

# Comparative Philosophy and I

## *Abstract*

The paper narrates the author's becoming as a comparative philosopher. Elaborating a series of intellectual crises, aporia which the comparative philosopher thought her way out of, the paper develops the claim that as simultaneously »I« in the flesh and »I« in the text, the comparative philosopher is singular. The claim opposes the orthodoxy of philosophical biography and autobiography, which asserts the figure as a duality. This is significant when it comes to considering the knowledge practices of comparative philosophy and its truth claims.

## *Keywords*

Philosophical autobiography, African thought, Yolngu Aboriginal thought, predication-designation, ontological-ontic.

This short paper partially narrates my becoming as a comparative philosopher. I begin by characterizing this figure who, as a knowing self, might compose such an autobiography. Comparative philosophy being inevitably, at least to some extent, autobiographical, it seems the comparative philosopher is a duality, the »I in the flesh«, and the »»I« in the text«.<sup>1</sup> In opposing that formulation I propose the I of the comparative philosophy as a singular particular knowing self. This I, the knowing self, is like all other knowing selves, in expressing the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the dualistic self of the autobiographical philosopher in the Western tradition (see J. L. Wright, *The Philosopher's I: Autobiography and the Search for the Self*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). Here »an Outer, rhetorical self, the literary, social, and/or psychological ego represented in texts as the source of one's identity [and authority]«, (*ibid.*: 9) is set against an Inner »self as referent of particular statements and actions, an internal (Inner) perspective of the self as active creator of one's statements and actions« (*ibid.*: 5). These two given or found entities, which are metaphysical commitments of such a philosopher, are separated by a »chasm [that] never collapses completely« (*ibid.*: 9).

tensions between realness as ontically expressed and realness as ontologically expressed. Later in this short paper I explain the distinction between these two ends of what I see as a continuum, but to say it quickly here, it arises in tensions between the organising of things through bodily materialised collective action on the one hand, and the collective actions of word-using, (language we might name it with a rather ugly neologism) on the other. I see the expression of that tension as a condition of human existence and as the basis for human knowing. I argue that settling the ontological question of the character or figure of the comparative philosopher is crucial in comparative philosophy, in that it is preliminary to asking about the epistemological status of comparative philosophical knowledge claims.

But that is not all that is at stake here, and indeed may not be the most significant aspect of what is at issue. It may be that what is of most interest in characterising the knowing self of the comparative philosopher is the clues it provides for articulating a knowing self that might resist and subvert the new universalism of the knowing self marketed by twenty-first century capitalism – the knowing self as a centre of economic enterprise. The realpolitik of a thriving (or otherwise) community devoted to comparative study of world philosophies involves negotiating passage through this complex global force of the new capitalism, proposing as it does this form of human knower as a new universalism. In many places (including Australia) this has so fundamentally changed the institution of the university and its associated educational organisations (schools and so on), that those institutions can no longer be relied upon to provide a context supportive of endeavours such as comparative philosophy.

Consider the following, equally my experiences as analyst in the flesh and ›my experiences‹ which have re-emerged as experiences of a comparative philosopher ›I‹ in analytic texts. These are my life experiences and con-texts for philosophising. The list begins with working alongside Nigerian Yoruba classroom teachers in modern schools in Africa in the 1980s. Unexpectedly I found myself engulfed in confusion, as number, up until that time a taken-for-granted universal, fractured into several distinct culturally located objects. Then on returning to my homeland after eight years with my family in Nigeria, I found to my delight that my work with Yoruba teachers had prepared me for involvement with Yolngu Aboriginal Australian knowledge authorities, who in the 1990s were actively engaging with mathematics educators in seeking to invent a modern school curricu-

lum that drew on the dual logics they saw as expressed in their kinship categories on the one hand, and in numbers on the other.

Later, and now recognizing myself and being recognised by others as ›a philosopher‹, I engaged with Yolngu Aboriginal Australian landowners who were determined to connect with, yet stay separate from, environmental scientists in devising land management strategies. All these engagements involved intense immersion, long periods of bodily co-presence amongst practitioners of disparate knowledge traditions as they were struggling to go on together in doing their differences respectfully and generatively.

Then in the first decade of the twenty-first century, teaching and further family duties impinged strongly on the fleshy comparative philosopher. Such long-term bodily involvement with ›others‹ became more difficult. In consequence I found myself involved with colleagues from Charles Darwin University in what were officially funded as ›projects‹. The first such project involved younger Aboriginal men and women who saw possibilities in appropriating digital technologies – in which unnoticed ontological assumptions lurked, for Aboriginal purposes.<sup>2</sup> My involvement in such a project could be pursued through more limited and episodic, bodily co-presence.

