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0. Introduction

In this thesis, I will investigate the question of how the possibility of comparative philosophy's potential for effecting change can be conceptually understood and sketched. The question arises from the tension between what comparative philosophy has managed to achieve and the concepts which are understood to have helped it do so. One thing is its name. Though the name 'comparative philosophy' may make one expect comparing and contrasting between similar but different, related but not identical objects, in comparative philosophy comparing is not done merely for comparison's sake. Rather, comparing figures as the means to an end. Comparative philosophy's aim is grander in scale and different in character to writing fascinating and correct theory that straddles the cultural-philosophical divide: it seeks to counter the Western dominance of the philosophical canon and diversify the process of canonisation by inclusion of theories of cultural traditions other than the West. Furthermore, it seeks growth from the engaging of different traditions, from the personal and philosophical development this engagement requires. When investigating different cultural philosophies, comparative philosophy necessitates the learning of a new language and the pondering of a cultural tradition other than one's own. It simultaneously leads to and requires a new perspective that is neither one's original nor that of 'the other side,' as well as the development of what is being called "a new type of philosopher." It is not immediately apparent how these creative, innovative and (self-)critical dimensions are connected to the practice of comparing. In fact, to expect creation, innovation and a critical perspective from solely comparing and contrasting seems misguided. Additionally, comparative philosophy seeks to address some common figures of thought and social interaction that appear in theoretical works when two cultures meet, especially when they are alien to each other—think here of issues stemming from ignorance, intolerance, inexperience, as well as their more sinister relatives. In this context, comparative philosophy's 'reflective' character and its tendency for 'reflexivity' are lauded. However, by reflecting one's own position and one's own unquestioned assumptions, how is this thought to change one's point of view regarding others? Taken literally, reflection denotes the viewing of *oneself*, not the other/someone else. But is comparative philosophy not all about looking beyond one's own cultural boundaries? Furthermore, is the sort of pondering and self-contemplation that reflection seems to denote capable of the change intended here? Understood as a metaphor, reflection is meant to reveal to me the role I myself play in the appearance of what I encounter. This, though, also does not put the tradition different to one's own, the object of comparative philosophy's investigation, front and centre. Another question is this: to tackle those (intercultural) issues by way of the *person* thinking along those problematic

lines, is this usually or universally understood to be a (theoretical-)philosophical task? Would we not expect a more directly textual or conceptual mode of action instead of a ‘personal’ intervention? This thesis seeks to describe how and explain why, despite these conceptual incongruencies and theoretical-practical tensions, comparative philosophy ‘works’ and is an effective agent of change. The goal of my thesis is to suggest a way of conceptualising the method of comparative philosophy that is conducive to the change in attitudes it promises to effect. In my opinion, this is an important cause because a misunderstanding of the workings of comparative philosophy and failing to understand that it works both risk losing the transformative potential of this philosophical project. The first leads to inefficiency, the second to dismissal.

This thesis aims to develop the idea of a philosophical framework that promises to benefit the realisation of comparative philosophy’s potential. To this end, I propose to do a reinterpretation of the understanding of the method of comparative philosophy. Since what sets comparative philosophy apart is its rigorous and engaged approach to similarity and dissimilarity with a keen sense for the consequence of framings in these terms, for this reinterpretation, there is needed a theory with a clear conceptual role for change in the dynamics between subject and object and where sameness, similarities and differences are accounted for in the relational terms they always appear in. The philosophy-physics of Karen Barad appear to fit the bill. However, I have found no indication either in Barad’s writings nor in the secondary literature that Barad’s theoretical work has been or is meant to be made fruitful in the context of comparative philosophy. Nevertheless, there is certainly precedent for using Barad as an inspiration for readings and re-readings in other fields of research. I was therefore not discouraged from attempting an ‘agential realist’ re-reading of the understanding of comparative philosophy with the hope of aiding the fulfillment of its potential. In this thesis, I have attempted an agential realist interpretation of comparative philosophy’s transformative potential and a re-reading of its (self-)understanding. This, however, is no more than programmatic and indicative of a way further research could take. I am merely presenting, suggesting a way of looking at the problems of comparative philosophy referenced above with an ‘agential realist’ perspective because I see some possible conceptual benefits and a possible addressing of some of what I loosely term ‘blind-spots’. It is not my intention to defend or construct a new systematic understanding of comparative philosophy in this thesis. To defend something like this, one would have to engage in argument with theories such as that of Ma and van Brakel (2016) regarding weaknesses and strengths vis-à-vis (their Wittgenstein-inspired) systematic approach. Furthermore, such an attempt would have to engage in detailed discussion about the agential realist interpretation’s implications for such central themes as ‘culture,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘universalism’ and ‘relativism’ and many besides (for a comprehensive list, see Connolly 2022), which though they are

very important in comparative philosophy, they are not something I can explicitly determine in my thesis. Furthermore, an investigation of how specifically this systematically developed possible agential realist account differs from, e.g., transcultural and postcomparative approaches would be interesting in that context. However, this is not something I can focus on, though I do see this as being a sensible second step. I am sketching, charting a path, giving an overview, making the connection. I try to show why I think Barad offers an intriguing approach. Despite this I am not engaging the question ‘why Barad and not something else?’, merely for the reason that this would require work far beyond the scope of a thesis like mine.

I see the discursive positioning of my work in comparative philosophy, because it is a methodological investigation of comparative philosophy. However, my work itself is not explicitly comparative, which is why the umbrella term of intercultural philosophy might be more appropriate. At the same time, however, this work is a very specific and arguably new type of intercultural philosophy, namely one informed by Karen Barad’s philosophy-physics.

The main body of this thesis is split into two halves. The first half deals with Karen Barad’s philosophy-physics, first with “agential realism” and second with “diffraction”. It gives a broad overview of my understanding and interpretation of some of the most important terms and concepts and how they relate to each other. In the second half, there is first an account of comparative philosophy as described and defended by Tim Connolly (2022), explaining the basics of comparative philosophy and the possible limitations of ‘comparing’. In a second step, two alternative approaches to comparative philosophy will be discussed. Both Robert E. Allinson and Franz Martin Wimmer’s approaches offer a more direct critique of comparative philosophy, and both see the necessity of suggesting something they see as better. They give different though related reasons for this. After Connolly’s advocacy of comparative philosophy and the dual rejection of it by Allinson and Wimmer, a third perspective will be the presentation of two encyclopedia entries as speaking with the ‘voice of comparative philosophy.’ These entries rhetorically figure as the ‘self-understanding’ of comparative philosophy that it itself, in the first person, relays to the reader. The section on the self-understanding deals with three common errors of comparative philosophy and the way it relates to these, as well as to itself, on the one hand, and what I call the ‘promise’ of comparative philosophy, on the other. The final section is the agential realist re-reading of the (self-)understanding of comparative philosophy that builds on the ideas encountered in the previous sections and in the first half of the thesis. After a short introduction of the guiding questions and issues, the puzzle of comparative philosophy’s success in the face of its conceptual confusion, the role of reflection, the function and structural position of the individual in comparative philosophy’s

potential for change and the way to promote this potential are unpacked. The conclusion consists of a short overview of the findings and ties them together.

1. Karen Barad: Agential Realism and Diffraction

1.1 Introduction to Karen Barad

In this chapter, I will present some important concepts and ideas from Karen Barad's¹ general thought. I will refer mainly to the 2007 published monograph *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Their seminal work that was written at the beginning for Barad's foray into philosophy 'proper' and has stayed a point of reference. In their writings since then they have taken up and further deepen what was set out in the early book. It has thus stayed relevant both for Barad and in the reception of their thought, where it is often appreciated for its readability, rigour and density of concepts. On their relationship to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad says:

I consider it to be an ongoing project. For one thing, the book doesn't end (nor did it start) with its publication. Or rather, it's an open book, if I can put it that way; it's temporally open, and it continues to draw my attention back to it. My work continues to be in conversation with it. I'm re-turning, turning it over and over again. (Adrian et al. 2021, 133)

Barad is a trained quantum physicist but subsequently turned to a more philosophical direction of research. The two main influences on Barad's thought are the Nobel winning physicist Niels Bohr and philosopher Donna Haraway; but there are many other besides, though they will not be directly relevant in the context of this thesis. Bohr's influence will be most clearly visible in discussions of the phenomenon, the apparatus, the interference of the investigator, and the intra-active co-constitution of subject and object. Haraway's name will mainly appear in the context of "diffraction" which Haraway posits as an alternative to 'reflection'. I regard both influences as equally important for the point I want to make in this thesis.

Barad's project in general has enjoyed a wide and diverse reception, such as in education (Cameron-Lewis 2016, Taylor 2013), social sciences (Dunk 2020), aesthetics and theories of art (Park 2025). Their work will appear under the headings of posthumanism, new materialism, philosophy-physics, quantum theory, feminist theory and many more besides where "agential realism" has proved

1 As far as I am aware, Karen Barad uses they/them pronouns.

popular and productive. Barad's systematic theory, first developed in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, is an attempt at rethinking the basic tenets of scientific practice and quantum physics. It is noteworthy that what motivates their work is justice. At first it may sound strange to say that an interpretation of quantum physics is done with justice in mind. The entangled nature of physics with the material consequences of theory will be subject to elaboration in the following. Besides agential realism, another key term that appears in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is "diffraction". Similar to agential realism, diffraction has inspired much re-thinking and re-interpreting in a variety of scholarly disciplines.

In this section of my thesis, I will give an overview and interpretation of Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, with a focus on those aspects and concepts that I have deemed especially relevant for an interpretation of comparative philosophy. Despite this thematic selectiveness, in my opinion the overview given is nevertheless representative. It is my intention to do an agential realist reading of comparative philosophy, not the other way around, and that is how I have approached my reading of Barad. On this point I would like to state in anticipation of the themes of agential realism discussed below that from the perspective of agential realism an interpretation with this sort of intention does not lead to a portrayal that is in any way less objective.

Agential Realism and diffraction are the two main headings of this section. Barad distinguishes their theory from "representationalism" and develops it by way of separation from it. For the development of their 'performative understanding', a discussion of the (Bohrian) concept of the phenomenon and of the nature of practice is necessary. As the name already reveals, agential realism is about agency. Agency, however, appears not as an endowment of the individual but rather a characteristic of matter. This is of great consequence for the concept of and the potential for change. Diffraction will be discussed briefly as a phenomenon and object of natural scientific research but mainly as metaphor and methodology. Diffraction offers a different way of understanding sameness and difference.

1.2 Theories of Separation

Barad starts *Meeting the Universe Halfway* with a discussion about the opposition of social constructivism and scientific realism (MH, 40) to which an alternative will be proposed (“agential realism”) (MH, 44). Barad identifies representationalism as being the foundation for both social constructivism and scientific realism, as they share representationalist assumptions (MH, 48). Representationalism is understood by Barad as the theory of representations thought of as ontologically distinct from what it is that they represent, while what is represented is not dependent on the act of representing. “That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations and entities to be represented.” (MH, 46) Put very simply, representationalism is about words and things, where words stand for things independent of the words that stand for them, where truth consists in their correct correspondence (MH, 56). The metaphysics at the foundation of representationalism assumes that individual entities with “separately determinate properties” make up the world (MH, 55). Barad takes issues with the understanding of entities as nonrelational in their endowment with properties. This is essentialist in the sense that each entity is construed as nonrelational in its endowment with properties (MH, 55–56).

A constellation of three parts is implied by representationalism: knowledge, the knower, and the known. Representations function as mediations between entities that, regarding their existence, are independent of one another (MH, 47). Barad calls this an “ontological gap” (MH, 47) that is taken for granted and begs questions of accurate representation in science, language and politics. Although Barad started with natural science, where social constructivism and scientific realism are relevant in considerations of the experiment, critical perspectives from other areas of theory are included. Indeed, Judith Butler’s criticism of representationalism that builds on Michel Foucault’s political thought appears as a central point in Barad’s line of thought that leads to the suggestion of an alternative to representationalism in natural science. Barad’s reference to areas of study other than natural science is not because of a consideration of them as equally important or relevant in the grand scheme of things, or because of an epistemological or other kind of ‘superiority’ (MH, 92). Rather, concretely there is something relevant for the “actual practice of science” (MH, 47). Foucault and Butler account for materiality in the sense that discursive practices play a materially constitutive role. Since gender is not “an attribute of individuals [...] but an iterated doing through which subjects come into being” (MH, 57), the essential separation of representation and represented, *as well as* the separation of any area of study where representationalism is theorized as *immaterial* is put into question. There is a central point to keep in mind when following Barad’s

thinking: it is not only natural science that deals with the matter of materiality. By taking political representationalism into consideration, it becomes clear that there is no ‘clean’ representation, only pre-informed and informing representation (MH, 47).

Barad states that representationalism conceptually neglects the role of practice. It “is a practice of bracketing out the significance of practices [...] [it] marks a failure to take account of the practices through which representations are produced” (MH, 53). Representing is not a trivial matter (MH, 52), since ‘seeing’ requires skill, practice, care, adaptation, preparation, selection, decision, and evaluation (MH, 53) of whether one is convinced or not of what one comes to see (MH, 51). Nonetheless, representationalism is “deeply entrenched”, has attained a “common-sense appeal” (MH, 48), and there is a Cartesian habit of mind that assumes that though we do not have direct access to things, we do have direct access to representations. However, we do not have to continue following this habit, which paves the way for an alternative to representationalism to come into view (MH, 49).

1.3 The “Performative Understanding”: Practice and Phenomenon

Barad’s “performative understanding” denies the basic premises of representationalism. However, Barad’s rethinking goes deeper insofar as it questions the concepts that form the very basis of both proposed theory and its critique (MH, 68; see also 49, 177, 180). To understand scientific practices in a performative way is to account for “the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a *direct material engagement with the world*” (MH, 49; original emphasis). There is thus no place for the ontological separation of representations and (what can be) represented. The focus shifts to the “practices or performances of representing, as well as the productive effects of those practices and the conditions for their efficacy” (MH, 49). Barad does not envision giving up on realism, but is interested in a realist account that does not adhere to metaphysical individualism (MH, 56). Barad’s account is a realism “toward *phenomena* and the entangled material practices of knowing and becoming” (MH, 56). The concept of the phenomenon stands in opposition to representationalist metaphysics as Barad sees it because it makes redundant the talk of independent entities and mental references to them. Furthermore, the ‘performative understanding’ “challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things [...] insists on understanding thinking, observing, and theorizing as

practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (MH, 133). It is a “contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real [...] [and] of the unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.” (MH, 133) An emphasis on the notion of ‘practice’ and the role practices play in the performative alternative to representationalism as well as the concept of the phenomenon are central to Barad’s suggestion. In the following, they will be elaborated in turn.

1.3.1 Phenomenon

Barad’s understanding of the phenomenon is founded on her reading of Niels Bohr’s “philosophy-physics” (MH, 97). There are numerous aspects of Bohr’s thought that Barad cites. As mentioned by Barad, Bohr’s standing in the history of science is somewhat peculiar. He is the inventor of the model of the atom, the author an acclaimed interpretation of quantum mechanics and a Nobel Prize winner. And yet, he is still misunderstood in the most central tenets of his theory. This though, as Barad would surely attest, is not merely down to his readers. The complexity and depth of his thought was such that this has been the first obstacle. Furthermore, it was Bohr’s aspiration and intention for the expression of his theory, which was philosophical in nature as well, to be methodically aligned with its content (MH, 121). Considering what Bohr was proposing, perhaps this alignment of content and mode of expression was necessary. Bohr did not merely criticise, he put into question the concepts on which criticisms are based (MH, 121–123). Additionally, there are gaps and points where his theory is incomplete (MH, 122).

Regarding the ‘phenomenon’, Barad extensively takes up Bohr’s ideas. ‘Phenomenon’ is not to be taken in the Kantian or phenomenological sense of a *Ding an sich* or the perceived object (MH, 128). The crucial point of the phenomenon is its designation of “wholeness”(MH, 118–119). The whole encompasses the “object” and the “agencies of observation” (MH, 118). Bohr saw that the classical physical understanding (with its reliance on the assumptions of representationalism) was inadequate. Where classical physics neglected or compensated for the interaction of the object and the apparatus that observes it, for Bohr’s quantum physics this interaction is central (MH, 119). “[The] nature of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the apparatus” (MH, 106; original emphasis). This had great implications for the understanding of experiment and measurement.

