

COMPARATIVE ESSAYS IN
EARLY GREEK AND CHINESE
RATIONAL THINKING

JEAN-PAUL REDING

COMPARATIVE ESSAYS IN EARLY GREEK
AND CHINESE RATIONAL THINKING

This page intentionally left blank

Comparative Essays in Early Greek and Chinese Rational Thinking

JEAN-PAUL REDING
University of Zurich, Switzerland

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Copyright © Jean-Paul Reding 2004

Jean-Paul Reding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this Work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Reding, Jean-Paul, 1950–

Comparative essays in early Greek and Chinese rational thinking

1. Philosophy, Ancient 2. Philosophy, Chinese – To 221 B.C.

3. Philosophy, Chinese – 221 B.C.–960 A.D.

I. Title

181.1'1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reding, Jean-Paul, 1950–

Comparative essays in early Greek and Chinese rational thinking / Jean-Paul Reding.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

Contents: “Contradiction is impossible” – The origin of logic in China –

Philosophy and geometry in early China – Greek and Chinese categories –

Words for atoms, atoms for words – Light and the mirror in Greece and China –

“To be” in Greece and China.

ISBN 0-7546-3803-0 (alk. paper)

1. Philosophy, Chinese–To 221 B.C. 2. Philosophy, Ancient. 3. Philosophy,
Comparative. I. Title.

B126.R435 2004

180–dc21

2003045369

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-3803-2 (hbk)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1 'Contradiction is Impossible'	17
2 The Origin of Logic in China	31
3 Philosophy and Geometry in Early China	49
4 Greek and Chinese Categories	65
5 Words for Atoms – Atoms for Words: Comparative Considerations on the Origins of Atomism in Ancient Greece and on the Absence of Atomism in Ancient China	93
6 Light and the Mirror in Greece and China: Elements of Comparative Metaphorology	127
7 'To Be' in Greece and China	167
<i>Chinese Characters and Texts</i>	195
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	223

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

- 1 “‘Contradiction is Impossible’” is a previously unpublished contribution.
- 2 ‘The Origin of Logic in China’ is an original contribution. Part of its research material goes back to an earlier paper that appeared in *Etudes Asiatiques* 40/1 (1986), 40–56, under the title ‘Analogical Reasoning in Early Chinese Philosophy’.
- 3 ‘Philosophy and Geometry in Early China’ is a completely rewritten and expanded version of a paper that appeared in *Etudes Asiatiques* 47/4 (1993), 623–44, under the title ‘Les philosophes-géomètres de la Chine ancienne’ (in French).
- 4 ‘Greek and Chinese Categories’ appeared first in *Philosophy East and West* 36/4 (1986), 349–74. The present version is updated, corrected and enlarged.
- 5 ‘Words for Atoms – Atoms for Words: Comparative Considerations on the Origins of Atomism in Ancient Greece and on the Absence of Atomism in Ancient China’ is a previously unpublished contribution. It originated as a series of lectures (‘*Warum gibt es keinen Atomismus im alten China?*’) delivered at the University of Zürich in 1990/91. An earlier version of it was presented at the conference ‘Thinking through Comparisons’ in Eugene, Oregon (May 1998).
- 6 ‘Light and the Mirror in Greece and China: Elements of Comparative Metaphorology’ was first presented at the Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii (April 1996), and also later in the same year at the annual meeting of the ‘Société romande de philosophie’ at Rolle, Switzerland (June 1996). A shorter and less technical French version has appeared in the *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 129 (1997), 1–30, under the title ‘L’utilisation philosophique de la métaphore en Grèce et en Chine. Vers une métaphorologie comparée’ (in French). The present version has not been published before.
- 7 “‘To Be’ in Greece and China’ is a previously unpublished contribution.

I am grateful to the editors of *Philosophy East and West* (Honolulu, Hawaii), *Etudes Asiatiques* (Zürich, Switzerland) and the *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* (Lausanne, Switzerland) for the permission granted for reprinting material that first appeared in their publications.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Comparing ancient Chinese to ancient Greek philosophical thinking is certainly a fascinating enterprise. But it is also a questionable one. What is the philosophical justification for such an undertaking? And why should we compare ancient Chinese to ancient Greek thought, rather than to Indian, Arabic or African ways of thinking? We might ask, further, if we have at our disposal a comparative method adaptable to a project of this scope.

Let me begin by trying to answer the last question first. The comparative method is firmly established in the natural sciences, where we have a number of comparative disciplines, such as comparative zoology and comparative anatomy. Historical linguistics, comparative law, religious studies and comparative mythology also deserve to be mentioned in this context. Comparative philosophy, however, is rather ill famed, and has never acquired the status of a unified and independent philosophical discipline.¹ Even the very notion of comparative philosophy as a discipline distinct from pure philosophy is rejected sometimes.²

Comparative philosophy is also seen very often as nothing more than a broader approach to the study of the history of philosophy, by including Indian, Chinese and African philosophies as appendices to standard histories of Western philosophy.³ The most common way of practising comparative philosophy, however, is to spot marked differences or similarities between specific doctrines or global attitudes of Western and Eastern philosophy. The goal I have set myself is to rehabilitate the comparative method as a more rigorous way of doing philosophy with a cross-cultural perspective.