More recently and more vaguely, and now as an old woman, this analyst in the flesh and comparative philosopher in the text, works with younger Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians committed to involvement in ›developing‹ their ›remote places‹ in Australia's north. Nowadays, it is not school curricula or land management strategies that are their focus, but rather the struggle now is to devise new Indigenous institutional forms. Collectively designing Indigenous organizations fit for engagement in the services market economy that the Australian state is intent on establishing in their communities is what drives the Yolngu Aboriginal Australian comparative philosophy work I now do, with the *Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance* team at Charles Darwin University, mostly from my remote Melbourne setting. In a similarly vague and bodily-removed manner I work also with Saami politicians and academics in Norway's Arctic region. Here we seek to devise ways to infuse (and to some extent selectively refuse) the processes of the

<sup>2</sup> For examples see H. R. Verran, ›On Assemblage: Indigenous Knowledge and Digital Media (2003–2006), and HMS *Investigator* (1800–1805)‹, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Vol. 2, No 1–2, 2009, pp. 169–183.

modern European institutions of parliament and university, with the political and epistemic processes of Saami life.

The list points to a rich set of life experiences and even more, extraordinary good fortune. Like the philosophically inclined anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) I was able to ride the flood tide of the global expansion of the Western academy's university in the second half of the twentieth century. Just as he did, I rode »crest after crest, until today, when it seems at last, like me, to be finally subsid-ing« (Geertz 2001: 4).<sup>3</sup> Here I picture that series of waves generated by the global expansion of what is now seen as old-fashioned scholarly higher education, a current which originally transported me from my banal Sydney childhood to a provincial university in Australia's New England that modelled its life on Oxford University, a current I revelled in being caught up by, as serial plunging into confusion; again and again struggling my way back to the surface for philosophical breath. Being dumped again and again (as waves do) into aporia where confusion reigned, for much of the time it was not evident in which direction the surface might be. The guiding metaphor of this piece of autobiographical philosophy derives then from the seemingly everlasting summer of my Sydney war orphan childhood, a hot, jolting bus ride away from the northern beaches. Being led along by this (and other metaphors) it will be in ending the story that I come back to the knowing self of the comparative philosopher with its seeming bifurcation, and the question of if and how this figure might provide clues in articulating a figure of the knowing self who might engage, resist, and subvert the newly vibrant economic enterprise self of twenty-first century capitalism.

Studying biological sciences, and graduating as a metabolic biochemist to take up a lecturing position in a UK university in my mid-twenties is not only a quite surprising position for a girl of my social background to land herself in, it is also a quite unlikely position from which one might become a philosopher of any sort. Such a transformation began in child rearing, proceeding through unemployment, teacher training and work as a primary school classroom teacher, and later as a science teacher educator. So it was that, with a stroke of good luck, in my mid-thirties I found myself teaching teachers in Nigeria. The first moment of the intellectual trajectory that carried me to

comparative philosophical analysis occurred in the humble surrounds of Yoruba Nigerian primary school classrooms in the 1980s. In the hopeful aftermath of Nigeria's Biafran war (1967–1970), in struggling for a reconciled civil society, universal primary education had been declared, putting pressure on Nigeria's teacher training capacities. Employed at what is now Obafemi Awolowo University, in Ilè Ifé as an expatriate Australian teacher of science teachers, I was working with dedicated and skilled Nigerian teachers in devising ways that modern science and local Yoruba knowledge might equally inform children's learning.<sup>4</sup>

The experience had unexpected outcomes. I found myself forced to confront a quite uncontroversial philosophical assumption. The proposition that numbers are not universal abstractions, but rather are historically and culturally located objects forced itself upon me in these classrooms.<sup>5</sup> I saw clearly that numbers as taught by skilled and experienced Yoruba teachers, and as they exist in Yoruba life, are not those prescribed by the universalism of science; there are conceptually disparate numbers. Experiencing numbers as different was for me tied with up the requirement that I assess and evaluate the classrooms lessons of my students. The experience was painful because often when the number practices being taught were »wrong« the lessons were a wonderful success and the children clearly learned the metric system of enumeration. But often when the content of the lessons was correct, the lessons failed pedagogically, sometimes spectacularly so.

