

METHODOLOGIES OF  
COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

*The Pragmatist and Process Traditions*

ROBERT W. SMID

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

# CONTENTS

---

---

PREFACE		ix
INTRODUCTION	THE BALLAD OF EAST AND WEST	1
CHAPTER ONE	WILLIAM ERNEST HOCKING: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY FOR THE "EMERGING WORLD CULTURE"	15
CHAPTER TWO	FILMER S. C. NORTHROP: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AS COMPARATIVE IDEOLOGY	41
CHAPTER THREE	DAVID HALL AND ROGER AMES: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AS THE PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE	79
CHAPTER FOUR	ROBERT C. NEVILLE: COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AS SYSTEMATIC PHILOSOPHY	141
CHAPTER FIVE	REVISITING THE TWAIN	193
NOTES		231
WORKS CITED		269
INDEX		279

## PREFACE

---

---

When the idea of writing a book of my own was a faint, distant notion at best, I remember reading the following comment in the preface to my advisor's first book. "My philosophical debts are the heavy ones of a young man," he wrote. "It is especially true that what is good in this book is what my teachers have taught me and that what is bad comes from my own incorrigibility" (Neville 1992a [1968]). At the time, this impressed me as an admirable expression of modesty with which to launch a book—and an especially easy one when followed by such a strong philosophical argument as the one presented in that text. Having now written my own text, however, I feel the modesty in that statement all the more palpably and am quite sure that it was intended with all sincerity when he penned it now forty years ago.

In the text at hand, I have not only all of the inexperience of youth but also all of the inexperience of one writing at the outset of a subfield's development. As it stands, while there is a growing literature pertaining to the actual practice of comparative philosophy, there has been very little written on the subject of methodology for such comparisons. Ideally, this text would have been written by someone much older than me and someone with much more experience in comparative philosophy. Yet such a text has not been forthcoming, and it has seemed to me too important a task to let waste away waiting for someone with more experience to pick it up. Thus, while any contributions this text might make can ultimately be attributed to the sound guidance I have received from my teachers, its shortcomings will be due less to any incorrigibility on my part (as if I were writing in a field where counterarguments were clear and compelling) than to my own lack of adequate creativity and foresight with respect to an emerging subfield that is anything but well defined.

It is thus with tremendous appreciation for his exceptional guidance in the development of this project, combined with a genuine humility concerning the final product, that I dedicate this work to my primary doctoral advisor, Robert Neville. Throughout this project, he has been consistent in his insistence that this work pay him no deference, always reminding me that the success of the project will require a relatively evenhanded assessment of all methodological alternatives. As he has told me on numerous

occasions, he is not interested in attracting disciples but in cultivating a new generation of thinkers who can make their own constructive contributions to pressing philosophical (and other) concerns. I hope that this project honors that request and thus honors his guidance, by assessing his work on par with all of the other approaches considered in this study.

Plato was surely right in the *Theaetetus*, however, when he compared the development of an idea to the birth of a child. My wife and I have often joked about this, as my dissertation was completed at about the time our first child, Dalia Jean, was born, and this book will be published at about the time that our second child is born. Anyone who has had a child knows how much support is needed and appreciated around the birth of a child, and so thanks must go out not only to my primary philosophical midwife (so to speak) but also to the many others who have aided in the delivery of this project.

First, I bear great debts to my former teachers at Boston University, John Berthrong and Wesley Wildman, both of whom have provided guidance at important points in the development of this book; they should likewise be credited with the successes of this project and exempted from its shortcomings. Sincere thanks is also due to Roger Ames, who has been more than generous with his time and the opportunities he has provided in the development of this volume; I hope that he will also be honored by the evenhandedness with which I have tried to address his work, as well as the extent to which his work has influenced my own. I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues at Curry College, including Les Muray, Bette Manter, Alan Revering, and Russ Pregeant, who have been a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, and understanding as I have tried to jump the many high hurdles of completing this work. Special thanks in this respect is due to Alan, who has been a great help in the final stages of editing for publication, as well as to Nancy Ellegate and Laurie Searl at SUNY Press, who have been more than patient with the few hurdles I have tripped along the way.

