A Theory of Interpretation for Comparative and Chinese Philosophy

Lin MA and Jaap van Brakel

abstract

Why should interpretation of conceptual schemes and practices (forms of life) across traditions work at all? In this paper we present the following necessary conditions of possibility for interpretation in comparative and Chinese philosophy: the interpreter *must* presuppose that there are mutually recognizable human practices; the interpreter *must* presuppose that “the other” is, *on the whole*, sincere, consistent, and right; the interpreter *must* be committed to certain epistemic virtues. Some of these necessary conditions are consistent with the fact that interpretation is not thwarted by the “danger” of relativism or of incommensurability. Some other conditions are suggestive of re-orientations of methodologies of comparative and Chinese philosophy.

keywords

principle of reasonableness, principle of charity, principle of humanity, mutual attunement, family resemblance, forms of life

MA Lin

School of Philosophy, Renmin University of China (Zhe-xue-yuan), Av.

Zhongguancun 59, Haidian District, Beijing 100872, China

e-mail: malin2008@ruc.edu.cn

Jaap van Brakel

Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte, KU Leuven, Kardinaal Mercierplein 2, 3000

Leuven, Belgium

e-mail: Jaap.vanBrakel@kuleuven.be

A Theory of Interpretation for Comparative and Chinese Philosophy

1. Introduction

In this section, we provide a synopsis of our views concerning (all) the principles governing the *necessary* conditions of interpretation in comparative and Chinese philosophy. Some of them we have already discussed elsewhere; these will be briefly reviewed in so far as necessary for understanding the present paper. The focus of the present paper is on three necessary conditions of interpretation in comparative and Chinese philosophy: the necessity of assuming mutual recognition of human practices across traditions, the principle of mutual attunement, and the necessity of the interpreter having to assume epistemic virtues. In addition, we include a critical discussion of the debate between David Wong and Chad Hansen concerning the principles of charity and of humanity.

We use Y to refer to the interpreter(s) and X to refer to what is being interpreted: either the author/speaker, or his/her text or corpus (or that of a school or tradition). Interpretation is always a matter of comparison. When Y interprets X, Y would be engaged in comparing the practices and conceptual schemes of X and Y in order to “carry over” the conceptual schemes of X in terms of Y’s conceptual schemes.¹ We use the word “interpretation” in a broad sense to include translation, comparison, explanation, and exposition of the conceptual schemes of a particular (philosophical) tradition, X, in terms of the conceptual schemes of another (philosophical) tradition, Y.²

This paper can be seen as complementary to van Brakel and Ma (2015). The latter paper focuses on the necessary condition of the interpreter having to assume that *all* concepts in *all* traditions are family resemblance concepts. Family resemblance is not merely a helpful tool, as is commonly assumed in comparative and Chinese philosophy; rather, it is a *necessary* condition for interpretation and translation.

¹ The literal meaning of the German word *übersetzen* (translation) is “carry over.”

² A conceptual scheme is a cluster of concepts. Because of the holism of concepts, a concept is, strictly speaking, already a conceptual scheme. Some writers invoke “non-conceptual thought.” But how could one tell others about non-conceptual thought without using language? In our terminology, “language” covers any kind of language games, including language games that hint at non-conceptual thought.

Hence, it is misleading to speak of an English word and a Chinese word or character having the same meaning or being synonymous.³

The family-resemblance-principle is a feasible alternative to what we call the “not-so-necessary” conditions for interpretation across traditions: (1) the ideal language assumption, (2) the often assumed necessity of a shared, or common, or in-between language, (3) the assumption of a number of (linguistic, cognitive, cultural, philosophical) universals. Dropping these three not-so-necessary conditions reveals that both universalism and relativism assume the existence of precise meanings (either as universals or as related to a specific tradition) and makes it possible to dissolve the false dichotomy of “either universalism or relativism.”

The evidence (the “data”) underdetermines the interpretation of a text, a philosopher, or a tradition. Underdetermination implies that there is no such thing as *the* correct interpretation. There is an indefinite manifold of more or less plausible interpretations.⁴ The possibility of interpretation has been undermined by two extreme and mutually opposed positions: One is that no interpretation/ translation is possible, which is the source of the threat of incommensurability. Our alternative to this position is to adhere to family resemblance across the board. The other position is that too many interpretations are possible, which derives from the freedom of underdetermination. Our alternative to this position is to uphold the principle of mutual attunement and the requirement to choose epistemic virtues.

Basic conditions for interpretation also include what we call the soul principle in that Y *must* assume that X is a human being. The soul principle is the basis of the condition that there *must* be mutual recognition of human practices, which condition builds upon the necessity of family resemblance of human forms of life. Without these universal facts or transcendental conditions, interpretation would not be

³ Saunders considers the question whether *dang* 當 is “a synonym for ‘is true’” (Saunders 2014: 216). However, the use of the word “synonym” is misleading. It presupposes a static essential meaning that can be shared by different words. There can be no “synonyms” across traditions or languages (even in the context of the same language, synonym is an infelicitous word). For example, it is misleading to take the German word *wahr* and the English word “true” as synonyms. Instead, it is better to use the discourse of family resemblance.

⁴ Underdetermination already starts at the theoretically unavoidable indeterminacy of the reference of terms, the indeterminacy of translation, and the principled underdetermination of a theory or interpretation by the data. Such things as meanings, beliefs, intentions, and background knowledge of X are interpreted *at the same time*. No specific entity can be interpreted independently of numerous other interpretations.

possible. We discuss the notion of forms of life and the soul principle in section 2 and mutually recognizable human practices in section 3.