The comparative method must not be confused with the mere act of comparing. Everything may after all be similar to – or different from – everything else.⁴ The comparative method is part of a whole scientific and epistemological procedure. The comparative sciences are located midway between historical and empirical sciences. Based on historical data such as texts, archaeological finds or recorded history, they nevertheless are, like

1 Denominations such as ‘geophilosophy’ (Ohji and Xifaras 1999) or ‘ethnophilosophy’ have an implicit relativistic ring. Interesting is Deutsch’s ‘contrastive philosophy’ (Deutsch 1970: 320). For a critical discussion of the comparative method and its relation to philosophy, see Wu Xiaoming 1998; Benesch 1997; Reding 1998 (with bibliography). See also the impressive collection of texts in Mazaheri 1992. On the new school of intercultural philosophy and hermeneutics, see Holenstein 1994; Mall 1995; Schneider 1997; Schneider 1998; Wu Kuang-Ming 1998.

2 See Allinson 2001.

3 Brunner 1975: 252.

4 ‘Whatever you can affirm about Eastern or Western thought, it is always possible to quote a doctrine which says exactly the opposite.’ (Regamey 1968: 503) See also Segal 2001: 349–50.

empirical sciences, in the position of emitting and testing hypotheses. Comparative sciences, it has to be said, never predict anything. Comparative disciplines cannot rely, as the natural sciences do, on facts freely reproducible under laboratory conditions. They rather ‘retrodict’, which means that they can put forth theories, hypotheses and explanations dealing with what we may call ‘diverging evolutionary chains’.

There are two essential aspects to the comparative method. The first has already been mentioned: it is a method to confirm or invalidate hypotheses. The observed similarities and differences must appear as meaningful elements in a cluster of hypotheses, not as learned curiosities in a description of exotic mentalities. The second aspect is much harder to explain, because it seems, at first sight, to be a *petitio principii*: the structural unity of the comparative domain and of the data has to be presupposed.

To clarify this second issue, take an example from historical linguistics.⁵ If we consider the Greek word *oikos* (‘home’) and the Latin *vicus* (‘village’) from the point of view of their phonological evolution, the hypothesis of a common Indo-European ancestor **uoikos* imposes itself. The Greek *oikos* and the Latin *vicus* hence are really one and the same word. The rationale for comparing these different forms lies in the fact that Latin and Greek, just as Sanskrit or Old Persian, have branched off from a presumed common ancestor, namely Proto-Indo-European. It is, of course, possible to emit hypotheses in historical linguistics, and put them to test by trying to find words or verbal forms that fit or do not fit a proposed reconstruction. If we have the Latin *vinum* (‘wine’), we can predict (‘retrodict’) that the corresponding Greek form must be *oinos* (‘wine’), if our earlier hypothesis of the relationship between *vicus* and *oikos* is to be confirmed. The scientific task then is to describe and explain the process whereby these words have developed in different ways. We do not need to explain their similarity. In a simplified manner, we could say that Greek still *is* Proto-Indo-European. The right question to ask here is not ‘why is Greek different from Latin?’ but rather ‘why is Greek not the same as Latin?’⁶ The similarity is the original *datum*; the *explanandum* is the difference.

In an analogous way, we can compare fins to wings. It will be much more difficult, in this case, to specify the common ancestor of these two organs, although we can, with reasonable certainty, point to a common ‘locomotive function’. The important factor here is the medium in which the corresponding locomotive organs had been placed. It is indeed the medium, water or air, which is responsible for the diverging ways in which locomotive organs have evolved.

These examples show that the comparative method, as it appears in historical linguistics or in comparative zoology, is generally used to deal with differences, and more precisely, as I have indicated above, with diverging evolutionary

5 This discipline is rightly called ‘*grammaire comparée*’ in French.

6 The French grammarian Ferdinand Brunot wrote at the beginning of his *Histoire de la langue française*: ‘French really is no more than Latin spoken in Paris [...]’ (Brunot [1905] 1966: 15).

chains.⁷ These chains may nevertheless, in some way, be seen as identical to each other, because they can be related to a supposed common ancestor. In 'neutral' conditions, Greek and Latin would not even have started to branch off from Proto-Indo-European, just as aquatic life might never have left the ocean.

In comparative philosophy, the basic unity of philosophical thinking must also be our initial postulate. In the case of comparative philosophy, however, we cannot point to a common philosophical ancestor. The great philosophical traditions of India, China and Greece all have an origin that can be historically specified, and it is certain that Greek and Chinese philosophies have sprung up independently from one another.⁸ Even if we do not have any compelling reason, at least at the start, to believe that what the first Greek, Chinese, Indian, African or other philosophers did was essentially the same,⁹ the basic unity of philosophical thinking must be our initial postulate, just as Proto-Indo-European is the starting hypothesis for historical linguistics, or law-abiding communities for comparative law.¹⁰ The commensurability¹¹ of the facts that are to be examined has to be presupposed; otherwise, the comparative discipline as such cannot even be established. An expert in comparative linguistics could never start an investigation if first it had to be proved that the signs of the languages examined are words in the same way as are those of the languages already known. This is not to say, of course, that every word or linguistic datum from another language is of interest to the comparativist. Comparative material is drawn together with an eye to possible applications; as a consequence, not every phenomenon from another culture is immediately significant to the comparativist. Only those instances that may further existing knowledge about the concerned domain are investigated by the comparativist. Moreover, the comparativist approaches this domain with hypotheses already in mind, which are confirmed or invalidated through examination of the comparative material.¹² The role of these hypotheses is to isolate the parameters that have caused these evolutionary chains to become different.