Finally, of course, I would like to thank my loving wife, Lora, who is perhaps as happy to be on the other side of childbirth (for once!) as she is to see this book's completion. Being married to someone writing a book seems to be almost as hard—and perhaps sometimes harder—than being the person who writes it, so I would like to thank her for her remarkable patience and understanding throughout this process. Without it, this project would likely have never come to fruition.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE BALLAD OF EAST AND WEST

---

---

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till  
Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat.

—Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West"

Such are the often-quoted words of Rudyard Kipling just prior to the twentieth century. At first glance, Kipling appears to have been sorely mistaken, as the "twain" of East and West have now clearly met and even interpenetrated on almost every conceivable level. Yet what most fleeting citations of Kipling's "Ballad of East and West" fail to include are the concluding two lines of the quatrain: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, when two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!" (1994, 245). These additional lines furnish the poem with an important sense of ambivalence, suggesting that cultures may come together productively, but they also may not, with the difference being determined by the "strength" of those who represent them. In this sense, Kipling appears to have been largely correct, as East and West would meet in countless venues over the next century with decidedly mixed results.

Kipling had his own ideas of what constituted "strong men," but if one can look past his nineteenth-century romanticism he raises a crucial question for contemporary consideration: if there are better and worse ways for diverse cultures to engage one another, what differentiates the former from the latter, and how can we more successfully bring about the former? This is, at its most basic, a methodological question, and one that would plague comparativists throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, this question is hardly settled even now in the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, scholars over the last century have made a number of important

contributions that must be understood and critically appraised if the question is to be addressed with any more success in the current century.

This text examines one small but important source of such contributions: namely, comparative philosophers. While cross-cultural influence is hardly unprecedented in the study of philosophy, twentieth-century philosophers experienced this influence on a scale far beyond that of any previous century: more cultures converged in a greater variety of venues and to a greater extent than had ever done so before. The rise of comparative philosophy in the twentieth century represents the attempt of many of these philosophers to understand these cross-cultural influences and consider their philosophical implications. Perhaps as a validation of their efforts, comparative philosophy has grown in both interest and influence and now represents a vibrant subfield in the discipline of philosophy.

### WHAT IS COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY?

Comparative philosophy can be defined by its attempt to move across the boundaries of otherwise distinct philosophical traditions—especially insofar as these traditions are divided by significant historical and cultural distance—thus enabling a comparison of what lies on either side of the boundary. By this definition, a comparison of Descartes and Locke would constitute no less an instance of comparative philosophy than one of Mencius and Aquinas (e.g., Yearley 1990), although the latter would likely be of greater interest to comparative philosophers because of the greater historical and cultural distance among the traditions represented.

This fluidity in the content of comparative philosophy stems from the fluidity of the very notion of a “tradition” (philosophical or otherwise). The word *tradition* is derived from the Latin verb *tradere*, which literally means “to hand over” or “to transfer.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that, within a tradition, something—usually an idea or a practice—is being passed on from one person or group to another. Yet there are few things that are passed on with all of their original integrity still intact and just as few things that are not passed on to at least some extent. In other words, strictly speaking, each person is a tradition unto him/herself, while each is also part of a panoply of broader, common traditions. What the use of ‘tradition’ seems intended to designate is that something *distinctive* and *of particular importance* has been passed on from one person or group to another. That is, it is a practical designation rather than a metaphysical one.

This distinction is an important one because it suggests that, in attempting to cross the boundaries of these otherwise distinct philosophical traditions, comparative philosophers are not attempting to do something that is either unprecedented or *prima facie* impossible. The boundaries between traditions are not impenetrable ones; they simply become more difficult to traverse as the historical and cultural distance between them increases (i.e.,

where what is being passed on is held less and less in common). As aware of these difficulties as anyone, comparative philosophers take as their subject matter traditions whose historical and cultural distance from one another is especially significant, paying particular attention to the implications of trying to traverse that distance while still remaining faithful to the traditions compared.

Within this general aim of comparative philosophy, there are two distinct but interrelated dimensions of the subfield that must be distinguished if one is to have a clear conception of the whole. On the one hand, comparative philosophy can mean the comparison of ideas, texts, or aims of different philosophical traditions, where the primary focus is the comparisons themselves. Understood in this sense, comparative philosophy entails the “comparison of philosophies,” where the term *philosophies* is taken to represent the philosophical ideas, texts, or aims compared. The comparison of philosophies is often taken to represent the whole of comparative philosophy and easily accounts for the overwhelming majority of works published in the field.

