

INTER-CULTURALITY AND PHILOSOPHIC DISCOURSE

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Chapter Three

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A source of misunderstanding between Chinese and Western philosophy: the difficulty of forming a clear idea of the foundations of Western culture

Abstract: We get used to point at the differences between Chinese and Western philosophy as the main obstacle for an intercultural dialogue. But there is also a far less visible source of difficulties: western academics themselves hardly grasp the foundations of their own culture and, therefore, are not in a good position to present them to their Chinese colleagues. I would like to show the academic teaching of philosophy in the West, and therefore the texts that come from it and that are offered to our Chinese colleagues, cannot help them make a right idea of Western culture basis. Why? Because Westerners, while trying to understand representational systems of other cultures, do not proceed to the same understanding towards their own culture (they are doing others' social anthropology, but not their own). Western universities favour great philosophers' studies, and focus on what distinguishes one from another, but they do not try much to find out their common fundamental preconceptions that remain through the centuries. Moreover, as they have erected philosophy as a specific discipline, they have separated it from other cultural expressions, notably from religion and Christian thought, although these have dominated Western culture during the last 2000 years. The fact that Western culture has originated from a double matrix, both pagan and

Christian, is so clear that Western intellectuals do not think there might be anything worth to study closer from it. This also prevents them from having a global vision on the specific configuration of their own culture. Consequently, it is almost impossible for Chinese researchers to understand well what constitutes fundamental features of our culture, and the inter-cultural dialogue is thus distorted.

Keywords: Western thought, Greco-Roman culture, paganism, Plato, theology, Christianity

In the course of the previous international congress of Chinese philosophy [ISCP 16th International Conference, 2009, Fu-Jen Catholic University, NDLR], in Taipei, I listened with considerable interest as several Chinese colleagues commented on certain well-known passages from Chuang Tzu or Confucius and compared them with texts by modern Western philosophers such as Heidegger, Derrida or Lyotard. I was particularly struck by this for, whereas the *Lun Yu* and the *Chuang Tzu* are absolutely fundamental texts of Chinese culture, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Habermas or other Western philosophers are patently not foundational for Western thought.

It is true that these authors occupy an important place in the academic world. It is not surprising, then, that they are studied in universities and talked about in philosophical conferences, especially as, in the eyes of our Chinese colleagues, such authors are representative of Western modernity. However, if one wishes to ground an intercultural dialogue on a firm foundation, one has to look beyond the Western philosophers who are fashionable in university circles. It is essential to take a broader view and reflect upon the foundations of Western culture.

I am not implying here that our Chinese colleagues have failed to show sufficient interest in what constitutes the foundations of Western thought. Rather, it is we Western academics who are open to criticism. If it is indeed difficult for our Chinese colleagues to form a clear idea of the most fundamental features of Western thought, this is, in fact,

because we Westerners are incapable of clearly presenting these characteristics to them.

This is why, before proposing a few indications on these fundamental features, I will attempt to answer the following question: why are Western academics unable to provide an overview of the foundations of their own culture?

I

The one-sided western anthropological gaze

The first fact that needs to be taken into consideration in answering this question is that we Westerners are careful not to study our own culture in the same way as we study those of others. Over the last few centuries, Western travellers, ethnographers and social anthropologists have taken a keen interest in other cultures. They have striven to describe them and grasp their main characteristics. But as they remained prisoners of their West-centred vision, they failed to examine their own culture in the same way. As Pierre Legendre aptly put it: “objectifying myths, revealing beliefs, and analyzing their translation in social rules” is an activity we are quite prepared to undertake as long as it concerns others, but not when it concerns us ourselves. Yet what we should be doing is “directing our study towards our own shadow-zones, and re-examining the most secure notions and classifications as if we were dealing with a foreign culture.”¹

But this is something we find hard to do. Why is this so? Probably because, like everyone else, we are keen to maintain certain illusions about ourselves. Now, the history of our relations with other cultures is such that it has not – not yet at least – forced us to abandon these illusions, to question the foundations of our culture and to call some of them into doubt. Over the last few centuries, the economic, technological and military

¹ Pierre Legendre, *Le Point fixe. Nouvelles conférences*, Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2010, pp. 35-36. [Trans. by the present translator]

superiority of the Western world has encouraged it to believe that its culture and thinking were also superior. Today, however, the Western world no longer enjoys the material superiority which still prevailed in the 20th century. But this has not prevented its university system from maintaining its advantage for a while yet and forcing recognition as the centre of a global academic network. Hence the prestige still attached to Western philosophy, and which, for Western philosophers, represents a source of intellectual comfort and self-satisfaction.

