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Weber, Ralph

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What about the Billeter-Jullien Debate? And What Was It about? A Response to Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Ralph Weber

University of Zurich
ralph.weber@access.uzh.ch

No doubt Thorsten Botz-Bornstein is right to highlight that the debate of 2006 and 2007 (if indeed it can be called a debate¹) between Jean François Billeter and François Jullien was particularly heated. It was to some extent a personal affair in that both protagonists overstepped the scholarly bounds set for an exchange of arguments, the heat at times reaching the boiling point. Billeter reproached Jullien for no less than instrumentalizing China, fashioned as the absolute Other and instrumentalized for almost no other purpose than to continue a philosophical discourse established by Jullien himself, a discourse that became ever more auto-referential, furthering only the most dubious of ideological interests. In one passage, Billeter goes so far as to claim that, rather than allowing the "Chinese authors" their own voice and letting them develop their own arguments, in the end "it is always him [i.e. Jullien] who talks" (Billeter 2006a, p. 45). Regardless of just how personal Billeter's opposition to Jullien was meant to be—and at least one commentator claims that beyond the polemical title the text offers a "rigorous argumentation" (Danjou 2006; cf. also Zufferey 2006)—Jullien certainly took it personally, asking himself in his riposte, *Chemin faisant*, just why Billeter was so angry at him (Jullien 2007, p. 137).

His riposte is marketed on the title page in big letters as a "*Réplique à ****," which is explained by the series editors, Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, in terms of the reaction to a splinter that more often than not swiftly removed is quickly forgotten but that occasionally provokes a considerable reflexive gesture, of just the kind that Jullien offers, thanks to ***. A quote by Foucault precedes the text itself, reading: "There are critiques to which one responds and others to which one gives a riposte.

Perhaps wrongly so, for why not similarly lend an ear that is attentive to incomprehension, to banality, to ignorance or to insincerity?" Only once, at the very beginning of the text, is Billeter's name (by implication the subject either of incomprehension, banality, ignorance, insincerity, or a combination of all four) fully mentioned; thereafter only his initials, JFB, are used. Even until recently the practice of giving the silent treatment has persisted, as when Jullien in the interview with Martin and Spire simply observes "that the sinologists who criticize me . . . have *themselves* produced nothing since that critique—do you need names?" (Martin and Spire 2011, p. 209; italics in original), before referring the reader to the many books he has written since *Chemin faisant*. Needless to add, this point is premised on quantity trumping quality, which is at least slightly disconcerting given that Jullien's works have been found as early as 1996 to be marked by "a great deal of overlapping if not outright repetition (or at least rewriting)" (Reding 1996, p. 162)—something that apparently still is the case in his many books "produced" since then.

From one standpoint, Botz-Bornstein is also right in referring to the affair as mainly a French debate, involving a sizable number of participants and spanning a considerable period of time, from Billeter and Jullien's 1989 and 1990 exchange in the pages of *Études chinoises* over how to read Wang Fuzhi (see Billeter 2006a, p. 37 n. 1); to several volumes on and in co-operative works with Jullien (Jullien and Marchaisse 2000, Marchaisse 2003, Cornaz and Marchaisse 2004, Chartier and Marchaisse 2005, Jousset 2006, and Serrurier and Bricout 2011); to the publication of the partisan *Oser Construire: Pour Jullien* (Chartier 2007) and Billeter's answer to it (Billeter 2007); to the many discussions of Jullien that continue to take as their starting point the exchange with Billeter (cf. Keck 2009). The text by Martin and Spire, for instance, makes ample reference to the debate, as Botz-Bornstein mentions, and speaks out in favor of Jullien (Martin and Spire 2011, pp. 77–97). Yet, the debate is also the starting point for Jean Levi's (2011) recent criticism of Jullien. Beyond the borders of France, the debate has met with some response in Germany, where another partisan volume titled *Kontroverse über China: Sino-Philosophie* was published in 2008 and where the issues separating Billeter and Jullien have been paralleled with those separating the so-called Bochum (Heiner Roetz) and Bonn (Wolfgang Kubin, Hans-Georg Moeller) schools of sinology, the latter being "the declared friend of François Jullien" (Kubin 2008, p. 66). And indeed, from another standpoint, the affair has not merely been a French debate, but one that has involved issues of relevance far beyond France to concerns of sinology and philosophy generally. To the extent that this is true, Botz-Bornstein is to be congratulated for addressing the affair and its continuing repercussions in precisely such terms, namely as a debate of more general importance.

