THE QUESTION OF RATIONALITY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION AND THE CHALLENGE OF COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

During comparative discourse, some scholars have ridiculed African indigenous concepts, phenomena, beliefs, and worldview in a forceful attempt to allow it to fit into western framework and to avoid the charge of irrationality. It is against this background this essay attempt to establish the basis for the rationality of discourse within the African philosophical tradition and set a basis for any form of comparative discourse with other philosophical traditions. My goal is not simply to argue for the inclusion of our philosophical tradition, but to prevent its distortion or the imposition of any sort of inferiority of thought on African minds. I posit that non-African epistemological framework nor should yardstick for rationality not be used as the measure for discerning the reasonableness of African philosophical reflections. My discussion on African understanding of reality and human being dwelt on the ontological reflection of Emmanuel Osigwe Anyiam Osigwe and Anthony O. Echekwube. We posits that there is only one reality but various forms of rationality. Since there are multiplicity of interpretation of reality based on one’s location within the cosmos, African interpretation of reality must not be dismissed or judged using framework from other society. I conclude that comparative discourse is possible and could merit from African worldview and value systems.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The underlying questions behind this essay are: Does African thought system conforms to the rules of formal logic? If not, how then can it be taken to be intelligible or rational? In other words, how can the intelligibility of any thought system be judged? Should it be test against the rules of formal logic, using certain criterion of meaningfulness of language, or be judged amidst the beliefs, culture, and conception of reality within the society from which the thought system emerged? If the latter is the case, does this then implies that there are no universal thought system that cuts across every culture and which could be used as standard for measuring the intelligibility or rationality of any thought system? Does all human have
rationality as a common feature? What then is this rationality if not defined in terms of its conformity to western formal logic?

This paper begins with the notion of rationality, then proceed to establish the originality and authenticity of African philosophical tradition. We shall discuss the test for rationality of a thought, beliefs, practice, or phenomenon within an African society. Finally, we shall examine the tenability of comparative or intercultural philosophy in relation to African philosophical tradition and argue for the basis on which such intellectual exercise could be done.

2.0 THE NOTION OF RATIONALITY

In the history of ideas, the term ‘rationality’ or the phrase to be ‘rational’ is a characteristic of a cognitive agent exhibited when such an agent adopts beliefs based on appropriate reasons. Aristotle had argued that rationality is a key feature that distinguishes human beings from other animals. However, the adjective ‘rational’ is used to characterize not only agents and specific beliefs but also behaviours and activities. In such cases, rationality can be contrasted either with non-rationality or irrationality. A building, a stone, or a tree, for instance, is non-rational because it is not capable of carrying out rational action. A being, therefore, that is capable of being rational but regularly violates the principle of rationality is said to be irrational. Among rational beings some beliefs are non-rational since they are matters of taste and no reasons are required. Beliefs and activities that are contrary to the dictate of reason are irrational.

Furthermore, rational beliefs have been contrasted with beliefs arrived at through emotions, faith, authority, or by an arbitrary choice. The point of each contrast is to capture a sense in which we believe a proposition either without carrying out an appropriate assessment or in spite of the result of such an assessment. For example, we determine the balance in a cheque book rationally when we enter the correct credit and debit and do the arithmetic. Irrational ways of determining a balance include picking a number at random or choosing a number because we find it pleasant. When dealing with empirical matters, rational beliefs are arrived at by accumulating relevant evidence; a rational individual will suspend a belief until an adequate body of evidence has been accumulated and evaluated.

In the late 17th century, the notion of rationality was strongly developed among the western philosophers like Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, John Locke, and many others. They unanimously agreed on the central status of ‘reason’ as objective and competent – in contrast
to faith, mysticism, spiritualism, and intellectual authoritarianism. The gave ‘reason’ a pride of place and discard as irrational other human means of knowing or interpreting reality such as intuition, revelation, or mysticism. Thus, the notion of ‘rationality’ would be portrayed as the output of strictly deductive and inductive reasoning and logical system. This notion of rationality reigned even till the beginning of 20th century, as emerging scholars involved in various inquiries decaled science as the ‘paradigm of rationality’ based on its mathematical and experimental method as the only producer of objective knowledge.

