Abstract
The article is devoted to the philosophy of the well-known ancient Chinese sage Confucius paying attention to the Western misunderstandings of it. The fundamental differences between Chinese and Western civilizations, the problem of transcendence, and different attitude towards history are discussed in the text. Being neither a religion nor a philosophy in the strict Western sense of the word, Confucian thinking still finds its parallels among Western philosophies. The article faces the phenomenological task to discover concrete modes of awareness, their active engagements, and their correlate contents that are sufficiently broad and founding to cut across diverse disciplinary and cultural phenomena. This brief essay is a step in that direction with explicit commitment to Confucian explication and continuity of Chinese civilization. Despite variations and different levels of interpretation, a common context between Confucius and Western philosophical trends may be found.

Keywords: Confucius, Chinese civilization, phenomenology, learning.

Introduction

The China that we know and appreciate today cannot be understood without its “thinking context”, just as the West today is not some sudden novelty, created ex nihilo. Yet the task that we must confront in our relationship with China, admittedly the oldest and continuous civilization on this planet, requires an articulation of a common frame of reference. Barring that, we would only have two different sets of proclamations – Western and Chinese – without any possible connections; it would be simply talking about oranges and carrots (Mickunas, 2009). We must also avoid the most pervasive efforts to find a common frame by calling Chinese and specifically Confucian thinking “religion”, and comparing it to western religions (or more precisely to Mid-Eastern Western religions) (Fingarette, 1972). A simple presumption for doing this, specifically in contemporary “science laden metaphysical philosophies” of the West, is that if it does not look like such philosophies, then it must be “religion”. Indeed, the entire set of modes of thinking, inclusive of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zen Buddhism, are relegated to the departments of cultural studies or religions. But such a trend in no way offers us an access to
Confucius, since to equate his texts to religion is to think of gods, prophets, eternal edicts, life after death, eternal punishments or joys. No such prophesies, eternal tortures, or angels coming from above populate Confucius’ writings. In brief, religion cannot be a common frame of reference. Perhaps the trouble is located in the West with the joyous proclamation that god is dead and thus a need to search for alternative divinities to fill the “divine gap.” While this might sound comical, we must remind ourselves that countless scholarly careers were launched and countless of them failed within the productive industry of the death of one god and the efforts to create numerous others.

**Civilizations**

If we disregard the superficial labels that separate two civilizations, we may be able to access each other at a more open and honest level. Comparative civilizational studies in the West, for example, with the organization International Society for the Comparative Studies of Civilizations, that includes scholars from diverse fields and civilizations, have always raised a fundamental question of “access” to the “other”, since the problem is one of interpretation across languages and traditions. In brief, any kind of translation is an interpretation; any kind of method, coming from a specific civilization without any prejudice might contain its own civilizational components, not found in another civilization (Mickunas, 2008, p. 1-19). Resultantly, there appears to be a failure to establish a common framework of reference. This means that knowing of the language of each other does not guarantee mutual access. Given this problem, it is essential to find another way that would seek out the most basic awareness belonging to each civilization in order to note the levels of conjunction and divergence, despite linguistic variations at that. As a matter of fact, such linguistic deviations have been the career arena of philologists, both in China and in the West, but does philology know the fundamental awareness which pervades a tradition? As we continue our discussion, it will become obvious that the understanding of “awareness” is neither individualistic, subjective, mental, psychological, nor collective; nor is it limited to awareness of things of our environment. It is necessary to articulate how a person “understands” the world as a whole, and not just its parts. And the awareness “as the whole world”, is the background on which the “individual” and even a society make sense of themselves and their specific perceptions.

In discussions of civilizational and cross-civilizational topics there is a constant reappearance of a required awareness across all domains of methodological controversies, from language based interpretations of the world to complex life worlds, requiring a more fundamental tracing of such awareness. As the conventional wisdom has it, civilizational awareness comprises the most pervasive and in turn the most concrete experience. While the latter is not thematically
articulated, it lives in everyday cultural expressions. That is why we regard this awareness to be relevant to methodological understanding of civilizations. Other methods for inner-cultural and cross-cultural comprehension, for the most part, have led to controversies that do not reach fundamental outlines within which such cultures play a role of a secondary level of symbolic designs of a given civilization. Numerous efforts to provide a method with sufficient compass for inner-cultural and cross-cultural comprehension, for the most part have led to charges that proponents of a given methodology either lack expertise in diverse disciplines or in complexities of other cultures, or borrow a methodology from one discipline or one culture and thus cannot grant universal validity to such a methodology. No doubt, each positive and human science, and each culture, has a dream of its supremacy and all-inclusiveness.