But precisely what *is* its more general importance? What was—and insofar as it continues, what is—the debate about? For Botz-Bornstein, the more general importance of the heated French debate is twofold as the title of his comment already makes fully clear: first as a debate on comparative philosophy and second as a debate that re-enacts some long-standing tensions between philology and philosophy. It is at this juncture that I finally would like to disagree. I am not at all persuaded by

these two characterizations of the Billeter-Jullien affair (and I think that the two characterizations offer an odd pair, since the latter is certainly not encompassed by the former, but has a much wider scope), and hence shall offer in what follows some objections with regard to each, before eventually pointing to some issues that I would rather choose to emphasize as more generally important. My objections to each characterization differ in nature. I shall argue that the French debate has certainly not been on comparative philosophy in the view of either Billeter or Jullien (or most of the French commentators), while conceding that the exchange between them can be interpreted as one on comparative philosophy, but only if one is ready to grant that the outright rejection of comparative philosophy on the side of the protagonists amounts to a contribution to comparative philosophy. The point, obviously, can be argued both ways. I shall then argue that Botz-Bornstein is wrong in reading the debate as one of philology versus philosophy, particularly if the two contenders are each taken to represent one of these positions only (Billeter being the philologist, Jullien the philosopher). Neither Billeter nor Jullien endorses such a polar view.

So in what sense was the debate about comparative philosophy? To be sure, the notion of comparative philosophy hardly ever finds mention in the French literature that has emerged in the wake of Billeter's *Contre François Jullien*. In France, the affair has largely been interpreted as one about sinology, or about philosophy, or about politics far and away beyond the disciplinary concerns of each. Given the fact that the many English translations of Jullien's works enjoy quite some popularity in comparative philosophy circles, where Jullien is understood as offering an attractive approach in comparative philosophy, it might be quite natural to read the debate in that light. But the two contenders themselves do not lend much support to such a reading, at least not upon some closer examination of their positions.

It is true that Billeter argues against comparativism, but against one of the kind exemplified by Feng Youlan's attempt at redefining "Chinese identity in terms opposed to an assumed Western identity" or (ignoring important differences) by Xu Fuguan and Mou Zongsan (Billeter 2006a, pp. 21, 33), or one referred to as comparative "for convenience" only (*pour la commodité*) (p. 22). Billeter offers no explicit discussion whatsoever of "comparative philosophy," but quite a bit of discussion on the political implications of this comparativist position, which he ascribes to Chinese intellectuals and which he thinks is amenable to facile accommodation within the given political system (p. 23). Jullien is claimed to have adopted his conception of "Chinese thought" from these intellectuals (including the tendency toward a uniform presentation) (Billeter 2006a, p. 41), but Billeter is explicit about Jullien's identification with "a comparativism that is his own" (*un comparatisme qui lui est propre*) (Billeter 2006a, pp. 33–34). With regard to Billeter, my point is simply that even if it is admitted that he does criticise comparativism and that he does think of himself as writing about philosophy (as he does), it is wrong to infer that his *Contre François Jullien* is on comparative philosophy in any but the loosest sense.

Jullien's position over against comparative philosophy is rather complicated, but—this is also true—he does at times seem to subscribe to some such endeavor when he refers to his "comparativist working site" (*chantier comparatiste*), when he

cites Ricoeur's supportive qualification of his work as "constructing comparables," or when he describes his critical project as interested in "the conditions of possibility of thought in one and the other of these cultural areas [i.e., China and Europe]" (Jullien 2007, pp. 85, 96, 38). Comparison hereby plays an important role for him on various levels. For one thing, he of course admits to comparing all the time, for instance when engaging in translation, but he is quick to add that he is also keen to "de-compare" (p. 105). For another thing, his choice of China is predicated on a grand comparison with Europe, the result of which is that Jullien takes both equally to boast sophisticated thought that is textual, commented, and explicated (pp. 33–34). This is despite China's asserted exteriority in terms of geography, history, and language, which allows him to formulate his program as one of detour and access. The commonality, however, proves that Jullien indeed is not claiming absolute exteriority. In this regard, Billeter has certainly drawn too extreme a picture of Jullien's position.