In Barad’s reading of Bohr, measurements refer not to properties (held by independently existing entities) but to phenomena (MH, 120). Only *within* the phenomenon are the object and its observing

agency differentiated. Thus, the primary ontological unit is not the individual entity, but the phenomenon (MH, 141). The phenomenon is not that which is observed, but rather, as I understand it, encompasses the object and the entire apparatus of observation. It follows that in the case of the Stern-Gerlach-Experiment, a canonical experiment of 20th century physics where sulfur-rich cigar smoke in the lab made the test results detectable, the phenomenon therefore even includes Stern's cheap cigar, and his habit of smoking them (as part of the experimental apparatus) (MH, 165). The object of observation would not have appeared in the way it did had it not been for this specific observational apparatus. The silver atoms' visibility was due to the specific experimental arrangement that included cigar smoke. Although the cigar smoke was not the only factor that led to the appearance of blackened silver atoms on the screen, and regardless of whether this was arranged wittingly or unwittingly, it was part of the agency of measurement just as much as the machines Walther Gerlach painstakingly set up (MH, 163–164). In fact, objects independent of observation (MH, 120) have no place in Bohr's theory of the phenomenon.

This begs the question of the possibility of objectivity. Does Bohr envision objective observation? Though Bohr and Barad see an *inseparability* of subject and object in the phenomenon, this does not mean their distinction cannot be counted on. The distinction is not a given, not predetermined, but is “marked”; a “cut” is performed: “the physical and conceptual apparatuses form a nondualistic whole marking the subject-object boundary” (MH, 120). Just because subject and object do not have relation-independent boundaries, does not mean they are identical or indistinguishable, or incompatible with realism. In the context of a given phenomenon, subject and object have their marked roles, and since they are *separable only in their inseparability within the phenomenon*, they are “cut together-apart” (Adrian et al. 2021, 150), “(*one move!*)” (Adrian et al. 2021, 123). The cut is enacted to resolve the (ontological and epistemological) indeterminacy². Objectivity is thus based on the specific experimental conditions (MH, 120), not the general assumption of independently propertied entities taken for granted as accessible to perception. Take the example of Albert Einstein who, as a figure of ‘classical physics’, the quantum physicist Bohr disagrees with. For Einstein, spatial separability, absolute exteriority—and therefore ontological separability—was the condition for objectivity (MH, 173). However, Bohr did not share Einstein's metaphysical beliefs (MH, 174). The difference between what Bohr and Barad offer and the understandings they are countering is merely that the distinction subject-object/observing agency-object is not taken for granted or presumed/pre-assumed; the objectivity of the results of measurement is an objectivity *in the context*

2 Though indeterminacy is a central concept of Bohr's, this term will only be tangential here. However, the performative, agential realist interpretation accounts for Bohrian indeterminacy.

of the entire phenomenal apparatus. In Bohr and Barad's understanding, it cannot be any other way: "[Bohr] calls into question the very notion that objects have an independent existence separate from the conditions of determinability specified by the apparatus." (MH, 127) The cut, cutting together-apart, resolves the indeterminacy, thereby marking a distinction between subject and object. The results of the observation of the object are objective insofar as they pertain to the reality of the observed object. However, this does not mean that they must be entirely unaffected by the agency of observation and the apparatus that led to them being obtained. On the contrary, the results are dependent on "all relevant features of the experimental arrangement", i.e., the whole of the phenomenon: "In particular, apparatuses provide the conditions for the possibility of determinate boundaries and properties of 'objects' within phenomena, where '*phenomena*' are the *ontological inseparability of objects and apparatuses*." (MH, 127–128) The "apparatus is both causally significant (providing the conditions for enacting a local causal structure) *and* the condition for the possibility of the objective description of material phenomena" (MH, 175). In short, objectivity is tied to a phenomenon and the specifics that determine how object and observing agency are cut together-apart. No more is objectivity conditioned on taken for granted, or as Barad might also say, unaccounted for, and in Bohr and Barad's eyes untenable presumptions. Due to this inseparability and the nonetheless separate entities cut together-apart that emerge in the phenomenon, Barad introduces the term "intra-action". On the concept of 'intra-action' more will follow below. For now, let us note that Bohr—and with him Barad, too—is committed to hanging on to objectivity despite his accounting for the 'interference' of 'subjective agents'. In Bohr's understanding, "phenomena do not merely refer to perception of the human mind; rather, phenomena are real physical entities or beings (though not fixed and separately delineated things)" (MH, 129). Objectivity must be understood as an objectivity of the phenomenon in which the in/separability of subject and object and their cutting together-apart in the act of observation are recognised. In the following section, I will elaborate on the cut and the act of observation as 'practices'.

1.3.2 Practice

Now that the concept of the phenomenon has been elaborated, I get back to Barad's performative understanding as an alternative to representationalism. The crucial point for Barad's performative understanding is that phenomena are not pre-existing but *produced* (MH, 58). Constitutive exclusions (Adrian et al. 2021, 138; MH, 59) play a defining role in the productions. A particular concept is embodied to the exclusion of others (MH, 120), meaning that "theoretical concepts"

(MH, 129) are not mere ideations, but material. For Bohr, concepts—such as ‘position’ or ‘momentum’—are

defined by the circumstances required for their measurement. That is, *theoretical concepts* are not ideational in character; they *are specific physical arrangements*. [...] [M]easurement and description (the physical and the conceptual) entail each other (not in the weak sense of operationalism but in the sense of their mutual epistemological implication). (MH, 109)

Concepts are specifically embodied, and (because of the specific relation of ‘position’ and ‘momentum’) mutually exclusive experimental arrangements are needed for their independent observation (MH, 109). In fact, according to Bohr the concepts are *at work*: “theoretical concepts are [...] materially embodied in apparatuses that produce the phenomena being described” (MH, 129), giving meaning to certain concepts “at the exclusion of others” (MH, 199). The production of phenomena is thus due to the materialisation-workings of concepts, as well as specific practices on the basis of exclusion. What kind of practices are we to think of here?

Barad refers to Foucault, Butler and Bohr in calling practices constitutive for the production of phenomena. The point taken from Foucault and Butler is that “knowledge-discourse-power practices” (MH, 57) are a material matter, too. In relation to the whole of the book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, of which the subtitle talks of “matter and meaning”, we could say that *even* discursive practices *matter*, in both senses of the word—*matter and meaning*. Not only material elements effect materialisation, but discursive practices (Foucault, Butler) and concepts (Bohr) also materially precipitate. Furthermore, the point Barad wishes to make clear is that discursive practices do not merely affect matter as if from another mode of being. Discursive practices are *themselves material*, a matter of materiality. Therefore, what Barad criticises about Butler and Foucault is that they reinforce the duality (nature-culture) they seek to undermine. In broad strokes: by considering nature as determined by culture, they are separated; and the influence of one on the other crosses the divide. Moreover, Barad regrets that Butler’s theory “ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization” (MH, 151). This somewhat weakens nature, and Barad notes: “the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter” (MH, 132).

While the view Barad attributes to Butler and Foucault is that discourse has great bearing on the practices of materialisation, Barad argues that discourse is inherently material, a matter of (physical) *matter*: as a material practice, discourse is part of the material becoming of the world.

Keeping the ‘performative’ construal of materiality as (a process of) materialisation in mind, a certain potential of matter is lost by Butler and Foucault: “The power of refiguring materiality as materialization is diluted if we limit its role to being merely an effect of the reiterative power of discourses or a mere support for language.” (MH, 211) The difference to Barad’s view is that the “material dimensions of agency” are (better) accounted for by Barad (MH, 211). Thus, after the duality of subject/object another traditional cornerstone is ‘reworked’ (Barad 2014): the binary nature/culture (natural-cultural, material-discursive). We have arrived at the point of what is at issue at the deepest level in Barad’s philosophy: the nature of nature. Or rather, the implications of Barad’s performative understanding stem from/touch the very *nature of nature*.

For the purpose of clarity in this thesis, I will say that the question of the *nature of nature* is not primarily relevant insofar as the topic is the method of comparative philosophy. Also, this is not a thesis primarily on natural philosophy or ontology. Nonetheless, the dualities that have shaped our thinking have also influenced our thought about the world (nature). Not to talk of the *nature of nature* at all would be relying on representationalism’s assumptions. Rather than taking the dualisms that inform the traditional thinking for granted, with Barad we see them as *material practices*. The re-working of the dualisms, i.e., the critique that critiques what critique is normally based on when combined with a consideration of *the nature of nature*—material-discursive—shows that what might be considered cultural, theoretical, ideational, purely philosophical, or in any other way ‘immaterial’ (such as the practice of comparative philosophy) is really not in a separate realm from ‘nature’. The *nature of nature* as Barad thinks of it is relevant, even for an essay on philosophical methodology because the separation of the discursive from the natural is not a given. In my reading of Barad, the separations the dualisms rely on are ‘enacted’. This does not mean that it does not make sense to talk of body/mind, nature/culture, etc., nor does it mean that they are not ‘real’. (As has been discussed, Barad explicitly holds on to realism.) However, they should not be taken for granted, and they are not the ontological foundation but intra-actively produced, constituted by material discursive processes.

Due to nature’s natural-cultural, material-discursive nature, there is responsibility for the exclusions enacted in all discursive practices not only for reasons related to logic and coherence (is a given theory logical and coherent?), but because of their producing of material phenomena. The responsibility of theory is therefore not only a question of ‘Does it make sense? Is it correct? Is it true?’ but also ‘*How does it matter?*’. This will be further discussed in the second half in regard to what it means for Comparative Philosophy. The *nature of nature* is forcing theory to face a new—

and multiple—responsibility, which is why Barad, in my opinion very aptly, speaks of “a particular ethico-onto-epistemological foundation” (Adrian et al. 2021, 150).

To sum up, this production is therefore an ‘intra-active’ production of phenomena (more on this below), material, material-discursive practices, enacting cuts—and also, as was mentioned above, something to do with *exclusion*.

Indeed, as Butler and Bohr emphasize, that which is excluded in the enactment of knowledge-discourse-power practices play a *constitutive* role in the production of phenomena—exclusions matter both to bodies that come to matter and those excluded from mattering. Crucially, there are epistemological, ontological, and ethical issues at stake [...] [T]he point is that these *entangled practices* are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter: different intra-actions produce different phenomena. [...] The point is this: one can’t simply bracket (or ignore) certain issues without taking responsibility and being accountable for the constitutive effects of these exclusions. (MH, 57–58)

The “constitutive effects of exclusions” (MH, 59) are simultaneously an epistemological, ontological and ethical affair. Barad refers to a quote of Bohr where he talks of a choice of the type of phenomenon one intends to study. In a sense, then, study is always incomplete and always exclusionary. The key point, however, is that the incompleteness of study does not mean it is arbitrary or not objective. Furthermore, exclusions are something to account for, not to circumvent. We must take account of exclusions. Again: These exclusions are *necessary*: without exclusion, no study.

The following section will be about Barad’s ‘agential realism’. Agential realism heavily depends on the notions of practice and the phenomenon outlined in the context of the ‘performative understanding’. Agential realism is where Barad systematically establishes the ‘performative understanding’ in its epistemological, ontological and ethical growths.

1.4 Agential Realism

‘Agential realism’ is arguably the central term in Barad’s theory. In it, a lot—if not all—of the threads of their thought come together. Some of the ideas that tie in to agential realism have already

been mentioned here. Those ideas, together with thoughts not yet introduced, will be discussed in more detail and in the systematic context of the overarching theory of agential realism.

As has been discussed, Barad is not willing to give up on realism. For Barad, agency is central to reality. ‘Agential realism’ addresses a multitude of questions, some of which are: how do discursive practices matter (MH, 136)? What alternative starting place can we think of, if the common sense understanding is “words untethered from the material world”, leaving us with the problem of how “representations gain a foothold” (MH, 137)? Is separateness an illusion (MH, 136)? What is the primary ontological unit (MH, 141)? What is the condition for the possibility of objectivity? (MH, 140) What is the relation between ontology and epistemology? How do we account for ethical considerations in scientific practice? How do practices of knowing relate to accountability (MH, 149)? What is ‘meaning’ (MH, 149)? What is the nature of matter (MH, 151)? What is the relationship between scientific and social practices (MH, 168, 169)? What is the role of human subjects in the materialisation of the world (MH, 171)? And not least the question about the im/possibilities and nature of change (MH, 177–182).

Despite this list’s length, it is nonetheless not comprehensive. Some of these questions are more easily answered than others, and some have already been discussed to various degrees. The reason for providing such an elaborate list of questions is to convey a sense of the scope of Barad’s theory. Agential realism is not simply a theory that takes the opposite view to representationalism and its “concordant epistemologies” (MH, 135). Rather, it seeks to re-think, re-work the very foundations upon which both representationalism, as well as approaches for opposing and critiquing it rest.

1.4.1 Matter and Agency

Agential realist ontology is a theory that thinks of matter as “agentive”: it is “produced and productive, generated and generative” (MH, 137). Agential realism refuses the givenness of space, time and matter, as well as the givenness and fixity of any *thing*, as this would be leaving out an account of the dynamism of matter’s becoming that has no beginning and end (Adrian et al. 2021, 121). In light of the ‘performative understanding’, the focus is shifted from “questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality [...] to matters of practices, doings, and actions” (MH, 135). Matter is an “active participant in the world’s becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity” (MH, 136). The term ‘intra-activity’ becomes pertinent, and it too is one of Barad’s most important concepts. ‘Intra-activity’ as opposed to ‘interactivity’ is the productive working *within* a unity. It thus implies the primacy of a whole, and not a separation. ‘Intra-activity’ is named

in recognition of their ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which relies on a metaphysics of individualism (in particular, the prior existence of separately determinate entities). *A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an ‘object’ and the ‘measuring agencies’*; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them. (MH, 128)

Matter intra-acts—and does not *interact*—because what is produced emerges not from, or out of something outside, and not through some kind of external input or stimulation. ‘Agency’ and ‘intra-activity’ are intricately connected: “Crucially, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity.” (MH, 235) Here, agency is not something an individual is endowed with, a kind of power or faculty of the subject. This is the view Barad moves away from. “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming.” (MH, 141) It “is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” (MH, 235). Agency, for want of a better way of putting it, goes further; it is (the mode of) *being*, it is being as *doing*. Thus, agency is material, a matter of materialisation. Since matter is ‘agitive’, i.e., productive as well as produced, generating as well as generated, being cannot merely *be*, but is also a *doing*. Intra-action speaks to the inseparability of that which is *interacting-within* (and therefore ‘intra-acting’); a within that is always that of a phenomenon.

At first glance, this may seem like a purely ontological point. However, the ontological and the epistemological are closely related (they intra-act!). Following Barad, it cannot be said that the world, or something in the world, is intelligible per se. Its intelligibility cannot be taken for granted, because this would build on the insertion of the assumption of a primary separation between observer and the observed. What is intelligible is intra-actively produced, whereby the separation is enacted. What intelligibility is conditioned on (boundaries between objects as well as subject and object, properties, meanings, etc.) emerges within a phenomenon. And it is not a localised dynamic but a mark of the world’s becoming:

The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world [...] does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself. (MH, 140)

Barad's use of the semantics of 'difference' is illuminating. Phrases like "differentially intelligible", "differential accountability" (MH, 379), "differential becoming" (MH, 89, 91) "differentiating-entangling" (Adrian et al. 2021, 123), etc., point to the intra-active producing of what is differentiated. A difference is the result of a process of differentiating that takes place within a phenomenon. The world makes itself (note its agency!) "differentially intelligible" because intelligibility depends on differentiating. Without the difference between observer and observed—the result of 'differential becoming'—intelligibility would not be possible. In fact, "*phenomena are differential patterns of mattering*" (MH, 140), and "*differences are a matter of entanglements*" (Adrian et al. 2021, 123). This is a question of epistemology, as well as of ontology, a question of knowing of the world and of the being of the world shaping intelligibility and in turn being shaped by it. According to Barad, "intelligibility is an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation. It is not a human-dependent characteristic but a feature of the world in its differential becoming. The world articulates itself differently" (MH, 149): coming to know the world and the world becoming to be known.

