

Chinese Philosophy

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I

Of the three main flows of philosophical thought, it has been maintained that the Indian is otherworldly, the Greek unworldly and the Chinese worldly. No philosophy is ever plainly worldly; to say that it is so is merely an attempt to caricature it in order to bring out certain features into striking relief. To those who know something of Chinese philosophy. The word “worldly” merely emphasizes certain features in comparison with the Indian and the Greek schools of thought; but to those who do not know anything about it, that word is liable to be quite misleading. What is meant is probably that Chinese philosophy sticks to the kernel either into the dizzy heights of systematic speculation, or into the depth of a labyrinth of elaborate barrenness. Like machines in an industrial civilization, intellectuality in philosophy drives; and whether it drives us into blind alleys or not, it may lead us far away from the wide boulevards or spacious squares. Intellectually, Chinese philosophy has always been in the open air.

We are accustomed to thinking of Chinese philosophy as consisting of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. It is rather as religions that these are exclusively mentioned. In the early stages both Confucianism and Taoism were only philosophies, and as such they were in the pre-Qin period members of a whole democracy of different schools of thought, the variety of which during that period was unparalleled in Chinese history. Since terms are inadequate, we shall refrain from any attempt at description. It is misleading enough to apply the familiar philosophical terms to Western philosophy, it is much worse to apply them to the Chinese. Once might say for instance that there were logicians in the pre-Qin period; but if so, readers might be led to think that there were people who brooded over syllogism, or the laws of thought, or even obversion and conversion. The Yin-Yang-ists have been described in a recent article as the precursors of science, and not without foundation either, but then they were precursors of something which strictly speaking never arrived; and if as a result of this description readers imagine them to be ancient Keplers or Galileos, they entertain a distorted view of a whole brand of thinkers.

Confucianism and Taoism are indigenous to China, they are properly Chinese; Buddhism, however, was introduced from India and it might be wondered whether it could be said to be Chinese. The introduction of a foreign philosophy is not quite the same as the importation of foreign goods. In the last century, for instance, the English were alarmed at the invasion of German Idealism. “The Rhine,” they declared, “has flowed into the Thames.” But however alarmed they might be, their Thames has not since become a mere Rhine; British Hegelianism while acknowledging its origin and impetus from abroad is distinctly English, though it is not so characteristically English as the philosophies of Locke and Hume. Buddhism in China, in the early stages, at any rate, has been modified by Chinese thought: indeed for a time it was robed in Taoistic garbs, and Taoism, it might be said, became its chief agency of distribution. But there was something stubborn in Buddhism which resisted Taoistic manipulations, hence although it became Chinese to some extent, it is not distinguished by the features characteristic of the indigenous Chinese philosophy.

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In the following sections we shall single out certain features for discussion. We shall refrain as much as we can from proper names, technicalities or details.

II

One of the features characteristic of Chinese philosophy is the underdevelopment of what might be called logico-epistemological consciousness. Undoubtedly such a statement has been made frequently, and perhaps too frequently it has been taken to mean either that Chinese philosophy is illogical or that it is not based on knowledge. Obviously this is not what is meant. We needn't be conscious of biology in order to be biological, or of physics in order to be physical. Chinese philosophers could easily manage to be logical without a developed sense of logic; their philosophy could be founded on the knowledge then accepted as such, and yet devoid of a developed sense of epistemology. To be conscious of logic and epistemology is to be conscious of the instruments of thought. Not having a developed consciousness of epistemology and logic, the Chinese philosophers presented their ideas with a barrenness and disconnectedness that might suggest to those who are accustomed to systematic thought a feeling of indeterminateness unexpected of philosophies, and possibly also dampening the enthusiasm of the students of Chinese thought.