In addition, Y *must* assume a principle of mutual attunement,⁵ which consists in a principle of reasonableness, a principle of charity, and a principle of humanity (section 4). These three principles are not horizontal either-or options, but principles that start to work in consecutive stages of interpretation. The earlier ones remain in force during later stages such that Y has to balance the relative weight of the three principles in advanced stages of interpretation.

Interpretation is constrained by the background of the interpreter, which leads to hermeneutic relativity. A major consequence that ensues from hermeneutic relativity is that interpreters *must* commit themselves to particular epistemic virtues, such as coherence with background knowledge and empirical adequacy. Epistemic virtues are the properties a good interpretation (or theory) should have. They are needed in order to choose between competing interpretations. Specification of epistemic virtues vary among interpreters and across traditions. Moreover, different epistemic virtues may conflict; for example, overall coherence on the one hand and faithfulness to the text and tradition on the other. The commitment to particular epistemic virtues and the way of conjoining them have often been overlooked (because each interpreter believes that his or her favored epistemic virtues are self-evident). This issue is touched upon in section 5.

Considering family resemblance “across the board” includes the principle of “no need to speak the same language.” Natural language is full of ambiguities, malapropisms and hybridities, but, in principle, this does not obstruct communication or interpretation. Speaking the same language is not a necessary condition for communicative interaction, and conventions of use are not strict rules. A language is not governed by just one theory of meaning. Instead, there are dynamic “momentary” passing theories of interpretation, tied to individual speakers of the language. No need to speak the same language leads to our suggestion that, ideally, the results of comparative and Chinese philosophy should be reported in (at least two) unrelated languages.

⁵ We have borrowed the phrase “mutual attunement” from Cavell (1979: 32), but use it in an importantly different sense.

2. Forms of life and “attitude toward a soul”

According to Wittgenstein, forms of life are what is given, the certainty of firm regular forms or rules of action, which make possible language.⁶ Most of the occurrences of *Lebensform* in Wittgenstein’s texts stress the close relationship between language (games) and forms of life.⁷ That people understand one another and themselves is due to their common participation in certain patterns, modes, ways, shapes, or forms of life. Growing up is growing into forms of life and learning to discern forms of life one does not participate in. A particular division of (types of) forms of life has only local relevance, but being familiar with many forms is inherent to talking among and about other humans.⁸

Forms of life refer to the complex of natural and cultural circumstances which are presupposed when using language and understanding the world. It provides the context of meaningfulness and justification. A precise explanation of the pre-notion forms of life is not possible, because any explanation presupposes forms of life. Therefore a form of life is an unjustified and unjustifiable pattern of human activity and its grounding certainties.⁹ It cannot be sufficiently stressed that forms of life should *never* be understood as something static. Though it is correct to say that certainties are grounded in forms of life, the certainty is not to be thought of as fixed and static forever.

Our interpretation and extension of Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life is a natural development of the views we hold concerning family resemblance concepts. We use “forms of life” as a philosophically loaded pre-notional notion.¹⁰ The following expressions convey the message of forms of life in various ways: background, common sense, episteme, the everyday, habitus, moral order, prejudices, structuration, the third space, world image/picture (*Weltbild*), world of practical

⁶ The phrases “forms of life” or “form of life” only occur a few times in the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009a: §§19, 23, 241; 2009b: §§1, 345) and a few more times in the *Nachlass* (1969: 134; 1975: §§358, 396; 1978: VIII-47; 2000, MS 133: 54).

⁷ Cf. “The indefiniteness of the number of languages is precisely due to the indefinite number of possible variations of forms of life” (von Savigny 1991: 108).

⁸ Forms of life should be understood as singular and plural *at the same time*, as both transcendental and empirical grounding, to serve as moral *and* cognitive basis for everything else, to possess universal *as well as* local range (Ma and van Brakel 2013: 303-304).

⁹ Cf. “The end is not an ungrounded proposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting” (Wittgenstein 1975: §110); “something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal (Wittgenstein 1975: §359).

¹⁰ Schulte prefers that we do not to call “form of life” a concept (Schulte 2010: 128). Forms of life are primordial in the sense that any talk of concepts (or something non-conceptual) already presupposes forms of life.

realities.¹¹ All these phrases bear some family resemblance with forms of life such that we may speak of “forms of life and its congeners.”

There are also similarities in our formulation of the notion of “forms of life” and certain versions of interpretation of Chinese concepts. For example, Hansen remarks that form of life “is a very tempting translation of *dao*^{way}” (Hansen 1992: 383n46; cf. 72, 75, 84). Fraser articulates a similar idea: “In the context of classical Chinese thought, agency is manifested through the activity of following a *dào*, a way or form of life” (Fraser 2014: 555).

Fingarette’s account of the features of “*li*” (禮, usually translated as rites) as “the essential foundation not only of habit but also of ultimate standards” also shows similarities to our description of forms of life (Fingarette’s 1991: 218-19). Following Hu Shi 胡适, Cua describes *li* 禮 as “all social habits and customs acknowledged and accepted as a set of rules to guide action” (Cua 2003: 371). Hall and Ames describe *li* 理 (yet another Chinese concept) as establishing “the *ethos* of a given community” (Hall and Ames 1995: 214).¹²

Li 禮 is often explained in terms of “social grammar,”¹³ which phrase may derive from Wittgenstein’s notion of grammar and can be considered as a congener of forms of life. According to Wittgenstein, “What belongs to grammar are the conditions (the method) necessary for comparing the proposition with reality. That is all the conditions necessary for the understanding (of the sense)” (Wittgenstein 1974: §45). Li Chenyang uses the expression “cultural grammar” to interpret *li* 禮 and compares it with ordinary grammar. Both are public and rooted in tradition; both change over time, have a descriptive function, figure in learning, and have a regulative and prescriptive function (Li 2007: 318-320). *Li* 禮 and *li* 理, as well as *dao*, may be considered as congeners of the notion of forms of life, despite their many differences.¹⁴

¹¹ These expressions can be associated with the work of Austin, Bakhtin, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault, Gadamer, Garfinkel, Hacking, Habermas, William James, Lyotard, Ryle, Schütz, Searle, Sellars, and others.