Phenomenologically speaking, such a dream is understandable; all modes of awareness have an eidetic generality that is prior to, and assumed by both, empirical generalizations and rationalist categorical universalities. Yet it ought to be equally clear that each mode of awareness is restricted to the essential morphology of its content. Resultantly, the methodological issue must face the question of essential incompatibility of diverse contents. Given this issue, it may be contended that each content may demand a specific methodology. This is the most pertinent to contemporary Western scientific and scholarly disciplines and their radical fragmentations. As postmodern writers suggest, there is no longer a master discourse. It seems, then, that given this context, any effort to offer some encompassing methodology would end up in a peculiar and at times nonsensical aggregate of concepts borrowed from various scholarly fields (Mickunas and Pilotta, 2012). The fault does not lie with individual scholars, but with modern assumptions which seek a unified method prior to testing the very notion of methodology. If the latter is regarded within the parameters of Western modern thought, as something constructed and then applied on, or used to access the phenomena, then it may be doomed to failure a priori. Prior to construction, there is a required investigation into the assumed modes of awareness and the ways they correlate to diverse contents. In this sense, no methodology can be adequate if it is external to these correlated phenomena. The task for phenomenology is to discover concrete modes of awareness, their active engagements, and their correlate contents that are sufficiently broad and founding to cut across diverse disciplinary and cultural phenomena. This brief essay is a step in that direction with explicit commitment to Confucian explication and continuity of Chinese civilization.

**Dual/Polar**

There is no one definition of a “whole world” as some sort of encompassing unity; rather, distinct civilizations have modes of arranging all events, things,
and perceptions in unique ways. Moreover, it is not the case that a specific dominant whole world in one civilization cannot contain, at other levels, the metaphors of the whole world of another civilization, or even become predominant, as in the venerable writings of the more recent neo-Confucians (Chang Wing-tsit, 1969). What is at issue, for our purposes, is to explicate these fundamental differences that are, at the level of whole world, mutually understandable, sensible and thus communicable. Indeed, if philosophy claims to search for and offer wisdom then the Chinese, and specifically Confucius, as well as Plato in the West, can be regarded as the wise, as philosophers. There is no doubt that various religions, to support the pronouncements of their prophetic shamans, may borrow readily from philosophers, but this does not imply that these philosophers suddenly become religious. Plato and Aristotle were “baptized” by different trends of Mid-Eastern religious dogmas, but this did not change the fact that they were primarily and to the end philosophers. The same can be said of Confucius and various Chinese Taoists. For our task, this means that it is impossible not to treat Confucius as a philosopher – lover of wisdom – as he insisted on searching and learning ever more throughout his life (Confucius, 1998, p.5). At the outset this means that he had no “one” dogma.

Given this context, we are in a position to explicate the most basic awareness composing the Western philosophies as a search for truth, i.e. the frame of reference which makes sense of all things, events, humans and their explanations. In the West, the dominant theme, despite variations, is “transcendence” that “explains” the world of “immanence”, i.e. the world we live in. It must be immediately noted that we understand both aspects, and accept them a priori as obvious. Let us recount the various meanings of the term “transcendence”, ranging from mind over body, through scientific theories, all the way to divinities. Already with Plato we note that the world we live in – the immanent – is transcended by “forms” that reside apart from the things of our immanent encounter (Weingartner, 1973). Following his postulates of the “topos noitos”, the world of transcendent mind, the appearance of Mid-Eastern religions in the west took up Plato’s doctrine and composed their divinity as equally transcendent, i.e. distinct from, although the source of the immanent world. And this led to the modern western scientific efforts to “discover” cosmic “laws”, written in precise and objective mathematical formulation, that explain, but are not identical with, the phenomena of this world. The laws are transcendent, but even the scientist as such, cannot be part of the world he investigates – he is a modern subject that transcends the world as a non-participating observer. This is to say, what he does is objective and hence his actions are equally neutral. In this sense, science is divine as it equates its “discoveries” to be the origin of all that happens in our daily experience (Stroeker, 1987, p. 2.). Those origins, the laws, the gods, the subject, are transcendent, eternal, immortal, while the aspects of
this world are temporal, they come and go, appear and disappear. Thus there is a search for transcendence where our “immortal” minds, souls, subjects will reside eternally. This sharp dualism – either/or – logic, has been and continues to be the scaffolding on which numerous variants have destroyed themselves, unable to resolve their arguments without constantly returning to the same irreconcilable dualism. It is not the task of this introductory essay to offer a resolution that, as a matter of course, might not be forthcoming from the West.