Not that there was no such consciousness. Perhaps inevitably from the nature of the impetus concerned, this consciousness started with what impatient thinkers are liable to dismiss as mere sophistries, however, was only a switch of the muses from the problem of ultimate realities to those of language, thought and ideas, realizing perhaps that the latter must be tackled before the former could be solved. Such a switch took place in the pre-Qin period when a number of thinkers started to maintain the distinction between the universal and the particular, the relativity of terms, the separation of hardness from whiteness, the doctrine of infinite divisibility of the finite, of the staticity of quickly moving arrows, etc., in the midst of speculations which were obviously more directly concerned with the problems of that turbulent age. Students of philosophy will inevitably think of the parallel in Greek thought. It was from similar doctrines arising out of reason itself that the intellectual finesse in Western philosophy was obtained; and it was by them that philosophy was in some sense converted into mental gymnastics. In China, however, the tendency was short-lived; admirable as it was for a beginning, it yet died a precocious death. The logico-epistemological consciousness remained underdeveloped almost to the present day.

Whatever the causes may be, and a large number may be suggested, the effect on philosophy and science is far-reaching indeed. Science in the West is linked up in an intimate way with Greek thought. While it is untenable to regard the former as a direct offspring of the latter, it is none the less true that the former owed part of its development to certain tendencies in Greek thought. Technique in experimentation was comparatively a late arrival in the history of European culture, and while it is of the utmost importance to science it is not its only necessary condition. Certain tools of thinking are equally required, and what was actually supplied might be most conveniently called mathematical patterns of thinking. The emergence of calculus was a great impetus to science, thus indicating that the instruments for handling data are just as important as their collection through observation and experiment. The patterns of thought to which Europeans had long been accustomed were Hellenistic. Hellenism is thoroughly intellectual; its intellectuality is characterized by developing ideas and carrying them ruthlessly and relentlessly either to their sublimities or to their absurdities. *Reductio ad absurdum* is itself an intellectual instrument. It was this element which was responsible for the early development of logic, which on the one hand

supplied the tools of early science, and on the other gave Greek philosophy that admirable articulateness which was the envy of later thinkers. If the development of this logico-epistemological consciousness was partly responsible for the presence of science in the West, the lack of this development must be partly responsible also for the absence of science in China.

The effect on Chinese philosophy is equally far-reaching. While Chinese philosophy is not adorned with intellectual frills and ruffles, it is also not burdened or stifled by them. This is not meant to portray earthiness. There is hardly any philosophy less earthy than that of Chuang Tze. John Middleton Murray has somewhere said that while Plato was a good poet, Hegel was a bad one. On some such basis, Chuang Tze should be regarded as a great poet perhaps even more than a great philosopher. His philosophy is expressed in exquisite poetic prose in delightful parables. Extolling as lofty an ideal of life as any philosophy in the West. There is a certain whimsicality that yet manages to be robust, a kind of finality that is not dogmatism, together with that liveliness and graspability which appeal to the understanding as well as to the emotion of the readers. And yet to those who are accustomed to the geometrical pattern of thought in philosophy, there is even in Chuang Tze a sort of intellectual bleakness or disconnectedness as well. Although deduction and inference must have been at the service of the thinker, there was no attempt to weave ideas into a closely knitted pattern. As a result, there isn't that systematic completeness which is so soothing to the trained mind.

But ideas that are worked out to their systematic completeness are liable to be such that we have to take them or leave them. Through them the author is irrevocably committed. They could not be eclectically taken without having their pattern revoked as well. Here as elsewhere the advantage or disadvantage is not entirely on any one side. It may be, as it has often been claimed, that the world will always be divided between Platonists and Aristotelians, and that probably in a number of senses; but other reasons aside, Aristotle, in spite of Aristotelians, may turn out to be much more short-lived than Plato, on account of the former's articulateness; for the more articulate an idea is, the less inarticulate in terms of the interconnectedness of ideas that its suggestiveness is almost unbounded. The result is that for centuries annotations and interpretations never stopped. Much original thought was disguised in the cloak of ancient philosophies which were never revoked, nor yet, peculiar as it may seem, completely accepted. Whether the numerous Neo-Confucianisms or Neo-Taoisms in the different periods in Chinese history were recrudescence of the original impulses or not, they were not at any rate repetitions of the original thought. In reality there was no lack of originality, but in appearance there was an absence of what might be called free adventures of thought. We are not here speaking of the practical reasons why Chinese philosophy stuck to the beaten path from certain periods onward. Even long before some philosophies acquired the intolerance of religions, the tendency to clothe original thought in terms of existing philosophies was already in evidence. Whatever mundane reasons there may be, Chinese philosophy in the form in which it was presented was particularly suited to being made use of by original thinkers in that it could gather original thought into its mold or structure almost without any effort.

