distinct identities?
- How is it possible for them to constructively engage each other and jointly contribute to our approach the object of study (or the issue under concern)?

Strategy

- Preliminaries: refined methodological notions and distinctions in need
- A framework of how to look at distinct approaches:
 - <1> distinct dimensions of a methodological approach;
 - <2> status and nature of methodological perspectives and their relationship to methodological guiding principles;
 - <3> adequacy conditions for methodological guiding principles .
- Universal or situational?

Preliminary resources

Given that the term ‘method’ or ‘methodological approach’ means a way of responding to how to approach an object of study, there is the distinction between three kinds of ways or methods, which might constitute three distinct dimensions of methodology [for a detailed account of this, see Mou 2001].

Methodological perspective (or perspective method)

A *methodological perspective* (or *perspective method*) is a way approaching an object of study that is intended to point to or focus on a certain aspect of the object and capture or explain the aspect in terms of the characteristics of that aspect, together with the minimal metaphysical commitment that there is that aspect of the object.

- The distinction between *eligible* and *ineligible* methodological perspectives.
- The distinction between methodological-perspective simplex and complex. (“multiple-perspective complex” and “guiding-principle-associated perspective complex”)

A methodological instrument (or instrumental method)

A *methodological instrument* (or *instrumental method*) is a way in which to implement, or give tools to realize, a certain methodological perspective.

They are largely neutral in character and serve for different methodological perspectives, though there is the distinction between more and less effective ones in regard to a certain perspective.

A methodological guiding principle (or guiding-principle method)

A *methodological guiding principle* (or *guiding-principle method*) is a way concerning a certain methodological perspective(s) in regard to an object of study, which is presupposed by the agent who takes that perspective (or one or more among the group of the perspectives) for the sake of guiding and regulating how the perspective should be evaluated and used, and how the purpose and focus that the perspective serves should be set.

- The distinction between *adequate* and *inadequate* methodological guiding principles concerning methodological perspective(s) regarding an object of study (or an issue under concern).

Some morals

- The merit, status, and function of a methodological perspective *per se* can be evaluated independently of certain (adequate or inadequate) methodological guiding principles that the agent might presuppose in her actual application of the perspective.
- The reflective practice *per se* of taking a certain methodological perspective as a working perspective implies neither that one loses sight of other genuine aspects of the object nor that one ignores or rejects other eligible perspectives.

On the other hand, it does matter whether one's taking a certain methodological perspective is regulated by an adequate or inadequate guiding principle, especially for the sake of constructive engagement of seemingly competing approaches.

A Framework of how to look at distinct (methodological) approaches

- The distinction between the methodological-perspective dimension and guiding-principle dimensions of a (methodological) approach
- Status and nature of methodological perspectives (eligible or ineligible? Relevant or irrelevant to the current purpose and focus of a project?)
- Relationship between methodological perspectives and guiding principles (taking eligible perspectives and having them be regulated and guided by adequate methodological guiding principles)
- General conditions for adequate methodological guiding principles (adequacy conditions) [for a suggested set of adequacy conditions, see Mou 2010]

How to look at distinct approaches: *some general morals*

- Identify the purpose and be sensitive to the focus: What is the jointly-concerned issue under examination (through philosophical interpretation)? *Which aspects are really possessed by the object of study? Which aspect(s) to be focused on?*
- Given a (methodological) approach to an object of study, distinguish methodological perspective dimension from methodological guiding principle dimension of a methodological approach.
- Evaluate eligibility of the involved methodological perspective (the methodological-perspective dimension of an approach)
- Generally speaking, *endeavor to maintain an adequate methodological guiding principle* (cf., adequacy conditions).
- Specifically speaking, whenever situation demands and allows, *endeavor to jointly apply the ying-yang model and the Hegelian model* [for my comparative analysis of the two model, see Mou 2008, section 2.1]:
 - <1> Apply the *yin-yang* model to look at the complementary relation between (eligible) methodological perspectives (simplexes);
 - <2> Apply the Hegelian model to look at the relation between distinct approaches (often, seemingly competing guiding-principle-associated perspective complexes).

Universal or Situational Approaches?

- Given an object of study (or an issue under concern), they can be constructively engage and complement each other.

- Methodological speaking, are they two distinct methodological perspectives (simplexes) or two distinct guiding-principle-associated perspectives (complexes)?
- When under the guidance of adequate methodological guiding principles in treating specific objects of study (or jointly-concerned issues), they can jointly contribute to our treatments.

Sample cases for illustration:

(1) Socrates's **universal**-aspect-concerned perspective versus Confucius's **situational**-aspect-concerned perspective concerning the virtue of (filial) piety [Mou 2008, Section 2.2]

(2) **Universal** philosophical concern with truth versus various **situational** approaches to distinct aspects of the philosophical issue of truth [Mou 2009]

Author's relevant writings cited in the above outline:

- Mou, Bo (2001), "An Analysis of the Structure of Philosophical Methodology: In View of Comparative Philosophy," in Bo Mou (ed.), *Two Roads to Wisdom?---Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (Chicago: Open Court), 337-64.
- (2008), "On Some Methodological Issues Concerning Chinese Philosophy," in Bo Mou (ed.), *History of Chinese Philosophy* (Routledge), 1-39.
- (2009), *Substantive Perspectivism* ("Synthese Library: Studies in Epistemology, Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science" monograph series", vol 344), Springer.
- (2010), "On Constructive-Engagement Strategy of Comparative Philosophy", *Comparative Philosophy*, 1.1: 1-32, <<http://www.comparativephilosophy.org>>.