Let us turn now to the China of Confucius, without any coaching from the Western metaphysicians. Confucius is clearly a man of this immanent world, who not once, as far as I understand, have mentioned some transcendent being, some spiritual realm – what could I know of spirits when I do not even know much about man – said Confucius (Confucius, 1998, p. 127ff.). Search all we want, we shall not find any basic concepts in the West which would emerge from the experienced world and belong in it as a way of being of value in it. To understand this, it is necessary to consider the whole Chinese-Confucian world, consisting of polarities “in becoming.” All fundamental aspects are symmetrically related, each requiring the other for full articulation, popularly presented as yin/yang. Yin does not transcend Yang, and conversely. Yin is always becoming yang and yang is always becoming yin, just as night is always becoming day and day – night. This is the context, but the ways in which it deploys daily awareness is the most significant. This world context is both, constituted by its elements and constitutes them. Let us be clear: the very notion of an element is to be transformed so that no element is separate as if it were some “transcendent” atom, but appears in its correlation to the rest. Each particular exists only as an interaction with the other, and hence we cannot speak of sequential causes as if one were a cause of another, since that would comprise a separation. Another way of saying this is that dualistic conceptions, ending in an asymmetrical relationship, lead not only to creator/created, but also to substantive-essentialist ontology of discrete and independent components. Confucian philosophy articulates Chinese understanding that gives primacy to correlative terminologies appropriate for the dynamic cycles: condensing in differentiation and differentiating in condensation, scattering and gathering waxing and waning. Such understanding comprises a continuum on which all differ in degree and not primarily in kind; thus the distinctions among events is qualitatively graded and not absolutely delimited: clear/turbid, correct/one-sided, thick/thin, far/near, genial/overbearing (Jung Hwa Yol, 2011, p. 75.).

This sliding process does not allow some point of inception, absolute beginning from which other events would follow. One basic conception is a cyclical cosmos of rhythmic order and readjustment. It should be obvious that social and political philosophy is equally explicated in terms of this cosmos: personal cultivation and public administration, knowledge and action,
where each aspect defines and is dependent on other aspects that cannot be
dualistically separated – as is evident from the lack of dualism of mind/
body. Thus if we associate qualitative aspects of matter only to the Western
notion as “thing”, Chinese will speak of hou, meaning physically thick and
also generous, or po as physically thin and frivolous (Hall David L, 1987,
p. 44ff.). For Confucius the problem of mind/body could not be resolved,
because it never arose. This leads to another broad, yet intelligible difference
between the West and China, the difference between history and tradition.