III

Perhaps most people at all acquainted with Chinese philosophy will single out the unity of nature and man as its most distinguishing characteristic. The term "nature" is illusive and the more one grapples with it, the more it slips through one's fingers. In the ordinary sense in which it is

most often used in our everyday life, it is not adequate to stand for the Chinese term “*t'ien*”. Perhaps if we mean by it “both nature and nature’s God,” with emphasis sometimes on the one and sometimes on the other, we have something approaching the Chinese term. This doctrine of the unity of nature and man is a comprehensive one indeed; in its highest and broadest realization, it is a state in which the individual is identified with the Universe through the merging of the subject into the object or vice versa, by sticking to the fundamental identity and obliterating all obvious differences. To express this idea adequately requires a special set of terms which it is not the intention of this article to introduce. We may confine ourselves to the mundane consequences. If the ideal is approached to any appreciable extent, there won’t be that unhealthy separation of a self or an ego from his fellow beings on the one hand, nor a demarcation of things human from things natural on the other. The resultant attitude both in Chinese philosophy and in popular thought towards nature in the ordinary sense is quite different from that in the West: Nature is hardly ever something to be resisted, to be struggled against, or to be conquered.

In the West, there is quite a pervading desire to conquer nature. Whether human nature is regarded as being “nasty, brutish and short” or human beings as angelically cherubic babes in the woods, they seem to be always battling against nature, claiming a sort of manifest destiny over the whole natural domain. The result of this attitude is a sort of anthropocentricity on the one hand and a certain malleability of nature on the other. The effect on science is tremendous. One of the incentives to the advancement of science is to acquire the power needed for the conquest of nature. Nature cannot be conquered without an adequate knowledge of it. It can only be made malleable for human beings by our making use of it through our knowledge of its laws. All the engineering marvels, all the medical achievements, in fact, the whole modern industrial civilization, including the armaments, for good or for evil, may be regarded in one sense at least as the conquest of nature by natural means towards a state of affairs desired by human beings. From the point of view which regards nature as something quite apart from humans, the issue is clear-victory so far belongs to the human beings; but from the point of view which regards human beings as having a nature of their own and therefore also problems of mutual adjustment arising out of it, the issue is not so clear-it may even turn out that the victor is also the vanquished.

The separation of nature and man results in a sort of anthropocentricity which is clearly exhibited in Western philosophy. To say that man is the measure of things, or that the essence of a thing is the perception of it, or that understanding makes nature, reveals the attitude that nature is somehow not simply given. In the language of philosophy, there is a certain constructability in the concept “nature” in which there is free play of intellect, and in the language of everyday life, there is a certain manoeuvrability over nature which human beings either do enjoy or want to enjoy. We are not speaking here of Idealism or Realism which are after all conscious constructions. We are speaking rather of the difference in attitude between China and the West such that while in the latter the world is almost taken for granted to be dichotomized into nature and man, in China it takes quite an effort to detach man from the nature and things. Of course, different schools of thought in China interpret nature in different ways, attach to it different degrees of interest or importance; different thinkers of the same school, and the same thinker at different times may also have different notions of nature. But whatever the notion may be, man is not set apart from nature and in opposition to it.