The first significant representation of science as the paradigm of rationality and model of genuine knowledge came with the positivist orientation. Positivism, along with phenomenalism, pragmatism, and operationalism, belong to the empiricist tendency. For the positivist, an inquiry into the conditions of knowledge can be meaningfully pursued only as a methodological inquiry into the principles and methods for the construction and corroboration of scientific theories. Any inquiry that transcends this methodology exposes itself to the same sentence of extravagance and meaninglessness once passed on metaphysics. Thus, at the heart of the positivist philosophy of science is the belief in the exclusive validity of science.

To strengthen this belief and account for the structure of scientific knowledge, the positivists combined the logical techniques of Russell and Whitehead’s Principia Mathematica with an empiricist epistemology borrowed from Ernst Mach. This was to result in the formal rigour and empirical basis of natural science, which became the touchstone for knowledge and rationality. That is, scientific method turned to an increasingly refined application of reason to understanding nature. Such that the deployment of reason among the Enlightenment thinkers laid the foundation of all the major branches of science as Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz independently developed the calculus while Antoine Lavoisier’s treatise laid the foundations of chemistry. Science, thus became the paradigm of institutionalized rationality holding beliefs and claims that are proven objective and reliable.

As John Hick observed:

“To the extent that reason develops, science develops; and to the extent that science develops, super naturalistic religious answers to be accepted on faith will be replaced with naturalistic scientific explanations that are rationally compelling”

Until the emergence of postmodern scholars, the term ‘rationality’ has thus been strictly defined with western science, mathematics and logic makes one to ask whether there is really
space for ‘intuition’, ‘spontaneity’ and ‘creativity’ since the world is governed by mechanism and logic, causality and necessity. Post Modernism introduced the idea of linguistic Social subjectivism instead of experience and reason, such that we are made to realize that scientific method and western logical framework has no better claim to yielding truth than any other method or alternative ways of knowing. According to Stephen R.C Hick,

Among the postmodern cultural theme rest is the view whether the liberal West is leading the rest of the World to a freer and more prosperous future – or whether its heavy-handed intrusiveness in foreign policy and its command of the international financial markets are exporting it McJobs to non-western nation, locking them into the system and destroying their indigenous culture…whether technology and other social achievements can be enjoyed by all cultures

Many postmodernists (mostly French and Italian scholars) deconstruct ‘reason’, ‘truth’, and ‘reality’ because they believe that in the name of reason, truth and reality, western civilization has wrought dominance, oppression, and destruction on the ground that it was within western civilization that the understanding of the term ‘reason’ and ‘power’ have been the most developed. Postmodernism, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality and having substituted social-linguistic constructs for that reality, emphasizes the subjectivity, conventionality, and incommensurability of those constructions.

3.0 AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION AMIDST OTHER TRADITIONS

Over the years, most books on ‘Comparative Philosophy’, has often considered only three philosophical traditions – the Indian, the Chinese (Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, etc.), and the European (The French, English, German, Italian, etc.). In this session, we shall present African Philosophical tradition as a qualified candidate for comparative discourses in philosophy. The question that then comes to one’s mind is: What is a philosophical tradition? A philosophical tradition refers to a chain of persons who relate their thought to that of their predecessors and in this way form a continuous transmission from one generation to the next, from teacher to disciple to disciple’s disciple.

The East versus West dichotomy is often a limitation of philosophical traditions and often leads scholars to unreasonable generalizations, because a proper categorization would refer to at least five categories:
a. Modern Western Tradition: which includes both American and Continental Europeans Philosophical traditions

b. Classical Asian Tradition: comprising of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese Philosophical traditions

c. Islamic Philosophical Tradition

d. African Philosophical Tradition

e. Classical Western Tradition: which comprises of philosophical traditions embedded in Judaism, Christianity, and Platonism.