If I was to engage with my Yoruba students and their pupils in good faith I must abandon my commitment to numbers as abstract universals. Yet at the same time I was aware that it was commitment to knowing well, where numbers as universals seemed a central tenet, which motivated me as much as the enthusiastic teachers in my classes, and perhaps even their pupils. Nevertheless through participating in the happenings in these classrooms I became convinced that, just as there are radically distinct languages, there are radically dis-

<sup>3</sup> C. Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> This aim to integrate the »universal knowledge« that universities peddle with »local knowledge« was (and is) commonly articulated and almost invariably ignored. The teachers and I were unusual perhaps in the way we made this an explicit aim of our teaching and learning.

<sup>5</sup> I describe the struggle to find passage out of this aporia in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Science and an African Logic* (H. R. Verran, *Science and an African Logic*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

tinct numbers. At first I assumed that there were different kinds of numbers – numbers are conceptually plural (same but different). However the consequences of this quite unnoticed assumption in my analysis meant that the analysis was fatally flawed, as I explain below. I would need to find a way to acknowledge numbers as multiples – as fundamentally different, but capable of being linked up and connected. Giving an account of numbers as conceptually disparate is what started me towards comparative philosophy, but at first I did not proceed in what I now account as the manner of the comparative philosopher.

Articulating the distinctions between the numbers that circulate in Yoruba life, and those that have life in laboratories that function according to the epistemic standards of science: one form of enumeration originating in the collective thinking that first came to life in Europe's so-called scientific revolution, and the other in trading commodities, including slaves. How might such a comparison of number be done? At first this seemed to be an exercise in orthodox foundationist scepticism – relativism.<sup>6</sup> I began systematic enquiry into using English and Yoruba number names in the practical bodily routines of tallying, into the patterns of generating number names, and into using number names in speech by considering the grammatical structures of English and Yoruba. This approach saw both bodily practices and linguistic practices as historically constituting a conceptual schema, and assumed the schema might be discerned by considering practices in the here and now.

Yoruba numeral generation involves a multi-base recursion (bases of 20, 10, and 5) where the working processes are division and subtraction. This contrasts markedly with the Indo-European system (incorporated into science) where a base ten and simple additive recursion applies. Nevertheless the digital human complement lies hidden in both. In Yoruba life valuation processes are almost invariably oral, whereas in modern life valuation proceeds most commonly in

<sup>6</sup> I am refusing the convention in philosophy that characterises scepticism and the relativism that follows as 'non-foundational'. I argue that sceptical relativists do propose knowledge as founded. They merely disagree with rationalist universalists over the nature and origins of foundations. The former find foundations in categories that emerge in instituted particular social, cultural, and historical processes and collective practices (and hence find truth conditions in coherence), the latter find foundations in categories given in the nature of reality which determine what is institutionalised by social organisation (and hence find truth conditions in representation).

written textual practices. Perhaps most challenging of all, I found that adjectives do not exist in Yoruba grammar. However can one value through qualities (like the numerosity involved in counting or the length involved in measuring) if qualification with adjectives cannot be achieved in one's speech patterns?

Eventually I was able to formulate and evidence a contention that Yoruba numbers work through modal abstraction, and numbers in science and Indo-European languages proceed as qualifying abstraction. Later I recruited children and had some of them tell me in Yoruba and others in English about how they were meshing their actions with hands and eyes and words in tallying and measuring. I summed up these findings in papers arguing and evidencing the contention that Yoruba and English language numbering equally proceeded by logic, each valid and internally consistent. Each offered possibilities for numbering as truth telling through a coherent conceptual schema, but the truths – the values articulated in enumeration, were incommensurable.

Ten years later, well into completing a book manuscript, which had the working title *Numbers and Things*, where I argued for, and evidenced, this sceptical proposition of different numbers within an analytic framework of epistemological relativism, I experienced a second profound intellectual shock. I recognized that orthodox sceptical analysis of numbers as culturally distinct concepts, *explains difference away*. My explanation of difference, proposed as an exit from the puzzle of how, in the absence of facility in Yoruba forms of life, I could trust the experienced Yoruba teachers I worked with to make appropriate conceptual innovations in those Yoruba classrooms by accounting difference, had launched me into a second aporia.

I had experienced differing forms of numbering in those hopeful Nigerian primary school classrooms, but in attempting to articulate that difference in an orthodox sceptical account which has the grounds of knowledge as social and historical in origin, I had explained the difference away, rendered it as absolutely outside human capacities of intervention.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rendering might seem an odd English verb to use here. But the usage is apt for I came to recognise that orthodox accounts of the process of abstraction in conceptualising, propose it as analogous to the process of rendering the scraps of a pig carcass into lard. In that usage rendering is a process of managing difficult and messy pig bodies so that both live and dead pig bodies are removed from the present here and now.