The West is historical in the sense that it appeals to the makers, the agents, of
history. We tend to enumerate events and who did them, where and when, who
was the first to posit a philosophical theory, who came after to criticize it, and
who followed the critic, each positing a new, and even a radically new theory,
comprising a break in history and forming a new beginning. The great figures
who invent themselves or are at the service of grand-transcendent purposes
of divine plan, of dialectical agonal battles, always constitute a transcendent
“ahistorical” arch that can break in at any moment. Indeed, we even imagine
how the great philosophers transformed the course of history – while sitting
in their ivory towers of theory, they moved armies, destined nations to be
formed and comprised a catalyst for great revolutions and finally purposive
progress and environmental disaster. Of course, for comparative analyses,
it is appropriate that history and tradition may overlap, but the question is
one of predominance. History is made by personages, while tradition has a
pervasive presence that does not yield to the positing of origination or creators.
History is “rational” in the sense that causes, motives, or reasons are ascribed
to events, even if those events might be chaotic. It is quite different with
tradition, since its rationality is not premised on transcendent justification,
but is best maintained through rituals, customs, solidarity and stability. There
is hardly any need for intervention from “all seeing consciousness” that is
disruptive and abstract – a sort of universal discourse that, nonetheless, has
to become particularized in specific situations. Meanwhile, historical societies
tend to depend on positive laws and sanctions, obedience and disobedience to
laws, backed by explicit moral requirements. Positive laws are external and
transcendent, and are obeyed on the basis of “rational” self-interest. Hence,
one calculates to what degree one can escape the rule of law without being
cought. This means that positive laws, despite their claim to universality, are
individuating, fragmenting, since such laws do not bind a community but are
external to it. As Confucius would have it, once a tradition and its community
fails, laws are established (Confucius, 1998, p. 81.).

This difference is emphasized by Hegel, who while attempting to be a
philosopher was one of the major figures who ended Western philosophy,
and who suggested that Confucius is only a man who has practical wisdom,
but had no speculative philosophy, no historical reason that would be all
encompassing (Hegel, 1962, par. 268.). It is important to note that for Hegel,
as well as for all modern pretence of being philosophical, all awareness
must be “mediated” by abstractions, while Confucius accepts the wisdom
of intuition – direct awareness that cannot be extricated from accumulated
experience of a tradition. Here Confucius rejects any notion of a separate
domain of wisdom that does not participate in conscious (xin) and direct
awareness that is inclusive of reflection of the aforementioned balance as
“good knowledge” (liang-chih). But following the understanding of hsin,
there is a unity of consciousness and action or “conscious action” that cannot
be separated from yi, as an action that is directly “reflecting thoughtful will”
(Hall, David L. 1987, p. 44).

Traditional civilizations are ritualistic, where ritual forms associated
with public and private relationships and activities allow for institutional
continuity with minimal reflective intervention. Rituals provide a form for
personal expression as aesthetic participation and not calculative detachment.
Here, Confucian concept of person is a development as an achievement of
interdependence through integrative emotions held in common. This is an
ethos that depends on exclusion of emotional outbursts and actions that are
not contained within immanent customs. Of this we shall speak subsequently
at the level of expressivity. Confucius can be seen not as a radical individual
who formed a new tradition, but a living tradition that is transmitted in his
name. A sharper distinction between tradition and history may be noted in the
way that the Chinese intellectuals articulated the “Westernization” of China –
the late Nineteenth and the early Twentieth century: the West saw itself as
having a historical mission to civilize (and of course Christianize) China – an
aggressive will, while Chinese saw themselves as “accommodating” will. The
latter will not allow for discontinuity, since an accommodating will allows
for absorption over long periods of time; the foreign elements will become
absorbed and given proper meaning in traditional interpretation (Hall David
L. 1987, p. 46.).

Expressivity

While the difference between history and tradition separates the West from
China to the extent that in the former great individuals or their eminent texts
dominate and form radical breaks in a continuity of history, the latter, China,
avoids such breaks not only because of tradition, but also, and primarily,
because of the connecting and continuous presence of “expressivity”. A brief
delimitation of this aspect will demonstrate that despite the Western focus on
individual figures making history, the continuity of that history also depends
on the expressive aspect. Basically speaking, the expressive is one level at
which both the West and China will find a commonality. From the donning
of the mask, angry or benevolent, to the solemn magic of transforming
wine into blood and bread into flesh, from daily rituals of greeting the sun, expressive characteristics manifest directly and move the experiencer—prior to intellectualization—by communicating a mood which spreads through any “reality”. Expressivity, in brief, can assume any embodiment, since it is not something called interior or subjective, but rather directly present, inner-worldly and yet transcendent of things. Yet it is not beyond or above the immanent world, but the very mood that pervades the presence of all things and humans. This transcendence is precisely what is capable of affecting us, not as an intentional act stemming from an interiority of a subject, but a movement of expressivity which comprises the very sense of gestures and is transmitted through gestures, postures, and mobile face and limbs, or total relaxed concentration.