According to agential realism, despite difference appearing-emerging within a phenomenon, despite what is separated not pre-existing as separate, despite intelligibility not being a given, distinction, separation, boundaries, properties are not illusory but, in the full sense, real. (In fact, as far as I can tell, there is nothing that could be *more* real.) Though the phenomenon is the primary ontological unit, within the phenomena separations are agentially enacted. In my understanding, Barad does not envision a sort of neutral, empty or inactive phenomenon which could be something to lay claim to primary *reality*. The ontological primacy of the phenomenon does not mean that what is in/separable within it is any less real; relations come before relata (MH, 136), but "relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions" (MH, 140). 'Concepts' and 'things' "do not have determinate boundaries, properties, or meanings apart from their mutual intra-actions" (MH, 147), but that does not mean that they are not real.

This entanglement of epistemology and ontology is consequential for the notion of objectivity: for the "agential separability" of relata is an "alternative ontological condition for the possibility of objectivity" (MH, 140). This falls in line with what has already been discussed regarding the question of objectivity. Barad draws heavily on Bohr's epistemological theory. However, it is worth noting that the entanglement of epistemology and ontology, or rather the ontological implications of Bohr's epistemology, are to a large extent Barad's own theoretical doing. Barad says: "Unfortunately Bohr does not explore the crucial ontological dimensions of his insights but rather focuses on their epistemological import. I have mined his writings for his implicit ontological

views” (MH, 138). Barad never claims to be faithful to Bohr. On the contrary, their “aim is not such much to provide a faithful representation of Bohr’s philosophy-physics as to propose a consistent framework for thinking about important epistemological and ontological issues” (MH, 123). Barad is seeking to bring ontology and epistemology together, i.e., to form a holistic picture of the *nature of nature*. “Agential realism” with its novel way of thinking agency and matter together is Barad’s attempt to fill in the gaps.

1.4.2 Apparatus

One important term to discuss is the “apparatus”. There is a certain difficulty in defining what Barad means by “apparatus”. This is due, on the one hand, to Barad returning to the term over and over again in similar but not identical contexts and talking about it in similar but not identical turns of phrase. It does not seem to be Barad’s goal to leave the reader with one clear, all-purpose definition of the term. This is, I think, also due to the apparatus’ versatility, and in some sense also due to a certain counter-intuitivity in its name. (This will hopefully become clearer.) Furthermore, the boundary of the apparatus is itself ‘indeterminate’ (its determination is enacted in agential cuts [MH, 144–145]). Not least, according to Barad, there is a significant gap in Bohr’s theory: “despite the centrality of the apparatus to Bohr’s analysis, he never fully articulates its nature” (MH, 142). Additionally, according to Barad Bohr falls prey to the same habits of mind he is trying to undo because his “apparatus is hermetically sealed off from any and all ‘outside’ influences” (MH, 144). Bohr’s apparatus is functionally impractical, and he “seems to have forgotten his own lesson that cuts are part of the phenomena they help produce” (MH, 145). Regardless of these difficulties, a general and varied impression of what, according to Barad, an apparatus is capable of is possible to summarise.

The word ‘apparatus’ may evoke a static structure or an instrument. This, though, would not be compatible with what as thus far been presented about agential realism and Barad’s thought in general:

According to Bohr, apparatuses are macroscopic material arrangements through which particular concepts are given definition, to the exclusion of others, and through which particular phenomena with particular determinate physical properties are produced. The far-reaching conclusion of Bohr’s proto-performative analysis is that the apparatus plays a much more active and intimate role in experimental practices than classical physics recognizes.

Apparatuses are not passive observing instruments; on the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena. (MH, 142)

This passage succinctly shows that apparatuses are active in determining, defining and producing within the phenomenon. As such, when one looks at the concept of the apparatus, one delves deeper into the details of intra-activity. This quote also makes clear why the way to conceptually grasp or rather think through the apparatus is not to give a definition of it. An apparatus is the arrangement through which by means of exclusions (that are material in nature) definitions are made, meaning in turn that there is no one universal definition—not even of the apparatus which has no privileged position in terms of definability—that can be, in a sense, excavated or discovered. To borrow a phrase Barad uses in another (though related) context: it is not frozen, static, statuesque. (MH, 90–91) Going about *defining* the apparatus would probably itself show a misunderstanding of its epistemological and ontological dimension (though by my reckoning Barad might call this something like a failure to take account of the concept’s mattering; more on this later).

Here once again, coming from the perspective of an area of research that falls within the humanities, such as philosophy in general or comparative philosophy in particular, we confront the question of the relevance or applicability to other fields of what Barad is explaining in terms of natural science. One must keep in mind three things:

First, Bohr is a physicist, who while not always strictly talking only of physics is also the originator of thoughts that might be classed as (more squarely) philosophical. This is the reason Barad calls his theory a “philosophy-physics”. (MH, 97)

Second, following Barad apparatuses are “specific material-discursive practices (they are not merely laboratory setups that embody human concepts and take measurements)” (MH, 146); discursive practices are material in their differential enactment of boundaries; vice versa, materiality is discursive (MH, 152): Barad talks of material-discursive with a hyphen (Adrian et al., 138); the two are in/separable in the world’s materialisation. Barad calls apparatuses ‘material’, but this does not mean we must think of them as rigid constructions or robust constructions made of steel, titanium, glass, etc. Apparatuses are material in the same way concepts are material—they are part of spacetime mattering and enact material configurations by exclusions. In Barad’s reading, apparatuses are physical—the etymology points to ‘nature’—but in understanding the apparatus’ physicality one must keep in mind the *nature of nature*. The separation of nature and culture cannot be taken for granted, cannot be presupposed. Their separation can only ever be produced, and would only occur within a phenomenon where they are separable in their inseparability as constituent parts

of the phenomenon—Barad speaks of ‘in/separability’. If it were to happen that a given apparatus was purely physical (in the conventional sense, i.e., in exclusion of and in opposition to the cultural, the mental, the linguistic, etc.), this would always be due to what by way of exclusion would be enacted as its opposite—the physical and its opposite cut together-apart. (And to complete this thought: this exclusion would be the doing of another apparatus.)

Thirdly, there is another argument in support of the multidisciplinary relevance: Barad’s own stated motivational perspective; justice motivates their research.

What drives my research is my passion for justice. This remains the motivation behind my current research project: re-turning to the topic of my dissertation—quantum field theory. [...] I was well aware of the fact that physics is implicated in the military-industrial complex, colonialism, imperialism, classism, racism and other forms of oppression [...] One thing that seemed clear to me at the time was the necessity of [...] addressing questions of the social, environmental and political impact of science and who has access to these forms of expertise and who is excluded. (Adrian et al. 2021, 119)

To be clear, in Barad’s understanding of agential realism the scientific practice of physics does not have an *effect* on what Barad in this quote say it is implicated in. Rather, violence, oppression, social and political matters are, as the term ‘implicated’ etymologically conveys, *enfolded into* the scientific practice. Physics is inseparable from the military-industrial complex, colonialism and so on; or more specifically they are *in/separable*. What does this mean? It means their separation cannot be taken for granted, their separation cannot be presumed. It means physics is not to be regarded as inherently uninvolved with and independent from the injustices mentioned. It also opens the door to reconfigurings that agentially separate physics from the violence Barad sees it as implicated in. There is another way of looking at it. When one takes account of this in/separability and of physics being implicated in this way, when one is accountable to the scientific practice in this in/separability and practices physics (and science in general) responsibly, there is a powerful potential for change. As will be discussed below, this incomparably stronger and better suited for meaningful change than the critical engagement we get from “reflection” and “reflexivity”.

Thus, both because according to Barad it makes sense regarding the physics, and due to the potential for change, it pays to consider the apparatus’ dynamics of mattering: apparatuses are not merely in and of a particular phenomenon, and they are not merely *in* the world. “Rather, apparatuses are specific material reconfigurings of the world that do not merely emerge in time but

iteratively reconfigure spacetime matter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming.” (MH, 142) The question of change, both as it concerns nature and regarding justice-to-come (Adrian et al. 2021, 120, 134) will be looked at next.

1.4.3 Change

What has thus far been discussed as having a bearing on the concept and possibility of change. In fact, change is a big part of the motivation of Barad’s theoretical enterprise: “What is at stake is nothing less than the possibilities for change.” (MH, 46) Here once more we can see the entanglement of matter and meaning. The search for justice: it is a change that is to be understood as physical. The following quote both sums up what this section about agential realism has presented and introduces the important aspect of change:

Crucially, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices—iterative reconfigurings of topological manifolds of spacetime matter relations—through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about changing possibilities of change entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. Particular possibilities for (intra-)acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail an ethical obligation to intra-act responsibly in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (MH, 235)

This is a great example of Barad’s style of writing and thought. This passage very densely interweaves some very important concepts: agency, matter, intra-action. It pays to go slow to unpack what Barad is saying, especially about change. The world’s being is not static, but a doing. The dynamics of this doing—in its intra-activity—are such that conventional understandings of ‘change’ risk failing to grasp the true scope of possibilities. The phrase “changing possibilities of change” goes further than a shake-up, a redistribution, starting-over, or similar measures. It speaks to a different kind of change: a change that is such that not merely “the form of causal relations [...] but the very notions of causality, as well as agency, space, time, and matter, are all reworked. [...] the very nature of change and the possibilities for change changes”—as ever with Barad, as part of

the world's reconfiguring becoming (MH, 179). The new possibilities which open the door to such radical change are part of the reworking.

The key to this unbound change is the connection of agency, matter and its intra-activity. Change will become an important talking point in later sections of this thesis. As stated in the introduction, the method of comparative philosophy is aimed at effecting a change that encompasses language, perspective and, not least, people, or a kind of person.

As the above quote mentions, this possibility for change carries with it a certain responsibility, "an obligation to intra-act responsibly". What is meant by this? We intra-act in the way we set up our apparatuses, the way we frame the world, which is a differential becoming by way of exclusions. Barad proposes their own theory as an "epistemological-ontological-ethical framework" (MH, 26). Representationalism and "concordant epistemologies" (MH, 135) have already been discussed in regard to epistemology ('words and things') and ontology (metaphysics of separation/individualism). What about ethics? Entanglement is not merely an epistemological or an ontological relation:

Matter itself is always already open to, or rather entangled with the 'Other.' The intra-actively emergent 'parts' of phenomena are co-constituted. Not only subjects but also objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future. This is as true for electrons as it is for brittlestars as it is for the differentially constituted human. (MH, 393)

This quote clearly shows how Barad sees their theory as being equally relevant for cultural, (inter)personal and maybe even emotional entanglements. Change is thus meaningful in its ontological re-forming, epistemological re-thinking and ethical re-working, not least where justice is still to come. In the following sections, change will be further discussed: first, in what role plays for the methodology aligned with agential realism and, then, change in the context of Comparative Philosophy.

1.4.4 Summary of Agential Realism

In summary, 'agential realism' is not an easy theory to understand because it goes against our common sense understandings of the world. Furthermore, Barad's phrasing and formation of their thought seems to me to perfectly embody the doing-ness and becoming-ness of matter. Agential

realism is the theory of not taking for granted what we (commonly, out of habit) take as given, which includes those most basic concepts that we rely on in our thinking. However, Barad's theory is anything but nihilistic. On the contrary, it is a defence of realism, its reworking, rebuilding as accountable to the agency of matter and the dynamics of its becoming. Among the things that cannot be regarded as given is agential realism itself; it is itself "agentive" (Adrian et al. 2021, 133–134).

In conversation, Barad is asked about the practical experience of teaching agential realism. Barad wants students to

come to understand that what we take to be an object needs to be understood as a phenomenon, a material-discursive phenomenon (which is a dynamism, not a thing), which entails the inseparability of the object and the apparatuses of bodily production (including the knowing subject who has been specifically disciplined by particular knowledge formations, etc.). (Adrian et al. 2021, 136)

The object and subject are entangled. The subject is a part of the world it is investigating and its participation is inseparable from the results of the investigation. These points will become important in the second part of this thesis where the comparative philosopher and the theories s/he investigates will be discussed. First, however, I will discuss what this means for the question of methodology.

1.5 Diffraction

1.5.1 Introduction to Diffraction

After the description of agential realism, the next question is what kind of methodological approach is fitting? It is important to envisage a place for "insights into how particular ways of framing things contribute to the very constitution of 'this' and 'that' as always already in relation to one another (in the sense of cutting together-apart)" (Adrian et al. 2021, 120). Thus, a methodology that is considerate of the insight that 'this and that' are relationally constituted and integrates this insight into its approach, is more fitting to agential realism. The method Barad is suggesting is also a physical phenomenon and a metaphor: 'diffraction.' 'Diffraction' has a multilayered role (MH, 72) in Barad's thought, and what I consider the crucial points (especially with a view to what will be discussed in the context of comparative philosophy) will be explained here.

Similar to how ‘agential realism’, true to itself, is not a given, ‘diffraction’ is something Barad approaches by ‘diffracting’ it. “In fact, diffraction not only brings the reality of entanglements to light, it is itself an entangled phenomenon.” (MH, 73) “So at times diffraction will be an object of investigation and at other times it will serve as an apparatus of investigation; it cannot serve both purposes simultaneously since they are mutually exclusive” (MH, 73). This will hopefully become clearer. To gain a first understanding of diffraction, I want to start by showing what Barad separates it from, and the methodological, conceptual and philosophical problems that they want to address with diffraction. If this diffraction is a methodology more in line with agential realism, does that mean that there is a methodology that goes along with representationalism? According to Barad, comparison and reasoning by analogy—concordant with representationalism—subscribe to a metaphysics of individualism and build on separation (Adrian et al. 2021, 120). The method of comparison and analysis based on analogy go along with representationalism. The issues Barad sees with representationalism were explained above. Diffraction is a way of responding to the discounted fact of intervention/interference while holding onto aspirations of objectivity. With its attunement to intra-active entanglements, it goes against the idea of atomistic givenness. It is a methodology that is “attentive to, and responsive/responsible to, the specificity of material entanglements in their agential becoming” (MH, 91). Diffraction is sensitive to change and differences that matter.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, diffraction is not merely a topic, a concept as part of a theory. Barad’s own methodology is diffractive, and they use it in “thinking insights from scientific and social theories through one another” (MH, 92). Natural scientific theories and social theories are not read “against each other”, positioned in opposition, being in turn each other’s “unmovable and unyielding foil”, nor are the insights from one exploited for their perceived epistemological superiority (MH, 92). Barad places insights from different disciplines “in conversation with one another [...] to engage aspects of each in *dynamic* relationality to the other [...] and questions of accountability and responsibility for the reconfigurings of which we are a part” (MH, 92–93). Barad calls diffraction “an apt overarching trope” of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (MH, 71). Chapter two titled “Diffractions: Differences, Contingencies, and Entanglements That Matter” is dedicated to an explanation of diffraction. However, they say it will take the entire book to explain it further (MH, 72), in order to understand it “both as a material-discursive practice and as a critical practice” (MH, 94).

Since for Barad diffraction is not just method but also metaphorical, what does the metaphor of “diffraction” go against? What is the metaphor of representationalist theories? It is ‘reflection’, figured by the mirror: “To mirror something is to provide an accurate image or representation that faithfully copies that which is being mirrored. Hence, mirrors are an often-used metaphor for representationalism and related questions of reflexivity.” (MH, 86) Reflection as a “trope of knowing” will be replaced (MH, 72). The diffractive method has “no patience for tricks with mirrors, where, for example, the macroscopic is said to mirror the microscopic, or the social world is treated as a reflection of the metaphysics of individualism perfected in atomic theory, and so on” (MH, 93–94). As a metaphor, diffraction is meant to displace reflection and the methodologies that go along with it. The critical potential of reflexivity turns out to be inadequate, which is where diffraction jumps in.

Having established the general context in which Barad’s idea of diffraction appears, its characteristics will be examined. Finally, the relevance of the notions of sameness and difference as they are contained in diffraction will be discussed, one reason being that sameness and difference are important for what will be said about comparative philosophy.