In short, Jullien at times seems committed to comparativism, but in a way that is widely considered to be one of a kind, by Billeter as much as by Jullien himself (although Thierry Meynard has described Liu Xiaofeng as a "Chinese Jullien" [see Meynard 2008]). Jullien sometimes expresses his loneliness in the endeavor of taking a detour through Chinese thought to access Greek and European thought, particularly those folds (*des plis*) which have not, and could not possibly have, been thought about (our un-thought, *notre impensé*), which come into view only when considered from a distance. The "detour and access" program (inspired by a passage in the *Sunzi*) sits uncomfortably with a traditional view of comparison as being about two or more *comparata* that are put on a par and equally subject to evaluation. This is clearly stated in his writings from at least as early as his conclusive note on "What is the use of comparison?" (*À quoi sert la comparaison?*) in his *Procès ou création*, where he qualifies his comparativism as "essentially fictive" and devoted to a "purely heuristic project" (Jullien 1989, pp. 312–313). In his more recent writings, Jullien has made it even clearer that he is not pursuing a comparative approach along any of the more conventional ways. He has come to distance himself from "comparing" altogether:

"Comparer," c'est—le sait-on?—une autre façon de ne pas se déplacer: de ne pas quitter, donc de ne pas entrer. Car on est demeuré dans ses catégories de départ, formant surplomb, à partir desquelles on range; l'hétérotopie et le dépaysement n'ont pas joué.

"To compare," that is—is it known?—another way of not travelling: of not leaving, and therefore of not entering. Since one has remained within one's initial categories, constituting an excess, on the basis of which one introduces order; no heterotopy and no change of scenery has occurred. (Jullien 2012a, p. 29)

Linking comparison to the concept of difference, Jullien further parts with any and all comparativism and embraces more strongly than in his earlier work the concept of distance-deviation (*l'écart*); difference is declared a concept of "putting into order" (*rangement*) and one that is not "adventurous" (*aventureux*), whatever that is supposed to mean (Jullien 2012b, pp. 28–29). Jullien explains that difference

establishes a distinction and remains on the level of description, whereas deviation (*l'écart*) proceeds from a distance and is productive (pp. 32, 34). In other words:

Par suite, tandis que la différence est bien le maître-outil des nomenclatures et des typologies—, l'écart est un concept exploratoire, à fonction heuristique. Si la différence est spécifiante, déterminante, l'écart, quant à lui, est inventif. À la différence de l'autre, c'est un concept aventureux.

Therefore, whereas difference is the master tool of lists and typologies, deviation is an explorative concept and serves a heuristic function. If difference is specifying and determining, deviation is itself inventive. Unlike the other, it is an adventurous concept. (p. 35)

That should make the difference (!) between difference and deviation clearer. It is against this background that Jullien “does not pretend to ‘compare’” or—without the use of inverted commas and more straightforwardly—“does not compare” other than temporarily and being limited in scope (2012b, pp. 34, 59). What the deviation approach produces according to Jullien is the tool of in-betweenness (*l'entre*), which allows him “to circulate between the thoughts of China and Europe” (p. 60).

This amounts to a shift in emphasis in Jullien’s recent work—somewhat (incidentally?) more conspicuous since the affair with Billeter—that has far-reaching implications as it involves a departure from the “detour and access” program (or at least a dynamization of it). Jullien now no longer wishes to take up a position of heterotopy, but rather one of atopy (a term Foucault also uses in his *The Order of Things*), which he finds better suits the new emphasis on in-betweenness (Jullien 2012b, pp. 61–62). Despite all of this, Jullien continues to understand his program as “an alternative to how the plurality of cultures may be considered” (p. 24), and as far as that consideration also features prominently *in* comparative philosophy (in the view of many in the field), it might perhaps be fair in turn to understand Jullien’s program as an alternative *to* comparative philosophy. Whether or not that makes his approach (let alone the debate with Billeter) one *on* comparative philosophy is in my view a conceptual question and ultimately undecidable. Given his explicit departure from the concept of comparison, I would argue that Jullien’s writings (and the debate with Billeter) are not about comparative philosophy. In fact, it is quite obvious that what he wishes them to be about simply is philosophy: no qualifying adjective required. He understands himself, as he has made it clear many times, as following in the footsteps of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, but, stuck as these philosophers are in European thought, he rather embarks on a deconstruction from without (*déconstruction du dehors*), thus creating tensions that alone he claims are able to revive philosophy (2012b, p. 60). It is thus that Jean-Marie Schaeffer can come to think of Jullien’s work as no less than “one of the most decisive contributions to contemporary philosophical thought at the international level” (Schaeffer 2003, p. 77). For reasons that for lack of space I cannot explicate here, I do not share Schaeffer’s enthusiastic assessment (cf. Weber forthcoming in 2014).