Western philosophers like to claim that philosophy, democracy and rational thinking in general originated in Greece. Greece was thus idealized. It was only about fifty years ago that a rare few European researchers began to call into question the unique, superior status of ancient Greece. Louis Gernet, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne started applying to Greece the methodology of social anthropology which had, until then, been used exclusively for the study of primitive or exotic societies. For his part, Walter Burkert has shown that the boundary that had been drawn by Greek studies between Greece and the Orient was a fiction. “It is absurd,” he writes, “to claim that Orientals only represent the pre-rational, the mythical stage, from which the Greeks set out and which led to the beginnings of the movement of the Enlightenment.”²

As for the study of European and American cultures themselves with the distanced gaze of the anthropologist, we are still only at the very first stages. In France, Louis Dumont was a pioneering figure. After studying social structure in India, he turned his attention to modern Western individualism.³ His views may now seem somewhat hasty and oversimplifying. But he had the merit of initiating the task which we need to pursue, and which consists in examining the Western world through the eyes of the anthropologist. We should also mention the great legal historian, Pierre Legendre, who was quoted above.

² Walter Burkert, *La Tradition orientale dans la culture grecque*, Paris: Macula, 2001. [Trans. by the present translator.]

³ Louis Dumont, *Homo aequalis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, and *Essais sur l' individualisme. Une perspective anthropologique sur l' idéologie moderne*, Paris: Seuil, 1983.

For my own part, I also seek to identify the presuppositions, the beliefs and deceptive self-evidences which have decisively and durably shaped the Westerner's conception of the human being and society. Indeed, I consider that philosophy courses in Western universities pay much too little attention to uncovering the fundamental preconceptions on which philosophy has been based from Plato to the present day. As for other cultures, Westerners consider that they are characterized by durable fundamental characteristics (hence, for example, the supposed existence of a single entity such as 'Chinese thought', which was always purportedly the same, whatever the author or the period⁴). They do not, however, consider that the same thing applies to their own culture; which is why, in the study of the major Western philosophers, they always insist upon what is specific to each of them. As for what is common to all of them, they consider it is the exercise of Reason – an ability of the human mind, which, so they think, has an unquestionable universal value.

II

The rejection and oversight of religion by philosophy

If we wish to understand why Western academics are largely unable to offer their Chinese colleagues a global overview of the foundations of their own culture, a further group of facts needs to be taken into consideration: the distinction between philosophy and religion, together with the complex history of the relations between the latter.

As you are aware, the Western categories of "religion" and "philosophy" did not exist previously in China and Japan (nor in many other cultures). At the end of the 19th century, the Japanese coined two new words to translate "philosophy" and "religion" as,

⁴ *La Pensée chinoise* [Chinese thought] is the title of a well-known book by Marcel Granet (first published in 1934).

in their wake, did the Chinese.⁵ As you are also aware, the word “*philosophia*” appeared in ancient Greece and the word “*religio*” was used by the Romans.

In antiquity, however, the meanings of these two words were not as separate as they are today. In reality, there were, on the one hand, the cults currently practiced in society and which were part and parcel of the institutions and, on the other, argumentatively worked-out doctrines, such as Epicureanism, Platonism or Stoicism, which were of interest to the cultivated portions of society. The latter two doctrines, while referring to schools of thought and wisdom, also had an import which today would be described as religious. Platonists believed that a heavenly life awaited them after death. The Stoics considered that humans were the “sons of God”. And in the wake of Plotinus (3rd century A. D.) there was a proliferation of discourses which could just as readily be described as “theologies” as “philosophies”.