¹² Translations of *li* 理 include: pattern, principle, ordering, reasonability, logos, coherence, knowing, noticing, thinking, rightness, standards of value, and more.

¹³ Cf. Ames and Rosemont (1998: 51).

¹⁴ Some will argue that concepts such as *dao* and *li* have a morally positive association, which forms of life do not have. In our description of the notion of “forms of life” we include ethical or moral principles prevalent in a form of life (that is to say forms of life include *all* socially constructed meanings that inform one another, whether concerning factual, moral, or whatever issues). Whether it

At the most basic level, similarities of forms of life (i.e. mutually recognizable human practices—see below) are grounded in what we call the “attitude-toward-a-soul principle.” This condition is taken for granted in the practice of every form of comparative philosophy. The soul-principle is derived from Wittgenstein’s famous remark,

My attitude [*Einstellung*] toward him is an attitude toward a soul [*zur Seele*]. I am not of the opinion [*Meinung*] that he has a soul. (Wittgenstein 2009b: §22)

In another place in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, “If one sees the behavior of a living thing, one sees its soul [*Seele*]” (Wittgenstein 2009a: §357). The translation of *Seele* in Wittgenstein (2009a: §357) was changed from *soul* to *mind* in the fourth edition. In the critical discussion of Fraser’s *Golden Bough*, Wittgenstein says, “too little is made from the fact that we count the words ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ as part of our educated vocabulary” (Wittgenstein 1993: 133). Although Wittgenstein does not offer extensive explanations about the “grammar” of his usage of “soul,” we can take it in the minimum sense that, when interpreting, one would/should always recognize the other as a human being.

3. Mutually recognizable human practices

For interpretation to be successful, it is necessary to assume that X is a human being and engages in practices the majority of which are immediately recognizable as human practices. Very different practices can be recognized as human practices because they show some similarity with practices the interpreter is familiar with. However, “similar” practices recognized by the one and the other respectively are not the same, though usually (often, but not always), there are family resemblances as seen from a third point of view (which may coincide with the perspective of the one or the other). In comparative and Chinese philosophy, Y will “see” practices of X as being similar to practices Y is familiar with (not necessarily practices of Y’s forms of life). That Y recognizes strange practices as similar to practices Y is familiar with is both a necessary (transcendental) condition of interpretation and a well-confirmed empirical fact. There are always family resemblances between (human) forms of life, although what the resemblances are in a particular case are relative to the languages and conceptual schemes involved (and hence judged differently by different parties).

makes sense (or not) to speak of a Nazi form of life and/or a Nazi *dao* is a complicated issue, which we cannot address in this paper.

There are always enough (perceived) similarities to make a start at interpreting difference. Nelson Goodman (1972: 437-446) has famously argued that every thing resembles every other thing (in some respect). However, this is not part of our notion of “mutually recognizable human practices.” The relevant respects are always already given by the conceptual schemes of the interpreter or forms of life the interpreter is familiar with.

Down-to-earth actions and behaviors often have a close resemblance across traditions. One may think of practices such as molding clay to make a vessel (*Daodejing*, ch. 11) or cook Ding dissecting an ox (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 3).¹⁵ These practices may convey an image of a highly sophisticated and abstract notion. However, to “compare” the “emptiness” of Heidegger’s jug and Laozi’s vessel (*qi* 器) requires that we first recognize the everyday practice of molding a vessel. At the same time, one should always be ready to revise one’s secure attunements. One should be prepared to come across somebody like Zhuangzi (莊子) who confronts death with exaltation.¹⁶

The more one studies or interprets, the more differences transpire, but this is so *only* against a background of numerous similarities. Unavoidably, the interpreter starts by projecting her/his perceived similarities “in the large,” while noting differences in the small.¹⁷ Differences in the small may hint at differences in the large, but perhaps not yet “understood,” for example *wu* 物 may be taken to mean object/thing, but this misses important differences at a more sophisticated level.¹⁸ Awareness of differences in the large may require re-interpretation of differences in the small. This is part of the hermeneutic circle of interpretation (preliminary assumptions, observations, interpretations, revising preliminary assumptions, and so on).

¹⁵ Cf. Ma (2008: 137; 2015: 831).

¹⁶ See Graham (1981: 23-24). For Zhuangzi, emotions specific to life and death dissolve in the ecstatic acceptance of “everything.” As is often recounted, when Zhuangzi’s wife died and Hui Shi 惠施 came to offer his condolences, he found Zhuangzi squatted on the ground, drumming on a basin and singing (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 18).

¹⁷ An overlooked aspect of Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance is the distinction between similarities in the small and in the large (Wittgenstein 2009a: §66). Similarities in the small refer to *prima facie* similarities. Similarities in the large refer to similar ways of fitting in the embedding forms of life.