One might choose to recognise all the elaborate and messy labour of accom-

Accounting the difference in numbers so that it could be engaged with in those hopeful classrooms was my motivation, yet my explanation of the difference as modal versus qualifying abstraction, had injected an imagined past into the transcendent domain of the ideal – albeit rendering it a more complicated ideal. My painstaking effort was directed towards learning to engage with the difference explicitly in those hopeful classrooms, yet the sort of difference I accounted was absolutely unavailable for engagement. It was found; a given.

The difference of sceptical relativism has numbers as conceptual objects linguistically and practically determined in a misty historical past that has become some sort of cultural ideal. As abstract symbols populating an internally coherent conceptual schema, the truth telling of such numbers (in valuing) depends on the internal coherence of the schema. Yet in those Nigerian classrooms I had witnessed and been excited by teachers choreographing conceptual confluence in numbering in the present. Proceeding joyfully in their conceptual innovations, not even a whiff of the dead hand of my imagined conceptual schema had been present. I had discerned that it was important to be able to explain this process so that a careful consideration of better and worse in the manner of conceptual confluence in the various here-and-nows of African and other such classrooms, might be devised. This is what I came back to as I recognised that my entertaining stories, focussing on numbering to tell of abstraction differences in Yoruba and modern life (with its scientific numbering deriving in the Indo-European linguistic heritage) had abandoned the present of those classrooms.

How to understand numbers as made and remade (differently and/or the same) in the present? In accepting the challenge of this new aporia, I saw that no longer was the task to explain difference,

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plishing that, but usually a kilo of lard is just taken for granted as abstracted, or rendered, actual pig. Lard seems to ›magic pigs away‹, numbers also ›magic pigs (and lard) away‹. One can never retrieve actual pig bodies (live or dead) from lard, just as one can never retrieve actual messy situations of valuing through enumeration, from numbers. (Perhaps the experience of being fostered, and working long hours, on a farm in Western New South Wales in my late childhood might be detected here?)

Telling conceptualisation as abstraction allows a good story, but the realness of storying is different to the realness of embodiment-attending to the translations between those realnesses is all important in comparative philosophy. Foundationisms as analytics (relativism and universalism) both deny that any translating work is involved.

but now I needed to explain how difference could be engaged in an emergent present. How a workable robust sameness might be achieved for long enough to go on together doing (and respecting) the evident differences between numbers, now became the puzzle. An entirely new account of what numbers are and how they work needed to be devised.

Across a few painful months as I came to terms with abandoning my *Numbers and Things* book project, I accepted that I had revealed that difference which might be generatively engaged with in a here and now, needed to be framed by means quite outside Western philosophical orthodoxy. At this point, as I see it now, I began to become as I, the comparative philosopher, setting about assembling a new manuscript as a way of working my way out of this new aporia. The text of *Science and an African Logic* gradually accumulated across the 1990s after I had left Nigeria and was living in Melbourne in Australia. During those years I was spending months working closely with Yolngu Aboriginal Australian groups and individuals who as clans, collectively own estates in Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory, and inevitably what I was learning of Yolngu Aboriginal Australian thought began influencing my rethinking of this Yoruba material.

With white Australian teachers, teacher educators, curriculum officials, and later environmental scientists, my new Aboriginal friends were working to bring to life an epistemic base that might prove adequate to the new modern Yolngu institutions they were inventing – schools and environmental NGOs, for example. In addition, within what was then the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne, I was teaching undergraduates courses in sociology and philosophy of science, and beginning to supervise graduate students in science and technology studies. While my children, still mourning the loss of the wonderful childhood they had experienced in Ilè Ifé, were becoming young inner-city adults, I found myself rearing my grandchild. In subjecting her to a childhood similar to that I foistered on my children, during the periods I spent with my Yolngu friends in Arnhem Land, I always took her along.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> By disclosing this family information I attempt to reveal how the condition of the figure of the comparative philosopher impinges on the lives of others, which includes one's close family members as much as one's co-participants in projects of doing dif-

Over several years I collected and re-arranged the arguments and empirical evidence of *Numbers and Things* to constitute the complicated sequence of chapters in *Science and an African Logic*. Concepts, in this case numbers as objects known, and equally the concept of the knower of such concepts as number, are presented here as collectively enacted sets of routine, variously complicated, embodied and socially embedded practices, including utterances – objects known and the knowers of those objects, knowing subjects, are equally multiple bundles of practices in a here and now, and hence each a unique and particular concatenation. Counter-intuitive, and frankly uninspiring, though that formulation is, both knowers and the objects they know are events; happenings in the present. In concluding this paper in considering the I of comparative philosophy, I come back to the question of how that figure, an event who happens to, in, and from the here and now (a mere bundle of disparate sets of practices), might be considered an authoritative knower, one who publishes autobiographies such as this text. A specific aspect of this is the tricky issue of the relation between knowers in the flesh (including the comparative philosopher) and the knower in the text who tells stories of all those knowers in the flesh as embodied and embedded bundles of materialising and signifying practices.