7 The link of the comparative method to evolution is also stressed in Segal 2001.

8 I cannot discuss here Bernal's hypothesis of a possible Afroasiatic origin of Greek civilization (Bernal 1987; Bernal 1991).

9 It is Heidegger's – and ultimately Hegel's – thesis that philosophy is a purely European phenomenon, incommensurable with the thought of other ethnic groups (Heidegger [1943] 1987: 3). Husserl ([1938] 1977) and Gadamer (1972: 362) also share this assumption.

10 Proto-Indo-European is, of course, not to be considered as the language spoken by some Indo-European ancestors. It is a hypothetical, artificial and formal reconstruction. Its goal is to explain the relations between the different branches of Indo-European, not the reconstruction of the primitive language. On the comparative method in historical linguistics, see Meillet [1924] 1984.

11 For a discussion of this aspect, see Yu Jiyuan 2001: 296.

12 It may also happen that the comparative method is rejected on ideological grounds. Segal (2001) quotes cases where the comparative method is rejected in biblical studies because it levels religions and does not account for the peculiar status of the religion of ancient Israel in its environment.

The question we should ask in comparative philosophy is not ‘why is Greek philosophy *different* from Chinese philosophy?’ but ‘why are they not *the same*?’ Without this methodological postulate, we are left with bare differences, which we cannot investigate, or mysterious points of contact, which we cannot explain. In other words, the goal of the comparative method is to get hold of the parameters that cause these evolutionary chains to become different. But these parameters act in equal ways on all the chains that are under consideration.

Let me use a simile to further clarify this situation. Take the example of two rivers coming from two different springs. We know that the flowing of rivers obeys scientific laws, codified by the science of limnology. In one sense, there is only one basic law: flowing water always takes the shortest possible way. Ideally speaking, every river should flow, as many canalized rivers nowadays do, in a straight line. But if we follow up their meanders on a map, the actual course of our two rivers may appear to be totally divergent, and even incommensurable. We have to imagine Chinese as well as Greek philosophy as two meandering rivers, and not Greek philosophy as the ideal straight line, and only the Chinese as being of the meandering type. Nevertheless, the scientific approach to the seemingly random meandering of rivers is rendered possible by the fact that the postulated ideal line of their flow is modified by a number of parameters common to all meandering rivers, such as the nature of the geological substratum on which the rivers flow, or their pluvial or nivo-pluvial rate of flow. This simile may help us to understand how it is possible that two diverging and apparently unrelated phenomena nevertheless may obey exactly the same laws.

One sees at once that this way of practising comparative philosophy also establishes much stronger initial conditions. If the comparative approach is to yield more than a mere *description* of what is felt strange or different in another philosophical culture, and eventually lead us on to the way of an *explanation* of these differences, we will also have to start from much stronger assumptions, namely: in a comparative undertaking the ‘home philosophy’ and the ‘other philosophy’ must be on one and the same epistemological level. There can be no room for a norm-defect structure. To be fair, we have to admit that the principles explaining the presence, the absence, or the particular configuration of a facet of the ‘other philosophy’ must also at the same time explain why this facet is present, absent, or different in our ‘home philosophy’.

This bold hypothesis now raises another problem, namely that of the status of these different philosophies. The relations between Eastern and Western philosophies have been characterized in a great variety of ways. All attempts to put these different modes of thinking on a par have ended up, in one way or other, by postulating that they were complementary to one another: Western thought is good at logic and science, Indian thought at religion, Chinese at ethics.¹³

13 See, for example, Suzuki 1914: 47; Scharfstein and Daor 1978: 120–21.

This kind of explanatory model is clearly not viable under the conditions just laid down. It is simply unsatisfactory to claim that the first Chinese philosophers had been bad logicians compared to their Greek counterparts, or that the first Greek philosophers had neglected economics. We cannot admit a 'division of labour' in philosophy. There can be no radical and unbridgeable difference in this sense between Greece and China.¹⁴

On the other hand, my initial thesis is not that we are dealing with identical types of philosophizing. What I would like to show, rather, is that there is a common set of initial conditions that are modified by several 'parameters'. This view implies – paradoxically – that it is at the beginning that different cultures are closest to each other. But this really means no more than that the possibility that either culture could develop one way or the other had been – theoretically at least – the same in the beginning.¹⁵ The conviction of the comparativist is, precisely, that those differences are nowhere contingent, but that they must appear as different, and not the only possible, solutions within one and the same framework. Moreover, these solutions must appear as conditioned only by different and equally applicable 'parameters', and not by irreducible 'mentalities' or 'world-views'.¹⁶

Even on these assumptions, however, we do not yet have the material that would permit us to carry out a comparative investigation meeting the standards just described. If both cultures have nothing in common in the way they have unfolded their possibilities, we still lack the means – the *tertium comparationis* – that would make them comparable at least in some aspect. The most important presupposition of the method outlined here, therefore, is that it is possible to find threads that are, for some time at least, common to both cultures¹⁷ and that it is possible to pick up these common threads. In other words, it should be possible to go back to the crossroads where Greek and Chinese philosophers stood before making opposite choices.