It is, then, hardly surprising that, in its quest for recognition among the elites of the Roman empire, early Christianity presented itself as a philosophy. Thus, the Christian doctrine of the Fall was borrowed from Plato, and the Fathers of the Church drew heavily on Stoicism and Neo-Platonism.

Yet they grounded their dogmatic authority above all in the texts of the Old and New Testaments: these texts were the word of God (for the God of the monotheistic religions is a person who thinks and speaks, as human beings do), and the Fathers of the Church enjoyed the privilege of interpreting it and commenting upon it. This necessarily led to the establishment of a clear-cut distinction between, on the one hand, the truths revealed by God and, on the other, those discovered by the philosophers through the exercise of reason based upon “innate ideas” (which constituted, as it were, a “natural religion”).

In the late 13th century, Thomas Aquinas, while still remaining faithful to this

⁵ On this point, I refer the reader to Anne Cheng, “La ‘philosophie chinoise’ en Chine”, and Vincent Goossaert, “L’ invention des ‘religions’ en Chine moderne”, in the excellent book edited by Anne Cheng, *La Pensée en Chine aujourd’ hui*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

distinction, sought to assimilate the work of the philosopher Aristotle and integrate it into the framework of revealed truths. At this time, in both the Arab world and Europe, there was no clear-cut boundary between philosophy, “natural religion” and “rational theology”. In the 17th century, philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes and Locke, who were not members of the clergy, were nevertheless Christians and, moreover, steeped in theological reading. This was no less true, later on, of Kant and Hegel. Rousseau was condemned by the Catholic Church because he did not adhere to the revealed dogmas, but he was a firm believer in natural religion (the existence of God, the immortality of the soul and the divine origin of the moral conscience). These convictions were fairly close to those shared by enlightened Protestants.

In short, there were close links between Christianity and the dominant currents in philosophy for over a millennium and a half.

But the situation was to change in the course of the 19th century. Since the Middle Ages there had been an ongoing struggle between the power of the States and that of the Church. As you are aware, the States gradually assumed most of the powers that were initially exercised by the Church and its clergy. Thus the universities which for centuries had been controlled by the Catholic Church, and later also by the Protestant churches, progressively passed into the hands of laymen educated in the spirit of the Enlightenment.

Thereafter, philosophy professors constructed and taught a historical narrative which presented their academic discipline as totally separate from religion. People came to think that the Middle Ages – which were considered as an unfortunate obscurantist historical parenthesis – had been dominated by the Church, its clergy and theologians, whereas from the Renaissance onward, and especially with the great philosophers of the 18th century, reason and the ability to think for oneself had regained the upper hand and been set free from control by the religious and political authorities, and had thus reconnected with the glorious inheritance of ancient philosophy. This narrative is in part a fiction aimed at celebrating the triumph of rational thinking over the dogmas and beliefs of Christianity: how philosophy overcame its rival. As a result, philosophy was obliged to

repudiate the links which connected it to Christianity, avoid any mention of them, and act as if the history of Western thought was purely that of philosophy inaugurated by Plato.

This is why philosophy departments in Western universities attach so much prestige to the persona of Socrates whereas the name of Jesus is quite unmentionable. Yet if there is a figure who, by virtue of his importance, exemplary nature and influence, occupies a position similar to that of Confucius in China, it is not Derrida, Heidegger or even Socrates, it is Jesus⁶.

III

Platonism, salvation doctrines and dualism

The triumph of secular philosophy over religion and the clergy has not just led the academic community to under-estimate the place of Christianity in Western culture. It has also blinded philosophers to one of the nevertheless essential characteristics of the tradition to which they profess allegiance. For it should be noted that Platonism is a doctrine of salvation, one from which Christianity, which is itself also a doctrine of salvation, borrowed certain of its characteristics.⁷ Historians of religion are accustomed to distinguishing between doctrines of salvation and social religions or cults (which can also be found in most societies and are often described as “pagan”). Doctrines of salvation attribute a suprasocial destination to the human being. Hence they do not recommend that he be in harmony with his natural and social environment, but that he fulfils himself in a higher world, the immaterial realm of God and Ideas.