1.5.2 Diffraction: Phenomenon–Metaphor–Methodology

1.5.2.1 Phenomenon

First and foremost, diffraction is a physical phenomenon of interest in classical physics and then became a matter of great importance in quantum physics (MH, 72). Barad mentions that the two terms ‘interference’ and ‘diffraction’ are taken by some physicists to refer to different phenomena. Barad however uses the terms interchangeably (MH, 80–81), and I will sometimes use them interchangeably where it aids understanding. In classical physics, diffraction is to do with the combination and overlapping of waves (MH, 74). One example is the disturbance of the surface of water. If waves are created at two points, the “resultant wave is a sum of the effects of each individual component wave; that is, it is a combination of the disturbances created by each wave individually” (MH, 76). The resultant wave can thus be larger or smaller than its component waves (MH, 76). What we see is an interference pattern as the waves interfere with one another, forming peaks and troughs. The observed pattern results from the specific disturbance(s). Changes in the force or frequency of the disturbance or the distance between the two points will result in a different pattern of interference. Another example is the effects on waves when they are obstructed. As can

be seen from the figures Barad shows, the specific shape of the object leads to different observable patterns (MH, 77–78). Light also shows diffraction patterns. Barad mentions the diffraction pattern around an object that “reveals an indeterminate outline around each of the edges” making the “determination of a ‘real’ boundary quite tricky” (MH, 75). Another type of diffraction pattern of becomes visible under the microscope, and because of the monochromatic light source (MH, 76). However, interference patterns like this are ubiquitous. They normally do not become as clearly visible because of “overlapping diffraction patterns that disguise one another” (MH, 75). Diffraction is thus an optical as well as physical phenomenon.

The quantum understanding of diffraction is less easily summarised. However, as Barad succinctly puts it diffraction “is a quantum phenomenon that makes the downfall of classical metaphysics explicit” (MH, 72). Barad concedes that it takes the entire book of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* for the concept to become clear. The ‘two-slit experiment’ is a pivotal experiment in debates on the nature of light (wave vs. particle) (MH, 72–73). A remarkable finding on the way to “the development of quantum physics, is that under certain circumstances *matter* (generally thought of as being made of particles) is found to produce a diffraction pattern!” (MH, 82) Counterintuitively, and consequentially for Western epistemology and ontology, “*light* manifests *particle* behavior under certain circumstances (and wave behavior under other circumstances)” (MH, 83). It seems as if the very nature of light (wave or particle) is subject to change in circumstance. This queer finding of nature’s performativity is brought to light by diffraction. Diffraction experiments have subsequently taken on an important role in physics. It has already been mentioned that diffraction can be either the object of investigation or the investigative apparatus. “It has now become routine to use diffraction experiments to determine different features of matter. [...] sometimes the goal of a diffraction experiment is to learn about the nature of the substance that is being passed through a diffraction grating, and sometimes it’s to learn about the diffraction grating itself.” (MH, 83) Barad wants the reader of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* to keep the “suggestion of the complexity and profundity of diffraction phenomena” in mind, noting its figurative, methodological and phenomenal evocation (MH, 83).

As a phenomenon, diffraction has been of importance in both classical and quantum physics, in a sense also marking the transition from the former to the latter. Whereas in classical physics, the phenomenon was associated with waves and their superposition, forming distinct patterns, quantum physics began using diffraction experiments to determine the features of the matter investigated. This led to fundamental questions for traditional epistemology and ontology. The following section will be about diffraction as a metaphor.

1.5.2.2 Metaphor

In its metaphorical sense, Barad takes the concept of ‘diffraction’ from Donna Haraway. Barad builds on Donna Haraway’s remarks in her book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™. Feminism and Technoscience* on diffraction. Haraway picks up the term from a 1992 painting by Lynn Randolph called “A Diffraction” (Haraway 1997, 272–273). Haraway places diffraction as a “counterpoint” to reflection (MH, 71). The metaphor of reflection has been very influential in the Western philosophical tradition and in its philosophical practice. The point Barad adopts from Haraway, and that I later wish to make use of for an investigation of the method of comparative philosophy, is that reflexivity’s critical potential is inherently limited. It merely “displaces the same elsewhere” (MW, 16). As a way of *critically* relating to a self, or repositioning oneself, it is somewhat unsuited. Reflection stays within the geometry of sameness (MH, 72).³ Therefore: “Diffraction, the production of difference patterns, might be a more useful metaphor for the needed work than reflection.” (Haraway 1997, 34) What makes diffraction promising is its relationship with difference. “Diffraction is an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world.” (Haraway 1997, 16) Both diffraction and reflection are optical phenomena. The difference is that “the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, [but] diffraction is marked by patterns of difference” (MH, 71). As I take it, in Barad and Haraway’s view the philosophical characteristic of the mirror has been misunderstood and its power for transformation overestimated. Barad gives the following description of philosophical mirroring: “Mirrors reflect. To mirror something is to provide an accurate image or representation that faithfully copies that which is being mirrored. Hence, mirrors are an often-used metaphor for representationalism and related to questions of reflexivity.” (MH, 86) Barad and Haraway decry both aspects of the mirror’s virtue of ‘faithfully copying’. And secondly, elsewhere in Barad’s theory, we can glean that faithful reading—let alone faithful copies—is not always the best policy (MH, 123). Firstly, Haraway draws attention to the spectre of losing authenticity and the sense of reality in the original-copy dynamic (Haraway 1997, 16). A further point of contention is that the mirror needs a gap to work. Mirrors more or less faithfully produce images “of objects placed at a distance from the mirror” (MH, 81). I will try to make the problematic of these three issues of the mirror (faithfulness, authenticity, distance) clearer with a

3 Barad views geometry as dynamically limited, attested in associations with straight lines, predictability and easy calculability. On the limits of geometry as figure and metaphor and their alternative suggestion of topology, see chapter six of *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (223–246). The concept of sameness will feature in a following section.

brief overview of what may they could lead to. I see three ways in which the faithful production of images by the mirror is problematic in the context of change and difference broadly construed: first, faithfulness is not a universal virtue and productive irrespective of specific differences of a particular situation; second, there is a risk of original and copy as well as beginning and end of the perpetual process of reflection becoming indistinguishable, leading to challenges in telling what to believe and how to live; third, reflexivity as a resource for change is ever dependent on distance and separation. The virtue of the mirror is thus seen as somewhat unprofitable.

Furthermore, reflexivity is criticised for being unable to achieve its goals. The aims of the scholarly practice of reflexivity are to “reflect on and systematically take account of, the investigator’s role as an instrument in the constitution of evidence [...] as opposed to less-reflexive modes of investigation that leave the knower out of the equation” (MH, 86). Barad brings up two ways in which reflexivity comes up short. The first is the fact that “crucial social factors” have been ignored and the “mutual constitution of the ‘social’ and the ‘scientific’” underestimated; the second is that reflexivity is nonetheless “based on the [representationalist] belief that practices of representing have no effect on the objects of investigation” as well as that representations are accessible to us in a way that objects themselves are not (MH, 87). The issue here is: “Reflexivity, like reflection, still holds the world at a distance.” (MH, 87) Diffraction, however, is a “critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar.” (MH, 90)

What do we learn by engaging in such practices? We do not uncover preexisting facts about independently existing things as they exist frozen in time like little statues positioned in the world. Rather, we learn about phenomena—about specific material configurations of the world’s becoming [...] to understand and take account of the fact that we too are part of the world’s differential becoming. And furthermore, the point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that *practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world*. Which practices we enact matter—in both senses of the word. Making knowledge is not simply about making facts but about making worlds, or rather, it is about making specific worldly configurations—not in the sense of making them up ex nihilo, or out of language, beliefs, or ideas, but in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (MH, 90–91)

On this quote, there are two points I consider worth making. First, diffraction offers us a way of *conceptually assigning a place* for the intra-active becoming of what we investigate *in our methodological approach*. This is important because what we investigate does not pre-exist in the

way we find it. This will be an important point for my discussion about comparative philosophy. Theories, too, like ‘things’, do not pre-exist frozen in time, statuesque, waiting to be excavated. Our understanding of a theory *matters*. We must take account of the intra-active dynamics, in which we materially participate, that investigation of a (body of) theory entails. In this way, we do not lose objectivity in our approach, we merely do not take objectivity for granted.

Second, from the perspective of agential realism, to say that our knowledge making practices have material consequences is imprecise. In the first instance, it is claiming a separation of knowledge and matter, inscribing a dualism across which consequences unfold. Furthermore, the lack of separation, or rather the *in/separability* of practices of knowing and the knower from matter in its material becoming, means that they were *never not mattering*. Drawing from these two reasons for the imprecision, it can be seen that there is thus a fine but important difference to consider between, on the one hand, being conscious of the material consequences a theory can have and, on the other, taking account of every theory’s inalienable participation in the world’s material becoming. A specific kind of ethical involvedness and a real potential for transformative change are harboured in this difference. In an agential realist understanding, ‘theory’ and its ‘consequences’ cannot be neatly kept apart. Discursive practices do not merely accompany the question of responsibility for their ‘real world’ effects or consequences. Consequently, the power and (activist, political, social, etc.) potential of critically engaging by way of theory become evident. In my understanding, Barad is thereby philosophically materialising an empowerment of critical thinking and theorising. The notion of diffraction and moving away from the mirror’s mirroring and the self-vision of reflexivity as the guiding, tone-setting metaphor is crucial to this potential.

As a metaphor, diffraction figures as an improvement on the mirror’s reflexivity. Reflection’s *pouvoir* has been exaggerated, and it is unclear how it can achieve its aims through its own force. In a sense, reflection contains a philosophical obstacle to the fulfilling of reflexivity’s potential. Reflexivity’s dis-engaged critique is superseded by diffraction’s accounting for our involvement with making differences that matter.

1.5.2.3 Methodologies of Separation

The mirror carries themes of reflecting the same elsewhere and holding the world at a distance. On the theme of methodologies that come from mirroring (MH, 86), Barad mentions comparison and analogy. These mentions come from a specific context: first, they are interrelated—what is comparable as well as what is analogical has to have some similarity, and analogy is another way of comparing; second, quantum theory is often used for analogies. Barad wishes to distinguish

between their approach and “a host of analogical (mis)appropriations of quantum theory” (MH, 70). In the introduction to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad discusses such a case. Michael Frayn’s play *Copenhagen* deals with Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg’s roles in the physico-politics of second world war Europe, when the development of the atomic bomb loomed large. Barad praises Frayn for his well written play and for the close connection sketched between science and politics (MH, 5) but criticises the analogy he makes between physical particles and mental states (MH, 5, 7). Barad speaks of Frayn’s construal of mental states as analogous to particles: like particles, mental states are subject to the same problems of knowability. Frayn applies Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle on the basis of an analogy between the physical and the psychological. (MH, 7)

Following on from this point, Barad’s observation makes clear from the start in what way *Meeting the Universe Halfway* is not to be misunderstood. It is not that the psychological is *like* the physical in the sense that quantum mechanics can be a tool of analysis for both. Rather, the psychological and the physical are part of the same (intra-active) becomings of the world. “Indeed, there is a host of material-discursive forces—including ones that get labeled ‘social,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘psychic,’ ‘economic,’ ‘natural,’ ‘physical,’ ‘biological,’ ‘geopolitical,’ and ‘geological’—that may be important to particular (entangled) processes of materialization.” (MH, 66) Psychological states are not *like* quantum states of electrons—the same goes for the different “material-discursive forces” just mentioned. Psychology, as well as physics, is phenomenal, part of the materialisation of the world, and *in/separable*. For Barad, the issue with Frayn’s analogy is that it posits a separation between the physical and the psychological, and this divide is then bridged *with the help* of quantum physics, *on the basis* of analogy. Frayn’s method of analysis is therefore analogical. There is thus an important difference to Barad’s method. Though Barad calls their method diffractive “in analogy with the physical phenomenon”, this does not make the method itself analogical: it is important to distinguish between applying the inspiration for a method (the phenomenon of diffraction) to the method (the method of diffraction), and the *nature of the method* (which is ‘diffractive’) (MH, 88). Frayn’s methodology is analogical because he treats the psychological *in the same manner as* the physical *while assuming their separation*. The analogy consists in Frayn using an approach that works in one field in another field due to a specifically construed similarity in the two fields separated by a gap. In Frayn’s analogical analysis, the psychological is aligned with the physical, and the psychological is seen as subject to the same laws despite them allegedly belonging to independent realms. In this sense, Frayn (mis)appropriates quantum theory.

According to Barad, analogical analysis is of limited value. Unlike the diffractive method, it does not allow one

to examine in detail important philosophical issues such as the conditions for the possibility of objectivity, the nature of measurement, the nature of nature and meaning making, the conditions of intelligibility, the nature of causality and identity, and the relationship between discursive practices and the material world. (MH, 94)

The diffractive method is best suited for the examination of these areas. Moreover, it is also best suited to examinations that are attentive to these aspects even if they are not the object of investigation in a given and specifically set up apparatus (see also that the object of inquiry can be the tool of inquiry, as discussed above).

With this short discussion of analogy, the in/separability of the constituent parts of phenomena, including the psychological and the physical, has been re-emphasised. By extension, Barad describes their research as “transdisciplinary” (MH, 93), thus acknowledging the existence of *different* disciplines. The key point in this regard is that this boundary is not taken for granted and, furthermore, how they are brought into (a different sort of) relation. Analogy, for the reasons already elaborated on, will not do as a mode of relating. Barad’s approach is to think “insights from scientific and social theories through one another” (MH, 92) and to “place the understandings generated from different (inter)disciplinary practices in conversation with one another” (MH, 92–93). This “*dynamic* relationality” is in line with relational ontology (MH, 93).

There is another methodology—apart from analogical analysis—that Barad distinguishes diffraction from: the comparative method. In Barad’s case of reading theories of natural science and social theories through one another, a comparison between the two would have suggested itself. However,

I am not interested in reading, say, physics and poststructuralist theory against each other, positioning one in a static geometrical relation to the other, or setting one up as the other’s unmovable and unyielding foil. Nor am I interested in bidirectional approaches that add the results of what happens when each takes a turn at playing the foil, as it were. (MH, 92)

Can we say that the themes of the “unmovable and unyielding foil” and bidirectional adding of the results of contrastings are indicative of the comparison? While in the context of this quote Barad does not expressly mention comparison, somewhere else they talk of the same themes while also

explicitly naming comparison (“compare and contrast” [Adrian et al. 2021, 120]). Barad is not looking to “explore unilaterally the lessons of physics for social and political theories, exploiting what is seen as the greater epistemological value of the natural sciences over the human sciences”, nor to “counter the overblown authority of science by suggesting a reversal whereby the social sciences would be a model for the natural sciences” (MH, 92). “This goes to the point of how to think insights together, without the process being comparative or additive, and the framing of differences as subtractive.” (Adrian et al. 2021, 123) It is worth pointing out that there is a certain overlap in what underlying characteristics shape analogical analysis and the comparative method. Both rely on a gap, stand independently of another, and in the first instance unaffected by each other, and are located in the orbit of representationalism and its “concordant epistemologies”. In the same way that what is taken as separate in analogy what is compared in the comparison cannot be assumed to be distinct before, or independent of, “material-discursive boundary-making practices” (MH, 93).

In summary, what I have termed ‘methodologies of separation’ are approaches that rely on a gap, where, from the perspective of agential realism, mutual constitution and material-discursive worldings are a conceptual blind spot. They are, furthermore, ill-suited to being attentive to certain philosophical issues in a meaningful way, leaving their approaches dependent on unaccounted for assumptions. It stands to reason that both of the mentioned aspects negatively impact the value of the results gained from these approaches. In the following section, the terms sameness and difference, as relevant for the potential for meaningful change, are studied.

1.5.3 Sameness and Difference

So far, difference and sameness have come up in a number of ways. In my view, there is a certain observable turning away from ‘sameness’ by Barad. The mirror, reflection and reflexivity are seen as limited in their potential for change, and diffraction, attuned to difference, is deemed both fitting with the agential realist understanding of nature and promising of making a meaningful difference. However, the specific notion of difference and how it relates to sameness is worth considering. By introducing diffraction to what was formerly the domain of reflection/reflexivity, a new kind of change comes into view, along with a different sense of difference. How difference is conceived of is thus of great importance in matters of diffraction. In an interesting footnote, Barad refers to physicist Thomas Young’s (1773–1829) understanding of difference.