To pick up those threads it is necessary to turn away from the mainstream of ancient Chinese philosophy and study its rather neglected facets of rational and logical thinking. We shall concentrate, therefore, not on Confucianism, Daoism or Legalism, but on the work of the Later Mohists, Zhuangzi and Gongsun Long. It might be objected that these thinkers are perhaps not sufficiently representative of the Chinese mind, because their fundamental options – rationalism and utilitarianism – were not retained in the great summa of Chinese thought elaborated during the Han dynasty. But their example shows in a significant way that rationalism did offer itself as a *choice* to the Chinese. It is legitimate, therefore, to compare Chinese to Western rationalism, and

14 The postulate of the fundamental unity of cultures is prominent, though in a different way, in many other comparative works. See, for example, Needham 1962: xxxv; Todorov 1982; Schwartz 1985; Jullien 1995; Hall and Ames 1995; Mall 1995; Wiredu 1996.

15 On this problem, see also Jullien 1998: 57–67.

16 For a devastating critique of the notion of mentality, see Lloyd 1990.

17 Note that this approach is totally different from that of Jullien (1995), who tries to locate the Chinese ways of approaching reality at the very outskirts of *Western* ways of thinking.

observe both fighting on the same battleground, because we still move in an as yet unshaped – potential – cultural universe. So, even if this strain of thought is not characteristic of Chinese thinking as a whole, it illustrates quite vividly its *potentialities* and provides us with unique and ideal comparative material. We can only regret that the number of comparative investigations that can be conducted under such criteria is very limited, because the meeting points are scarce and because not many of the writings of this tradition of the buried *logos* survive.¹⁸

The unifying theme of the essays collected in this volume is, precisely, an investigation into the remnants of this form of rationality. My central claim is that this is not a kind of Chinese rationality, but simply rationality in China.¹⁹ There are, as we shall see, a great number of elements that appear to be the same in both cultures, such as, for example, the discovery of the axiomatic method, the art of definition, the principle of contradiction, logical syntax, and categories. The hypothesis developed in these essays is that Greek and Chinese rational thinking are different facets of one and the same phenomenon. It is not the case that one of these chains would be the standard whereas the other one would be deviant, that Greek culture is the norm, whereas Chinese culture would be the ‘exception’. The present series of essays on the theme of the buried *logos* in China could well have as its counterpart a corresponding series of essays on a buried *dao* of economical philosophy in ancient Greece.

The methodological hypothesis is, as I have already indicated, that we should have ended up, in China as well as in Greece, with one and the same type of rational philosophy. If we cast the problem in these terms, we have to ask then for the parameters that can account generally for the most basic differences between Greek and Chinese data. It should also be clear that it is impossible for some particular form of philosophical thinking to become a universal standard of reference for comparative studies. The standard of reference in comparative philosophy, if such a standard exists, cannot be an idealized or artificial construction, because there is no ideal way of philosophizing. The standard of reference can only be an inexhaustible pool of possibilities, towards which the parochial nature of our thought blocks our access until we see our own ways of thinking as one of many possible solutions within a much larger framework.

This is why the comparativist looks rather for extreme differences in comparable evolutionary chains, because these cases are most likely to suggest fruitful hypotheses or enlightening explanations.²⁰ For a comparative

18 Jullien (1998: 90–96) applies only hesitatingly the name ‘philosophy’ to these more rationalist strands of Chinese thinking (Later Mohism) while he tries to reinterpret all the lore traditionally qualified as Chinese philosophy in terms of wisdom (*sagesse*).

19 This ‘golden age of rational logical inquiry’ (Harbsmeier 1998: xxi) is still a largely neglected chapter in the history of Chinese philosophy.

20 This conception owes much to the French comparativist Masson-Oursel. See my discussion of his views in Reding 1985: 25 and Reding 1998.

undertaking in philosophy, Greece and China are therefore ideal starting-points, because both have developed, in their beginnings at least, in total independence from each other and have also, moreover, totally different linguistic backgrounds.²¹

There is then another question we may ask: what are the results a comparative philosopher may expect? Undoubtedly, the comparative philosopher will try to get a better understanding of philosophy.²² Just as a linguist cannot expect to explore the subject thoroughly through the study of only one language, the philosopher too hopes to broaden and deepen his knowledge about philosophy by examining the philosophical productions of other cultures. There is no more sense in saying that a language is inferior to another or is a primitive language than to say this of a philosophical theory. Comparative philosophy, therefore, is in principle incompatible with a Hegelian approach to the history of philosophy.²³ A Western philosopher cannot really claim to know philosophy if he is not ready to investigate the totality of philosophical facts.²⁴ The Hegelian philosopher, who establishes a theory of the global evolution of philosophy that tries to prove that there can be philosophy only in the West, very much resembles a linguist who would leave aside African, American Indian and Sino-Tibetan languages because he believes that Indo-European languages can teach him all there is to know about language.