⁶ One of the few philosophers to have given Jesus a place is Karl Jaspers: “Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: the Paradigmatic Individuals”, *The Great Philosophers*, volume I, trans. R. Manheim, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.

⁷ See Victor Goldschmidt, *La Religion de Platon*, Paris: PUF, 1949, and François Flahault, *Adam et Ève. La condition humaine*, Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2007.

Alfred North Whitehead, the English mathematician and philosopher, contended that the European philosophical tradition was a series of footnotes to Plato. Even if this judgement is somewhat excessive, it should encourage us to step back and be more circumspect in our study of Plato's dialogues. Instead of merely admiring in the latter the emergence of conceptual thought, one should be concerned with the fact that his religious doctrine contrasts sharply with the conception of the human condition to be found in Greek religion and with most forms of so-called pagan wisdom.

Unfortunately, however, Western philosophy professors usually consider that there is no real thought outside the tradition to which they profess allegiance, or at any rate, no thought in whose name one can call into question the fundamental preconceptions in which Western philosophy is grounded. Even Nietzsche, who saw himself as an opponent to Plato, remained a prisoner of the exultation of the individual and the heroic tradition which so powerfully pervade the Western view of the human being. His vision of paganism was deeply romantic; it did not have much in common with the social religion of the ancient Greeks, nor with the paganism of other cultures.

There is, of course, a materialistic philosophical current which denies dualism, that is the Platonic (and also Christian) belief according to which matter and spirit, body and soul, are made of two radically different substances. But this current is far from being preponderant in philosophy. Of course, there now exists a sort of materialism whose planetary triumph is visible to all today; but it is one of an economic, not a philosophical order: the frenzied desire for money and anything that can be purchased.

It is difficult for Westerners to break free entirely from their dualistic philosophical and religious tradition, as it is upon this basis that they have learned to consider themselves as individuals. The figure of Christ, torn between his two natures, came to represent, throughout the Western world, the exemplary prototype of the individual. In philosophy, it was this same dualism that made it possible to conceptualize the autonomy of the individual.

Let us take the example of Kant's morality, which is still so influential in Europe and the United States. When we are motivated by our sensibility, our sociability and our interest for other people, says Kant, our action has no genuine moral value. Action out of pure respect for the moral law is the duty which makes people worthy of their human dignity. This moral law, he states, is not derived from our social nature, it is not linked to our belonging to the sensible world, its origin is supra-sensible, like our soul which is our true self. Kant encourages us to conceive of ourselves as individuals who have to think and act without being dependent on others. Such a conception of the individual is, then, founded upon Christian and Platonic dualism, in which the perishable body is opposed to the soul, whose nature is considered to be divine and immortal. There is nothing surprising about this as Kant was a Protestant. To his way of thinking, such a dualism was so self-evident that there was no need to justify it, or even to mention it. And it would, indeed, be fruitless to search in his writings for a passage in which he presented his dualistic vision and put forward arguments in its favour.

This silence explains why it has been thought in some quarters that Kant's was a secular philosophy, whereas it is actually profoundly marked by Christianity. This silence also explains the misunderstanding illustrated by the Chinese translation of Kant's three Critiques by Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), as though Kant's thinking could be reconciled with the Confucian tradition. In the 17th century, Chinese scholars reacted vigorously against the Christian doctrine which the Jesuits wanted to have them adopt. In the eyes of these scholars, it was shocking and absurd to denigrate the sensible world, and to belittle social relationships and family ties in the name of a god that no one had ever seen or heard – a god who, moreover, is supposed to have come down on earth and sacrificed his own life in order to grant them the gift of eternal life!⁸ Western philosophies, on the other hand, have had a better reception as they speak the language of rational thought and have understood the need to conceal the dualism with which they are suffused.

⁸ See Jacques Gernet, *Chine et christianisme. La première confrontation*, Paris: Gallimard, 1991.