At the outset, the existence of African Philosophical Tradition was subjected to a fierce debate. It has often been argued that African worldviews and thought patterns do not fit into their notion of ‘rationality’ as ‘they are not related with enough care to explicit principles – at least to principles by which situations may be analysed’\(^\text{11}\). As other charges have been cleared over the years, the charge of rationality still lingers – that accounts for the main argument of this essay. The question of rationality must have accounted for a situation, during the debate of the idea of African Philosophy, where European scholars like Placide Tempels\(^\text{12}\), Alexis Kagame, Marcel Griaule\(^\text{13}\) would be making efforts to show that most African thoughts are consistent, rational and therefore philosophical, while fellow Africans like Kwasi Wiredu\(^\text{14}\) and Paulin Hountondji\(^\text{15}\) would be arguing against it. The four school of thoughts emerging from this debate had their own strength and weaknesses. Presently, we have even been able to give a positive response to the challenge that those existing philosophical traditions have ‘pervasive habits of thought and a history of self-reference – of person to person, of intellectual group to authoritative person, tradition, or text, and so on’\(^\text{16}\). Our most recent references to sage such as Mbuyo Akoko\(^\text{17}\), Osigwe Anyam Osigwe\(^\text{18}\), and many others is a good progress in this regard.

African Philosophical Tradition has developed immensely within the past four decades. Efforts of African scholars like P.O. Bodunrin\(^\text{19}\), Kwamer Gyekye\(^\text{20}\), D. A Masolo\(^\text{21}\), C.S. Momoh\(^\text{22}\), Kwasi Wiredu\(^\text{23}\), S. Gbadegesin\(^\text{24}\), I.C. Onyewuenyi\(^\text{25}\), Odera Oruka\(^\text{26}\), G. Sogolo\(^\text{27}\), K.C Anyanwu\(^\text{28}\), Olusegun Oladipo, A.O Ec hekwube and many others have improved the frontiers of this tradition. In recent times, philosophers in Africa has endeavour to embark on various inquiries in order to formulate, analyse, exposes, appraise, criticize, reconstruct and compare our cultural values and worldview – by worldviews, he refers to general statements about the world, which are product of reflection and speculation, and also serves as guide for perceiving,
feeling and transforming reality. Essays, books, conferences and many other media has been used to develop conceptual or theoretical framework for perceiving, feeling, and transforming reality in the Africa context and for the rigorous examination of the ideas and values we live by.

Furthermore, African philosophical tradition has developed its metaphysics, ethics and epistemology. With regards to Ethics, scholars like Echekwube has canvassed for moral order based on traditional African values such as integrity, honesty, courage, truthfulness, fairness and ‘goodwill’ – values that would promotes an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation. With regards to Metaphysics, various scholars have made research into our culture to sort out originality and authenticity of African reality and ontology. For instance, Echekwube’s metaphysics of homogeneity of African reality propagates the view that “a reference to absolute reality is a core element in all human culture” and this “must be rediscovered and properly articulated if we are to provide effective orientation and grounding for our varied intellectual, social religion, scientific, economic and political endeavours”.

Various metaphysical reflections have emerged in relation to beliefs, phenomena, and practices within African society. One of the most original reflection done with regards to the human person is Anyiam-Osigwe’s conception of the human being. For Anyiam-Osigwe, the soul is the highest in the hierarchy of the ontological qualities constitutive of the human being. This is because the soul is the mode and means by which the human being consciously “attains integration with Divine Intelligence”. Although Anyiam-Osigwe does not expressly use the term “conscience”, there is no doubt – on the basis of his reasoning – that his thesis that the human being is “inherently” or “innately good” points to conscience as the voice that reminds the human being of goodness whenever it is appropriate to do so. Freedom of the will is the fourth element in Anyiam-Osigwe’s hierarchy of the ontological qualities constitutive of the human being. These qualities affirm the human being as image and likeness of “God”. The divine in and of the human being is thus the locus classicus of human dignity according to Anyiam-Osigwe. From this emerges his ontological concept of the human being. It is that:

“man in phenomena existence endures in the material extension of the cosmos. By his natural composition, he possesses an exterior material extension which is his empirically perceptible identity and on the other hand he possesses his spiritual identity which is his pristine identity”. (p. 36)
It is important to note that Anyiam-Osigwe here introduces the concept of the spirit; the “spiritual” as an ontological quality different in meaning from the “soul”. For him the human being is both a material and a spiritual being.