If diffraction is to serve as an important metaphor for differences that matter, it is crucial that we pay attention to the kinds of differences that different understandings of diffraction evoke, so as to not conflate questions of accountability to differences that matter with postmodern celebrations of difference for difference's sake. In this regard it is worth noting that although Thomas Young, who first proposed the two-slit experiment, theorizes diffraction as being about differences, his notion of difference relies on sameness as a primary category as well as the fixity of place: "In order that the effects of two portions of light may be thus combined [into a pattern of interference; M.O.] it is necessary that they be derived from the *same origin*, and that they arrive at the *same point* by different paths, in directions *not much deviating from each other*" (quoted in Kipnis 1991, 88; italics mine [Karen Barad; M.O.]). Presumably a "mutated modest witnesses' of the Second—Millennium (Haraway) wouldn't want too quickly to embrace this conception." (MH, 419)

Quantum physics has shown that there are different kinds of difference (Adrian et al. 2021, 123). So what kind of understanding of 'difference' is necessary for diffraction's metaphorical, methodological and material-discursive potential for promising intervention? How should 'difference' be understood so as to take account of materialisation, the world's differential becoming? Barad seems to be appealing for a 'genuine' notion of difference which is not reducible to a deeper sameness. Nonetheless, this disavowal of sameness seemingly pertains only to sameness as the underlying condition for difference: starting from the same point but going different paths. In my view, in a sense Barad is staying true to the cause of "relationality" as intended by their 'relational ontology'. The relata of a relation cannot be 'celebrated'—Barad speaks of "postmodern celebrations of difference for difference's sake"—in suppressing the other constituents of the phenomenon. Nor can what is worth celebrating—or makes it so—be seen as absolute, i.e., independent of its relatedness. And conversely, without 'genuinely' different relata, what would be left of the relation? Consequently, difference should not be valorised for its own sake (presumably at the expense of sameness). Not the difference celebrated for its own sake (which Barad calls "postmodern"), but the difference *that matters* is meaningful, and *how* it matters.

As has been mentioned, there are differences that make a difference. Barad is advocating taking the difference-making into account. Is sameness capable of making a difference in a promising way? Are metaphors and methodologies that go along with sameness, i.e., reflection and reflexivity, suited to an accountability to the matter(ing) of difference? Barad invokes Haraway and says 'no'. Critical engagement, making a difference (with promising effects becoming attainable), aligning

with relational ontology, integrating considerations of certain philosophical issues all require another way of approaching things that rests on what I have provisionally called ‘genuine’ difference—as ever with Barad, for epistemological, ontological as well as ethical reasons.

1.5.4 Summary of Diffraction

I have attempted to sketch important aspects of Barad’s thoughts on how agential realist epistemology-ontology-ethics are integrated in their methodological approach. The congruency of theory and method entails a disavowal of representationalism and its accompanying methodologies. Reflection and reflexivity, cornerstones of traditional Western ontology and epistemology, are portrayed as conceptually flawed since they fail to achieve what is expected of them. The hope for making a promising difference requires a sensibility for hands-on participation, not a philosophical distance that could itself never stay purely theoretical, but as a material-discursive practice would always be materially manifest. Analogy and, as needs further inquiry, comparison implicitly subscribe to essential separation and lack sensibility for the “relation-before-relata” order. As phenomenon, metaphor and method, diffraction runs through the whole of Barad’s seminal book and is at work on multiple levels. The presentation of some central tenets of Barad’s thought forms the basis for an investigation of conceptual tensions in the method of Comparative Philosophy. At the end of the second half of this thesis, ideas of agential realism and diffraction will be drawn on in discussing ways to handle these tensions.

2. Towards an Agential Realist Comparative Philosophy

2.1 Introduction

After Barad's theory, I now turn to the other focus: comparative philosophy. First is Tim Connolly's portrayal of the basics of comparative philosophy and the limits it seems to have in a diversifying world. Central themes are here: the skill of comparing, what the comparison consists in and what sets comparative philosophy apart. In the second section I will briefly discuss two intercultural alternatives to comparative philosophy which both offer a more pointed critical perspective than Connolly presents in his nevertheless differentiated investigation. The first is Robert E. Allinson's "integrative" approach which is marked by words of caution when hailing the virtues of comparing. Interestingly, especially for a thesis on Barad's Bohr-inspired philosophy-physics, Allinson interprets one of Bohr's central concepts as interculturally developed. Allinson's critique addresses mainly a perceived lack of genuine engagement, a charge that will be returned to in due course. The second alternative is *interkulturelle Philosophie*. Its criticism of comparative philosophy is that the comparison for all its transgressing of borders is still caught up in the locality of culture.

Interkulturelle Philosophie by contrast is truly global.

After this account of comparative philosophy, in another section I attempt to let it speak for itself. To this end, I present two in my view highly interesting and due to their inherent conceptual-philosophical tension productive quotes from two different encyclopediae as the 'self-understanding' of comparative philosophy. Setting it up as the voice of comparative philosophy enables me to address easily and directly certain blind-spots that could fool comparative philosophy's supporters and critics; it also offers a rhetorically different perspective on the phenomenon 'comparative philosophy' that increasingly appears more and more complex. Central to this complexity are the perceived and intended role of reflection and a seemingly noncomparative aim and trait of comparative philosophy.

In the final section I will attempt an agential realist re-reading of the understanding and self-understanding of comparative philosophy. The point is to try to explain why despite an alleged misunderstanding and conceptual confusion at the heart of the comparative philosophical project it nevertheless succeeds. The works of its success will be described in terms of diffraction, intra-action, entanglement and material-discursive practices.

2.2 Philosophy Comparatively Thought⁴

In his book *Doing Philosophy Comparatively. Foundations, Problems, and Methods of Cross-Cultural Inquiry*, Tim Connolly (2022) first emphasises the general importance of ‘comparing’, also outside of philosophy or maybe even outside theoretical work at large. Engagement with other ways of thinking is vital for the progress of society. However, merely encountering something unfamiliar is not enough. One’s own way of thinking needs to be perpetually challenged by comparing it to other ways of thinking (Connolly 2022, 3). For the field of philosophy, important questions of the comparison are questions of commonality or lack thereof, same or different foundations, and the relation to one’s own philosophical problems (Connolly 2022, 2). What sets comparative philosophy apart is that it aims to bring “historically and culturally distant realms of thought” together (Connolly 2022, 2). What is decisive here is “the scope of comparison” (Connolly 47). There is a cultural, regional and historical distinctness between the two sides (Connolly 2022, 48). Comparative philosophy, then, is the “study of different *philosophical traditions* [that] have evolved within separate *cultures*” (Connolly 2022, 47), where these lines of separation (Connolly 2022, 48) are transgressed by the comparison. In Connolly’s opinion, there is innovative potential in this endeavour: “What makes the work of comparative philosophy so fascinating is that it represents a new era in the development of philosophical traditions that have been around for thousands of years.” (Connolly 2022, 51) Connolly is not necessarily saying that comparative philosophy is a philosophy of a new era of philosophy globally construed—though it arguably is. Rather, the point he is making here is that the comparative encounter between, e.g., Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy is a turning point in the history of both traditions involved. Furthermore, it promises to be a turning point for the future of philosophy globally construed. This will become clearer in the following.

However it may appear, bringing realms of thought thus separated together is not a trivial matter. For one, a certain openness is required: “Without openness to what other philosophical traditions have to teach us, comparative philosophy would not be possible.” (Connolly 2022, 24) But even given a sufficiently open attitude, the matter of culture complicates the situation:

The joining together of philosophy with tradition and culture raises many questions. What does it mean to be a philosophical tradition? What is the relation of a particular work of philosophy to the culture in which it was composed? How significant are cultural boundaries

⁴ Some of the ideas of this section were first developed in my term paper for the course 160169 PS Grammatiktheorie und Struktur einer nichtindogermanischen Sprache (2025S): Introduction into Classical Chinese.

to philosophical understanding? Is there one thing, philosophy, or many particular cultural philosophies? Which cultural-philosophical traditions should we engage with? (Connolly 2022, 48)

Philosophy is imbued with a cultural, historical, regional context, i.e., a certain particularity, relationality that is not merely theoretical, or that is more than merely theoretical. Philosophy in this sense is considered in the context the theoretical work appears in or is generated by. ‘Culture’ is also more than the individual (such as the author or the reader) and more than a text, bigger in scale and in historical significance (Connolly 2022, 48). It is where historical significance manifests. Taking this greater context into consideration requires a different sort of engagement. “Making sense of other cultural-philosophical traditions means taking the time to understand why their members devoted large portions of their time and energy to concerns that seem less central to us.” (Connolly 2022, 48–49) From a philosophical perspective, it seems important to realise that the reasons for the different levels of devotion in the same or different concerns could be cultural, as well as theoretical. Can the cultural and the theoretical henceforth be kept apart? When philosophical comparison transgresses cultural lines of separation, are theoretical and cultural questions still distinct? While investigating a theory, one begins to ponder the other. However, what seems striking in another philosophical tradition also leads us to turn our gaze to something closer to home: “[T]he peculiarities of other traditions can also be an occasion for self-reflection.” (Connolly 2022, 49) The inclusion of the cultural-theoretical or cultural-philosophical dimension leads to pondering one’s own philosophy as rooted in tradition, culture, history, region, etc.

Comparing in this context is furthermore difficult because questions of knowledge and knowability (what is each side talking about?), question of translation and translatability, and questions of evaluation, (partial) understanding, practicality (by which standards, concepts should we analyse and judge?) arise (Connolly 2022, 2–3). Investigating across the lines of separation, a kind of back-and-forth between differences and similarities starts: “comparative philosophy is about finding ‘similarities in differences and differences in similarities.’” (Connolly 2022, 38) In the play of similarities and differences between separated cultural-philosophical traditions, what is the goal of the comparison? What follows from it? How to react to the uncovered similarities and differences? Should the reaction be an attempt at reconciliation, minimal agreement, or letting them be? Generally, the aim should be to “enable productive interaction” (Connolly 2022, 3)—but how? As Connolly points out, the question of ‘how?’ is important here.

Without some prior reflection on the methodology involved in extending philosophy across the vast linguistic, cultural, and historical gaps involved in the subject, comparison may do little more than reinforce one's prior ways of thinking. (Connolly 2022, 5)

Circumnavigating self-reinforcement needs to be worked on. The ability to compare is not a given and cannot be presupposed. It is a skill that has to be cultivated, a "result of prior reflection and practice" (Connolly 2022, 5). Connolly strikes an encouraging tone: "Working through the basics of comparison can help us to develop the virtues of thought necessary to understand other cultures' philosophical traditions, and to navigate an increasingly diverse world." (Connolly 2022, 5) This quote contains a few different points worth elaborating. Let us start with the 'basics'.

2.2.1 The Basics

Connolly identifies two distinct ways of comparing: the *descriptive* way and the *evaluative* way. The former deals with describing similarities and differences between the things compared, while the latter is concerned with evaluating them in relation to each other (Connolly 2022, 30).

Connolly separates three purposes, or dimensions, of comparative philosophy. The first two are the *interpretive* and *constructive* dimensions, and the third, which comes somewhat later in the development of the discipline of comparative philosophy (Connolly 2022, 33), is the *methodological* dimension. The point of the interpretive dimension is "using terms, ideas, or concepts from one philosophical tradition to help *understand* or *interpret* another philosophical tradition", whereas the constructive dimension is about "seeking to *advance* or *develop* philosophy through cross-tradition engagement" (Connolly 2022, 31). The methodological dimension is comparative philosophy's intention "to *reflect* on the nature of comparison itself, where the primary focus is the development of a philosophic account of what comparison is and how it is best carried out" (Connolly 2022, 33). As Connolly states, methodological reflection is needed to avoid failing to meaningfully engage (Connolly 2022, 33). Furthermore, in my view, neglecting to tap into the constructive dimension means missing out on the theoretical potential of comparative work in philosophy. If considered in light of *their own* philosophical merits, engaging with theories and ways of thinking new and different to one's own can make philosophy develop and progress. Society advances through comparing experiences and expectations; philosophy advances through comparing ways of thinking and arguing. But to achieve this, the constructive and methodological dimension are needed, too.

2.2.2 Navigating a Diversifying World

This brings us to a subsequent point. For Connolly, developing and refining comparative philosophy, as well as learning to compare, are ever more important skills in the modern world. However, I want to make the following point: Even if we emphasise the importance of comparison in navigating today's global issues—as Connolly does—we do not ‘comparingly’ navigate. We navigate with our “virtues of thought” (Connolly 2022, 5), and we draw on our notions and morals. Comparing is not a way of navigating the world. But *by working through the basics of comparison*, we work on the conditions on which learning to navigate differently are based. Openness and curiosity are prerequisites for travel through these choppy waters. We learn to take account of issues of knowability, fairness and objectivity, how to deal with similarities and differences—these are crucial points of human and ecological socialisation, pressure points for our morals and notions. Yes, we must perpetually compare, but there must be something more so that our notions and morals, optimistically speaking, remain fit for purpose and, practically speaking, may become suitable to a diversifying world's dynamic of change. It is my wish to say that this change must be thought not merely as a change in the theoretical field, a change in the discourse, but rather to include the individual doing (comparative) philosophy. Though I cannot find Connolly making this point explicitly, in my opinion it is there in the value he puts in an open attitude, practicing and improving one's comparing, self-reflection and meaningful engagement that consciously seeks to go against self-reinforcement. The change Connolly wishes to see in the theory and in the world has a lot to do with the individual.

Apart from its progressive potential, Connolly also attests comparing general philosophical value. In a way, there is a philosophical absolutism to ‘comparing’ when Connolly claims: “Learning any philosophy at all means learning to make comparative judgments.” (Connolly 2022, 25) Comparing in an informed or educated manner is therefore part of all philosophising. The counterquestion to this would be: is comparing even philosophical?

“Comparative philosophy is philosophy,” Wilhelm Halbfass writes, “insofar as it aims at self-understanding. It has to be ready to bring its own standpoint, and the conditions and the horizon of comparison itself, into the process of comparison which thus assumes the reflexive, self-referring dimension which constitutes philosophy.” [...] The reflective dimension also matters because comparative philosophy is a discipline in transition. As a well-known comparativist once quipped, “comparative philosophy has a dubious past, a very bright present, and, hopefully, no future.” (Connolly 2022, 33)

Is all of philosophy comparing or is comparing philosophical at all? Whatever the case may be, the comparison is not everything. If that means philosophy may be temporarily comparative and ‘cashes out’ when it becomes redundant, then it is not just the general situation, including the individual, theory and the world, that has significantly changed but also ‘philosophy’. After all, comparing appears as an agent of change. In this understanding, there is nothing static about any of the involved parties. The question of the static relation in comparative philosophy will be further discussed below.

Comparative philosophy is a “discipline in transition” and the discipline of transitioning to an unbound, global philosophy. It simultaneously points beyond itself and works towards getting rid of itself. It is what it hopes for. Comparative philosophy aims beyond itself and abolishes itself. It anticipates a future where all cultural-philosophical traditions are equally considered, by cross-culturally comparing ahead of time. At the same time not quite the relic of an age where philosophy was narrower in cultural scope, nor the quite auspicious sign of a philosophy without cultural borders. It is a trace of a future that is not yet here, an open prophecy of a past that has been completed. In terms of the history of philosophy, however, it marks the beginning of a new tradition; it is the inauguration of a different future. Comparative philosophy is not itself a cultural-philosophical tradition, but its arrival rings in a new era in any comparable cultural-philosophical tradition. Thus, comparative philosophy may be seen as a ‘liminal phenomenon’ in the history and future of philosophy. The question I want to carry over into the subsequent section is this: Is it really, as the last quote seems to say, ‘reflection’ that can determine and achieve all this?

Connolly sees the discussion about the merits of comparative philosophy in general, or his book in particular, in the context of enabling a better foundation for intercultural philosophising. “I hope the discussion in its entirety will convince readers that thinking about the process of comparison will make our own attempts at cross-cultural philosophy better founded.” (Connolly 2022, 34) I claim that comparative philosophy is here a kind of *Hilfswissenschaft*. It is nevertheless a help we should not want to do without. However, what makes comparative philosophy a challenge is that which makes, or previously made, cross-cultural philosophy un-founded or built on an unwanted basis, on a certain inertia: “How do we ‘shift’ that which forms the very basis of how we see the world? And if philosophical foundations are peculiar to their traditions rather than features of the human condition, by what means can different cultural-philosophical traditions engage in meaningful dialogue?” (Connolly 2022, 41) These are questions that I will address with Karen Barad’s ideas contained in the theory of agential realism.