This means that the immediacy of expression is not so much faced or confronted as participated in and lived through. It is like a lively tune which sends our limbs into frenzy, or the Dionysian tragedy sending horror across the faces of the audience. The horror is a spontaneous expression of being moved, being gripped by a presence where what does the gripping and the being gripped are one. This conception of expressivity abandons not only the inner-outer dualism, but also abandons the distinction between our anatomical body and expressivity and its characterization, and the expressivity manifests among the experienced phenomena: the fearsome storm and the fear forming across the face participate in one expressive movement; the lonely night and the lonely heart, the bright morning and the sparkling eyes converge in the medium of expressivity which does not lend itself into separations. While attempting to radiate an expressive joy across the morning sun and the shimmering tree tops, we are drawn into the morning glory and find ourselves moved with its expressive presence. This suggests that we are in constant communication with each other and with the world through direct participation in the excessive sensuality of ourselves and worldly events.

Expressivity can be manifest in extremes, yan-qi – yo-ki, cheerful atmosphere, or yin-qi (in-ki), gloomy mood. It can be present in various images, such as “hazy day,” “shiny night,” “splendid heavens,” or, according to Mencius and his Taoist background, “hao-jan chih ch’T” (kozen-no-ki) is the strong moving spiritual power. Thus this qi/ki is greater and larger, wider and stronger, fills the world between heaven and earth and to the very ends of the world. For humans, the practice of balanced and thus righteous life establishes a proper qi/ki. The latter were expressed in many ways, including poetry. Thus a follower of Mencius Wen T’ien-Hsiang composed a poem “Cheng-ch’i-ko”, or “the song of the right qi/ki.” Following this “song” a famous Japanese poet, Toko Fujita, wrote a poem as a “response” to Wen T’ien-Hsiang’s poem, where the images of qi/ki were totally “Japanized” to include Japanese dignity, spirit, Japanese sea, cherry blossoms, Mt. Fuji, and the Samurai sword. It is no wonder, then, that the Samurai were attracted to Chinese wisdom in
the form of Zen, since even at the manifest level of *ki* they could lose their individuality by “melting” into a mood of heroism, become one with it, and continue their tradition. This aspect is significant to the extent that for Confucianism there is no such thing as a subject with all sorts of interior psycho-dramas, emotions, feelings and traumas, since the expressive, the *qi/ki* is an envelopment that continues a tradition as an all pervasive mood of respect, family honour, benevolence and, of course, the polar balance. Such a mood, atmosphere, is also present in the West, but not given full credence because it has become individualized and thus subjectified. The all-pervasive moods, joys, loves and hates, have been reduced to the properties of individual psychological interiority, expressed in individual passion for great deeds, but having no presence as a medium of a continuous tradition. The balance of *qi* is precisely the permanent aspect of Confucian philosophy, allowing changes without extremes to the extent that moving to one polar extreme will bring in its wake another polar extreme, creating radical disruptions (Mickunas, 2012, p. 111ff.).

**Change and stability**

The differences between China and the West can be understood on the basis of what comprises stability and continuity of a civilization. It is no secret that students of civilizations seek out “universal standards” to judge which civilization would be most appropriate to be such a standard; the tendency is to grant China such universality is premised on its “permanence” and that means continuity. This leads to the question concerning how permanence and change are regarded in China and in the West. A great many of the characteristics relating permanence and change can be read from the discursive systems of particular traditions. In Chinese tradition, the permanence term *li* is related to the balance of *qi*, while becoming term *ch’i* designates change. In this sense change is not contained by the permanent, as would be the tendency in western metaphysics, but rather the permanent emanates change. In addition, such terms as “spontaneity” and “life” are associated with the permanence term *li*, while, surprisingly such terms as “order” and “law” are tied to *ch’i*, flux. It seems, then, that in the Confucian tradition permanence is natural, and one must adhere to it spontaneously, and spontaneity consists of this adherence. In turn, flux, in its purity, is compelled less naturally; in this sense, fits of passion, that are outside of the balance, must be regarded as abnormal or artificial, lending credence to the awareness of spontaneity that must adhere to permanence. Taoists even claim that evil becoming arises solely from artificial human self-assertion. It is striking that the permanent dimension is neither subjective nor objective, but the way that the pervasive mood is balanced within a tradition, allows dynamic spontaneity and its
More recently Habermas inadvertently, although correctly, noted a peculiar Western habit: theories neither derive from, nor are they connected to facts. The connection between them must, therefore, originate with a point of interest (Habermas, 1976). It is obvious that “thinking” in the West is disconnected from the world in which we live and are engaged in daily affairs. Thinking is “transcendent” and there are various indications of that, specifically in the modern West, under the name of “applied” theories and methods. The very notion of application assumes an ontological difference between thinking and the world, or thinking and action, leading to the separation between theories “about” reality, and theories – ethics that direct action. But even here, ethics is separate from action and, as transcending any given action, must be applied – philosophy departments of the West have “specialists” in ethics and separate specialists in applied ethics. The only connection that is offered between theories and life became a matter of selecting the one for application that best accommodates some prejudice, be it psychological, social, metaphysical, or divine. Final outcome is Kant, where the phenomena of the experienced world do not have anything to do with “the thing in itself” and hence must be organized by a priori, i.e. categories of thinking that organize the otherwise blind experience – but organize it theoretically.