According to Anyiam-Osigwe, the human being is endowed with reason. This confers upon the human being the title of “sovereign” authorised to exercise power over all the other beings. For Anyiam-Osigwe, “God” is the ultimate source of the human being’s sovereign authority over all the other beings. He discerns in this a special relationship between “God” and the human being. This is a unique relationship distinguishing the human being from all the other beings. The special quality of this relationship is that the human being is, ontologically, the image and likeness of “God”. In Anyiam-Osigwe’s own words:

“Man is a human being and not an animal. Even when he shares certain physiological features or forms with some species of the animal kingdom, man is imbued with a certain level of consciousness as well as mental and physical faculties which are beyond the faculties of any animal. Through the faculty of the soul man intuits into and consciously interpenetrates the energy flux of the cosmos. It is by the faculty of the soul that man attains conscious integration with Divine Intelligence. Man, as a manifestation of Divine Intelligence, is made in the image and likeness of God in whose identity he partakes”. (p. 47-48)

4.0 THE RATIONALITY OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

As discussed above, most Western philosophers tried to judge the rationality in the discourse of other culture using ‘Reason’ as the measure. This led to the accusation of other forms of reasoning as ‘irrational’, especially as it does not fit into certain accepted laws of thought in the West. Meanwhile, we have come to the understanding that ‘Rationality’ should not be defined solely in terms of meeting the requirement of formal logical system or fulfilling the expected criteria of meaningfulness as presented within the positivist framework – which proposed an understanding of rationality or irrationality of a thought system adjudged within its socio-cultural context and meaningfulness determined in its linguistic context.

Before the advent of Post-Modernism, African traditional thought system has been charged with irrationality within the western conception of rationality. This act was evident in the works of some classical anthropologists like Tylor, Levy-Bruhl and Durkheim. For Levy-Bruhl, African traditional thought can be grouped into the category of “primitive mentality” (in
contrast to “civilized mentality”), and that as such Africans are characterized by a prelogical mode of thought – which is unscientific and uncritical, containing evident contradictions\(^3^2\). Their argument was that the mind of the African is so intellectually mal-structured that it does not accord with some presumed universal principles of reasoning\(^3^3\). The antecedent to their claims is the belief in a universal principle of reasoning by which any given though can be judged to be logical or illogical.

Levy-Bruhl’s view influenced African scholars like Leopold Senghor\(^3^4\), who attributes some form of reason to traditional man – that traditional man’s reasoning is of a different sort because it is determined by mystical representations. Such that while western thought could be taken to be rational,

African thoughts would be considered as either following the ‘logic of sentiments’ or ‘intuitive reason’ according to Levy-Bruhl and Senghor respectively\(^3^5\). Scholars like Peter Winch has made attempt to free African traditional thought from the charge of irrationality, as argue (following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s claim that since) that the logic of our reasoning reside in the language we speak, different forms of life call for different paradigm of discourse. So, as there are different forms of life\(^3^6\), so also are there different universe of discourse, conception of reality and criteria of rationality. Though, this position raised a problem for the possibility of cross-cultural rationality, it is the best response that could grant intelligibility to African philosophical tradition.

Taking a leap from there, this essay will posit that reality is one, but our perception of reality differs based on our location within the cosmos. In other words, there are different representations of this (one) reality as embedded within our languages and cultural mode of discourses. We agree with the claim that our social reality is constructed by the language we use. That is, thought system of any society is implicitly expressed in the language (in the case of Africa, they are embedded in the written and oral tradition). Such that within African mode of explaining reality, one would find not just metaphysical and religious interpretations, but also materialistic interpretation – this account for why most scholars like Anthony O. Echekwube attributes homogeneity to Africa’s reality.

Secondly, it would be a generalization to simply say that ‘reason’ is to the West, ‘intuition’ or ‘consciousness’ to the East, and ‘spirituality’ to the Africans. African discourse on Ancestors, Life after Death, Hierarchy of Being, Destiny, Reincarnation, The Nature of Man, Witchcraft, Mysticism, etc. may not be scientific (within the western understanding of what is scientific)
but they are rational and logical as scientific thought within its own cultural context. A critical look at various philosophical works from different cultures would show that while Western (scientific) thought quests for the unity, simplicity, order, and regularity which underlie apparent diversity, complexity, disorder, and anomaly in the phenomena universe, the typical Indian notions of rationality are, on average, non-hedonistic, non-individualistic, non-positivistic, and aim at surrendering the personal ego to an impersonal tradition or to some universal consciousness.