The second characterization of the debate that Botz-Bornstein offers is framed along and likened to historical clashes “between philologists and philosophers.” Compared to Jullien, Billeter is described as “an old-school philologist who knows

his Chinese and his classics” but has only modest ambitions “to enter a genuine philosophical discussion.” The positions are clearly distributed, Billeter being the philologist and Jullien the philosopher, while both are considered to be sinologists. This allows Botz-Bornstein to frame their debate as a re-enactment of the famous clash between von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and Nietzsche. That this is just one of many possible frames must be clear to Botz-Bornstein; he himself mentions Keck’s framing of the debate as being similar to the “attacks by French enlightenment thinkers on Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” which can hardly be called a debate of philology versus philosophy. Billeter himself, in his response to *Oser construire: Pour Jullien*, frames his exchange with Jullien as one between Arendt (a.k.a. Billeter) and Heidegger (a.k.a. Jullien) and what he sees as their different attitudes on political responsibility (Billeter 2007, pp. 68–69).

Given that there are probably always many frames through which to view such a debate, the question to ask is: just how useful is the frame of philology versus philosophy for understanding what the Billeter-Jullien debate has been about? To be sure, neither Billeter nor Jullien follows that frame directly. Jullien, for instance, ends his recent book *Entrer dans une pensée* (Jullien 2012a) with a note explaining why he did not include in the text any references to sources drawn upon (his answer, by the way, is that he would have had to append a note to almost every line). In this explanation, he writes that he trusts the reader to have understood the character of his text, which is a “Manifesto of Sinology, at the same time philological and philosophical” (p. 187). With regard to Billeter, nothing is more telling than that Zufferey (2006), evaluating *Contre François Jullien*, comes to think that one might reproach Billeter with being too much of a philosopher and too little of a historian, sometimes “more philosopher than philologist” (*parfois plus philosophe que philologue*). What should we make of these varying attributions of philology and philosophy? It seems to me that we are dealing with a variety of understandings of what philology and philosophy are each about and how they relate. But, as Botz-Bornstein makes it in his title and in the allusion to the clash between von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and Nietzsche, to make this a question of either-or seems not very useful. Viewed more closely, it is also not what Botz-Bornstein himself does, for what he puts opposite each other is not philology and philosophy, but rather “old philology” (Billeter) and “genuine philosophy” (Jullien).

There are two consequences that this kind of framing of the debate brings about. For one thing, it allows Botz-Bornstein to claim some high philosophical ground from which to portray “Billeter’s convictions” as outdated, as “unusual in a post-World War II world” (even in terms of ordinary “high school education”), and as lacking understanding of “what hermeneutic philosophy has attempted to clarify since the early nineteenth century.” This strikes me as unnecessarily polemical and also mistaken. If there is any consensus on the question of “genuine philosophy,” then it is that there is no consensus whatsoever. Simply to declare New Criticism to be the new philology and to equate some sort of poststructuralist-hermeneutic view of philosophy with genuine philosophy begs the question. Portraying the debate in the overly polar terms of philology versus philosophy cannot have other results

than that Billeter and Jullien are either speaking past each other or that Billeter is indeed no real opponent to Jullien, as the latter claims in the final sentences of his riposte. Botz-Bornstein seems to follow Jullien's opinion also in this regard. Although admitting that "Billeter addresses some important points," Botz-Bornstein does not elaborate these points, but in conclusion hints at some other criticism not advanced by Billeter. In my opinion, Botz-Bornstein's framing of the debate as one between old philology and genuine philosophy and his siding with Jullien fails to make the debate philosophically attractive. The debate seems easily, all too easily, decidable. But, and that is the second consequence, viewing the debate through such a frame if anything detracts from the issues that are indeed of more general importance and that are not so easily decidable.