On the other hand, however, comparative philosophy can also mean philosophical reflection on the nature of comparison itself, where the primary focus is the development of a philosophic account of what comparison is and how it is best carried out. In this conception of comparative philosophy, *what* is compared is not as important as *how* it is compared. Thus, the subject matter of the comparisons considered might be philosophical ideas, but they might also be religious practices or standards of ritual decorum; what the comparativist is most concerned with in this case is improving the comparative process itself by subjecting it to philosophical scrutiny. Conceived in this sense, comparative philosophy is best understood as the “philosophy of comparison,” where “comparison” refers to the question of how one set of things is understood with respect to another.

These two dimensions—the “comparison of philosophies” and the “philosophy of comparison”—are both crucial components of comparative philosophy, and comparative philosophers at their best incorporate both dimensions in their work. It is as difficult to compare philosophical traditions well without reference to a critically refined comparative method as it is to develop such a method without an adequate awareness of the similarities and differences among philosophical traditions. Each dimension needs the other in order to flourish and by flourishing aids the other in its further development. The two exist in dialectical relationship with one another, each informing the other for mutual benefit and improvement over time.

It is thus for good reason that almost all those who have made significant contributions to the philosophy of comparison have also made contributions to the comparison of philosophies. Unfortunately, however, this mutual commitment has not hitherto been very reciprocal: only a small number of those who have made contributions in the comparison of philosophies have

given substantive consideration to the development of a philosophy of comparison. As a result, while there has been a proliferation of texts comparing philosophical ideas from different cultures, there has been a relative dearth of texts concerned with the notion of comparison itself.

This disparity would be acceptable if the few texts that take up the task of methodology were exhaustive of the available possibilities or were so well known within the academy as to require little further elaboration. Yet neither of these alternatives seems to be an accurate portrayal of the state of comparative philosophy. Those who have made contributions to a philosophy of comparison know well that their contributions are still very much works in progress, as is clear from the fact that they continue to publish new and enterprising texts on the topic. At the same time, many of the texts that take up the comparison of philosophies seem to proceed without an adequate awareness of the full variety of methodological options available to them. Indeed, the assumption seems far too often to be that "what comparison is" is sufficiently obvious that it requires little further attention; yet the diversity of approaches actually taken demonstrates that the methodology of comparison is far from a settled question.

The purpose of this book is to make a small contribution toward restoring the balance between these two aspects of comparative philosophy by aiding in the further development of the philosophy of comparison. It seeks to do this in four ways: by shedding light on an ongoing methodological conversation among philosophers of comparison; by providing a concise account of the comparative methods of some of that conversation's most prominent participants; by offering a critical assessment of each of these methods with respect to its strengths and weaknesses; and, finally, by considering the implications of the results of this inquiry for the nature of the philosophy of comparison.

The reason for the first move is that, while there has been an ongoing conversation among philosophers of comparison, only parts of it have been documented in the available literature, and there exists no organized record of its development. Unless one is already familiar with it, this conversation can be difficult to trace through the literature. As a result, it has remained largely obscured from the broader population of comparative philosophers. This is an unfortunate loss for all comparativists because their conversation sheds additional light not only on how comparative methods develop but also on the strengths and weaknesses of each method as illuminated by the critiques of other conversation partners. In order to help bring this conversation to light, each of the first four chapters will begin by placing its respective method in the historical context of its development, paying particular attention to any points of connection that exist with other methods considered in the book. In addition to the methods, the text will also pay attention to the relationships among their authors, who relate to each other variously as teachers, students, classmates, colleagues, and friends.



There is a very human dimension to this conversation, and this text will seek to illuminate these relationships as appropriate.

The second move follows from the first: because there is a lack of awareness of the ongoing conversation, there is consequent unfamiliarity with many of the available methods of comparison. Typically, each of these methods has been laid out over the course of multiple publications and entails multiple stages of development, making it difficult for those who do not take the philosophy of comparison as their primary area of expertise to establish and maintain a mastery of them. Additionally, the few sources that examine multiple comparative methods—thus constituting methodologies in their own right—tend to do so only as a secondary feature of a larger project (e.g., Hall and Ames 1987; Neville 2000).<sup>2</sup> Without a source that takes as its primary task the explication of some of the leading methods of comparison, scholars have often been left to simply perpetuate the method most prominent in their respective academic communities. In the interest of raising awareness of a broader array of comparative methods, each of the first four chapters will follow its historical introduction with a detailed explication of its respective method. My hope is that, by providing these detailed accounts in a single study, this text can serve as a more centralized resource for understanding some of the methodological options that are available.