2.2.3 Resume

Comparative is not only about reflecting one's own unquestioned biases—a claim made below—but has increasingly found a consciousness for the role of methodology in this reflecting: “Reflection on the problems that arise in making cross-cultural comparisons has become an increasingly visible component of the field of comparative philosophy. Often, minor methodological mistakes can result in vast misunderstanding.” (Connolly 2022, 4) The goal is to end up with productive “qualitative judgments” (Connolly 2022, 4). I am suggesting—by way of a reading of Barad—a way of approaching this holistically. I will try to find a way to account for questions regarding the goals of the endeavour, biases and the possibility of objectivity. What makes “qualitative judgments” ‘qualitative’ may be something similar. What is the measure of its quality? Following Barad, this should be nothing else but the reconfiguring of the world in which these judgments happen. Judgments are something of the world, and their quality may be judged by the reconfigurings partaken in. Furthermore, Barad's opinion of reflection is in tension to the expectation Connolly has of it, an expectation comparative philosophy greatly depends on in his description. This will be another important topic in the following. However, before comparative philosophy undergoes a Baradian reading, I will briefly anchor next to two approaches to intercultural philosophy/philosophising which see themselves as alternatives or answers to comparative philosophy. This will hopefully serve the twofold purpose of deepening the understanding of what sets the comparative philosophical method apart and outlining a critical perspective on it.

2.3 Two Alternatives: Integrative Philosophy and *interkulturelle Philosophie*

In their book *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy*, Ma Lin and Jaap van Brakel see “intercultural philosophy” as an umbrella term (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 1) under which, among others, comparative philosophy, world philosophy and *interkulturelle Philosophie* are subsumed. I want to take up one instance of global philosophy, the “integrative” approach of Robert E. Allinson and also “interkulturelle Philosophie.” The reasons for this are different. On the one hand, Allinson's text contains a (withering) critique of the comparative paradigm. I will give consideration to some of these arguments. On the other hand, Allinson mentions Niels Bohr, and uses him to lend plausibility to his own ‘integrative’ intercultural approach. According to Allinson, Niels Bohr's concept of complementarity was inspired by his reading of Chinese philosophy. Since I am using a Bohr-inspired theory, namely Barad's philosophy-physics, to

develop a perspective on comparative philosophy, i.e., a way of intercultural philosophising, the devotion of some time to a supposed interculturality at a central point of Bohr's thought seems fitting.

In Ma and van Brakel's discussion of "*interkulturelle Philosophie*", I want to shine a light on the issues of this approach that are understandable in the context of Barad's critique of "reflection." In short, as I will argue, "*interkulturelle Philosophie*" seems to have a problem of reflection. I will then introduce Franz Martin Wimmer's intercultural approach and how it relates to comparative philosophy.

2.3.1 Allinson's Integrative Approach: 'Complementarity' Intercultural?

Robert E. Allinson advocates what he calls "integrative philosophy" as the way forward (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 195). Allinson assumes that there is a universal methodology and draws on Western as well as Chinese influences "as if they are working within one and the same research paradigm" (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 196). There is a reliance on "superficial similarities" but the grand differences are unaccounted for, passing over questions such as translatability; there are two sides that are integrated to form a complementary whole (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 196). By way of illustration, as well as to make his claims plausible, Allinson brings up the case of Niels Bohr. Before Bohr came up with his famous concept of "complementarity", he was sent a manuscript of Chinese philosophy, and according to Allinson, this manuscript played a crucial role in the development of "complementarity." (Allinson 1998, 505)

His [Niels Bohr] metaphor of complementarity is the expression of the basic principle of *Yin-Yang* philosophy. If a metaphor taken from Chinese philosophy may be of great explanatory power in the world of physics, may it not be all the more possible that the same metaphor may possess great explanatory power in the world of philosophy? This might represent a case in which a regulative principle of physics can be utilized as a regulative principle of philosophy. (Allinson 1998, 507)

What Allinson is getting at is a "notion of how to apply the principle of complementarity to East-West 'comparative philosophy', or what is better termed 'integrative philosophy'" (Allinson 1998, 510). He sees a coexistence of "Eastern and Western views" in the universe (Allinson 1998, 506). For Allinson, what Bohr's supposed Chinese influence proves is the intelligibility of Chinese philosophy for the Westerner (Allinson 1998, 505–506). This mutual intelligibility is an important precondition for the 'integrative' paradigm. Without this intelligibility, the universality of mind at

the basis of the “universal methodology” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 195) becomes dubious. Furthermore, would it then make sense to ‘integrate’ even if—which would also be doubtful—it were possible to ‘integrate’? What excites Allinson about the example of Bohr is that “Not only was Chinese philosophy intelligible to the great Jewish physicist, Niels Bohr, but he was able to apply its insights to break new ground in the archetype of Western thinking, the science of physics.” (Allinson 1998, 506) Intelligibility is established, but what makes this promising for a philosophical project is the idea of one side’s applicability to and relevance for the other side. In their integrated state they form a “more complete union”; while seeing them as in a relation of complementarity emphasises a productive, additive co-existence (Allinson 1998, 510).

In Allinson’s treatment of Bohr, there are two things going on. First, the Chinese influence on Bohr is meant to show the intelligibility of Chinese philosophy for a Western scientist like Bohr. This is necessary for the integrative approach to work. Second, Allinson uses the very idea Bohr interculturally developed as the metaphor or model for the approach (‘integrative philosophy’, ‘complementary philosophy’) that made the development of ‘complementarity’ possible in the first instance: “Chinese philosophy can play a marvellous role for integrative philosophy in the world today by offering a principle of integration, the complementarity principle.” (Allinson 1998, 515) Because integration across the East-West divide is possible in principle, which is something that Bohr and the success of his Chinese inspired physics supposedly proves, the concept of “complementarity” could be developed in the way it appears in Bohr’s thought. At the same time, this very concept (complementarity) contains—or *is*—the principle of the specific movement of thought that it resulted from.

Thus, from the intercultural genealogy of complementarity through its role as a metaphor or model for a philosophical approach, Allinson creates a counterpoint to the ‘comparative’ method. Needless to say, according to Allinson the two sides of the ‘comparison’ neither form a complete union nor do they mutually beneficially exist like integrated complements do.

[T]he label “comparative philosophy” is a creaky old description that needs to be abandoned, summoning up, as it does, the picture of two static, ahistorical images existing side by side which are passively compared and contrasted with each other. (Allinson 1998, 510)

Interestingly, it is not merely the lack of harmony that is the reason for comparisons redundancy. The mention of “passively” comparing points to a not to be discounted role of the philosopher who is doing the intercultural investigating.

The model of “comparative philosophy” suggests a static witness role for the philosopher who stands on the sidelines and comments, as a neutral journalist or television newscaster, on the merits and demerits of Eastern and Western mentalities. Under this static model, the concept of “understanding” is reduced to the concept of tolerance. (Allinson 1998, 511)

A philosopher should not be merely a witness, a journalist or a news presenter. But this is the role a philosopher plays when they do not integrate in the context of “the constant and continuous need to bring both philosophies into play and into harmony with each other” (Allinson 1998, 510). The philosopher must involve themselves, pro-actively immerse themselves (Allinson 1998, 512) to be able to philosophically react to the “co-temporary moment” or the “co-temporary condition” (Allinson 1998, 510): it is “philosophical antiquarians who relish the thought of comparing and contrasting viewpoints for the pleasure of viewing them in their pristine display cases side by side as they observe them untouched, in the intellectual museum in which they are housed”. (Allinson 1998, 514) Allinson thus puts great store by the role the philosopher plays in the intercultural philosophical encounter. However, in addition to the philosopher’s role, Allinson also considers the effect their philosophising has on them: “[The antiquarians; M.O.] remain untouched by the viewpoints which they have safely ensconced in their locked show cases. What assistance is such an idle viewing activity to either the philosopher, the cause of philosophy, or the world?” (Allinson 1998, 514) In intercultural philosophy, the complementarity principle is needed to avoid the confrontational Either/Or, a “conflict model” (Allinson 1998, 515).

With his emphasis on the role of the philosopher and the mutual interference of philosopher and philosophy, as well as the locating of this dynamic in the becoming of the world, Allinson raises issues that Barad also mentions. How Barad’s ideas relate to the comparative method will be elaborated below. Apart from this overlapping between Barad and Allinson, Allinson’s ideas of integration and complementarity are the second relevant point for the subject of this thesis. Is Bohr’s intercultural influence a sign of intercultural credentials of the Bohr-inspired philosophy-physics of Barad? Is the use of a Bohr-Barad perspective on comparative philosophy already legitimised by Bohr’s supposed intercultural thought? Interestingly, Barad never speaks of Bohr’s Chinese influence. Barad primarily discusses Bohr’s complementarity principle in contrast to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, to which it is an answer or an alternative (MH, 115). Though for

Allinson it is clear that for Bohr Chinese philosophy was “either instrumental or decisive for his complementarity principle in physics” (Allinson 1998, 505), and Lee Keekok (2017) agrees with this view, Brakel and Lin call Allinson’s argument “freewheeling” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 196). Brakel and Lin further try to discredit Allinson’s claim by disputing the relevance of the principle of complementarity to Quantum physics, by pointing to the fact there is allegedly no one single formulation of this principle and by claiming that, in any case, “the mysteries of quantum mechanics are irrelevant for the matter at hand [ways of intercultural philosophy; M.O.]” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 197). Regardless of whether the arguments of this attempted discrediting hold sway or not, there is no plausible let alone conclusive evidence Allinson presents for this claim apart from the fact that Bohr was given the manuscripts before he developed the concept of complementarity and its supposedly obvious similarity to Yin-Yang (Allinson 1998, 505). The director of the Bohr Archive, Finn Aeserud, cites Professor Ge Ge, the translator of Bohr’s complete works into Chinese, as saying that there is no evidence of a connection (Aeserud 2015, 72). I will not attempt to resolve this disagreement. It is worth pondering, though, what opinion Barad might have on this matter. Maybe there is a similarity to Barad what criticises about Michael Frayn in the introduction to *Meeting the Universe Halfway*: is the analogy of Yin-Yang with complementarity comparable to Frayn’s analogy between the uncertainty of mental states with physical particles? Or is the thinking-together of Yin-Yang and complementarity compatible with in/separability of the physical and the mental? Perhaps the separation of Yin-Yang and quantum physics should not be taken for granted but is rather enacted. I will refrain from speculating about what Barad might say on this matter. Should Barad ever speak on this, it would be worth revisiting and looking in depth at the question of Bohr’s potential intercultural credentials.

2.3.2 Interkulturelle Philosophie: Beyond the Comparison

The scholars of the German-speaking world who established *interkulturelle Philosophie* also went against a perceived static relationality in the intercultural encounter. They “attach more importance to the dynamic interaction between different traditions” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 187). The dialogical approach of *interkulturelle Philosophie* is meant to enable one to learn “something from the other that one cannot learn from oneself” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 189). However, when in the course of a philosophical dialogue/dialogical philosophy the interlocutor-tradition, i.e., the tradition that is not one’s own, is presented from *one’s own perspective* the dialogue collapses and turns into a monologue (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 189). (The charge of monologism is also levelled at comparative philosophy [Connolly 2022, 17]). Perhaps we could see this dialogue-cum-monologue as reflexive in nature. One mirrors the same into another tradition, and nothing new is seen (Haraway, Barad).

While Ma and van Brakel call *interkulturelle Philosophie* an attitude, Franz Martin Wimmers calls it an orientation, or a direction, of philosophy. Ma, van Brakel and Wimmer all hold that comparative philosophy, on the contrary, is a ‘discipline’ (Wimmer 2009, 305; Ma/van Brakel 2016, 187). Furthermore, *interkulturelle Philosophie* and comparative philosophy have different intentions in the context of contemporary philosophy, though they share a goal: Comparative Philosophy is interested in the history of philosophy, while intercultural philosophy, or interculturally oriented philosophy (*interkulturell orientierte Philosophie*), addresses “an intention of systematic philosophising” (*eine Intention systematischen Philosophierens*); the shared goal is to replace the European history of philosophy claiming to be global with the global history of philosophy. However, the meaning of this goal for both projects is not the same. For comparative philosophy the global history of philosophy is its main charge, but for intercultural philosophy it is an essential requirement (*wesentliche Voraussetzung*) (Wimmer 2009, 306–307). Wimmer sees the need to go beyond comparing and revising the canon, which works on the basis of integrating several philosophical traditions (Wimmer 2009, 306). Nevertheless, might the mode of engagement Wimmer is content with for his idea of philosophy/philosophising fall somewhat behind comparative philosophy’s dedication?⁵ Comparative philosophy puts great emphasis on the value of philological engagement, and Allinson mentions the necessity of immersing oneself (Allinson 1998, 512). However, I think it would be overly hasty to be dismissive of comparative philosophy on the

5 “Aus den unterschiedlichen Zielsetzungen und Gegenständen ergeben sich auch unterschiedliche Qualitätsprofile: Gilt für komparative Philosophie, dass historiographische und philologische Kompetenz hinsichtlich der jeweils zu vergleichenden Traditionen unverzichtbar ist, weil eben die zu vergleichenden Texte und Traditionen in ihrem Originalzusammenhang und –wortlaut verstanden und interpretiert werden sollen, so gilt das nicht für Philosophie im Allgemeinen, auch dann nicht, wenn sie in interkultureller Orientierung betrieben wird.” (Wimmer 2009, 309)

back of a certain philological emphasis. In a sense, the difference is due to a mere difference in expectations in philosophy. Wimmer himself states as much. For Wimmer, philosophy is truly global. Comparative philosophy is historically location-specific and not radically global. However, Wimmer notes that this represents an inherent limitation. In the “global interactions of philosophical traditions,” geographical and cultural privilege should be counteracted. In my understanding, Wimmer aims at a form of philosophising that is not, or no longer, shaped by geographical polarity, but is also capable of undermining such prioritisations, regardless of where and in what form they occur. A second limitation of comparative philosophy is historical-philological specialisation. While comparative philosophy is to be understood as a historical discipline, intercultural philosophy has a systematic claim. Furthermore, it aims to be philosophy in a *comprehensive* sense (Philosophie in einem *umfassenden* Sinn), “[sie] will also auch ontologische, epistemologische, logische oder ethisch- bzw. ästhetisch-normative neben philosophiehistorischen Projekten *orientieren*” (Wimmer 2009, 308; my emphasis). Wimmer seems to make an internal differentiation within philosophy. Philosophy is not just the study of the history of philosophy. Philosophy has the potential to do more than reflect on philosophical problems, be they ontological, epistemological, logical, ethical, aesthetic, etc. In the last Wimmer quote, this potential to do more is indicated not just by the semantics of the verb “orientieren” but also in its grammar. The grammar of the verb “*orientieren*” in this quotation is remarkable and indicates a direction. The peculiar use of “orientieren” is *not reflexive* and does not presuppose what it is that philosophical projects will be oriented *towards* in this “*comprehensive* philosophy.” Where the different and diverse philosophical projects will end up is *not pre-determined* by intercultural philosophy. In Wimmer’s grammar, philosophy is *going places*, but it is open about the destination; it shows an “open attitude toward the result of dialogue” (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 188–189).

This ‘will to orienting’ is in connection to what Wimmer sees as one of the essential tasks of intercultural philosophy:

Es ist eine der wesentlichen Aufgabenstellungen interkultureller Philosophie, Methoden zu entwickeln, um die aus differenten kulturellen Hintergründen stammenden Denkweisen in ein gegenseitig weiterführendes Gespräch zu bringen. Ich habe für den Idealfall solcher Gespräche das Modell des ‘Polylogs’ vorgeschlagen; andere sprechen von ‘Dialogen’.
(Wimmer 2004, 19)

For *interkulturelle Philosophie* which is an attitude, an orientation, a direction of philosophy as a *comprehensive* philosophy, orienting is not merely thematic or topical but a methodological

mission. However, comparative philosophy also has a methodological mission. According to Wimmer, what we learn from comparative philosophy is like a preliminary stage, a foundation of knowledge on which we can build. This knowledge is necessary, but as Wimmer emphasises, we must go beyond it—towards comprehensive philosophising which can only be global. Nevertheless, unlike his colleagues, he refrains from bad-mouthing comparative philosophy on this basis in what they (inaccurately) call a “*Methodenstreit*” (Wimmer 2009). Wimmer has in mind a philosophy that is unbounded in two respects. On the one hand, the integration of only certain cultural traditions as a guiding principle for the globalisation of philosophy should be replaced by truly global polylogical—and not merely dialogical—philosophising, even where this (selective) guiding principle is informed by professional expertise. On the other hand, philosophy/philosophising should be realized as something that can itself set directions.