I leave aside for the moment that worry over the basis of any authority the I of comparative philosophy has. That anxiety is related of course to the epistemological status of knowledge claims made from within in the presentist analytic I came to adopt in finding a way out of the painful aporia that recognising the explaining *away* of difference had plunged me into, an analytic that for me *is* comparative philosophy. I go on now to focus on the third aporia treated in *Science and an African Logic*.

This constitutes the book's third triptych (chapters nine, ten, and eleven). Here a divergence is signalled. Oddly much of the second part of chapter nine is in actuality, a beginning to the eight chapters that have preceded it. In contrast the first part of the chapter starts off another story that is not about numbers at all, but rather about language, words, grammar, predication, and designation. Here lurking at the end of a book about numbers and number-

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ference together. I acknowledge that the individual lives of the children I reared were made more difficult by my becoming I, the comparative philosopher.

ing, in the final two chapters, a third aporia, one that concerns language, is introduced.

A difficulty to do with language that I had only alluded to in the previous chapters is the focus. In assembling the stories for *Science and an African Logic*, I discovered that while the effect of re-articulating my metaphysical commitments in exiting foundationism was dizzying, and the entities I found myself engaging with felt strange, I could proceed in a more or less straight line of arguing and evidencing – at least for a short while. Then the crest of the wave curled again. The first time I experienced this I was plunged into confusion over recognising difference in numbers, at a time when I was committed to numbers as same – universals. The second time confusion struck it was the outcome of recognising that the only intellectual tools I knew how to use limited me to attending to idealised past and future; they made difference in the present, the here and now, inaccessible. The third dumping concerned language. The third aporia of this story is in a sense a wave constituted within the huge dumper of the second aporia. In my relativist work I had been committed to language use as »referring to the world« while assuming it as historical, a socially constituted practice. But my new commitment to a single realm of realness, an emergent present, where worlds »clot« in collective acting, *there is no world »out-there« to be referred to!*

In taking up a »presentist« analytic frame where realness is constituted in the single domain of the here and now, the story of languaging through uttering (or writing) words with its predicating and designating,<sup>9</sup> must be closely attended to. It demands a quite alterna-

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<sup>9</sup> In the account I am about to give of negotiating this third aporia around language use I will make frequent reference to the linguistic processes of predicating-using verbs, and designating-using nouns as the subjects of sentences. This singling out of these linguistic processes from the many other grammatical tools that language users engage without recognition of their doing so, will strike many as odd. To understand the full significance of how I see predicating designating featuring in comparative philosophy readers will need to take on the challenge of part three of *Science and an African Logic*. Here is how I explain the significance of these grammatical processes near the beginning of chapter nine.

In developing use of the signing code language, classifying is central. There are two distinct types of classifying that beginning talkers engage in: classifying over types of bodies, and classifying over types of interactions between bodies. The first of these classificatory acts has children accumulating lexical items which come to function as nouns; general terms. In English these are terms like »mama« and »doggy«. The boundaries of the classes labelled with such terms are

tive account of language than that which serves in foundationism (Verran 2001: 179). Recognising word-using as expression of embodied and embedded collective going-on in the here and now, we are obliged to locate the collective action of word using, uttering sounds, notably including predicating and designating, by bodies in place. Language now became for me an expression of embodiment in a particular here and now, with the forms of predicating and designating, that a unique signature of various language families, having historically clotted as form in past practices of uttering, yet as continually re-enacted, and infinitely plastic, in the present.<sup>10</sup>

Such a description of languaging, as performance here and now, seems obvious when we pay close attention to children learning the practices of word using,<sup>11</sup> or indeed when we pay close attention to how we, as philosophers learn to use words in philosophising. Linguistic determinism with its assumption of language as embedded in the workings of minds (universalism) or societies (relativism) is pervasive, and its influence is often difficult to discern, since each and all languages, being always ontologically particular, have a capacity to hold us in their thrall, oddly, even as, in using language, we escape.