Thus far we have merely touched on the nature of man. The partial conquest of nature in the West seems to have left human nature more assertive than before, and far more dangerous. The

attempt to humanize science and industry is an attempt to temper human nature so that the results of science and industry would not be implements of cruelty, slaughter and general destruction. If civilization is to be preserved some such attempts at individual and social control are necessary and calling attention to them is surely a credit to a number of thinkers. We should however be careful about suggesting conquest. In a sense and a significant one too, nature whether human or non-human has never been conquered. No natural law has ever been nullified or suspended for human benefit and at human will; what has been done is to bring about a state of affairs such that certain natural laws operate against certain others so that the results desired by human beings are sometimes realized. If we try to conquer nature by damming it up, nature will overwhelm us with vengeance; there will soon be leakages here and there and later there will be floods, landslides and explosions. The same is true of human nature. The doctrine of original sin, for instance, results either in psychological subterfuges which make human beings undignified, or else in explosions which make them destructive or anti-social.

While certain internal restraint through philosophy or religion and certain external restraint through law are required in any society and admit by Chinese philosophy, it does not advocate the frustration of the functioning of the primary instincts. There is a result something which, for lack of an adequate term, might be described as natural naturalness or contented contentedness. By these terms we do not mean to insinuate that there are fewer instances of cruelty or barbarity in Chinese history than in that of any other nation; evidences of want on destruction, or blood-thirstiness, or of desires running rampant seem to abound in Chinese history as anywhere else. What is meant is rather that there isn't that unnaturalness which Oscar Wilde saw in the naturalness of a Victorian. The Chinese may have something to say against unnaturalness, but they do not make a fuss over being natural on the one hand, and seem to be quite contented with their contentedness on the other. Perhaps in modern times we are accustomed to regarding contentedness as stagnation, as mental laziness, or as spiritual snuggery. The modern point of view is essentially one that encourages revolts against one's self, producing as a byproduct such psychological wear and tear that ease and equanimity in life can no longer be maintained. It is a point of view that is opposed to the one we are trying here to describe. The Chinese are contented with their contentedness, exhibiting ideologically the attitude that each to himself is something that is given, and therefore something to be accepted; to borrow a phrase so admirably employed by F.H. Bradley, each has his "station and life," and in them or it he has his natural dignity. We are not speaking here of the heightened philosophical state attainable only by the few. Although Confucianism allows everybody the possibility to become a saint, failure to do so does not cause any psychological stain. Given this attitude concerning one's station and life, one is not merely at one with nature, but also at one with society.

IV

It is but a truism that individuals cannot live apart from society. Both Greek and Chinese philosophies embody this point of view. From Socrates to Aristotle there was an extraordinary emphasis on the importance of a good political life, and all of those scholars are political thinkers as well as philosophers. The underlying idea seems to be that the fullest or the most "natural" development of an individual can only be attained through the medium of a just political society. Philosophy touches life just as intimately as literature and perhaps more intimately than a number of other subjects. Those who are born philosophers or those who happen to have philosophy thrust upon them through political or social encroachment upon their liberties are bound to take the

above truth as one of the premises or active principles. The attempt to furnish what is now called *Lebensanschauung*, to give it its meaning, and to lead a good life was a more primitive incentive to philosophy than what is currently valued as pure understanding. Since a good life was desired, the principle of the interrelatedness of life and politics led philosophy straight to political thought and philosophers became directly or indirectly connected or concerned with politics.