IV

The fate of the greco-roman pagan tradition

Lastly, we need to mention the Greco-Roman pagan tradition. Although foreign to the dualism in which Western thought is grounded, this tradition has nevertheless been preserved. It always has been – and still is – considered as a precious legacy. In short, two strands can be seen in the West: a religious and philosophical tradition, on the one hand, and a pagan culture, on the other. How, then, do these two legacies combine?

It was a straightforward enough matter to find inspiration in Greek and Roman architecture. Roman law too could be co-opted. Following on from the Roman empire, the Church took on the task of organizing society. However, the message contained in the Gospel stood in contradiction with the usual norms of social life. As Pierre Legendre so ably observed, there thus came into existence a legal vacuum that needed to be filled⁹; it was therefore necessary to revise and compile Roman law while at the same time setting it in the framework of Christianity, an undertaking that was completed under the emperor Justinian in the 6th century.

But what was to be done with the numerous narratives (“myths”) transmitted through Greco-Roman pagan culture? For most of them portrayed pagan divinities – divinities whose existence, unlike that of the one God, was strongly influenced by sexuality. There were two possible solutions.

The first consisted in making up a symbolic interpretation of these myths which made it possible to give them a meaning compatible with the new beliefs. This approach, which had already been employed by scholars in antiquity, was reused by Christians who also applied it to the Bible. As a result, the philosophical import of pagan works (such as the *Theogony* of Hesiod) was regrettably misjudged and ignored.

The second solution consisted in denying these narratives any truth value and only

⁹ Pierre Legendre, *op. cit.*, p. 140 *seq.*

allowing them aesthetic value. Thus, from the Renaissance onward, painting, sculpture, opera, poetry and literature drew widely upon these stories (in particular those told by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*). And so, while Christianity postulates a separation between the soul and the sensible world, secular art, on the contrary, brings them together, celebrating sensible beauty and even erotic nudity. The minds of Westerners have long been occupied, preoccupied even, by the tension between, on the one hand, an earthly aesthetic ideal and, on the other, the ideal of supersensible truth, and they are still trying to deal with the problems caused by the discordance between these two views of the world.

Given the discordance between the philosophical register and that of the sensible joy of everyday life, the notion of the “art of living”, which implies the association of the two, has never completely gained respectability (indeed, in France, the expression, the “art of living”, is only used in the context of interior design or cookery magazines). The difference with the Chinese tradition on this point is significant since, as you know better than I, in the eyes of Chinese scholars, the art of living is far from being a negligible quantity: calligraphy, painting, poetry and relations of friendship readily go hand in hand with the quest for self-perfection.

(translation: Rodney Coward)

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論對西方文化基礎形構清晰觀念之困難

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本文要旨在於主張西方學院式的教育，其教科書和所提供給華人學者的知識，無助於華人學者對西方文化基礎結構清晰而恰當的觀念。其理何在？主要是因為西方人士在致力於理解其他文化的表象系統時，並不同時致力理解自己的文化本身，（對其他文化從事社會人類學研究，卻不如此研究自己的文化）。西方大學以研究各個偉大哲學家及其間彼此的差異為重，但卻幾乎完全未曾試圖擺脫那些常見的、持續數世紀之久的、根本上先入為主的偏見。此外，還把哲學樹立為一門特殊的學問，使之與其他文化現象區隔，尤其是與宗教與基督教義思想區隔，即使後者曾主導西方文化兩千年之久。事實上，西方文化的來源兼具異教與基督教義的雙重母模特質，是那樣的明顯，以致西方有識之士都未曾意識到其中尚有多處值得進一步加以研究和探討。也因此阻礙了他們賦予自己文化特殊形態以一種全面觀照的視野。因此之故，對華人學者而言，要能恰當理解構成西方文化的基本特質，在實際上幾乎是不可能的，並因而導致跨文化對話的扭曲。本文作者以個人多年的研究觀察為據，例舉西方大學與學術界所忽略的，因此無法將之恰當傳輸給華人學者的一些基本特徵。

關鍵詞：西方思想、希臘—羅馬文化、異教思想、柏拉圖、神學、基督教義