I discovered the hard way that considering languaging and word-using as just one among many of the routine materialising and signifying practices contributing the practical collective work of going on together in a here and now, requires continuing effort to resist language's story of itself. Word using is an amazing generative force and it requires explicit attention from an analyst committed to articulat-

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of various sorts, children learn the boundaries and the classificatory labels by ostensive training.

We often think that it is through extending their use of this sort of classifying that children come to talk of the world »properly«, that is, learn to refer or designate. However classifying over bodies is only secondarily involved in learning to refer/designate. The real strength of the encoding practices which come to be useful in making meaning lies in encoding over the actions that bodies engage in. This second classification results in children accumulating lexical items that in time will come to function as predicates (verbs) in making meaningful sentences (*ibid.*: 179).

<sup>10</sup> See H. R. Verran, »Epistemisch-politische Aspekte von indigenen, modernen und von Vergangenheiten abweichenden Zukünften – Gan̄ma: Wie eine Allegorie im Mathematikunterricht der Grundschule zur Wirkung gebracht wird«, *psychosozial*, Vol. 38, No. 140/4, 2015 (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> This is the form my evidencing took in chapter eleven of *Science and an African Logic* (Verran 2001: 220–234).

ing the present in the present for the present. Language is always threatening to take off, to soar upwards towards the realm of ideals with just a few wing flaps, like the grey heron that occasionally makes off with frogs from my garden ponds.

Engaging with this third aporia had me bringing language use into the folds of embodiment, understanding predication and designation as bodily practice re-enacted routinely and usually unthinkingly, in the present of uttering or writing/reading. In looking back I see now that it is the particularity of numbers' conceptual constitution that me obliged to undertake this work in completing *Science and an African Logic*. Inadvertently adopting numbers as my horse,<sup>12</sup> my Rocinante, later I saw that numbers turn out to be a hardest case for analysis conducted through a commitment to concepts as clotted materialized meaning making routines as the here and now. It was because numbers were (are) my companions in doing comparative philosophy, that this third aporia around language, which had me differentiating ontology and ontics,<sup>13</sup> caught me up in its vortex.

Numbers as words (and graphemes invoking words) emerge within, and inhabit the categorical logics of particular languages actively and routinely collectively (re)precipitating quite unnoticed,

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps surfboard would be a more elegant metaphor here, but since I have never ridden a surfboard, and as a war orphan often fostered on a wheat and sheep farm I rode horses many times, I will mix my metaphors, especially since the analogy with Cervantes' Don Quixote and his Rocinante seems apt.

<sup>13</sup> »Ontics« is a term that may baffle readers. A neologism derived from the English adjective »ontic«, itself a 1940s neologism coined from the ancient Greek term for being (ont), ontics as I use it has beingness as actively accomplished, as enacted in the here and now in collective action (not necessarily involving humans). Ontics as I use it is doing what it takes to enact a thing like a number (or indeed a rock). I imagine numbers, like all entities as inhabiting the spaces or intervals between collective enactments. Numbers seem to lie there mostly just out of focus in collective life, always ready to actively re-exist when the right actions are done and the right words said. I imagine numbers pulsating and quivering there in these intervals, always in *potentia*, apart from their brilliant, ephemeral realisation or clotting in enactment, time and time again. Rocks' existences can be told in a similar manner, but that is not my task here. This implies that there is always a lurking virtual enacted as *doppelgänger* of the real, which vanishes of course in the moment of its being addressed directly.

To give an example in showing what a commitment to ontics entails, let me remind readers that Aristotle is often said to have articulated an ontic formulation of the principle of non-contradiction namely »a thing cannot at the same time be and not be« (*Metaphysics*, Bk. 3, ch. 2, 996b, pp. 29–30). In contrast, having realness as actively accomplished in the here and now, having the real enacted in the doing of ontics as the present, equivocates on this principle of non-contradiction.

practices of predicating (and designating). Language (including numbering with words and graphemes) articulates an emergent ontological realm, an arena where the ontic (as unlanguageed realness) can be studied, talked about, and argued about. The categories of an ontological realm (languageed realness) are peculiar to the linguistic grammar it has life within, and numbers embed that categorical logic in their structure.