The third move is the most important and most difficult one for this project: namely, providing a critical evaluation of the methods previously described by drawing attention to the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Hitherto, there has been almost no sustained critical evaluation of the available comparative methods. Of course, philosophers of comparison have often responded to both their critics and their competitors (who are usually one and the same), but these responses often take their own method for granted and do little more than elaborate and further develop their own positions. This study seeks to press the assessment further by *applying the comparative process to the comparative methods themselves*. Accordingly, each of the first four chapters will conclude with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the method under consideration.<sup>3</sup>

Following the historical contextualization, explication, and assessment of each of these methods, all that remains is to try to understand each of them in relation to one another. That is, what remains is the comparison of the comparative methods themselves. Careful consideration will be given to what they suggest collectively about the development of the philosophy of comparison, what advantages each method has relative to the others, and what all of this suggests about the nature of comparative philosophy itself. The fifth and final chapter of this text will have as its sole focus the investigation of these issues. While the conclusions reached in this last chapter will be the most tentative and least completely formulated, it is also the chapter that should prove most fertile for the further development of

comparative philosophy as a whole. Its accomplishments and its limitations are those of the current state of comparative methodology.

### SCOPE OF THE LITERATURE

As noted earlier, the primary concern of this study is with the dimension of comparative philosophy that is concerned with the philosophy of comparison rather than that concerned with the comparison of philosophies. Accordingly, the subject matter for this study is not the literature *of* comparison (i.e., literature that takes as its primary task the practice of comparing religious and philosophical ideas) but rather the literature *about* comparison (i.e., literature that takes as its primary task philosophical reflection on the nature of comparison itself). This distinction will inevitably be blurred, as virtually every text that discusses comparison in its own right also engages in comparison for sake of exemplification; some of these comparisons may even be highlighted in this study for illustrative purposes. Ultimately, however, texts are included or excluded primarily on the basis of their concern with the methodology of comparison, and their claims about such methodology constitute their chief interest here.

While the amount of literature in comparative philosophy that is self-consciously concerned with the philosophy of comparison is noticeably limited relative to the literature concerned with the comparison of philosophies, it nonetheless constitutes a significant body of work that extends beyond the possible purview of a study of this size. Accordingly, not all methodological approaches in the philosophy of comparison will be considered here. Rather, this study will consider only a very small subset of the larger group: namely, those that arise out of the American pragmatist and process philosophical traditions.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, it will examine the methods of four leading philosophical comparativists in those traditions: William Ernest Hocking, F. S. C. Northrop, David Hall and Roger Ames (in collaboration), and Robert Cummings Neville (along with the Comparative Religious Ideas Project). There is a line of continuity running through these figures—largely due to their historical and biographical connection with one another—that grants this selection an integrity of its own and ensures a coherent focus throughout the project.

The study begins with the work of William Ernest Hocking (1873–1966), a second-generation pragmatist and student of William James. The reasons for beginning with Hocking are twofold. First, while some first-generation pragmatists and other early representatives of American philosophy expressed an interest in non-Western culture and incorporated this interest into their own work, the comparative philosophical implications of this interest were not carefully addressed let alone developed in their own work.<sup>5</sup> Second, while Hocking was not the most orthodox of pragmatists, he was the representative of that tradition that was first and most directly involved

in the second-order reflection on comparison considered in this study. All things considered, while it has strong philosophical and cross-cultural roots in previous thinkers, comparative philosophy proper began in the American traditions with Hocking.

The second figure addressed in this study, F. S. C. Northrop (1893–1992), provides a natural progression from Hocking's work. Northrop was Hocking's prize pupil, who launched his initial foray into comparative philosophy with the assistance of his teacher. While he was still less of an orthodox pragmatist than Hocking, he was even more of a figurehead for comparative philosophy among his generation of American philosophers. Moreover, while there is a line of continuity between him and Hocking, he also moved the study of comparative philosophy in a new direction and ultimately developed his own comparative methodology. While Northrop's approach was somewhat controversial among the growing body of comparative philosophers, it was nonetheless well respected and one of the most prominent approaches; indeed, it would be difficult to discuss midtwentieth-century comparative philosophy without sustained reference to Northrop.