Rather than stressing the extreme differences between both cultures – as do most other writings on this subject – my aim is more precisely to look for the parameters that have to be restored to see the similarities. I have focused my attention essentially on two parameters: the difference in the starting-points of philosophy and the difference of language.

In ancient Greece, philosophical thinking begins with natural philosophy and with theory of knowledge, whereas in ancient China, economics and social philosophy come first into focus. The Mohists begin their philosophical adventure with a definition of the basic properties of human nature. Their attitude is, nevertheless, typically rational: their problem is to secure a foundation to their doctrine that would, on the intent at least, go back to an absolute and unshakeable – Cartesian – starting-point. What makes these attempts comparable and commensurable, is that both focus on the problem of finding a starting-point, not only for the specific problem of the foundation of ethics, but for philosophy *tout court*. The specific problem that early Chinese philosophy had to solve was to provide a reasoned account of the transition from impulse (*yu^a*) to virtue (*de^b*), from impulse to social and legal order (*fa^c*), or from impulse to ritual behaviour (*li^d*).

21 On this problem, see below.

22 Comparative philosophy, as Kwee Swan Liat had already noticed, is a meta-philosophy. See Kwee 1953: 64.

23 This problem is further discussed in Reding 1985: 14–19.

24 The notion of ‘philosophical fact’ is borrowed from Masson-Oursel 1941. See also Masson-Oursel 1911; Masson-Oursel 1926.

Philosophy is thus like an unknown continent, which is discovered, almost simultaneously, in China and in Greece. However, each culture has its own landing-place, from where the exploration of the other, yet unknown parts, starts. Although it is the same continent for all, it does make a difference, if rational thinking, logic and argumentation are approached and conceptualized, as they are in ancient China, from the point of view of politics and economics or if they are approached from the side of natural philosophy and theory of knowledge, as they are in ancient Greece.

The second and most important parameter is, of course, language. The originality of my work in this domain lies in the fact that it tries to explain in a non-relativistic way and with the help of many detailed examples how and to what extent language inflects the development of philosophical theories, in China as well as in Greece. My global aim is to show that the bringing together of two different and independent traditions enables the philosopher to reach a unique vantage-point from where he can gain new insights into the basic structures of philosophical thinking.

Comparisons, as I have already indicated, require some kind of philosophical justification. The main interest of the themes treated in the seven essays proposed here lies in the fact that they are all centred around a common project, namely to test the hypothesis of linguistic relativism. If we look for the parameters that can possibly explain the diverging evolution of Greek and Chinese rational philosophy, we have indeed to consider in the first place the linguistic influence. What kind of philosophical differences are imputable to the language used by the first Greek and Chinese philosophers? There is no *a priori* answer to this question. We have rather to set up a crucial experiment, to decide whether linguistic structures and philosophical ways of arguing are in some way correlated to one another or whether they are independent of each other, even if it is not yet clear what correlation, independence, influence or interference should mean in this context.

The reason why Indian philosophy cannot help us here is all too evident. Indian philosophy shares with Greek philosophy a common Indo-European cultural and linguistic background, which makes it impossible for us to distinguish, of the observed similarities, those that are of strictly philosophical origin from those which are merely linguistic. The relation between Greek and Indian philosophy might be compared to two rivers sharing the same upper reach (namely the Indo-European culture), which means that they cannot be studied without at the same time taking into account the parameters governing these common 'upper reaches'. In the same vein, Buddhist China might be compared to the confluence of two rivers.

There is yet another condition that has to be fulfilled if our crucial experiment is to succeed: the language we analyse must belong to a stratum of 'pure' ordinary language, that is, a language that is as yet untouched by philosophical manipulations. Philosophical arguments have a life of their own. Once the first arguments are developed (such as Parmenides' ontological deduction), subsequent philosophers respond to them and create thereby an interrelated

texture of technical terms, arguments and theories, likely to change the very structure of ordinary language. Many of the distinctions embodied in our ordinary ways of speaking, for example, are themselves remnants of earlier philosophical distinctions sunk into the collective 'linguistic unconscious', like Aristotle's 'substance' and 'essence', 'actual' and 'potential'. Nietzsche, and after him the French deconstructionists, have made us conscious of the fact that our 'normal' ways of speaking are far from being philosophically innocent, but are undermined by a whole labyrinth of hidden philosophical terminology.²⁵ Our experiment, therefore, can only be successful if it is possible to have access to a state of language that is prior to the coining of philosophical terminology, which means nearly prior to the origin of philosophy itself.²⁶ Surprisingly enough, these rather strict experimental conditions can also be met.