¹⁸ In modern English a thing is usually not thought of as an organism, whereas arguably organism is a paradigmatic example of *wu* in classical Chinese (Ma 2015: 815f). Cf. also: “When they speak of *wanwu* 萬物 they probably do not mean 10,000 countable objects, but 10,000 nameable stuff kinds” (Hansen 1992: 48).

Absence of practices provisionally taken to be quasi-universals is possible,¹⁹ but this can only be observed given a background of many cases of family resemblance of practices and language games. It is the recognition of practices of humans that lie at the basis of similarities of (human) forms of life. More sophisticated interpretations of difficult passages in a text have to be embedded in more easily accessible mutually recognizable human practices.

Examples of (presupposed) mutually recognizable human practices include: engaging in exchanging goods, pointing, greeting, making music (singing or using instruments, dancing), preparing food by heating, wood working, using language, rituals, artistic practices, and much more. For interpretation to be possible, it cannot happen that there are no mutually recognizable human practices at all.

Mutual recognition of human practices is taken for granted by all interpreters. For example, in sophisticated discussions of the *Zhuangzi*, easily recognizable practices are presupposed without further ado; for example the practice of a carpenter and the artifacts he makes (a boat, side boards of coffins, ridgepoles of tall roofs), as described in the wretched timber stories in the *Zhuangzi*.²⁰ However, parts of the text that are easy to interpret because of mutually recognizable human practices still warrant careful analysis of possible differences. For example, numbers will usually assumed to be universals, but because associations may differ, it is better to speak of quasi-universals. It is easy to imagine contexts in which it does matter, for example a number having particular significance (apart from being used in some standardized measurement).

From the Western perspective, art(works) in the broad sense can be considered a quasi-universal. Whether there is a counter-part quasi-universal as seen from the Chinese side is another question. The way of determining family resemblance of artwork has been based on what one sees; for example, a drawing of a bison or of an elephant,²¹ or Carpenter Qing's bell-stand (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 19). Alternatively, we can

¹⁹ Quasi-universals belong to the metalanguage of Y and connect family-resemblance-concepts from a limited number of traditions, thus fulfilling a necessary role in interpretative practice.

²⁰ See for more details on the "wretched timber" (*sanmu* 散木) stories in chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi*: van Brakel (2014).

²¹ Drawings of bisons and elephants are found in Paleolithic rock art (discovered in Argentina, Australia, China, France, India, Namibia, etc.), dating from around 10,000 BCE. According to Bataille, the "beautiful" Lascaux paintings are, though unintentionally (83), "the most ancient art" (Bataille 2005: 103). Bataille writes from the perspective of Western aesthetics and only concerning the Lascaux Caves. However, rock art may meet the criteria of traditional Chinese aesthetics as well: "vital resonance and live movement" (*qiyun shengdong* 氣韻生動, Xie He 謝赫).

determine family resemblance as well as cultural differences in terms of how (art) is embedded in forms of life. One can certainly discern the image of animals as decoration on Qing's bell-stand; one can also consider the practice of sculpting a wooden bell-stand and using it in a ritual. From such a perspective, one can further understand the correspondence of the shape of sculptured animals to the rhythm of music. Qing's account of the necessity of fasting in order to come into harmony with the "heavenly rhythm of the thing" may be difficult to imitate. But this practice is still (faintly) recognizable across traditions.²²

If a European and a Chinese painting have the "same" subject, for example a horse, some bamboo, or a landscape painting (*shanshuihua* 山水画), there are recognizable similarities. But interpretations may be quite different indeed. Even more divergence emerges when one is told that some Daoists say that in painting the brush forgets the hand.²³ However, the last sentence can only be made sense of, if it is assumed, among other things, that "brush" is a quasi-universal.

4. Principles of mutual attunement

Y *must* assume a degree of mutual attunement between Y and X. The principle of mutual attunement falls apart in three constituents: principle of reasonableness, principle of charity, and principle of humanity. The mutual attunements (agreements) "enforced" by the three principles of mutual attunement do not exclude X being "original" or "unique." But Y can only ascribe such qualifications to X, after having ascribed many agreements.

Mutual attunement of Y and X assists in steering interpretation. The latter is a dynamic process in which interlocutors interact with one another. In a face-to-face situation (such as intercultural philosophical dialogue), interaction goes in both directions. If one party is deceased, as is the case with most textual interpretation, the dynamism of attunement is operative in the dialogue among relevant interpreters and commentators.

In later stages of interpretation, attunement is not meant in the sense of aiming to reach consensus, but in the sense of mutual recognition of differences against a background of quasi-universals on both sides. When interpreting texts, there happens attunement among interpreters and commentators, but again, one does not primarily

²² For discussion of Qing's bell stand as artwork see Ma (2015: 830-32).

²³ See Ma (2015: 822), citing Lin Xiyi 林希逸.

aim at reaching consensus. There is no singing together in concert, but fine tuning of hermeneutic circles across traditions relative to an indefinite variety of background conceptual schemes of interpreters and commentators.

principle of reasonableness

We reserve the phrase “principle of reasonableness” for the principle of mutual attunement in the pre-linguistic stage of interpretation, including interpretation of the use of human-made artifacts in mutually recognizable practices (whether in pre-historical or historical times). Y *must* presuppose that, *usually*, X (the maker of artifacts) has reasonable beliefs (according to the criteria of reasonableness of Y) given X’s *Umwelt* (as perceived by Y). In addition, the principle of reasonableness includes many features of human beings as “social animals,” for example the mutually recognizable practice of “being-with.”²⁴ Our formulation of the principle of reasonableness is a variant formulation of the principle of humanity (see below). A somewhat more concrete description is to say that Y should ascribe those beliefs to X that Y might have, were Y in X’s place (allowing for some yet unexplained exceptions).