The third set of figures addressed is David Hall (1937–2001) and Roger Ames (1947– ), as exemplified most significantly in their collaborative work. There is a noticeable gap between their work and that of Northrop, both in time and in the character of their methods. Hall and Ames began their comparative work about a quarter of a century after Northrop had written his most influential books and have been much more concerned with highlighting the profound differences among philosophical traditions than with exploring their potential complementarity. This change can be traced to two changes that occurred in the intellectual landscape in the middle of the twentieth century.

The first change was the rise of analytic philosophy and the simultaneous decline of traditional American philosophy. The early analytic tradition had been cultivated primarily in the European context, but many of its leading representatives emigrated to the United States in the wake of World War II (e.g., the logical positivists Rudolf Carnap, Carl Hempel, and Hans Reichenbach) and fostered the growth of a vibrant analytic tradition on American soil. Additionally, there was a surging interest in mathematics and the natural sciences, initially spurred by the drive for technological superiority over Nazi Germany in that same war and intensified by the continuation of that drive against the Soviet Union in the Cold War that followed. This interest was only further amplified when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik* in 1957, thus initiating a "space race" that threatened to leave the United States vulnerable if it fell behind. The net result of this change was a shift of interest and resources toward traditions that cultivated the level of precision and demonstrability prized in mathematics and the natural sciences—in short, toward analytic philosophy and away from American philosophy.

The second change was an increase in the availability of critical translations of non-Western philosophical texts, along with more careful and informed historical studies of the traditions from which they emerged. As a result, earlier comparative conclusions were called into question for their inability to account for this new information, and it became clear that these comparisons tended to assert facile similarities where more profound differences prevailed. The result of this development was a growing distrust of comparative philosophy and a tendency to focus on areas studies, allowing for only the most minute and text-based comparisons.

The result was that, at least within American traditions of philosophy, comparative philosophy languished, and when it reemerged it took on a noticeably different character. This change is represented well in Hall and Ames' work, which represents both the late-twentieth-century reemergence of American philosophy and the redoubled concern with maintaining the highest standards in the interpretation of non-western texts and traditions. With Hall and Ames, process philosophy (and, to a lesser extent, pragmatism) has been brought to the fore of the comparative philosophical discussion in America, and while they may not have even been orthodox Whiteheadians (or Rortyans, for that matter) any more than Hocking or Northrop were orthodox pragmatists, they have nonetheless been less among the most prominent comparativists in the American tradition for their generation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because they have been explicit about their partial debts to Northrop, the chapter after Northrop's appropriately moves to consider their work.

Finally, the work of Robert Neville (1939– ) reflects many of the same changes in comparative philosophy as those encountered by Hall and Ames, though he responds to them in very different ways. Like Hall and Ames, Neville begins writing on comparative philosophy in the last quarter of the twentieth century and represents the vanguard of the reemerging American traditions of philosophy; yet while he also draws on the pragmatist and process traditions, he draws on very different aspects of those traditions. Likewise, while Neville also remains sensitive to the shortcomings of previous approaches to comparative philosophy (especially with respect to assertions of similarity), he sees the recognition of these shortcomings as evidence of improvement within comparative philosophy—and as a spur toward further improvement—rather than as grounds for restriction of any further synoptic reflection. Indeed, Neville represents in many respects the opposite end of the methodological spectrum from Hall and Ames and thus can be used in conjunction with them to frame the broader contemporary debate about comparison within American philosophy.