It should have become clear by now that the comparison between China and Greece, right at the beginning of philosophy, that is, prior to the retroactive influence of philosophy upon language, is, for the time being, *our only chance* to find out if, and possibly how, language interferes with philosophical thinking.²⁷ As long as we try to solve the problem of the influence of language on philosophical argumentation within our own culture, we very much resemble Baron Munchhausen who, after he got caught in a swamp, pulled at his own hair to get out of it again. It is impossible, for us, to find out how philosophical thinking would have developed in ancient Greece with a linguistic substratum different from Greek ... unless we postulate that rational philosophical thinking as it has developed in ancient China is just what we are looking for.

Why at all, one might ask, is the problem of language important in a philosophical perspective? The reason why a philosopher should feel concerned with this problem is easy enough to state. If it can be proven that language has a deep and systematic influence on the manner in which thought and experience are organized, the traditional claim of philosophers, at least since Descartes and Spinoza, but probably as early as Plato, to have access to an objective and neutral grasp of reality is untenable. If reality can only be perceived through the

25 Derrida 1981. The principle is also recognized by Owen (1979b: 145): 'Modern English can be more precise because it is heir to so much analytic thought on the issues, including Aristotle's.' Owen, of course, thinks that Aristotle has improved our ways of speaking, whereas Derrida clearly implies that he has ruined them.

26 On this aspect, see also Kahn 1995.

27 Graham (1989: 389) writes: 'Chinese thought before the introduction of Buddhism from India is the unique instance of a philosophical tradition which, as far as our information goes, is wholly independent of traditions developed in Indo-European languages (Arabic philosophy descends from Greek, Tibetan from Indian). It therefore provides the ideal test case for Whorf's hypothesis that the thought of a culture is guided and constrained by the structure of its language.' Creel (1970: 2) notes: '[...] the Chinese setting is so isolated and divergent from that of the West as to provide almost a "laboratory" situation.' See also Reding 1985: 37.

veil of language, the direct and immediate contact with the real nature of things at which the philosopher aims is impossible.²⁸

Descartes and Locke had been aware of the potentially pernicious influence of language upon thinking. They could not imagine, however, that this influence might itself be tied up, not to language in general, but to a particular tongue, such as Greek, Latin, English or German, or to a group of historically related languages, such as Indo-European, and thus be opaque to detection and to conscious reflection before the awareness of structurally totally different types of languages.

If the search for pure and absolute knowledge really is the one thread running through Western philosophy, the efforts made to track down and eliminate the distorting influences that prevent the philosopher from reaching the object of his quest are no less important. The attitude of the great rationalists, such as Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz or Locke, is still quite optimistic. They subscribe to the fundamental postulate of rational philosophy, namely that the philosopher first has to make – and has the means to do so – *tabula rasa* of all his preconceptions and presuppositions, before he can start building a new philosophical system. Descartes even places himself in the most unfavourable conditions for knowing, only to show that absolute knowledge is possible whatever the epistemological condition and position of the knowing subject. The *cogito ergo sum* is the cornerstone of Descartes' system precisely because this principle is the only one that is invulnerable to the worst imaginable distorting influences on knowledge.²⁹

This ideal of the foundations of knowledge, inherited from axiomatic geometry, has been shattered rather late in Western philosophy. The starting-point is perhaps Bacon's theory of *idola*, exposed in his *Novum Organum*. The most important for our context are the *idola fori*, under which all the bad influences of language upon thinking are to be ranged.

However, the Western philosophers' attitude to these distorting influences has itself changed radically. Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Derrida and many others have pointed out that the philosopher is influenced by factors acting secretly and at a rather subliminal level. Psychological, sociological, ideological and psychoanalytic factors, cognitive styles, the simple fact of being a man or a woman – all have a strong and definite, though less overt, influence on the way in which reality is grasped by the philosopher. This concept of influence is therefore crucial for the understanding of the making of late modern and contemporary philosophy, whose development is due mainly to a reaction against the postulate of the *tabula rasa* of rational philosophy.

28 Gadamer 1999.

29 Descartes' argument, however, is open to an objection that becomes immediately evident to someone familiar with the *Zhuangzi*, especially with the 'butterfly-dream': instead of proving that thought is inseparable from the existence of the individual person having this thought, the *cogito* only shows that 'there is thinking going on', the 'I' being totally idle. On this argument (known as the 'Lichtenberg objection'), see Katz 1986: 118–30.

Nietzsche's philosophy is the most radical attempt to show that the philosopher, while constructing his system, is secretly influenced by subjective and psychological factors that are simply below his limits of consciousness, not factors a philosopher could think out or imagine, as Descartes believed. Unaware of these elements, the philosopher nevertheless thinks his system to be 'pure' and freed from any conditioning influences. Nietzsche reveals in a quite merciless way these hidden assumptions, located mostly in what he calls '*Vorurteile*' (prejudice), right at the beginning of his *Beyond Good and Evil*. A few pages later, Nietzsche then renders the nature of the Indo-European languages directly responsible for some of the main structures of Western metaphysics.³⁰ Had he known Chinese, Nietzsche's critique of philosophy might have been even more devastating.