The principle of reasonableness exclusively in force during pre-linguistic stages of interpretation is rarely discussed. It may seem irrelevant to the situation of interpreting ancient texts, but it remains in force during linguistic stages of interpretation. It can be considered a concretization of the soul-principle and is intertwined with mutually recognizable human practices.

Already “before” interpretation and the principle of reasonableness become “active,” there is mutual attunement of humans and their local *Umwelt* (which includes other humans). Invariants constrain the course of events in the system of humans *cum* environment taken together as a whole.²⁵ If there were not such invariants or affordances, there would not be a biological basis for mutual attunement. A human being (or a group of human beings) creates and reshapes his or her or their *Umwelt* when interacting with the world and other humans. Ascribing meaning to a linguistic or non-linguistic “something,” tacitly assumes ascribing an *Umwelt* to X.

²⁴ See on “being-with” as quasi-universal Ma (2014).

²⁵ See Gibson (1979). We follow Gibson in suggesting that invariants are lawlike relations among different modes or dimensions of activity (involving social, cultural, as well as physical and biological factors). One’s grasp of affordances is the attunement to such invariants.

principle of charity

In the primordial “radical” stage of linguistic interpretation, *Y must* presuppose that *X* is, *on the whole*, sincere, consistent, and right. This necessary presupposition resembles Davidson’s principle of charity.²⁶ Only by assuming that *X* is sincere, consistent, and right on the whole (by the standards of *Y*), is it possible to ascribe logical, epistemic, or deontic error to *X*. However, our proposed principle of charity differs on at least four important points from that of Davidson and his followers.

First, for Davidson, logic, and a behavioristic notion of belief (“holding true”) and some other matters are assumed to be universal across all humans and their languages, and therefore do not need to be interpreted. In our view, nothing should be exempted from interpretation, not even logic. No specific universals are needed (which Davidson does assume in his highlighting of triangulation).²⁷ Second, Davidson’s principle is only concerned with one-way interpretation, and the roles of interpreters and speakers or authors are more or less fixated. Third, Davidson does not mention either the principle of reasonableness or the principle of humanity. He focuses exclusively on the early stages of linguistic interpretation. Finally, apart from Davidson’s consistency, truth, and rightness, our principle of charity explicitly includes that *Y must* presuppose that *X* is sincere (or trustworthy), and perhaps more.

Therefore, we formulate our revised principle of charity as follows: One can only have disagreements against a background of agreements. *Y must* presuppose that *X* usually is sincere, often speaks the truth, is by and large consistent, and is on the whole right—all of this according to *Y*’s criteria and formulated in *Y*’s language. Being right includes having true beliefs concerning both “facts” and “values.” Further, a degree of emotional and moral attunement is as necessary for successful communication and interpretation as pragmatic agreement on the happenings in the world. There must also be some agreement on meta-epistemic virtues such as coherence (“fitting”). Finally, the revised principle of charity includes cases of

²⁶ Davidson gives different formulations of his principle of charity; for example: “assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right” (Davidson 2001: 137). For discussion see LePore and Ludwig (2005: 182-196).

²⁷ Triangulation is “the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another’s responses” (Davidson 2001: xv, 83). Davidson argues that in the simplest and most basic situations we “class together the same distal stimuli” (Davidson 2004: 143). We don’t agree (Ma and van Brakel 2016: 183-189).

agreeing that two incommensurable statements (in two different languages) are both true.²⁸

principle of humanity

The principle of humanity is like the principle of charity but now according to the standards of X's community. Something like the principle of charity and something like the principle of humanity both play a role in subsequent stages of linguistic interpretation. However, it is important to stress that in later stages of interpretation, X's beliefs may indeed be judged according to the criteria of the community of X, *provided* the interpreter has already used the principle of charity to find out what the criteria of judgment are in X's tradition.

There is a wide range of formulations of the principle of humanity. A common example is: "make a thinker explicable and render them as interesting or coherent as possible."²⁹ Grandy is always cited when the discussion turns to the "origin" of the principle of humanity, but his formulations are rather vague and general. For example: "The principle of humanity urges us to bear in mind that the speaker is a person and has certain basic similarities to ourselves when we are choosing between alternative translations" (Grandy 1973: 445). What are these "basic similarities"? They may range from "innate similarity standards" to mutual recognition of human practices. The former, but not the latter, entails that some basic concepts are universally shared, for example GREEN.³⁰

In advanced stages of interpretation—the usual situation in comparative and Chinese philosophy—all three principles (of reasonableness, charity, and humanity) apply and their relative weight depends on the choice of quasi-universals (i.e. the lexicon of the interpreter's metalanguage) and epistemic virtues (for evaluating alternative interpretations). These relative weights cannot be "calculated."

According to some commentators, the three principles are methodological principles instead of *necessary* conditions. However, the principles of reasonableness and of charity are definitely *necessary* conditions. However, the principle of humanity

²⁸ Cf. Graham's example of "the cat sat on the mat" and *mao zai xizi shang* 猫在席子上. Both statements are true though they may be considered incommensurable. The Chinese sentence is "true even if the cat has never before now sat on the mat, false if it sat on a cloth mat" (Graham 1992: 65).

²⁹ McLeod (2015: 175), following others and without using the phrase "principle of humanity."