While this choice of figures represents only four points in the history of comparative philosophy, they are four of the most influential developments in comparative methodology within the American tradition and thus provide a telling snapshot of its development over time. For example,

if one takes the East-West Philosophers' Conferences as a measure, almost every one of its nine conferences has been attended by at least one of the figures examined in this study.<sup>7</sup> The only gap, as noted above, is the later midtwentieth century, during which American philosophy itself was on the decline; yet, again, if the aforementioned conferences were any indication, comparative philosophy itself encountered difficulties during this period as well: the conference did not meet from 1969 to 1989.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, while these figures have been among the most prominent comparativists in American philosophy to consider comparison on a second-order basis (as well as prominent comparativists in their own right), they have also shared another important characteristic: namely, the awareness of a continuity and ongoing conversation among them. Northrop was explicit about his debts to Hocking, Hall, and Ames about their debts to Northrop, Neville about his debts to Hocking, and Neville and Hall/Ames about their ongoing debate with one another.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing conversation that has persisted among these figures—heightened by their *awareness* of its ongoing nature—ensures a line of continuity throughout this project. Our awareness of that conversation will help us to understand the contemporary state of comparative philosophy in America and may help us to enter into that conversation in our own right as well.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Limiting the scope to the pragmatist and process philosophical traditions admittedly ignores the important contributions of a number of traditions of comparison. The most notable exclusions arise out of the disciplines of religious and theological studies. Religionists and theologians have been interested in comparison far longer than philosophers have, in large part facilitated by religions with an impetus for cross-cultural missions (including, though not exclusively, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam). The comparative study of religions has followed on this history of interaction and has gone a long way toward bringing greater sophistication and even-handedness to the comparisons that arise out of it.<sup>10</sup>

Although not highlighted here, the connection with comparative religions is important for the current project because it informs much of the current interest in the philosophy of comparison. The comparative study of religion arguably now dominates the philosophy of religion by defining the context of all of its traditional questions: one cannot address the question “what is/are religion(s)?”—let alone any of the more subtle philosophical questions about religions that follow—without understanding religions in comparative context. Yet one of the things that philosophers of religion have found in the context of comparison is that the religious is not as distinguishable from the philosophical as was previously believed (as seen, for example, in the case of Confucianism). Understood in this light, it is only

natural to take the developments in comparative religions and apply them to comparative philosophy—and, in fact, each of the comparative philosophers discussed in this study also maintains an interest in the religious dimensions of their comparisons.

What comparative philosophy can bring back to the comparative study of religions is a more self-conscious and critical philosophical concept of comparison to employ in its own comparisons. While the focus of this text is on comparative philosophy—understood as both the comparison of philosophical ideas and the development of a philosophical conception of comparison—the hope is nonetheless that the results of this project will prove helpful in spurring such self-conscious and critical reflection about methodology in the comparative study of religion as well.

The other noticeable exclusions that follow from the scope of this project are the many other traditions of comparative philosophy. For example, the analytic and Continental philosophical traditions both have their own traditions of comparison, as do a number of non-Western traditions; any one of these could have served as the subject matter for this text; they have been excluded simply because they do not conform as quickly to my own background and expertise. This limitation notwithstanding, I hope that this study will serve as a model for similar projects with alternative foci that will be undertaken in the near future.

#### IN DEFENSE OF METACOMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

As should now be evident, this text is not merely *about* comparison but is moreover an exercise *in* comparison. The thesis of this book is that, if it is possible to compare philosophical traditions in ways that lead to a better and more critical understanding of those traditions, it should also be possible to compare comparative methods with a similar result. Comparative philosophy seeks to give common voice to various philosophical traditions while remaining as faithful to each of those traditions as possible throughout the process of comparison. If it is critical and self-reflective throughout that process, then it should be no less critical and self-reflective when it considers questions of methodology. By shifting the focus of comparison from philosophical traditions to the comparative methods themselves—thus moving from comparative philosophy to metacomparative philosophy—this study simply presses the comparative process one step further.

This move, however, brings with it a number of unique challenges that might seem to call into question the very viability of this project. Of these, three are particularly pertinent and merit careful consideration.<sup>11</sup> The first pertains to the decision to take a further step back from the comparative process to subject such processes to comparative scrutiny. In an academic climate in which things “meta-” are as routinely maligned as they are proliferated in publications, the reader might be concerned that

this move to a metacomparative philosophy is merely a gratuitous attempt to supersede the already difficult task of comparative study. What is there, one might ask, to stop further steps back—a comparison of comparisons of comparative methods, perhaps, or some regression *ad nauseum* to ever more “meta” stages of comparison?