The gradual unveiling of all these distorting features has also provoked a strong counter-reaction, sometimes formulated as a revival of Cartesianism. Phenomenology and analytical philosophy are perhaps, among the major contemporary philosophical options, the most consistent attempts to demonstrate that below all these conditioning factors there is still a layer of unconditioned and universally valid knowledge. Although I basically agree with the philosophical ideals of phenomenology, namely the intent to free thinking from its conditioning factors and go back to a stratum of pre-theoretic and idealized conditions of knowledge, I do not believe that we can reach this goal without knowing how and when these influences act on our modes of thinking. It is useless, to my mind, to devise a method telling us *a priori* how to avoid the pernicious influences of language upon our ways of philosophizing if we do not even know how language may exert this influence. As long as we stay within one single cultural tradition, we can never know how philosophy would have developed had the linguistic substratum been not an Indo-European language but a Semitic or a Sino-Tibetan, or even an African language.³¹

The empirical research work that has been carried out in this domain rather corroborates the hypothesis of linguistic relativism. We owe the modern formulation of this tenet to Benjamin Lee Whorf, who had studied under Sapir and who had worked in the field of American Indian languages. For Whorf and the linguistic relativists in general, the conceptual structure of a natural language is even considered to be the condition of possibility of experience. Knowledge and experience of the world can only be gathered, according to Whorf, through language, as appears from the following quote:

We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see. Languages differ not

30 Nietzsche [1885] 1930: 27–28 (§ 20).

31 This critique also applies to Husserl's conception of a purely logical grammar in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (especially *Untersuchung 4*). On this problem, see Lohmann (1948) who tries to establish a difference between Indo-European, Semitic and Chinese.

only in how they build their sentences but also in how they break down nature to secure the elements to put in those sentences.³²

Whorf insists upon the fact that the languages differ from one another not only in their surface structures, but also in that the conceptual structures embedded in them are incommensurable. Language, according to Whorf, is not only a medium for expressing thought or for picturing reality. It has a cognitive significance of its own. The cognitive systems exemplified by different languages however are judged by Whorf to be mutually incompatible.³³ Whorf's relativistic conclusions, gained from his anthropological fieldwork on Hopi, an American Indian language, have to be checked against the thought and the language of many more civilizations. Whorf's major contribution to philosophy – even if his conclusions are exaggerated – is his effort to clarify the problem of the influence of language on philosophical thinking in a pragmatic and cross-cultural way, not in a speculative one.³⁴ But Whorf did not choose the right comparative material. The truth is that we cannot say what the intellectual outfit of the Hopi really is, for there is no Hopi philosophy or science, except the one Whorf himself has reconstructed for us.

Nevertheless, Whorf's hypothesis has importance beyond anthropology. If Whorf is right, the Western philosophers' ideal of pure and universal knowledge is impossible, because language and thought simply can never be separated.³⁵ If the philosopher is entrapped in his native language, then every cognitive insight he provides can do nothing else but redescribe the fundamental structures of his linguistic outfit. Benveniste had tried to show that Aristotle's system of the categories at best recapitulates certain basic structures of the Greek language.³⁶ Linguistic relativism is possibly brought back to life again in a different shaping by Lakoff and Johnson.³⁷ Their claim that human thinking, perceiving and acting is structured by metaphors, and the fact that metaphors differ from one language to another, strongly implies relativism.

What is needed, then, in order to go beyond this crude type of linguistic relativism? From the philosophical point of view, it would be enough to show that there are cognitive structures that are independent of language, which is, of course, very difficult, because these structures always have to be expressed within language. Nevertheless, there is another way of conducting the experiment, if we reverse the terms of the problem. Instead of starting with *different* cognitive contents, we shall try to demonstrate that one and the same

32 Whorf 1956: 240.

33 See Whorf 1956: 57–64.

34 See Bloom 1981; Bloom 1989 (focusing on native modern Chinese speakers) and Hansen 1983.

35 The inseparability of thought and language seems to be the central claim of linguistic relativity. See Slobin 1996. This conception goes back to Wilhelm von Humboldt.

36 See the essay 'Greek and Chinese Categories' in this volume.

37 Lakoff and Johnson 1980.

cognitive insight can be expressed through the medium of structurally very different languages. This is the plan that I shall try to follow throughout the seven essays collected in this volume. The basic idea that has guided me through all of these studies is this: before answering the question, is there an influence (good, bad or whatever) of language upon thinking, we have to know first how this influence shows up. We cannot take it for granted, as Whorf and many others seem to do, that the relation between language, thought and reality is invariable from one culture to another. To describe the action of language, with Whorf, as ‘dissecting’ is, as we shall see, a very poor metaphor.