³⁰ The last word (GREEN) is not an English word, but the label in the presupposed metalanguage for what is called "green" in English, *lǜ* 绿 in Chinese, *vert* in French, *lhenxa* in Kwakw'ala, and so on.

may also be considered as an epistemic virtue, i.e. a methodological rule, as suggested in the next section.

5. Principle of charity, of humanity, or both?

The secondary literature is not very consistent in its use of the phrases principle of charity and principle of humanity, although usually they are seen as alternatives, either the one or the other being invoked. For example, Hansen favors a principle of humanity that he formulates as: “most utterances [should] be explainable as warranted for the community” (Hansen 2007: 481). According to Hansen, the principle of charity would allow one to assume too much shared truths; with the result, for example, of avoiding the plausibility of concluding that, according to Gongsun Long, *bai ma fei ma* 白馬非馬 is false (but explainable). Hansen is right that one should not assume “too much” agreement and ascribe “too much” truth, but Davidson is right to say that in the *radical* stages of interpretation, charity is the governing principle that one *must* assume. To reiterate: the principle of humanity refers to later stages of interpretation, when Y has gathered, *obeying the principle of charity*, knowledge of X’s situatedness in the conceptual schemes and forms of life of X’s time and place.

A concrete illustration of the “clash” of the principles of charity and humanity can be found in the exchange on this issue between Chad Hansen and David Wong. Xiao and Huang may be quite right to point out that the difference between the attitudes of Hansen and Wong towards Confucianism is the major cause for their disagreements (Xiao and Huang 2014: 18). However, this leaves open the possibility that the attitude of Hansen and Wong towards Zhuangzi and other Chinese literati may be a consequence of their different opinions concerning principles of interpretation.

Wong analyses difference in terms of different priorities or weightings *given* shared “real values” (Wong 2006: 234).³¹ According to Hansen, Wong doesn’t allow one to say: “Confucians *falsely* believe ...” (Hansen 2014: 81). The principle of charity, wrongly, requires “them” to “massively agreeing *with us* on moral values” (2014: 80). Hansen emphasizes that Mencius and Mozi *disagree*; it is not a difference

³¹ For example, value of community and value of individuality are both universal values, but they are ranked differently in different traditions. Different moralities “are simply different prioritizations of the same universe of values” (Xiao and Huang 2014: 17). The difference between Confucians and Mohists is a question of “weighting” (setting different priorities).

of moral dialects (both being right, as Wong would see it). Moreover, by ascribing too much truth to the other, charity leads to paralysis: “other views are as right as your own” (93). In contrast, the principle of humanity allows an interpreter to attribute false beliefs to X in cases the principle of charity does not allow so. According to Hansen, “Wong picks and chooses among translations and translators” in order to find “their claims approximately true *in Chinese*” (83).³²

In an earlier publication Hansen holds that we should maximize *reasonableness* rather than truth; explain why “they” accept a belief. “Humans reason in similar enough ways that we can understand them” (Hansen 1992: 10-11). The principle of charity attributes “to Chinese philosophers a cluster of familiar but unsystematic philosophical doctrines” (11). In contrast to the principle of charity, the principle of humanity “presuppose[s] an entire theory [of explanatory interpretation] of the classical period in our interpretation of any part” (11).

According to Hansen, one must interpret a text in a way consistent with our understanding of an author’s assumptions, motives, and background knowledge in general. Hence Hansen’s focus on X’s “dependence” on the criteria of his/her community. Hansen writes (long ago):³³

This is not a prejudice that ours is the only way to reason, but a formal requirement of any theoretical approach to interpretation. If we did not make such an assumption we should never know when one interpretation is a better explanation of the text than another.

Hansen is right that we *must* presuppose “the principle of humanity *or some similar principle*” (Hansen 1983, emphasis added), but it does not follow that we must follow *his* version of the principle of humanity. Moreover, what Hansen is criticizing is *his* conception of the principle of charity, which may not be Wong’s view. (However that doesn’t mean that Wong is right.)

Wong says that charity (in the later-Davidson’s version) directs us to “optimize” (not maximize) agreement between X and Y whenever plausible.³⁴ Wong

³² See for Wong’s rebuttal of these criticisms Wong (2014: 230-31, 239n).

³³ Cited from revised Preface of Hansen (1983), available at <http://www.philosophy.hku.hk/ch/L&L1.htm>, section “The Coherent Theory Methodology of Interpretation.” All citations marked “Hansen (1983)” are taken from this section.

³⁴ Wong suggests that principles of charity and humanity are not “appreciable different,” provided the principle of charity is understood in terms of Davidson’s “optimization” version. Before 1973 Davidson would speak of the principle of charity in terms of maximizing agreement; after 1973 in terms of optimizing agreement (Davidson 2001: xix, 25, 100, 135, 137, 168, 169, 197). However, he does not seem to make a fundamental distinction between the choice of the word optimize instead of maximize (169). Perhaps more significant is another change in his formulation: from maximizing *truth*

acknowledges that this principle (of optimization) itself needs to be interpreted (Wong 2014: 229). Therefore he suggests that (dis)agreement ascribed must be part of “the best explanation,” employing a principle of interpretation *and* “scientific explanation” (230). However, invoking “the best explanation” doesn’t tell us anything about the criteria for being the *best* explanation.³⁵

In falling back on “explanation,” Wong has confused the principle of humanity with epistemic virtues, as Hansen has. For example, Hansen includes a principle of coherence into his principle of humanity, that is: “The requirement that we compare interpretations with regard to how coherently, consistently, neatly, and elegantly they explain the statements in the corpus” (Hansen 1983). As he correctly remarks, “elegance”, “simplicity”, or “neatness” are standards of interpretation/theory choice (i.e. epistemic virtues). These standards are needed because a number of different interpretations may fit the facts equally well. However, it is not true that Y *must* choose an interpretation that is more elegant. What Y must do is to choose and balance different epistemic virtues (which may or may not include elegance). The disagreements of Hansen and Wong are not concerning necessary conditions of interpretation, but concerning epistemic virtues.