The answer to this question is entirely practical: there is very little need for any comparisons further removed from the one at hand simply because there are hardly any comparisons like the one at hand to be compared. If there was already such sustained critical reflection on comparative methods, then a comparison one further step removed might be warranted. At the same time, because there is already a wide variety of well-developed methods of comparison, there is clearly something to be gained from a comparison of those methods. Far from being a fanciful feat of intellectual gymnastics that is simply one step more abstract than the others, this project has very concrete goals: namely, the cultivation of a better understanding of the available comparative methods, the development of a better sense of each method’s relative strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps even the generation of new insights about the nature of comparison itself.<sup>12</sup>

A second concern pertains to the fact that this project attempts to make comparisons when its very subject matter is comparison. The reader would be right to ask at this point whether the project is not therefore fatally self-referential. What method does one use in making these comparisons, if not a method that is at least potentially—if not actually—one of the ones being compared? This would seem akin to counting ways of counting: how does one begin to enumerate these without conforming to one or another tradition of counting? Yet comparison is still more dangerous, because it not only enumerates but also represents and even evaluates. Thus, the entire project would seem to be in danger of ceasing to be comparative in any legitimate sense, devolving instead into a mere reflection of its own methodological biases.

This concern is not entirely unfounded: the comparison of comparisons is self-referential and is so by necessity. As Thomas Nagel rightly pointed out, there is no “view from nowhere” (1986), no neutral position from which to make comparisons; instead, one must start the process of making comparisons with some particular conception of comparison, and one’s results will inevitably reflect that conception to some degree. Yet the plight of metacomparative inquiry is no different than the plight of comparative inquiry more generally: every comparative philosopher has a particular philosophical background, and it would be naïve to think that this background does not influence the results of his or her comparative work. The problem of self-reference is thus hardly peculiar to metacomparative inquiry; it plagues all who undertake the task of comparison.

Drawing on this similarity, then, this second concern can be resolved by taking a page from comparative inquiry more generally. Biases—methodological or otherwise—cannot be avoided, but they can be dealt with

responsibly and even productively. In comparative inquiry, this entails being open and honest about those biases, minimizing them where they seem to interfere with the inquiry, and drawing on them insofar as they enable one to engage the subject matter in question.

As noted earlier, my own philosophical background is heavily informed by the American pragmatist and process philosophical traditions, and I have drawn on this background in the selection of the particular set of comparative methods considered in this text. Appropriate to this subject matter, the method I employ here is also drawn broadly from these two interrelated traditions. I say *broadly* because, while each of the methods considered in this text has strong roots in American pragmatism and process philosophy, each interprets those traditions very differently and with notably different results. The aim of this text is to employ a method that is broad enough to register the insights of each of these methods without excessively biasing them in favor of one particular reading of the philosophical traditions underlying them.

From this broad reading of American pragmatism and process philosophy, the argument for comparative philosophy is that comparisons among traditions take place whether in accordance with carefully and critically constructed methods or not. Furthermore, at least some of those comparisons (though not necessarily all of them) enable a better understanding of the traditions compared, as evidenced from the fact that at least some understanding exists among the world's philosophical traditions, and that this generally seems to increase as interactions among traditions—which are all at some level comparative—also increase. From this perspective, a comparison can be considered good (and perhaps even true) to the extent that it enables a better understanding of the traditions compared. Comparative philosophy, then, has as its task the cultivation of “good comparisons,” both encouraging and developing comparisons that enable greater understanding among traditions and critiquing comparisons that stand in the way of achieving that end.

The argument for metacomparative philosophy, in turn, is that if it is possible to identify good comparisons, then it should be at least possible to identify what is good about the method that produced the comparison. Identifying what it is about a method that enables the production of good comparisons—what I will call the “strengths” of a method—can thus facilitate the production of more good comparisons and perhaps better ones as well. Moreover, carrying out this analysis across a variety of comparative methods can allow for a comparative understanding of the strengths of each method, thus providing a more informed sense of each method's relative strengths, another venue for the improvement of those methods, and a critically informed basis for the development of new and improved comparative methods.

This understanding of the possibilities for metacomparative philosophy is built into the method of the current project as follows: rather than forcing each comparative method to measure up to a static and external measure, each one is presented on its own terms, in accordance with its own inten-



tions, developments, and achievements. It is then assessed with as unbiased a rendering of its strengths and weaknesses as possible, seeking to remain as faithful as possible to the goals and values of that method. It is only in the final chapter that these assessments of each method will be considered in conjunction with one another. There, the intent will not be a matter of trying to identify the strongest method, since this would inevitably distort the methods under consideration by forcing them to adhere to a common, external standard.<sup>13</sup> Rather, the purpose will be to clarify the points of comparison among each of the methods considered and to indicate something of their strengths relative to one another.