2.4 The Self-Understanding of Comparative Philosophy⁶

While some of the positives and negatives, powers and pitfalls of comparative philosophy have been touched upon in Tim Connolly’s description of it, as well as in the context of how it relates to two alternative approaches (integrative and *interkulturell*), I will now attempt to further the understanding of it and turn to how comparative philosophy relates to itself. Some themes of this section have been touched upon by Connolly’s comprehensive portrayal. Nevertheless, I want to draw on two encyclopedia entries, one from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and one from the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, to dig a little deeper.

In my thesis, these two entries figure as a sort of ‘self-understanding’ of comparative philosophy. While Connolly critically engages with a vast amount of literature in his description of the method, leading to a complex and differentiated picture of what it means to do philosophy comparatively, these entries speak perhaps more candidly, more frankly, naturally; they speak their own mind: the voice of comparative philosophy. This is not to say that Connolly’s work is not representative of the comparative approach. On the contrary, I think his book can be safely classified as falling within the ‘methodological’ purpose he sees as a relatively recent development within comparative philosophy, while also delivering a differentiated portrayal. Nevertheless, Connolly’s writing is hardly programmatic. The following to encyclopedia entries, however, offer a different point of access.

6 Some of the ideas of this section were first developed in my talk at the 2025 graduate student conference „Roots and Branches: Chinese Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy and Beyond“ at East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.

In the end, the point will be to show that comparative philosophy has high expectations of itself. And there is a tension between its expectations and *how* it considers them achievable, between the aim and the way of realising it. Even though comparative philosophy does not exactly fail to live up to its high expectations—or rather, despite this tension must not necessarily fail—it cannot but look beyond itself. It will hopefully become apparent that comparative philosophy looks at itself and looks beyond itself.

2.4.1 Common Errors

The first of the two quotes I will more closely look at in this section pertains to common errors that appear when doing philosophy comparatively. The list should not be taken as final; Connolly mentions errors that to some degree overlap, while also diverging in other respects. Whatever the case may be about which errors and to what extent they present problems to the theoretical endeavour, the eye-catching aspect of this quote is that it seems to suggest a way these errors can be not just corrected but perhaps *eradicated*.

Oversimplifications, excessively stark contrasts, and illicit assimilations count as the most frequent sins. One benefit of comparative philosophy lies in the way that it forces reflection on the most deeply entrenched and otherwise unquestioned agendas and assumptions of one's own tradition. (SEP)

What exactly each of these errors, or “sins”, look like and what is to be understood by ‘agenda’ and ‘assumption’ will have to be left vague here. What I want to look into is the fact that comparative philosophy relates to its own errors, and the way it does so. It seems to be claimed in this quote that comparative philosophy offers a distinct benefit: In comparative philosophy is always implicated a reflection on one's cultural-traditional-philosophical pretensions. Let us assume that oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation do stem from ‘unquestioned agendas and assumptions’. Whether this is true or not for *these* three specific issues, it is out of the question that agendas and basic assumptions of thinking, wherever it occurs, will lead to what from a logical or methodological perspective may be understood (by some) as errors. This becomes particularly relevant when the agendas and assumptions are *unquestioned* and the encounter is *across cultural boundaries*. It can then be surmised that there is an inbuilt mechanism in the workings of comparative philosophy that counteracts errors, or is in principle meant to and capable of doing so (if it were always successful, no errors would ever appear). The first point I thus want to make is that there emerges a certain picture of comparative philosophy being conscious and taking account of frequent problems coming from its methodological specifics. The second is that the way

of becoming conscious of and taking account of those ‘common errors’ is by *reflection*.

Furthermore, the hope seems to be that reflection can do more than merely correct these errors. By addressing the root of where they come from, it might be able to get rid of them at the source (eradicate in the etymological sense). However, if we think of Barad’s critique of reflection, can we still trust reflection to do this? Is reflection the adequate means to an undoubtedly worthwhile end? Is reflection capable of what is expected of it here by comparative philosophy?

It seems worth explicating what exactly reflection encompasses here: the logical, the methodological, but also the ethical(!). Since the three stated errors are situated in the context of tradition-specific agendas and assumptions, they are seen not merely as an issue of logic. Due to the intercultural nature of oversimplification (oversimplifying a culture’s tradition), excessive contrasting (exaggerating points of difference to another tradition) and illicit assimilation (aligning one with another) and due to the fact that comparative philosophy is an approach that cuts across cultural-philosophical traditions, the three errors are also methodologically relevant and problematic. Furthermore, because of the involvement, in a specific way, of cultures—and not just ‘disembodied’, ahistorical, abstracted and decontextualised theories—ethical questions are thrown up. The use here of the word “sins” where the less charged ‘errors’ would also have done is striking. I will stick with the more neutral term. However, whether this is part of the intended meaning or not, ‘sins’ does carry stronger connotations of a moral foundation for the imperfections observed. And this moral dimension is something not outside comparative philosophy’s (logical, methodological, ethical) remit. Though oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation may more accurately be described as ‘errors’, the reflection on what they stem from is not merely methodological, but also ethically important. There seems to be an assumption of something like an ‘attitude’ that leads to specific errors when doing comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophy is also invested in addressing this attitude, as will become clear in the second encyclopedia entry.

In summary, comparative philosophy relates to the inherent proneness to error of the inter-cultural philosophical encounter and claims to contain the conceptual-methodological-philosophical capability of dealing not just with the errors as they appear but with what their tendency to appear is rooted in. This relation and this conceptual-methodological-philosophical redress is represented by ‘reflection’.

2.4.2 “The Promise of Comparative Philosophy”

The second of the programmatic quotes that figure here as the voice of comparative philosophy expresses what I will call the ‘promise’ of comparative philosophy. It bears witness to a great hope placed in comparative philosophy, of great confidence in its potential. In my view, it is possible to read this potential as building on comparative philosophy’s ‘reflective’ properties. Comparative philosophy is more than a synthetic project of theory combination or optimisation, it is *creative*:

Properly speaking, comparative philosophy does not lead toward the creation of a synthesis of philosophical traditions (as in world philosophy). What is being created is not a new theory but a different sort of philosopher. The goal of comparative philosophy is learning a new language, a new way of talking. The comparative philosopher does not so much inhabit both of the standpoints represented by the traditions from which he [or she] draws as he [or she] comes to inhabit an emerging standpoint different from them all and which is thereby creatively a new way of seeing the human condition. (IEP)

The scope of the change envisioned is remarkable. As is apparent, comparative philosophy promises to achieve much more than merely comparing. The comparison, this radical intercultural philosophical encounter, aims at nothing less than a change in language, personal context and perspective, which may be considered among the most important factors informing philosophising. It needs emphasising that we are talking about a new and different species of philosopher. In fact, in the grammar used in this quote this aim is already being realised. As with the question regarding reflection in the context of the previous quote: is the comparison capable of doing this? How is a new language, a new standpoint that is neither of the ones compared, a new perspective on the human condition and a new type of philosopher thought to emerge from the practice of philosophically comparing two (or more) culturally-philosophically distinct theories?

To be clear, I am not doubting comparative philosophy’s power to achieve all it promises; nor am I doubting its potential to eradicate the errors of a teething inter-cultural philosophy. I take the view here that comparative philosophy has achieved a great deal and has proved itself, as a theory but also as an agent of change which is showing itself to be logically, methodologically and also ethically significant. The question I want to investigate pertains precisely to its achievements: how has it been able to do this? Why has this worked when the creating of a new language, a new way of relating to the human condition and a new type of philosopher is decidedly not a *comparative* act?

How have the ethics of the intercultural philosophical encounter improved when *reflectively* pondering one's *own* tradition is claimed to make all the difference?

In my view there is a tension between what comparative philosophy aims to achieve, and has managed to accomplish, and the ways it has set out and continues to set out to do so. There is a paradox here. The central portents of comparative philosophy (its 'promise' and the eradicating of specific characteristic errors) are not really comparative at all. Furthermore, the way of improving the accounting for difference is figured in a metaphor of sameness and self-identity. This paradox raises fundamental questions about what we call 'comparative philosophy': Is it a misnomer? Is comparative philosophy, at heart, even comparative? What is the true role of comparing in comparative philosophy? May it be no more than the means to an end? Furthermore, is comparative philosophy best seen as a theoretical endeavour? The philosophical discipline of comparative philosophy explicitly sets out to effect fundamental change of what shapes philosophising. But it therefore in no uncertain terms aims to change the world.

In the following section, I will draw on Karen Barad's agential realism to address these questions and account for comparative philosophy's potential for change.

2.5 An Agential Realist Account Of Comparative Philosophy

2.5.1 A Puzzling Success Story

As radical and wide-ranging as the change effected by the creation of a new language, a new perspective on the human condition and a new type of philosopher may seem at first, I claim comparative philosophy is actually changing the world. Of course, this sounds not a little ambitious and perhaps overly dramatic, but this claim should not be too hastily dismissed.

After all, there have hardly been more influential factors than language, the human condition and the way thought and practice are related in the development of the world we see today. Colonialism, modern capitalism, war and climate breakdown—these issues were already mentioned in this thesis in the context of Barad's philosophy-physics—are closely related to and, to differing degrees and in different ways, determined by the factors mentioned in the quote about the 'promise' of comparative philosophy. The 'promise of comparative philosophy' shows, and states, that comparative philosophy is about more than sound theories and correct judgements.

The way I want to approach this question is with Barad's theory of agential realism. Why? Since Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* was first published in 2008, it has found great resonance in a variety of different scholarly fields (see above). Agential realist interpretations, readings and re-

readings have led to different perspectives in many fields of research. The appeal of Barad's theory for my purposes lies in the remarks on 'reflection,' as well as in agential realism's account of the mattering of theoretical investigation, the entangled involvement of the subject with the object of investigation and terming them as reconfigurings of the world. With Barad, the claim that comparative philosophy is changing the world will be contextualised in a theoretical framework (agential realism) that conceptualises the reconfiguring of the world as related to the individual and material-discursive practices. I will draw on these aspects of Barad's thought to take a shot at answering the questions posed at the end of the preceding section: how has comparative philosophy been able to achieve its aims? Why has it worked when the creating of a new language, a new way of relating to the human condition and a new type of philosopher is decidedly not a *comparative* act? How have the ethics of the intercultural philosophical encounter improved when *reflectively* pondering one's *own* tradition is claimed to make all the difference? As mentioned, these questions are highly consequential for the (self-)understanding of comparative philosophy.

It will be explicated that comparative philosophy's 'promise' is actually for global change. At the same time, for this to work, the conceptual emphasis on the inclusion of the individual and its role in the world's reconfigurings is needed. It may be easily overlooked, but the quote about the 'promise of comparative philosophy' is first and foremost about a change that starts with the philosopher doing comparative philosophy: it is the comparative philosopher that learns the new language, develops a new way of talking; it is they that come to inhabit an as yet undeveloped standpoint; and it is they who are the first to count as this new type of philosopher (IEP). Thus, the comparative philosopher is not just an agent of change in the sense that they effect it as something outside themselves. Rather, they are also the place where this change takes place. (In agential realist terms, we are talking about intra-action within a phenomenon.) However, this is not to isolate the change and limit it to the personal or private realm. It is merely taking account of the dynamics of 'reflection' on one's own cultural-traditional positionality (SEP), which takes place *in the individual*. There is thus something interesting implied in the encyclopediae: improving theory is done by a change in the person engaging in theoretical practice. Barad has developed a conceptual framework that I want to show as being capable of accommodating this promising dynamic. The logical, methodological and ethical are entangled in comparative philosophy's remit of not just ironing out but eradicating specific errors by addressing the attitude that leads to them. "What is being created is not a new theory but a different sort of philosopher." (IEP) In this entanglement, the mattering of the theoretical workings must be accounted for. In my view, in what I have termed the programmatic expression of its self-understanding comparative philosophy thus appears as an

ethico-onto-epistemological project. The point I regard as crucial to make is that comparative philosophy *needs* to be regarded as such to understand, explain and account for its ‘promise’ and the fulfillment of the promise, its (very real) potential for change, and comparative philosophy’s reliance on the entanglement of matter and meaning.

In the following, the agential realist reading of comparative philosophy’s self-understanding will be elaborated. The role of ‘reflection’ will undergo a Baradian critique, and diffraction will be suggested as the more suitable metaphor and method when addressing the common errors of comparative philosophy. Furthermore, implications of the individual’s involvement and interference in the investigation will describe in more detail how change is possible. Barad’s thoughts on objectivity have a role to play in this. Finally, change and reconfiguring of the world are considered in the context of what it means for comparative philosophy.

2.5.2 On Reflection’s Role

As was discussed above, reflexivity is too caught up in dynamics of sameness to make the kind of difference comparative philosophy has in mind. Barad calls these regarding transformative potential limited dynamics ‘geometrical.’ Because of its ‘samey geometry,’ reflection is unsuited to the kind of intended transformation. It seeks to make a difference but cannot but figure difference on the basis of sameness. Reflection is supposed to be the built-in mechanism to counteract errors; and these errors are not merely logically significant but are just as much methodological and ethical problematics. The errors of oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation do not have the character of miscalculations but appear rather (also) as a question of character. Addressing the errors is thus not about retracing our steps (think here of ‘geometry’). When comparative philosophy “forces reflection on the most deeply entrenched and otherwise unquestioned agendas and assumptions of one’s own tradition” (SEP), we take a good hard look in the mirror, so to speak. But what is the mirror capable of? In my reading of Haraway and Barad, I called its capacity for faithfully copying the mirror’s ‘virtue.’ I found these three problems with the mirror’s virtue: first, being faithful in one’s readings, interpretations and engagement with the tradition—we are “forced” to ‘reflect’ on *tradition* after all (SEP)—is not necessarily the best course of action when seeking to make a difference; second, copies dilute the value of originality and authenticity, especially copies that strive to be most faithful; and third, the mirror needs to be set at a distance, and it requires the same ‘gap’ (MH, 81) representationalism needs and is thus (conceptually-metaphorically) disengaged and always one order removed from what it is thought to (at least help to) transform:

first and foremost the individual. Reflection is thus a self-engagement that inserts a distance, however large or small it may be, a gap, and by disengaging the individual from itself separates it from the only available medium that granted it access to the object of its engagement. This is precisely the opposite of the aim of scholarly reflexivity, namely, to “reflect on, and systematically take account of, the investigator’s role as an instrument in the constitution of evidence [...] as opposed to less-reflexive modes of investigation that leave the knower out of the equation” (MH, 86)—comparative philosophy’s aim is this when it proclaims the benefits of reflection. Therefore, if one attempts to achieve this aim with the metaphor and method of reflection, one disengages. Diffraction, as a “critical practice of engagement, not a distance-learning practice of reflecting from afar” (MH, 90) offers a way out of this conundrum.

2.5.3 Whose Error Is It Anyway?

Nevertheless, despite the emphasis on the individual here, it should not be lost sight of that the errors of oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation are actually *objective*. From Bohr and Barad’s philosophy-physics, we heard of the entanglement of the investigator and the object of investigation. As has been mentioned, for Bohr and Barad this was not saying goodbye to objectivity. Following Bohr and Barad, despite their ethical import and the methodological implicatedness of oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation may be understood as names for *objectively* wrong judgements. According to agential realism, all investigation works by way of exclusion and is objective only ever in relation to the apparatus that enacts the exclusion/cut. The question what kind of individual, what sort of investigator, what type of subject, in short, *who* is part of the investigative apparatus is central to the objective results one ends up with. Intra-action between investigator and object of investigation is decisive here. Therefore, for the results shaped by these three errors to be *objectively erroneous*, it must be due to the matter of ‘*who*’. Who is the subject of the intra-action of investigator and object of investigation in cases of oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation? It is none other than the comparative philosopher. In this context, it is interesting *how* the comparative philosopher is structurally cast. The comparative philosopher remains both still to fully develop in the “being created of the new type of philosopher”, in their learning a new language, etc., and is already efficacious in the attested evaluation of oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit assimilation as the errors which they appear as to the comparative philosopher. The comparative philosopher is thus anticipated and already making a difference. Far from retracing their steps, the comparative philosopher of the future already informs the discourse. Only from the perspective of the comparative philosopher-subject could oversimplification, excessive contrasting and illicit

assimilation even be identified as the errors they are. The issue, therefore, is one of description and conceptual understanding: it is not by ‘reflection’ that one engages with one’s own tradition’s unquestioned agendas and assumptions but by making a difference, interfering with different differences. In these terms, the question of how to effect a change from what one has theoretically-conceptually learned never even comes up. The engagement is material-discursive, and as a matter of *matter and meaning* it is never not transformative in its own terms, in *its* role in the world’s reconfiguring.