The debate between Hansen and Wong about favoring either the principle of charity or the principle of humanity is misdirected. Both principles are applicable, though at different stages of interpretation. Davidson is right that, at the most fundamental level of interpretation of language, that is to say: in the primordial stages of radical interpretation, one *must* presuppose agreement in a large number of judgments, *as judged by the standards of the interpreter*. But in later, more pragmatic stages of interpretation, having acquired a basis of agreement for interpreting the standards of X, Y can embark on judging by X’s criteria.

6. Concluding remarks

As interpretation moves on, or as a result of discussions among scholars, one may

to maximizing *intelligibility* (xix).

³⁵ In passing it should be noted that the notion of “best explanation” has been subjected to devastating criticism (van Fraassen 1989: 142-149). It is not irrational to go for the best explanation, but it is irrational to believe that one is *compelled* to follow the inference to the best explanation. On the other hand, the so-called scientific realists argue that inference to the best explanation is the major epistemic virtue that leads to truth (i.e. how the world is) or to what *the* correct interpretation is. However that may be, even if we do accept inference to the best explanation, it belongs to the category of epistemic virtues.

reach a stage where a reformulation of (part of) the principle of mutual attunement may be advised. For example, the concepts used in the present formulation may not easily allow for extension across traditions.³⁶ For example, *cheng* 誠 seems to have a family resemblance with sincerity, but it has also been rendered as truth (and numerous other translations). This might suggest that a strict separation of the family resemblance concepts of truth and sincerity cannot be claimed across traditions. Moreover, although *cheng* is often translated as sincerity, Smith points out that the social rendering of “person(al)” in the Chinese context of *cheng* gives it “a twist that comes close to being the opposite” of English sincerity (Smith 1980: 429).

One *must* presuppose a principle of mutual attunement, but for the formulation of this principle there are many possibilities. We have suggested that the principle consists of three parts. Others (e.g. Hansen and Wong) argue that the principle of mutual attunement should be understood in terms of *either* charity *or* humanity. Rudebush focuses on *sophia* (wisdom) in the Western tradition and the sage (*shengren* 聖人) in classical Chinese texts and suggests to replace “being true” by “being wise” in the principle of charity (Rudebusch 2014: 457). We don’t think the latter is a good option. Perhaps a better example of a possibly needed reformulation of the principle of charity is not to use “true” in the formulation, but a generic quasi-universal notion of correctness instead, which has a wide scope, covering (or fusing) right, permissible, true, cohere, sincere, appropriate, fitting, as well as *yi* 宜, *ran* 然, *shi* 是, *zhen* 真, *cheng* 誠, *dang* 當, and other kinds of being correct.³⁷

Only after the necessary conditions are fulfilled can the interpreter focus on divergence, highlighting differences, realizing that the latter is only possible against a background of similarities. The necessary conditions of interpretation are:

1. The most basic condition is the attitude-towards-a-soul principle. It is always already assumed that “the other” is a human being.
2. A necessary condition is family resemblance across the board, which consists of two parts:

³⁶ In the simplest case, this means that a Chinese family-resemblance-concepts and a European family-resemblance-concepts display a relation of family resemblance (not of identity or equivalence). That is to say: a Chinese concept shows similarities to a European concept, as judged from European conceptual schemes; and a European concept shows similarities to a Chinese concept, as judged from Chinese conceptual schemes. The similarities seen from the Chinese and European side respectively are not the same, although there will be family resemblances (as judged by a third party).

³⁷ It has been argued that the “is true” predicate is absent in classical Chinese. See on this and truth being a subsidiary of rightness Ma and van Brakel (2016: 350-359).

- A. One *must* assume that *all* general concepts in *all* languages are family-resemblance-concepts. This includes the practice of extending family-resemblance-concepts across traditions and the no-need-to-speak-the-same-language principle.
- B. One *must* assume family resemblance of forms of life. Similarities and differences are grounded in mutually recognizable human practices. However, different parties seeing mutual recognition of human practices doesn't mean these parties are seeing the "same" practices.
- 3. Y *must* assume a variant of the principle of mutual attunement. In early (radical) stages of linguistic interpretation Y *must* assume that "the other" is *usually* sincere, consistent and right.
- 4. In later stages of interpretation the principles of reasonableness, charity, and humanity are all three of them operative and have to be balanced.
- 5. Y *must* choose a number of quasi-universals and epistemic virtues, which curtail underdetermination and ties a particular interpretation to a particular interpreter and his/her choices of epistemic virtues and quasi-universals.

These are the necessary conditions of interpretation. No more are needed; in particular the *not-so-necessary* conditions, mentioned in the first section, are not needed.

Some necessary conditions for cross-cultural interpretation play a role in the background, undermining the threat of relativism and/or incommensurability. This applies in particular to representatives of "soft" universalism: extending the family resemblance of practices and concepts across traditions, attitude-toward-a-soul principle, and principles of mutual attunement.

Some necessary conditions for cross-cultural interpretation are part of the methodology of any inquiry. This includes the necessity of choosing and weighting epistemic virtues. In the context of comparative and Chinese philosophy, epistemic virtues are effective in comparing competing interpretations; in assessing the balancing of the subsidiaries of the principle of mutual attunement; in the choice of quasi-universals; and in combating any other form of underdetermination.