On the other hand numbers also have an equally vibrant life in the real world unlanguageed, as enacted sets of routine embodied gestures of material arranging and re-arranging, and its outcomes. As much as they arise in language and carry the particular form of a language's predicating and designating, numbers equally arise in and carry with them, the unseemly burden of ordering within the materialising mess of ›stuff‹ in meaning-making. Numbers express an emergent ontic realm and many emergent ontic realms express numbers in the complete absence of words (and graphemes) attesting that, particularly in numbering, predicating-designating can act backwards so to say. If numbers have a life of their own then, it lies in and enacts, the tensions between these domains. Each manifestation of number is particular and unique, embodying the tensions that inform the achievement of its expression. Neither domain is ever escaped from.

The argument I make in chapters ten and eleven of *Science and an African Logic* implicitly proposes that, as a number, one is as much of the linguistically mediated ontological, as it is a thing of unlanguageed ontics. And the same is true of one as the knowing self in its always inevitably particular emergence. But, and this is important, in being so this does not imply that one is a duality – that there is a numeral and a number, a knower in the flesh and a knower in the text. One and ›one‹ are different in being the same and the same in being different, precisely because one is simultaneously many parts and a single whole. In one (as self, as much as number) same/different, and different/same are iterations of being enacted as present collective action. Or, rather, to be precise here, when predication and the form of designation that it precipitates is taken as a form of active, routine, collective embodiment in the present, in a particular here and now, the non-dualism of ›one‹ and one holds. In contrast, when languaging is purely symbolising, emanating from either minds or societies, same and different become metaphysically distinct in both numbering, and in doing the self.

To put this in a more general form and to be explicit about a condition I see as enabling human knowing, and indeed comparative philosophy as I articulate (enact) it, ontology becomes recognisable as iterated ontics, itself an iterative realm. Each and every assertion about *being* that is made in acting either with words or without words<sup>14</sup> in articulating commitments, hides further commitments within it. My claim is that the means of working through these iterations must be constantly attended to in truth-making (including valuing in enumeration) in the emergent present, and that I take to be the work of philosophical knowing including comparative philosophy.

All knowing expresses tensions between the ontic and the ontological; between realness as engaged with hands and eyes, felicitous and less felicitous concatenations of bones, muscles, neurones, and so on, and realness as engaged with sonorous and less sonorous utterances of words, elegant and less elegant combinations of inscribed strings of lexical items. Each and every knowing self assembles a larger or smaller repertoire of such practices and achieves varying levels of facility in them.

So how might we discern if a particular knowing self is to be trusted as authoritative? Everything seems so slippery and relative here. Why should the I of this text be taken notice of? In contrast to this figure (whom you as a reader must judge), let me point to the childish knower of Lucy who features as a knower in the text of *Science and an African Logic*. Back in the 1980s she provoked indulgent smiles from a future comparative philosopher in the flesh, her less than skilled practices in conserving matter marked her as a knower without authority. Her evident engagement in the ontics of conserving matter was not matched by facility in the ontological aspects of conserving matter (Verran 2001: 126). Then in the 1990s, her status as a beginning knower and her telling comment elicited respectful treatment from the comparative philosopher in the text (still smiling indulgently perhaps) who narrated her as a companion knower in the text (*ibid.*: 156).

In part, as always, discerning authoritativeness is a matter of judgement on the part of the listener/reader. But of course the practices and the judgement of facility with practices, can be much en-

<sup>14</sup> Can one articulate metaphysical commitments without words? I would cite preparing a meal and becoming a parent as articulating metaphysical commitments. Neither requires words.



hanced by developing techniques. Lucy was no doubt thoughtfully helped to develop such techniques in the practices relating to managing the ontic-ontological tensions involved in conserving matter in the English language mediated knowing community, as 'Dupe was no doubt helped by the Yoruba speaking adults who cared about her – teachers, parents and grandparents and so on. In less than a year probably each of them would be able to discern the lack of authoritativeness in the practices of conserving matter in their younger brothers and sisters. Much of our modern education system is concerned with developing authoritativeness and the possibility of discerning it in others. (And many of the tricks of capitalist marketing are about evading and scrambling the possibility of discerning authoritativeness, systematically confusing the techniques we moderns have all so painfully acquired.)

But while the stories of Lucy and 'Dupe are entertaining – not to speak of seemingly irrelevant asides about capitalism, our focus here is philosophical authoritativeness, particularly comparative philosophical authoritativeness. Your interest as a reader of philosophy, and my interest as a writer, might be agonistically opposed, but we are both interested in the epistemic-epistemological status of the claims I am making here. What techniques characterise the practices of philosophically working the ontic-ontological tensions that constitute the repertoire of philosophical knowing, practices that are salient to judging the authoritativeness of this odd knowing self I claim as the I of philosophy (including comparative philosophy)? I suggest that skills in asking and formulating answers to four questions constitute the skills of philosophical knowing: Who knows? (issues of how knowers are figured); What is known? (issues of ontics-ontology); How is it known? (issues of methods and methodology); and How is it known to be known? (epistemics and epistemology). All four questions and answers are intimately embedded in all the others. In a reflexive move the philosopher poses those questions to his or her own knowing, usually setting himself or herself as the generic universal knower. Thus all philosophy is autobiographical, although most is covertly so.