Whatever variants we may offer, the result is all sorts of postmodernisms and “praxis” action without any need for “knowledge”, since the latter is relegated to technological sciences. Philosophy, in this context, is left to offer edification without any understanding or even any effort to understand what sorts of principles might be involved for edification. Let us forget theorizing, and just roll up our sleeves and do “good.” One consolation is offered: we are historical beings and each of us interprets the world in our own way – basically, the world is what we say it is. This is so obvious from the plethora of the most confused pronouncements by the worshipped “theorists” of postmodern ilk, replete with infinities, infinite divinities, mother cults, phallophobias, and – of course – no theories. We are told that tradition is faulty, irrelevant, and each of us have no awareness that we are dominated by all sorts of forces, blind impulses, power syndromes, and any sort of traditional reason is just an oppression. With this set of “explanations” what we should readily give up are such traditional notions as tolerance, rights, specifically since they are inventions of racist phallocentric, Euro-centric while males (Gasche, 2009, p. 17). These brief introjections are relevant for a Western misunderstanding of Confucius. Having relegated history, as it is constituted by “great thinkers” and “eminent texts”, we are told that what moves humans are passions, desires, material forces, divine interventions, each rejecting the others as false, and all jumping into a snake pit to battle – total imbalance, total pre-eminence of psycho-subjectivities who, after all, cannot know themselves apart from adherence to the permanent continuity of polar balance (Mickunas, 2007, p. 231ff.).
“I desire, I want, give me” – blind narcissism. There is no balance of qi, no still moment that is required for finding oneself in the context of a tradition; there is only a current rage for “unconscious” action, whether the unconscious is cultural or bio-genetic, as long as it is incomprehensible to any human is paraded as truth.

In contrast to such “joyful” wisdom, Confucius extols learning as the primary aspect of human life, but learning that is not a transmission of abstractions, but a promoting of a reflection that is also directly relevant to action. At the base learning hsueh is a process of direct awareness, unmediated by theoretical considerations. Some suggest that hsueh is a form of Hsiao, meaning to teach and to become aware. For Confucius, it seems that both learning and teaching was totally intertwined. But what one learns and teaches is a cultural tradition wen that is transmitted not only as historical literature, the classics, but also what is learned orally, through institutions and rituals. Thus transmission of tradition engaged the entire person, summarized in “six arts” – liu-I, first is ritual li, then music yueh, then archery she, chariot driving, yu, writing shu, and calculation, shu. For Confucius, humans are similar in capacity to learn but, it must be added, there must be an “enthusiasm” for learning. This, for Confucius, is the distinguishing characteristic among people. The majority has no desire for learning, without saying that the majority is to be rejected, but that it might not exercise an appropriate balance: without learning courage will lead to unruliness, authority will lead to stupidity, presumed wise action will lead to license, or strength will lead to rashness (Confucius, 1998, p. 67ff).