In sum, a comparative method arising out of the pragmatist or process traditions would never simply *assert* the possibility of comparison; rather, it must *demonstrate* it by the results of its comparisons. Metacomparative inquiry takes the additional step of trying to identify what it is that allows for demonstrably good results in each method and to provide a context for consideration of whether and how these can contribute to the further development of comparative methodology as a whole. Like each individual comparative method, however, metacomparative inquiry in this tradition must also be based on its ability to provide insightful results. Accordingly, this study—and the method it employs—should be judged on the basis of its stated goals and values, namely, the cultivation of a better understanding of the available comparative methods, the development of a better sense of each method's relative strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps even the generation of new insights about the nature of comparison itself.

A third concern about metacomparative inquiry arises in contradistinction to the second: without drawing on a single, well-developed, and thoroughly tested method, does this project not run the risk of falling victim to all the vulnerabilities of any new method? Indeed, does the intentional broadness and openness of its method not make it susceptible to aimlessness and vacuity? It would seem that, in the absence of a clearly defined and well-tested method, the best that can be hoped for is a muddling through of the data in a simple, unrefined way.

However, it is by no means clear that the comparison of philosophical positions and the comparison of comparative methods are the same sort of activity, and it is therefore questionable that a method developed for the one would be appropriate for the other. There is an important difference between interpreting alternative comparative methods from the perspective of one method and attempting to mediate in an even-handed manner among competing methods. In the former, alternative methods are judged on the basis of the values of the method used to compare them, and because the values used to judge them are not necessarily intrinsic to them, there is a much higher propensity for distortion in the comparative process. In such instances of comparison, it would be difficult to distinguish the comparison of comparative methods from the mere self-expression of the particular method

employed. Metacomparative inquiry tries to move beyond this in the same way that comparative inquiry tries to move beyond the mere expression of philosophical positions. Although one cannot be certain from the outset that such a metacomparative philosophy is possible—and much less exactly what it should look like if it is—this project proceeds into the unknown with the same pragmatic optimism that has characterized the development of the methods it compares.

With respect to the development of this new method, it will inevitably face challenges throughout its development. However, although this may run the *risk* of naïveté and make the method *susceptible* to aimlessness and vacuity, it does not necessarily *condemn* the method to these ends. The pragmatism in which the method of this project is rooted is nothing if not optimistic about the productive power of vulnerability when it is coupled with the possibility for correction and improvement, and this is a virtue that is largely carried over into the process tradition as well. Taking for granted that it is at least possible that metacomparative inquiry is different in important ways from standard comparative inquiry, the thrust of the pragmatist and process traditions is to encourage the development of new approaches capable of determining whether such a difference exists and—if so—what sorts of methods are best able to address it.

The current project is admittedly novel and may thus have to “muddle through” its data to some extent at least initially. Yet comparative philosophy itself is also a relatively new endeavor—at least in the large-scale, self-conscious way it has been undertaken over the course of the last century. If it has taken American philosophy three generations to cultivate the comparative methods that are extant today, why should one expect that it would be any different for the comparison of these comparative methods? Indeed, what one finds when one looks to the history of the comparative philosophy is that the development of methods is hardly a seamless endeavor, perfect from its beginnings. Rather, it is an inherently messy affair that starts from modest beginnings but emerges over time as an increasingly sophisticated affair through perpetual correction and improvement.

Ultimately, any conclusions that are reached by a project of this sort can only be incomplete and inadequate when considered in an absolute sense, since they are but the perspectives of a single individual inaugurating the larger task of the comparison of comparisons. Yet the value of the following chapters should arguably be judged only on a basis relative to the extent to which they are able to advance the burgeoning study of comparative philosophy. The task at hand is to initiate the comparison of comparative methods on reasonably solid footing so that it can continue on the long process of correction and improvement that has hitherto sustained the comparison of philosophies itself. To the extent this project inaugurates that task and launches it on a productive trajectory, it will have been worth the effort.