A Methodological Framework for Cross-Tradition Understanding and Constructive Engagement

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The purpose of this paper is to present and explain a meta-philosophical methodological framework of how to look at seemingly competing approaches for the sake of cross-tradition understanding and constructive engagement in our carrying out philosophical inquiries in a global context. I intend to use this presentation and explanation as one way to explore the issue of how cross-tradition understanding and constructive engagement is possible.

1 Though some of the conceptual/explanatory resources (primarily those to be introduced in the first two sections) of this framework appear in my previous article [Bo Mou (2001), “An Analysis of the Structure of Philosophical Methodology – In View of Comparative Methodology,” in Two Roads to Wisdom – Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions, edited by Bo Mou (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001), pp. 337–364], what is given in the central portion of this paper is a substantial development, especially the part on the adequacy conditions for methodological guiding principles in view of the constructive-engagement approach in cross-tradition understanding. Earlier versions of (some of) the basic ideas of this paper (either in the form of this paper per se or as part of a more extensive paper on some other topic) were presented at the following conference/panel meetings: (1) the 9th East-West Philosophers’ Conference (Hawaii, USA, 1 June 2005), (2) the international conference on “Searle’s Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement” (as part of the presentation paper) [co-sponsored by the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy (ISCWP), Division of Humanities of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and the APA’s Committee on International Cooperation] (Hong Kong, 14 June 2005), (3) the ISCWP’s panel session at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division 2005 Meeting (New York City, USA, 28 December 2005), (4) the 10th Symposium of Confucianism/Buddhism Communication and Philosophy of Culture (sponsored by Department of Philosophy, Huafan University, Taipei, ROC, 17 March 2007), and (5) San Jose State University Philosophy Alumni 2007 Conference (San Jose, USA, 5 May 2007). I am grateful to the audiences at the above meetings and Weimin Sun, who is commentator on my paper at the above third meeting, for their helpful comments and criticism.

2 I use ‘cross-tradition’ here instead of ‘cross-cultural’ for the sake of due coverage in the current philosophical context. For one thing, ‘traditions’ here can mean either philosophical traditions or cultural traditions. For another thing, ‘traditions’ can mean either major philosophical traditions associated with their distinct cultural backgrounds (such as Western and Chinese philosophical traditions) or distinct sub-traditions within one major philosophical tradition (such as the analytic tradition and the continental tradition within Western philosophical tradition or the Confucian tradition and the Daoist tradition within Chinese philosophical tradition).
Before my presentation and due explanation of the suggested framework, let me first make some necessary clarification of a number of key terms that appear in the statement of the purpose of this writing. The term ‘constructive engagement’ here means a general philosophical approach that inquires into how, via reflective criticism and self-criticism, distinct modes of thinking, methodological approaches, visions, insights, substantial points of view, or conceptual/explanatory resources from different philosophical traditions, and/or from different styles/orientations of doing philosophy in a global context, can learn from each other and make joint contribution to the common philosophical enterprise and a series of commonly concerned issues or topics of philosophical significance. The foregoing constructive-engagement purpose and approach is considered as one defining character of the enterprise of comparative philosophy as the term ‘comparative philosophy’ is used in a philosophically constructive way. The suggested framework is methodological in a dual sense. First, it is directly and explicitly concerned with cross-tradition understanding and constructive engagement of seemingly competing methodological approaches from different traditions. Second, the framework per se is methodological in nature: it is concerned with how to look at seemingly competing methodological approaches from different traditions. In the above second sense the suggested framework is about philosophical methodology; in this sense, the suggested framework is also meta-philosophical in nature. When I made such meta-philosophical remarks on philosophical methodology, I do not mean that I am able to be (or pretend to be) absolutely neutral without or beyond “any ad hoc philosophical point of view and origin”; in the sense of ‘meta-philosophical’ as I use the term, my meta-philosophical remarks on philosophical methodology to be delivered via the framework present a certain philosophical point of view.

In the following discussion, my strategy is this. First, in the first section, I introduce and explain some relevant conceptual and explanatory resources employed in the framework, especially the distinction between the methodological perspective and the methodological guiding principle, and make some initial methodological points. Second, in the section on two paradigm methodological perspectives, I examine two paradigm methodological perspectives, Socrates’s being-aspect-concerned perspective and Confucius’s becoming-aspect-concerned perspective, both for the purpose of highlighting their significant methodological visions and for the sake of illustration of relevant points. Third, in the section on adequacy conditions for methodological guiding principles, I suggest six meta-philosophical adequacy conditions for adequate methodological guiding principles, which constitute one core portion of the suggested methodological framework. Fourth, in the final section, I bring out three paradigm methodological-guiding-principle models, i.e., the Zhuang Zi’s, Yin-Yang, and Hegelian models, for the sake of illustrating the preceding six adequacy conditions and emphasizing their respective roles in the enterprise of comparative engagement as specified above.