This tradition wasn't entirely carried on in the West, and one of the reasons why it stopped will partly be the subject of discussion in the next section. But in China the tradition persisted almost to the present day. Quite without exception, Chinese philosophy is at the same time political thought. One might say that Taoism isn't, but saying so is like saying that those who advocate economic *laissez faire* are not advocating an economic policy or not formulating economic thought. Surely anarchism is political thought even if anarchy sometimes means the absence of government. In political thought, Taoism might be said to be negative in what was advocated when compared with Confucianism. It regarded political measures of the kind advocated by the Confucianist as artificialities which created problems rather than solved them. This negative doctrine was based on something positive. The Taoistic political thought was both equalitarian and libertarian; it might even be said to be both carried to the extreme. With the doctrine of universal relativity carried to the sphere of politics, it was opposed to any kind of imposition of standards and political measures are in one way or another standardization. Standards there may be, and yet standardization need not take place, for the standards that are inalterably given in the nature of things need not be imposed at all, while those that need be imposed must inevitably be alien to the situation that gives rise to such impositions. Taoistic political thought was a sort of political *laissez faire* and *laissez aller*, it was negative only in the sense of condemning super-imposed political efforts, not in the sense of having entertained no political goal whatsoever. Like Confucianism, Taoism has its political ideal. That ideal might be described as a sort of equalitarian and libertarian bliss to be attained in a kind of Rousseauistic state of nature with perhaps certain European strenuousness edited out of its naturalness.

Compared to Taoism, Confucianism was much more positive in political thought. Confucius himself was a statesman as well as a philosopher. He abstained very wisely from the role of an original thinker, declaring that he was a transmitter of doctrines already entertained and a describer of institutions that existed in a bygone and somewhat golden age. Whether consciously or otherwise, he succeeded in endowing his creative thought with the objectivity of historical continuity. He might have described himself as a Neo-Confucianist, for in giving his thought the impersonality already mentioned, he succeeded also in rendering it uniquely Chinese. Even without political backing it probably could induce Chinese thought to follow its trail, and with political backing it easily molded subsequent thought into its own pattern. That pattern is both philosophy and political thought woven into an organic whole in which politics and ethics are inseparable and in terms of which the man and his station and life are also united. The unity of nature and man is also a unity of ethics and politics, of the individual and the society.

Philosophy and political thought may be linked up in many different ways. One may erect a metaphysical system and deduce from it certain principles concerning politics, or one may plunge into politics and indulge in political thought which has no systematic bearing with his philosophy. Political thought may be internal to a philosophical system and external to the philosopher, or internal to the philosopher, but external to his philosophy. In either case, there is a sort of dislocation; either philosophy ceases to be politically potent, or political thought loses its

philosophical foundation. British Hegelianism for instance furnished a political thought internal to the philosophical system, but so external to the philosophers, with the exception of T.H. Green, that neither it nor they could be said to have exerted any influence on English politics.

Confucianist political thought was internal both to the philosopher and his philosophy. Through the doctrine that internal saintliness or sagacity could be externalized into enlightened statecraft, every philosopher felt himself to be a potential statesman. It was in statecraft that one's philosophical ideals found their broadest realization. Since Confucianism has become a sort of unwritten constitution in China, the country has been governed more by flexible social control than by rigid legal discipline; and in such a body politic, the eminent philosopher and teacher was at least as much as, if not more of, an unofficial statesman, as a prominent lawyer in a country that is predominantly governed by law. A prominent Confucianist philosopher was a sort of uncrowned king or an uncommissioned minister of state, if not during his life, at least posthumously, for it was he who shaped and fashioned the *Zeitgeist* in terms of which life in any society was more or less sustained. It was thus that Chinese philosophers were sometimes said to have change the customs and manners of the land, and it was thus that Chinese philosophy and politic thought were significantly woven into a single organic pattern.

V

The unity of philosophy and politics lies partly at any rate in the philosopher. Chinese philosophers until very recent times were quite different from Western philosophers of today. They belonged to the class of Socrates and Plato. In his *Soliloquies in England*, George Santayana declared with some vehemence and more than a trace of protestation that he was a modern Socrates. Of all the present-day philosophers, he might indeed be singled out as a cultural influence of more than a technical significance, having gone through and beyond the technicalities of philosophy and stepped into the realm of humane letters. But frankly, there can be no more modern Socrates any more than there can be a modern Aristotle. Ever since Herbert Spencer, we have learned to be wise in checking our ambition to unify the different branches of knowledge through the medium of a single scholar. There is so much technique developed in each branch of knowledge that it is well-nigh impossible for the underlings that we are to be the masters of them all. We regret the passing of Socrateses. A living encyclopedia may bring forth a certain unity to knowledge which may be efficacious towards its further advancement, but since knowledge could be nibbled at piecemeal and improved or advanced through the present method of the division of labor, the loss of such a unity need not be regretted. In some sense, the passing of Socrateses is much more regrettable.