In the Western philosophical tradition there is the firm belief that, whatever the relationship between language and thought might be, the two domains that are linked together, namely thought (and hence philosophy) and language, are both autonomous and separate, even antagonistic elements.³⁸ Even if Whorf and his followers seem, at first sight, to disagree with this position, their approach still places them within the typical Western paradigm, at its very edge, because thought appears to be totally dominated and crushed by language. If language and thought are antagonistic factors in one culture, this does not mean that this relationship will be the same in another culture as well. The main goal of these essays will be to show that the frontiers between both domains are shifting, which means that one and the same cognitive insight may turn up as a philosophical theory in one culture and as a grammatical rule or a semantic structure in another. In this way, we shall be able to leave behind us the problem of linguistic relativism and even show that this problem is itself relative to Western ways of conceiving the relations between language and thought.³⁹

I shall also try to show that the very nature of the linguistic substratum of a culture already defines its attitude to philosophy, because language and philosophy are by their very essence complementary means of grasping reality. Many philosophical theories can indeed be viewed as proposals for a new way of speaking – and thinking – about the world; on the other hand, our ordinary ways of describing things as appearing, seeming or being, or events as actual or potential, show that much philosophical ground had already been cleared by former (Western) generations of native speakers and philosophers.⁴⁰ Philosophy is not entrapped in language. Philosophy is at the outermost cognitive edge of language.

There is thus a dynamic interchange of functions between ‘ordinary language’ and philosophical theories, depending on how generous the linguistic substratum is to philosophical impetus. If ordinary language is felt as

38 Wardy (2000) finds the right formula to criticize these attempts and show their limitation: thought is either ‘positively guided’ or ‘negatively constrained’.

39 See also Derrida 1981.

40 This problem emerges most clearly out of Austin 1964. The point had already been made by Boas (1911: 66): ‘[...] our European languages as found at the present time have been moulded to a great extent by the abstract thought of philosophers.’

illogical, as it certainly is by the first Greek philosophers, there is a strong need to clear up its dark regions by philosophical theories and terminology. The comparison with the solutions devised by the first Chinese philosophers when faced with the same problems shows, on the contrary, that this attitude is only the typical reaction of our own, Indo-European culture.

The first essay, “Contradiction is Impossible”, focuses on a curious paradox that is shared by logicians of both cultures. Contradiction, it is argued, is impossible, since each object has one and only one proper and true name by which it can successfully be called. If both interlocutors use the same name, there is no contradiction; if they use different names, they speak about different objects, and there is no contradiction either. In spite of these common initial assumptions about the nature of contradiction, the notion of contradiction itself is approached from the direction of political discourse and human interaction in ancient China, and from the angle of epistemology in Greece, thus causing the notion to develop in different ways in both cultures. The parameter of language, on the other hand, does not seem to have acted in this case, because the philosophical notion of contradiction that had been mastered in ancient China, at least by the more rationally minded thinkers, does not substantially differ from the early Greek concept.

The second essay, ‘The Origin of Logic in China’, uses the comparative approach to search for an explanation of the absence of formal logical theory in ancient China. My aim here is to show that analogical reasoning, as it had been practised in ancient China, bears unsuspected germs of logical thinking that had been left unexplored in Greece. Moreover, this essay also shows that Chinese logical thinking had started with the discovery of logical syntax, and not with formal logic as in ancient Greece.

Whereas the two preceding essays deal with logical concepts and methods, the third essay, ‘Philosophy and Geometry in Early China’, sets out to compare the impact that the discovery of the axiomatic method has had upon philosophy and geometry in Greece and in China. The essays show that there is wide agreement as far as the nature of the axiomatic method is concerned. The observed differences are explained by a rather complex interaction of linguistic as well as social parameters.

The fourth essay, ‘Greek and Chinese Categories’, offers a comparative approach to the origin and to the formation of categories in Greek and Chinese thought and addresses specifically the problem of linguistic relativism.

‘Words for Atoms – Atoms for Words’ tries to find an explanation for the absence of atomism in ancient China and its presence in ancient Greece.

‘Light and the Mirror in Greece and China’ proposes a comparative study on the use and the role of metaphors in philosophical discourse. This essay shows that metaphors, in ancient Chinese philosophical discourse, are used in a notably strict and rational way, in total contrast to Greek and Western uses.

The last piece, “‘To Be’ in Greece and China”, is an essay in comparative ontology. Its goal is to show the ambivalent role that the Greek language has played in the development of ontology. This essay builds upon a sharp

criticism of Graham's and Kahn's approaches. The Greek language is often depicted, along with German, as one of the – if not *the* – most metaphysical of all languages. This essay tries to show, on the contrary, that the Greek language was considered, by the first Greek thinkers, as a supremely illogical language, and that ontology had originated as a philosophical reaction and as a corrective to faulty ways of speaking rather than as a ready-made gift of a 'philosophical language'.

The main difficulty in my approach lies, perhaps, in the choice of the comparative material. The restriction to themes related to rational thinking, argumentation, logic, linguistic philosophy and metaphor has been dictated to me by methodological imperatives, because these domains offer the most suitable and the most fruitful terrain for comparisons, even if this may give a somewhat distorted picture of ancient Chinese philosophy.⁴¹

41 This picture has now been rectified by the work of Harbsmeier (1998) who shows that the Chinese language is well equipped to deal with all the important notions of rational philosophy. Unconvincing is Bronkhorst (2001) who tries to exclude China to show that rationalism is restricted to Greece and India.