

Generalisation and De-reification

BSHP

Cross-Cultural History of Philosophy in East Asia and Beyond

A British Society for the History of Philosophy Online Workshop

November 20, 2026, at 09:00 UK (GMT) | 17:00 China (CST) | 20:00 Sydney (AEDT) | 04:00 Toronto / Montreal (EST)

Principal organiser: Xingding Liu (BSHP Ambassador)

Historians of philosophy face a significant methodological tension: they must generalise across historical materials in order to make a tradition intelligible to others, yet simultaneously resist allowing those generalisations to ossify into closed, static systems that misrepresent the living complexity of the traditions they study.

The workshop brings together researchers, especially those in their early careers, who are grappling with this tension directly. Drawing on ideas from different philosophical traditions, speakers would examine the ways in which historians of philosophy can remain reflexively attentive to the role of contemporary scholarship in shaping the traditions they study — treating ancient thought as a living and evolving intellectual project rather than a fixed historical legacy.

The goal is to model what it looks like to do methodologically self-conscious, cross-cultural history of philosophy, thereby embodying the BSHP's commitment to the global history of philosophy.

Brief opening

Workshop chair: Xingding Liu (UNSW Sydney)

Session 1 (30 min presentation, 10 min commentary, 20 min discussion)

Kevin Berryman (Monash University): Selfless responsibility: Not-self and moral agency in Buddhism

Fang Xin (Peking University): From doctrines to problems: Contemporary metaphysics and the interpretation of Buddhist philosophy

Commentator: Timothy O'Leary (UNSW Sydney)

Session 2 (30 min presentation, 10 min commentary, 20 min discussion)

Monica Zixuan Ding (University of Toronto): Can “correcting the names” help LLMs become morally diverse?

Julius Geissler (University of Oxford): What makes reified categories a distinctive problem for comparative philosophy?

Commentator: Philippe Major (Lancaster University)

Brief closing

To participate, please use the **registration link**: <https://forms.gle/PxJPveSRJJoghRXA>

Note: Zoom access details will be emailed directly to registered participants prior to the event. This workshop is convened under the auspices of the BSHP. Attendees are warmly encouraged to **join the BSHP as members** by clicking [here](#).

Abstracts

Selfless responsibility: Not-self and moral agency in Buddhism

Kevin Berryman (Monash University)

Buddhism holds a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, all humans are not-self (*anattā*). On the other, humans are said to be responsible for their actions (*kamma*), which seems to evoke a self who can be responsible. This apparent contradiction brings up the question of who is morally responsible if there is no self. In this presentation, I argue that as the Buddhist subscribes to the not-self position, they are by default moral responsibility sceptics. At first blush, this appears to be a problem for responsibility in terms of *kamma*. But this problem is solved once impersonal interdependent causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is taken into account, where action and responsibility can still be attributed to humans without needing a self. What the Buddhist has is causal, not moral, responsibility. Fortunately, actions that increase or decrease suffering preserve an ethical directionality to this purely causal process, preventing its flattening into deterministic reductionism and the moral fatalism that would follow. What I will argue in this presentation is that there is no internal tension between *anattā* and *kamma* when we consider human action and responsibility, but rather an external tension between the Buddhist position and contemporary philosophical conceptualisations of moral selves and responsibility. I will propose that what the Buddhist has is best described as *selfless responsibility*.

From doctrines to problems: Contemporary metaphysics and the interpretation of Buddhist philosophy

Fang Xin (Peking University)

How can contemporary metaphysics help us understand Indian and Chinese Buddhist philosophy? Contemporary concepts can bring classical arguments into wider philosophical discussions, yet can also reduce complex traditions to familiar, fixed theoretical positions. I argue that the methodological value of contemporary metaphysics lies in identifying questions, conceptual distinctions and inferential relations within particular debates, while allowing textual evidence to test the interpretive framework itself.

Daya Krishna's field theory shifts the focus of philosophical historiography from established school doctrines to questions and the debates surrounding them; his practice of dialogue (*saṃvāda*) brings traditional concepts into contemporary inquiry. Drawing on this approach, I discuss two studies of my own. The first distinguishes criteria of existence from ontological commitments to illuminate the Sarvāstivāda–Sautrāntika debate over the existence of past and future dharmas. The second distinguishes temporal reference from persistence across time to examine how Sengzhao's *Things Do Not Move* (*Wubujian Lun* 物不遷論) addresses change, causation and discourse about past things.

These cases suggest that generalisation can articulate problems and arguments while preserving differences between positions and their historical development. This approach requires us to explain how ancient and contemporary questions become comparable, while allowing Buddhist arguments to revise the scope of contemporary concepts.

Can “correcting the names” help LLMs become morally diverse?

Monica Zixuan Ding (University of Toronto)

The talk is based on a manuscript the speaker co-wrote with Prof. Jing Hu (Concordia)

Genuine AI moral diversity may be achievable, not through expanding the pool or the diversity of moral beliefs in the training data, but through structural changes to the internal mechanism of LLMs. We aim to frame the issue using Xunzian insight regarding “correcting names”. For Xunzi, a specific moral system categorises objects into a normative taxonomy with a corresponding linguistic system of names. Linguistic systems are embodiments of moral systems. Based on Xunzi’s theory of names, we argue that the current LLM mechanism, such as contextual correlation prediction, is able to respect and reproduce the normative relationship between names to a very limited degree, and any further enhancement would require a critical change to the structure of the training methodologies. Such changes would allow LLMs to become better at correlating terms with the taxonomic systems they are embedded in, thus not only allowing LLMs to have better performance in moral tasks in general but also enabling them to operate in distinct moral systems (such as cultural linguistic systems, domain-specific systems), thus enabling these models to perform better in morally diverse contexts. The work is an attempt to include Classical Chinese philosophy into current debates on language and moral diversity, and apply it to real-life problem, such as AI ethics.

What makes reified categories a distinctive problem for comparative philosophy?

Julius Geissler (University of Oxford)

Generalization and abstraction are indispensable tools in the history of philosophy, allowing us to (re-)construct philosophical problems and theories, render historical debates intelligible, and make visible connections within and between texts and traditions. While generalizations operate at various levels and emerge under particular conditions and for particular purposes, they risk becoming reified when the contexts in which such abstractions become meaningful and useful, as well as their mediating role, are obscured or forgotten.

In this talk, I first argue that the distinctive epistemic pitfall of reified concepts and categories in the history of philosophy lies in producing a kind of explanatory closure that renders certain questions and problems in the historical material invisible or unintelligible. This, I propose, is a problem faced by historical work in philosophy more generally.

What distinguishes comparative and cross-cultural philosophy is that generalizations serve not only an epistemic purpose but often also a recognitional one, i.e., they constitutively confer a certain disciplinary status on the material that is being studied. The ability of particular generalizations and categories to perform this recognitional work is itself conditioned by the historical, social, and institutional context of a given field of learning. Reification in this domain thus amounts to naturalizing the conditions and mechanisms through which recognition is conferred.

This brings into view a reflexive account of comparative methodology centred on the transformability of its abstractions along both dimensions of intelligibility and recognition. The talk closes by offering a tentative picture of what such a methodological stance might look like in practice.