Additionally, the engagement is also—simultaneously due to the intra-active being-doing-becoming within the phenomenon—with the tradition that is not one’s own. Thus, the following point is valid in relation to the investigator subject.

A tradition is never a homogeneous and static totality, but internally heterogeneous, dynamic, and without sharp boundaries. Hence, a philosophical tradition is a historically heterogeneous entity subject to constant change. It should not be taken as a collection of fixed doctrines and teachings buried in scriptures and classics. Traditions (as well as languages and concepts) are (re)constituted as evolving events in history. (Ma/van Brakel 2016, 20)

It would be a simplification, or even from the perspective of agential realism inaccurate, to take a tradition as “a collection of fixed doctrines and teachings buried in scriptures and classics”. By a similar token, Allinson critically spoke of “antiquarians” (Allinson 1998, 514). The tradition is “subject to constant change” because of the involvement of the philosopher in interpreting the tradition’s texts. Allinson, too, with his integrative approach, had a genuine engagement in mind (Allinson 1998, 512).

Wimmer raises comparable points to these in the section about the differences between comparative philosophy and intercultural philosophy. One contrast between the two is drawn in the claim that the (comparative) objects of comparative philosophy are taken as given. (Wimmer 2009, 308). When comparative philosophy is construed as a historical discipline investigating historical, tradated texts, this seems obvious. However, from the perspective of agential realism two points may be raised. First, taking the objects of investigation, even when they are historical objects of comparison as independent of the subject investigating it, fails to take account of the intra-acting nature at the heart of the practice of investigating. Furthermore, it leaves unexplained why ancient texts should still be read today, why they still speak to us today across space and time, as well as why there are so many differing readings of one and the same textual object. Second, it leaves a great source of potential unexplored. The intra-active becoming of investigated object *and investigator* in the context of the

world's becoming opens the door to the prospective change comparative philosophy promises: in the person, perspective, language, type of philosopher, perspective *on* the *conditio humana*, as well as the *conditio humana* itself.

This involvement of the philosopher is, therefore, to be understood as one shaped by intra-action: the involvedly investigating philosopher and the object of his interest are differentially entangled in differential becoming. The object of one's investigation does not independently exist in exactly the form one finds it when one has a look. A tradition is never "homogeneous and static" because it is investigated. Agential realism uncovers that the wording in the quote with its referral to "events in history" is abstract and overly *impersonal*. A tradition (like languages and concepts) undergoes constant change because it is constantly being examined by different philosophers. Philosophers, in turn, change as they engage with different traditions.

2.5.4 Rolling Out The Red Carpet For Change

There is here also a reason why the old and oldest texts are still studied and worth studying today, why it is even possible to find ever new readings and interpretations that show different types of approaches that, though perhaps mutually excluding one another, are nonetheless all capable of simultaneously being objective. In an agential realist reading, studying philosophical texts *objectively is possible and meaningful* because of the *personal* participation of the philosopher and the transformative potential this entails for the text, for the tradition, for the individual and, last but not least, for the world in its reconfiguring. Comparative philosophy has a unique contribution to make in the philosophically meaningful project of mattering. It is important to account for the intra-active workings in which philosopher and tradition, person and object of interest are mutually constituted, in which they materially participate, in order to conceptually make room for and advance the potential for change. The conditions of possibility for objective and meaningful comparative philosophy are at stake, which are philosophically, conceptually-structurally promoted. Furthermore, the question of how to actually achieve the new type of philosopher never comes up. The engagement by way of the learning of a new language, informed by a new perspective on the human condition etc., has *already* transformed the (comparative) philosopher. The transformation is unavoidable in a material-discursive intra-active entanglement within a phenomenon where subject and object are mutually constituted.

There is thus a significant incompatibility between what comparative philosophy is trusted to do by way of the mirror's power of reflexivity, with what it actually delivers in the attempt to make a difference. In terms of difference and sameness, it seems inappropriate to expect a metaphor and

method in the tonal key of sameness to play out of tune. This is precisely why the understanding of difference matters. It is not the same difference as always but about a different conceptual-philosophical *sense* (or sensibility) for difference. This opens the door to a new kind of change. Haraway and Barad present a metaphor and method that does not start with sameness when it figures difference. Diffraction is “marked by patterns of difference” (MH, 71); it is a “metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world” (Haraway 1997, 16); we diffract to “get more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies” (Haraway 1997, 16). With diffraction, in contrast to reflection, there is no mystery where the difference is meant to come from. Replacing reflection with diffraction in the context of the eradication of those three common errors (and other characteristic errors besides) means turning from distance to engagement.

With what I have just elaborated, I in no way intend to say that I think the eradicating of the common errors discussed here or the development of a new type of philosopher does not work and that comparative philosophy is not successful in these stated aims. However, the concepts referred to in its programmatic declarations are misleading. In my understanding, comparative philosophy cannot, and in fact does not, rely on reflection and the comparison for all it wants to achieve. In the interpretation I have developed with significant input from Barad’s systematic theory of agential realism, comparative philosophy’s success is explained by its diffractive mode of engagement, contrary to the reflective stance it claims to have. Reflexivity is not the apt metaphor or method in a description of comparative philosophy’s material-discursive effect.

A second misleading use of a concept is comparative philosophy’s name. While some claim that comparative philosophy is not really philosophy (see Wimmer 2009), I both emphasise its value and at the same time point to its *noncomparative* ‘promise.’ What I have called the ‘promise’ of comparative philosophy may need genuinely comparative work for its realisation. However, it has a tendency towards something other than itself, something beyond the comparison: creation and innovation. However, if comparative philosophy were purely comparative, it is questionable how its (proven!) creative and innovative empowerment could ever develop. In the identifying and addressing of common errors, the comparative philosopher is anticipated. Is the creative and innovative capacity of comparative philosophy efficacious in the same temporal mode of anticipation? Despite its conceptual confusion and misleading name, if comparative philosophy is capable of simultaneously doing comparative work, working towards something beyond the comparison—some might say ‘greater’ than it (Wimmer 2009)—and anticipating and thereby already reaping the benefits of the arrival of this ‘beyond the comparison’, there is really something to behold. In that case, strangely, it does not do justice to itself in its own conceptual understanding

of itself, and nor does its name. We should not be fooled by this, as some defenders of alternative approaches to intercultural philosophy have been.

Comparative philosophy is thus a challenge. One way or another, it challenges philosophical traditions and effects remarkable change. Its contribution in this sense is immense. At the same time, it hides its own workings, the conceptual-philosophical secrets to its success. Is its arguably poorly chosen name and inadequately accounted for philosophical make-up a weakness? Possibly, it has made no difference. However, when viewed through the lens of agential realism, the scope of its philosophical content may show itself. It becomes discoverable that comparative philosophy can teach us much more besides comparing, and this discovery is conducive to change.

2.5.5 Reconfiguring and Flourishing

The new and different type of philosopher, the inhabiting of a new standpoint and the emergence of a new perspective on the human condition have material consequences for the reconfiguring of the world. A flourishing comparative philosophy, therefore, is not merely a set of correct theories and flawless conclusions entirely free of ‘sins’, though to be clear, this would also have a beneficial effect in the world’s becoming. As Connolly says,

even though all comparative philosophy is less-than-ideal, there are varying degrees in which it can fall short. While our image of another culture’s philosophy will inevitably be shaped by our own preconceptions, we can take steps to correct for this. These steps will never bring us to the ideal, but that is no objection to taking them. (Connolly 2022, 28)

Correcting will have positive effects, but comparative philosophy promises more. Measured against its promise, merely correcting would mean falling short. To be clear, correcting errors is a part of the benefit comparative philosophy can have; however, it is not everything. With Barad we can see that a flourishing comparative philosophy is part of the world’s reconfigurings, and can be so in a positive and transformative way. Practices of knowing make a difference and do ‘matter.’ Though comparative philosophy is not the only practice of knowing that matters in the world’s reconfiguring, it has its own unique contribution to make. How comparative philosophy is conducted has a great bearing on the ‘effects’ of differences that appear. Personally engaging can lead to promising and maybe even surprising results, lead to changes we did not expect and maybe thought were beyond the remit of comparative philosophy. In this sense, comparative philosophy may surprise you in its capacity for change. Though we may not yet know what the different kind of

philosopher will be like and what the new perspective will be, in their anticipation we get an advance of the benefit to come in the reconfiguring of the world.

Conclusion

The central question of this thesis was, how can the possibility of comparative philosophy's potential for effecting change be conceptually understood and sketched? I have gone about investigating this question by developing a differentiated understanding of comparative philosophy. To this end I have consulted the comprehensive description and investigation of comparative philosophy of Tim Connolly. Robert E. Allinson and Franz Martin Wimmer, with their critical perspectives and intercultural philosophical alternatives to comparative philosophy, offered a counterpoint to Connolly's advocacy. Finally, in two encyclopedia entries comparative philosophy spoke for itself. Following on from this, I made use of agential realist ideas to interpret some of the central emerging themes that seem to account for comparative philosophy's unique philosophical and transformative potential.

In the first half of this thesis, the agential realist ideas later used for a re-reading of comparative philosophy's (self-)understanding were developed. In my interpretation of Karen Barad's influential *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, I investigated some key aspects of their systematic thought. By drawing on Niels Bohr and Donna Haraway, especially, Barad created a novel philosophy-physics. The constitutive role of the investigator for the object's appearance, the conditions for the possibility of objectivity, the material-discursive nature of theory and the intra-active becoming of subject and object within a phenomenon all come from the entanglement of matter and meaning. In diffraction, Barad found a metaphor and method for making a difference and thinking difference starting from difference and not from sameness, as reflection does.

In the second half, the focus turned to comparative philosophy. The boundary transgressing philosophical project of comparative philosophy challenges one's way of thinking. It investigates across cultural-traditional boundaries. For comparative philosophy, a philosophical text is not exclusively an abstract object of theory but also tied to a cultural, historical, regional and linguistic context. This implicates this originally textual project in methodological and even ethical dimensions. Comparative philosophy is never merely logically oriented.

The philosophising across the boundary throws up specific questions that comparative philosophy grapples with: knowledge and knowability, translation and translatability, fairness of evaluation to name a few. For the idea for this kind of attempt to even cross the mind of a philosopher, a certain

curiosity is needed. Following this curiosity and proceeding further, learning and practicing one's comparative skills is claimed to be able to carry one a long way: there is a great potential for change and progress in challenging oneself with other ways of thinking. In my opinion, it is clear that comparative philosophy has proved successful in this regard. As I have tried to show, however, there are serious questions regarding this version of events. Why and how this success has come about is not straightforwardly answered. Time and again comparative philosophy explicitly relies on reflection for achieving some of its most important aims. But reflection is an inadequate name for the attempt to make a difference in the world. Reflection by being caught up in mirroring the same elsewhere cannot do what comparative philosophy expects of it. Furthermore, the innovative, creative and critical nature of comparative philosophy is unaccounted for in its name. As it turns out, its name is misleading since its most consequential successes are not accomplished by comparing at all.

In my suggestion for an agential realist interpretation of the method of comparative philosophy, I have sought to shine a light on these conceptual blind-spots and explain comparative philosophy's mystifying success. With the concept of diffraction and by accounting for the radical involvement of the individual in the comparative philosophical investigation, these blind-spots can be illuminated and the reasons for comparative philosophy's success explained. By drawing on such agential realist ideas as the material-discursive nature of investigative practices, the intra-active dynamics of the becoming of subject and object, the subject-relative nature of objectivity and the unity of matter and meaning, I have tried to develop an account of comparative philosophy conducive to its promise.

In the different though comparable iterations comparative philosophy appears in in Connolly's comprehensive and differentiated portrayal, Allinson's pointed critique of its mode of engagement and Wimmer's distinguishing it from systematically global orientations of philosophising, comparative philosophy has turned out to be a complex phenomenon. The agential realist interpretation I have suggested in this thesis is intended to add to this complexity. However, agential realism does not merely complicate matters in regard to comparative philosophy. Besides offering explanations for two central puzzles, it also opens the door to a new perspective on other crucial questions: the constellation of culture, individual and theory; the relationship of culture and philosophical tradition; and the appearance of sameness and difference, to name but a few. However, this is something I am only able to hint at this stage.

The complexity and paradoxical nature of comparative philosophy's methodology seems to have engendered two opposing positions: one defends the virtues of the comparison despite the limitations of the semantic field of 'to compare,' while the other dismisses it on precisely this basis

without appreciating comparative philosophy's obvious transformative power. I have sought to both acknowledge its material-discursive achievements and its inherent conceptual inadequacy. I have tried to present the philosophical limitations of its understanding as a degree of untapped potential. By accounting for its achievements in light of and despite its imperfections, a philosophical interpretation geared towards change may be a step towards a comparative philosophy unbound.

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Abstract

Obwohl „komparative Philosophie“ der Name für eine theoretische Disziplin der Philosophie ist, besteht eines ihrer zentralen Anliegen darin, Veränderungen sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb des theoretischen Diskurses zu bewirken. Neben dem Vergleich von Theorien über kulturphilosophische Grenzen hinweg und der Verteidigung der These, dass Philosophie nicht auf einen geografisch-kulturellen Raum beschränkt ist, geht es in der komparativen Philosophie auch darum, Einstellungen zu verändern und sogar eine neue Art von Philosoph*in zu schaffen. Obwohl die komparative Philosophie in dieser Hinsicht erfolgreich zu sein scheint, ist nicht sofort ersichtlich, wie dieser Erfolg konzeptionell erklärt oder beschrieben werden kann. Diese Arbeit schlägt einen Rahmen dafür vor.

Die in der komparativen Philosophie angestrebte Veränderung scheint über das hinauszugehen, was durch „Vergleichen“ erreicht werden kann. Darüber hinaus handelt es sich um eine Veränderung, die sich auf die Person oder auf Personen bezieht. Um die Funktionsweise der komparativen Philosophie zu erklären und zu beschreiben, schlage ich eine agentiell-realistische Lesart ihrer Methodik vor. Als konzeptionellen Rahmen nutze ich Karen Barads Philosophie-Physik. Einer der zentralen Punkte des agentiellen Realismus ist die Beteiligung des Individuums an der Untersuchung, d. h. die Untrennbarkeit von Untersucher*in und Untersuchungsgegenstand. Ein weiterer Punkt ist, dass Theorie nicht als von der Praxis getrennt, sondern als materiell-diskursiv angesehen wird. In der „Intra-Aktion“ von Subjekt und Objekt im Kontext einer theoretischen Untersuchung (wie der komparativen Philosophie) hat keines von beiden eine vorbestimmte Form, sondern wird vielmehr kontextspezifisch geprägt. Barad bietet somit eine Perspektive, die ich nutze, um das transformative Potenzial für das Philosoph*innen-Subjekt, das komparative Philosophie betreibt, zu konzeptualisieren. Ein weiterer Aspekt des üblichen Verständnisses von komparativer Philosophie ist, dass sie von Selbstreflexion und einer reflexiven Perspektive abhängig ist, um ihr transformatives Potenzial zu verwirklichen. Laut Barad ist Reflexion jedoch metaphorisch und methodologisch ungeeignet, um „einen Unterschied zu machen“, da ihr Bezugspunkt die Gleichheit ist. „Diffraktion“ ist eine Metapher und Methode, um einen Unterschied zu bewirken, der von einem Unterschied ausgeht.

Der erste Teil dieser Arbeit skizziert mein Verständnis von Karen Barads Theorie des agentiellen Realismus. Der zweite Teil beginnt mit einer Beschreibung der Methode der komparativen Philosophie, einer Verteidigung ihrer Vorzüge und einer kritischen Perspektive darauf. Schließlich werden Erkenntnisse und Konzepte aus der Diskussion des agentiellen Realismus und des Begriffs der Diffraktion auf das Verständnis der Methodik der komparativen Philosophie angewendet, um

diese neu zu interpretieren. Der konzeptuelle Rahmen des agentiellen Realismus stellt nicht nur eine Möglichkeit dar, die Wirkung der komparativen Philosophie zu beschreiben und zu erklären, sondern bietet möglicherweise auch eine Interpretation der komparativen Philosophie, die der von ihr angestrebten Veränderung förderlich ist.