Finally we claim that our accounts of family resemblance of concepts and forms of life across traditions, mutually recognizable human practices, the combination of three principles of mutual attunement, and the role of epistemic virtues already characterize "good practice" in comparative and Chinese philosophy.

acknowledgement

We are very grateful for the stimulating comments and suggestions of the journal's reviewers.

references

- Ames, Roger T., and Henry Rosemont. 1998. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Random House.
- Bataille, Georges. 2005. *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*. New York: Zone Books.
- Cavell, Stanley. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cua, Antonio S., ed. 2003. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 2004. *Problems of Rationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1991. "Reason, Spontaneity, and the Li禮—a Confucian Critique of Graham's Solution to the Problem of Fact and Value." In *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts. Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, edited by Henry Rosemont, 209-225. Chicago and La Salle IL: Open Court.
- Fraser, Chris. 2014. "Wandering the Way: A Eudaimonistic Approach to the Zhuāngzǐ." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13:541–565.
- Gibson, James. 1979. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1972. *Problems and Projects*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Graham, Angus C. 1981. *Chuang-Tzu. The Inner Chapters*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Graham, Angus C. 1992. "Conceptual Schemes and Linguistic Relativism in Relation to Chinese." In *Unreason within Reason: Essays of the Outskirts of Rationality*, edited by Angus C. Graham, 59-83. La Salle IL: Open Court.
- Grandy, R.E. 1973. "Reference, Meaning, and Belief." *The Journal of Philosophy* 70:439-452.
- Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. 1995. *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Hansen, Chad. 1983. *Language and Logic in Ancient China*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hansen, Chad. 1992. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought. A Philosophical Interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hansen, Chad. 2007. "Prolegomena to Future Solutions to "White-Horse Not Horse"." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34:473-491.
- Hansen, Chad. 2014. "Principle of Humanity Vs. Principle of Charity." In *Moral Relativism and Chinese Philosophy: David Wong and His Critics*, edited by Yang Xiao and Yong Huang, 71-102. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- LePore, Ernest, and Kirk Ludwig. 2005. *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Li, Chenyang. 2007. "Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between *Li* and *Ren* in Confucius' *Analects*." *Philosophy East & West* 57 (3):311-329.
- Ma, Lin. 2008. *Heidegger on East-West Dialogue: Anticipating the Event*. New York: Routledge.
- Ma, Lin. 2014. "A Zhuangzian Response to Heidegger's *Mitsein*." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41 (3-4):487-502.
- Ma, Lin. 2015. "Thinking with Zhuangzi and Su Shi against Heidegger on Artwork." *Philosophy East & West* 65 (3):809-845.
- Ma, Lin, and Jaap van Brakel. 2013. "On the Conditions of Possibility for Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12:297-312.
- Ma, Lin, and Jaap van Brakel. 2015. "Revisiting Wittgenstein on Family Resemblance and Colour(s)." *Philosophical Investigations* DOI: 10.1111/phn.12109.
- Ma, Lin, and Jaap van Brakel. 2016. *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press (forthcoming).
- McLeod, Alexis. 2015. "Replies to Brons and Mou on Wang Chong and Pluralism." *Comparative Philosophy* 6 (1):169-184.
- Quine, Willard V.O. 1960. *Word and Object*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Rudebusch, George. 2014. "Reconsidering *Ren* as Virtue and Benevolence." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40 (3-4):456-472.
- Saunders Jr., Frank. 2014. "Semantics without Truth in Later Mohist Philosophy of Language." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 13:215-29.
- Schulte, Joachim. 2010. "Does the Devil in Hell Have a Form of Life." In *Wittgenstein on Forms of Life and the Nature of Experience*, edited by Antonio Marques and Nuno Venturinha, 125-141. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Smith, Huston. 1980. "Western and Comparative Perspectives on Truth." *Philosophy East & West* 30 (4):425-437.
- van Brakel, Jaap. 2014. "Heidegger on Zhuangzi and Uselessness." *Journal of Chinese philosophy* 41 (3-4):387-406.
- van Brakel, Jaap, and Lin Ma. 2015. "Extension of Family Resemblance Concepts as a Necessary Condition of Interpretation across Traditions." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* (4):475-497.
- van Fraassen, Bas. 1989. *Laws and Symmetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- von Savigny, Eike. 1991. "Common Behaviour of Many a Kind: *Philosophical Investigations* Section 206." In *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Text and Context*, edited by Robert L. Arrington and Hans-Johann Glock, 105-119. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1974. *Philosophical Grammar*, edited by Rush Rhees. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *On Certainty*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1978. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by G. H. von Wright, Rush Rhees and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1993. "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough." In *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, edited by James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, 118-155. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2000. *Wittgenstein's Nachlass: Text and Facsimile Version. The Bergen Electronic Edition*. Bergen and Oxford: Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen and Oxford University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009a. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell. Fourth

- edition, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009b. *Philosophy of Psychology – a Fragment*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (2009). Formerly part II of *PI*.
- Wong, David. 2006. *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wong, David. 2014. "Reply to Hansen." In *Moral Relativism and Chinese Philosophy: David Wong and His Critics*, edited by Yang Xiao and Yong Huang, 215-240. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Xiao, Yang, and Yong Huang, eds. 2014. *Moral Relativism and Chinese Philosophy: David Wong and His Critics*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2013. *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*. Bingham: State University of New York Press.