To end this essay, I should therefore like to highlight some of these issues briefly. One of them has to do with the meaning of "China" in the French debate as much as in the philosophical discourse somehow considered to be about "China" or drawing on "China." This latter distinction indicates a tension, for whoever simply draws on "China" does not mean to advance claims about "China," and a dilemma, for drawing on "China" in some sense is drawing on something that cannot be completely unrelated to "China," and hence involves some sort of claim about "China." This is, I believe, a major problem in Jullien's work, which Billeter has also pointed out, calling it a "fundamental ambiguity" and an attempt at wanting to have one's cake and eat it too, that is, "to uncover the un-thought (*l'impensé*) of our philosophical tradition by drawing on Chinese thought and at the same time to maintain a general discourse about Chinese thought" (Billeter, 2007, pp. 67–68). Botz-Bornstein merely replicates the problem in his comment when he speculates that "the majority of Jullien's readers will confirm that China has become more familiar to them in its otherness through these books." This is an empirical statement, and insofar as it is true, it is certainly true enough. But it is also a fact that the majority of Jullien's readers seem not particularly acquainted with "China," at least judging by the many non-sinological voices speaking out in favor of Jullien in the French debate, among them philosophers of course, but also anthropologists (not working on "China"), psychoanalysts, et cetera (with the notable exceptions of Léon Vandermeersch and Kubin). It is also unclear what that "China" should be that supposedly becomes more familiar by reading Jullien's books. Following Jullien's heterotopical "China," it should be one rooted in pre-seventeenth-century Chinese texts.

Yet, the situation is further complicated by Jullien's occasional insistence that the concepts he gleans from these texts do tell us something about "contemporary China," which in these instances certainly does not refer to the Borges-like heterotopical "China" of the "detour and access" program. This is also manifest in his use of the notion of *déplacement*, which is part of Jullien's philosophical strategy based on earlier Chinese texts and which he claims to have undertaken, referring to his stay in the Shanghai and Beijing of the 1970s (see Jullien 2007, p. 40). What we take "China" to be in philosophical discourse is an issue related to a number of other problematiques addressed in the debate, such as how much context and—more importantly—which context is relevant, or the relation of philosophy (and philology)

to politics. These are all tough issues, and thinking that either Billeter or Jullien has better points with regard to any of them does not make the issues disappear. It is also unlikely that one of them should have better points with regard to all of them. Botz-Bornstein mentions only in passing that Billeter has some important points and that Jullien's work deserves some criticism. Compared to the beginning of his text, when he offers a useful disentanglement of Billeter's critique and mentions that this allows for agreement with some but not all points, Botz-Bornstein later fails to elaborate, but over and over tells us how mistaken Billeter is and how much more interesting Jullien is. I would have loved to read more about Billeter's important points and Botz-Bornstein's criticism of Jullien than merely to be presented with a framing of the debate that makes it appear as the re-enactment of a clash that even at the time when it occurred, that is, in the 1870s, was considered to be highly polemical and an instance of protagonists mainly talking past each other.

Note

- 1 – Philippe Nassif has pointed out that the affair can hardly be called a debate, since Jullien was content only to rectify the errors of Billeter, to reaffirm his own method, and to scorn his opponent for exposing "weak thought" (Jullien's second-last chapter in his riposte is titled "*Requiem pour une pensée faible*" [Requiem for a weak thought]; see Nassif 2007). A debate perhaps more worthy of the name was the one between Fava and Billeter in *Études chinoises* in 2006; see Fava 2006 and Billeter 2006b.

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Reply to Ralph Weber

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

I still believe that this is a debate about philology and philosophy, and Dr. Weber has not convinced me that Billeter is in any way more philosophical. "Framing" has always had a metaphorical character and its only purpose is to highlight some (certainly subjective) points. They are subjective especially since they echo (as I explain) my personal observations of how philosophy is often dealt with today within the larger field of the human sciences. Weber's question "Which China is Jullien actually talking about?" is precisely one of those questions that philosophers are asked by those more empirically minded humanists. I try to make clear that within certain abstract, philosophical contexts, such questions have less importance. It is thus not very useful to point out that the frame does not always fit in a literal sense. The frame could have been called "empirical versus speculative" (*speculatio* being the Latin translation of *theoria*), which would have eliminated references to concrete events in the history of philosophy.

It is also true that Jullien has attempted to design his own methodology, which he wants at times to push beyond the limits of the traditional "comparative" program, but seen through a wider and international lens Jullien's writings still overlap very much with comparative philosophy.

The purpose of my comment was not to give grades to Billeter and Jullien and evaluate their merits in sinology, but to draw attention to a problem that concerns philosophy and the humanities in general.