Concrete education

Cutting across the entire Analects, is a constant appeal to an exemplary person, one whose words do not exceed his actions and whose words are authenticated in practice. Thus, what one says has a performative importance, and the latter cannot simply go through the motions of moral conduct in a way that the action exceeds the meaning of words. There is the Confucian notion of “local worthy” who knows how to ingratiate himself with words, but who has no sense of what his words can do (One could call most politicians “local worthies”). This leads to the Confucian understanding of knowledge and wisdom. To get a glimpse of this understanding, it is advisable to point out that in the West in general, and in the modern West in particular, there is a struggle to reconcile theory with action. Theory always aimed at deciphering the reality of the world, having no relevance to what humans do, until the nineteenth century when the demand emerged that theory must become “practical”. But this demand did not obliterate the difference between theory and practice; it only shifted the requirements of theory to be “applied” to “reality.”
Anglo-Saxon world, philosophy departments have two separate programs, one, in the case of ethics, is “ethical theory” and another “applied ethics”. The latter is similar to a “first aid” kit: tell us where you hurt, and we shall apply a bandage on the sore spot. In Chinese thinking, sharply articulated by Confucius, such a distinction is nonsensical. For one, thinking, chih, is equivalent to “knowledge” and “realization”, both comprising “wisdom” as an aspect of administering an office or a station. Here, at the outset, there is no “fact-theory” distinction, and no “fact-value” separation. Hence knowledge and realization include forecasting an outcome of events in which the forecaster also participates and contributes to the outcome – and all of this is based on an accumulated experience of a living tradition.

The West has two moments or aspects that somewhat coincide with Confucius and also has a dilemma. First, there is a clear demand for learning in classical tradition and a conjunction of knowledge with action; here the principle of knowledge and good being both states that if one knows what is good, one will act well. Ignorance is what leads to bad actions. Resultantly, learning is a solution to negative human actions. Plato and Aristotle extolled Paidea. But in the modern West, there is a disjunction between theory – as explanation, and action, failing to take into account that theory is an aspect within human tradition and, once proposed, will change that tradition. Whether it is Capitalism or Communism, both theories were not trans-historical or eternal truths, but parts of a tradition that changed human action and almost led to the destruction of life – at least human – on this little planet. While being parts of a tradition, even theories are historically effective modes of awareness. This suggests that one must be careful with offering theories in an abstract form, because they might not be in continuation and actions of persons of a given tradition, and might force a rash imbalance that leads to major disruptions and above all – suffering. Meanwhile Confucian wisdom requires sensitivity to what is already available and a forecasting of what can be achieved without destructive results. This also means that the “theories” brought from the West and applied on China are doomed to fail. Mao’s Marxism, as something to be “applied” on the entire Chinese tradition for its transformation, led to drastic imbalance and destruction, in the sense of one-sided “transcendence” of theory over the immanent world.

Closely allied with knowledge-wisdom-realization is “living up to one’s word”, hsin. This means that truth is closely associated with appropriateness or genuineness. To state something, and to do so appropriately means that one’s actions must realize what is being said, being most careful about the results of such realization. Thus truth in speech is coextensive with its effects and with self-completion or self-realization and, through such realization, a completion of things involved in one’s actions. After all one does not act in a vacuum, but with things that require appropriate care. It is notable how tightly Confucius intertwines knowledge, action, self and world (Confucius,
1998, p. 113ff.). Too bad Heidegger did not study Confucius in order to genuinely understand the meaning of Sorge-Care.

Postscript

Despite variations and different levels of interpretation, a common context between Confucius and Western philosophical trends is LEARNING. In this sense, Confucius and Socrates would humbly decline to offer “ultimate” and “final” propositions about everything. This declining prevents a priori to place Confucius into some category as “religion”, with absolute divine edicts and omniscient wisdom. After all, if he claimed that he has not learned enough about humans, he could not even begin to be concerned about gods. A polite way of saying, we are contingent, finite, fallible and self-correcting entities who hope that the constantly cumulative wisdom of tradition, which we advance, will help us act genuinely. The same can be said of Socrates and the tradition he established – a tradition that was constantly intersected by various texts as “divine” and hence above tradition, to be imposed ex cathedra on the rest of the world – allowing philosophy to return constantly to human contingency, fallibility and sensible action – in balance with the world and its changes.

References


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