The comparative philosopher not only asks those questions of her (or his) own knowing but also of the knowing collectives she finds herself embodied and embedded within, thus comparative philosophy is necessarily empirical philosophy. My claim is that the answers to those questions, which help reveal the metaphysical assumptions that

inform knowing, are aporia, they present as paradoxes. In undertaking the work of a comparative philosopher, the empiricist necessarily equivocates about paradox in finding ways out of the aporia that just keep coming. In each situation the epistemic-epistemological status of comparative philosophical knowledge claims must be judged on a case-by-case basis, and on an on-going basis. The epistemic-epistemological basis of a knowledge claim is, like everything else, emergent, embedded in the actual workings of particular institutions and organisations.

So what of the case of my current engagement which I mentioned in beginning? How does all this emerge where analyst in the flesh and comparative philosopher in the text, works with inhabitants in ›developing Australia's remote places‹, where the struggle is to devise, say an Indigenous Yolngu organization, fit for engagement in the services market economy that the Australian state is intent on establishing in their communities? All four epistemic-epistemological questions are salient in our current work, but here, in stopping my narration, let me consider the issue of ›Who knows?‹ for that is felt as a particularly excruciating question by my Yolngu colleagues, faced as they are by the demand that their newly invented institutions should become collectively as competitive enterprise centres marketing services to their kin and compatriots.

In the past in my work with my Yolngu colleagues and friends this question of ›Who knows?‹ was important, but in the case of the innovative school curriculum and the land management strategies, for the state institutions involved, questions around the figure of the knower were overshadowed by that of ›What is known?‹ In the 1980s, and for much of the 1990s when there was more toleration and respect for difference in Australia, the institutions that were interested to engage with good will towards Aboriginal Australians were puzzled about the differences between the objects known as they struggled to engage across what they saw as a cultural divide. Those anxieties have not gone away, but in the era of new capitalism when states take the development and expansion of economic infrastructure as their main concern (coupled of course as it is with a concern to guard the security of that economic infrastructure), engagement becomes dominated by the question of who (collectively) knows – thus the worry about inventing new Indigenous institutions that might engage in the twenty-first century. Of course the question is coupled with a surveillance regime to ensure collective compliance with the

norms and standards of what is known in Australia as the new public management organisation. What can my story here tell us? How can a contemporary organisation be both (and neither) a traditional Yolngu Aboriginal organisation and a competitive enterprise centre, marketing services to their kin and compatriots? It seems a wave, albeit forming in a new current, has engulfed my thinking yet again. Excuse me while I struggle to discern which way is up.

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## Philosophy as Auto-Bio-Graphy: The Example of the Kyoto School

### *Abstract*

In the following, I would like to advance the position that it is too early to write down my own ›auto-bio-graphy.‹ For this purpose, I attempt to develop the idea of philosophy as auto-bio-graphy in three theses and to do so with the example of the philosophy of the Kyoto School so that the conception of philosophy as auto-bio-graphy can be expounded in consideration alongside some of the aspects of the philosophy of the Kyoto School.

### *Keywords*

Kyoto school, Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, noetic union, nothingness.

## 1 Outline of the Kyoto School

In the following, I would like to advance the position that it is too early to write down my own ›auto-bio-graphy.‹ For this purpose, I attempt to develop the idea of philosophy as auto-bio-graphy in three theses and to do so with the example of the philosophy of the Kyoto School so that the conception of philosophy as auto-bio-graphy can be expounded in consideration alongside some of the aspects of the philosophy of the Kyoto School.

Before doing this, the outline of the Kyoto School should be briefly explicated.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat like the Frankfurt School in Germany, the Kyoto School developed over several generations. Its founder, Ni-

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the philosophical background of the Kyoto School see the »Introduction« of my edited volume, *Die Philosophie der Kyōto Schule: Texte und Einführung* [*The Philosophy of the Kyoto School: Texts and Introduction*] (Freiburg: Alber Verlag, 1990 [2011 is a expanded volume with a new Introduction; 2014]).