Not only is there a division of labor in the modern pursuit of knowledge, there is also that trained detachment or externalization. One of the fundamental tenets in the modern scientific procedure is to detach the researcher from the object of his research, and this can only be done by cultivating his emotion for objective truth and making it predominate over what other emotions he may happen to have concerning his researches. Obviously one cannot get rid of one's emotions, not even a scientist, but if one is trained to let one's emotion for objective truth dominate over his other emotions in his researches, one has already acquired the detachment needed for scientific research. In accordance with this procedure the modern philosopher becomes more or less detached from his philosophy. He reasons, he argues, but he hardly ever preaches. Together with the division of labor, the tendency towards detachment makes him a detached logician, or a detached epistemologist, or a detached metaphysician. Philosophers in former days were never

professional. The emergence of professional philosophers may have done some service to philosophy, but it seems to have also killed something in the philosopher. He knows philosophy, but he does not live it.

That something is gained in philosophy after this method of approach is employed, there is not doubt. We do know more of the problems of each branch of philosophy than we did before. Although the personality of the philosopher cannot as yet be entirely divorced from his philosophy, a basis for objectivity is achieved which makes philosophy much more capable of cumulative effort than it ever was before. The advance in this direction is made possible by the improvements in the tools of expression; a kind of technique of articulation is being developed which cannot be ignore. Anyone may still enjoy the privilege of adopting any philosophy suited to his nature or pre-dispositions, but he can hardly express his ideas in any way he wants. Nor is the gain limited to philosophy; the philosopher has also gained an ideal of detachment. It might be described as a sort of sweet skepticism in which, to use familiar terms, Hebraic sweetness is seasoned with Hellenic light and Hellenic light is tempered with Hebraic sweetness. Anyone who is fortunate enough to approach this ideal will acquire the kind of rare charm in which skepticism doesn't make him cynical, nor does sweetness made him effusively or obtrusively good. He will not be militantly virtuous and may therefore lose that social or sociological efficacy or function expected of him, but considering the evil that militantly good people may do, he is bound to be a negative asset and a positive value. The ideal is difficult of attainment. In being detached and externalized philosophy becomes a rather tortuous and thorny path; it has become so strewn with technicalities that their mastery requires time, training and a certain academic single-mindedness and before these are mastered one might lose one's way or else wither away in the process. Even when he succeeds to any extent, he is hardly a modern Socrates.

Chinese philosophers were all of them different grades of Socrateses. This was so because ethics, politics, reflective thinking and knowledge were unified in the philosopher; in him, knowledge and virtue were one and inseparable. His philosophy required that he lived it, he was himself its vehicle. To live in accordance with his philosophical convictions was part of his philosophy. It was his business to school himself continually and persistently to that pure experience in which selfishness or egocentricity was transcended so that he would be one with the universe.

Obviously this process of schooling could not be stopped, for stopping it would mean the emergence of his ego and the loss of his universe. Hence cognitively he was eternally groping, and cognitively, he was eternally behaving or trying to behave. Since these could not be separated, in him you have synthetically the "philosopher" in the original sense. Like Socrates, he did not keep office hours with this philosophy. Neither was he a dusty musty closeted philosopher sitting in a chair on the periphery of life. With him, philosophy was hardly ever merely a pattern of ideas exhibited for human understanding, but also at the same time a system of precepts internal to the conduct of the philosopher and in extreme cases it might even be said to be his biography. We are not speaking of the caliber of the philosopher-he might be second rate; or of the quality of his philosophy-it might not be tenable; we are speaking of the unity of the philosopher with his philosophy. The separation of these has changed the social value of philosophy and deprived the world of one kind of colorfulness.

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