Thirdly, it must be noted that there are webs of ways of thinking and arguing which in turn depend on the linguistic and conceptual tools coming from particular language and culture. And most philosophical thought developed within varying cultural contexts: Greeks, Romans, French, Persians, Spanish, Jewish, British, Germans, etc. So, it will be difficult to accept a standard of rationality that emerged from a single culture. Even Kant warned against this when he questions whether ‘reason’ alone can know reality. He says:

> Reality – real, noumenal reality – is forever closed off to reason, and reason is limited to awareness and understanding of its own subjective products. Reason has ‘no other purpose than to prescribe its own formal rule for the extension of its empirical employment, and not any extension beyond all limits of empirical employment’. Limited to knowledge of phenomena that it has itself constructed according to its own design; reason cannot know anything outside itself…. reason is clueless about reality.

At this point, we will say that while the search for transculturally valid standards is still going on, the most tenable test for rationality of African thought will be the examination of those beliefs within our cultural worldview and a check on their compatibility or coherency with other beliefs within the same cultural context. This suggestion of ours is in the same line of thought with Kwasi Wiredu when he proposed the decolonization of concepts by thinking them through in one’s own African language and on the basis of the result, reviewing the intelligibility of the associated problems.

To conclude this session, it must be emphasized again that there is an objective African reality which has often been represented in traditional systems of thought. As V.Y Mudimbe noted in his book, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge, this reality has been distorted by Western interpreters as well as African analysts who often use categories and conceptual systems to analyse them. The framework often used depends on a Western
epistemological order and thus present those thoughts as irrational. The argument in this paper is that African traditional systems of thought can be made thinkable and explicit within the framework of their own rationality. This task is a necessary pre-requisite for any comparative discourse so as our African thoughts would not be evaluated and compared using theories and methods whose constraints, rules, and systems of operation suppose as non-African epistemological locus.44

5.0 THE PROBLEM OF INCOMMENSURABILITY AND PATHWAY TO COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE

Comparative philosophy entails an intentional setting into dialogue sources from across cultural linguistic and philosophical streams. It involves bringing together of philosophical traditions, comparing ideas among thinkers within very different and culturally distant tradition. When comparative philosophy is being done along the Chinese-Western axis, the analysis often proceed from one end or the other so as to bring to bear concepts, frameworks, and insights from one tradition to the project of making progress on questions and problems in the other tradition.

As several works have been done with regards to the task of comparing Chinese or Indian philosophical tradition with western philosophical traditions so as to sort out the similarities and dissimilarities, questions has also been raised with regards to the incommensurability of these philosophical traditions. While it could be true that the traditions, in the course of interaction or comparison, could enrich one another; or lights could be shed on some unquestioned agendas and assumptions of one’s own tradition, it is also true that some traditions could be distorted, misinterpreted, dominated, and subjugated. Their conception of the real, their modes of inquiry and justification, and their view of how people ought to live their lives could be rendered irrational or unreasonable. In other words, as Bryan Van Norden foresees, such comparison could lead to recreating the other tradition in the image of one’s own or the tendency to believe that one’s tradition is best and insofar as the others are different, they are inferior or in error.

The argument that each of the traditions is incommensurable with the other is empirically implausible and the attempt to argue in its favour entails its own derail. The question is: how were you able to enter each of the worlds far enough to show that they are closed to another? Or what is the impossible to explain or impenetrable in those worlds?
David Wong described the following ways in which philosophical traditions may be incommensurable:

i. The inability to translate some concepts in one tradition into meaning and reference in some other tradition

ii. The fundamental differences in some philosophical models which make it impossible for the advocates to understand each other

iii. The differences in traditions with regards to grounds for evidence and decidability which makes it impossible to make a judgment between them.

This paper agrees with K. Srinivas advised that comparison should be made between system and system, but not between concept and concept. E.g Compare the atomism of Vaisheshika with that of Democritus; not comparing spinozistic conception of substance with Shanara’s Brahman. Though comparative philosophy may not attain its aims of synthesizing various cultures to form a global philosophy but could enable us to see various angles to the same reality – in this regard, African Philosophical Tradition has much to offer.

Unlike Western and Oriental philosophies, African reality is fundamentally made up of one and it is characterised by an intrinsic relationship of both a sensible (perceptible and physical) and a non-sensible (non-perceptible and spiritual). Such that while philosophers in the West laid emphasis either on the empirical or the rational; the material or the spiritual, the body or the soul, and those in the East put emphasis on the spiritual to the detriment of the physical, African reality sees both as two sides of the same coin – in such a manner that there exist an interaction between physical and non-physical entities or forces. This view about African reality cohere with the notion of human nature defended by Anyiam Osigwe.

African cannot do a real comparative philosophy by examining our worldviews with the European eyes – an act that has formed a pattern among scholars in Africa Prof M B Ramose warned, during the presentation of his exposition of the philosophy of Anyiam-Osigwe (entitled, “To live in the way that honours: incorruptibility; a spiritual premise for material wellbeing: a critical appraisal of Anyiam-Osigwe’s submission on corruption”), that we should avoid as far as possible, reference to other philosophers and scholars with regard to: (i) coincidence of insight; (ii) similarity or difference with regard to the line of argument; (iii) contrast and comparison of standpoint. This is necessary to prevent deflection of attention away from the specific philosophy being advocated from African worldview.
This was the same point made by Dominique Zahan, in his book “The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa” that ‘African may bring to human culture a contribution which, if exploited rigorously, would undoubtedly have permitted a deepening of Hellenic philosophy and science prior to Plato and Aristotle”\textsuperscript{47} It must be remarked at this junction that if African philosophers embark on this platform, scholars from other traditions will be interested in understanding our philosophical reflections. This is because it would have become a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of practices and actions within the African society and a necessary foundation on which to build policies, theories, and ideologies that would better suite African society for human wellbeing and societal development. This has become a mandate in our effort to shape the mindset of a newly emerging Africa society.

\textbf{6.0 CONCLUSION}

In this essay, I have been able to debunk the notion of rationality built on western paradigm and epistemological loci, and I have been able to establish the originality and authenticity of African metaphysical and ethical discourses, and argue that a genuine comparative discourses that would not distort concepts, beliefs, and terminologies in African worldview can only possible on the ground that we accept the uniqueness of African philosophical tradition (along with her worldview, beliefs, values, and perception of reality) – such that the apprehension and evaluation of her discourse should be done within her own framework. I argued that the notion of Rationality has a cultural toning, and since there are multiplicity of interpretation of reality based on one’s location within the cosmos, African interpretation of reality must not be dismissed or judged using framework from other society. My opinion is that comparative discourse is possible and could merit from African worldview and value systems.

I discovered that discourse on ‘rationality ‘raises the question whether there existed an indigenous body of knowledge in the African setting that could pass as philosophy viewed or interpreted from the European conception. Now, I know that such question is misguided on the ground that the body of knowledge called ‘philosophy’ must not necessarily fits into the western framework before it could be right considered to be philosophical.
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12 C.f. Bantu Philosophy

13 Conversations with Ogotemmeli, p.3

14 Kwasi Wiredu, Philosophy and an African Culture, pp.6-8, 33-36

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24 See S. Gbadegesin, African Philosophy (New York: Peter Lang, 1991)


30 Ibid., p. 17

31 See E.B Tylor, Primitive Culture (New York: Brentano’s, 1924); Levy-Bruhl, Primitive Mentality (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923); Durkheim as quoted in J. Scorupski, Symbol and Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976)


35 Ibid., p.219

36 He defines a form of life as a set of linguistic rules and practices with specific procedures for judging the validity or otherwise of give claims.


40 Voyage of Discovery, p.111

41 Hick, p.29


44 Ibid.

K. Srinivas, “The Need for Comparative Philosophy” Source: http://www.here_now_4u.de/eng/the_need_for_comparative_philo.htm