

**"Chinese and Western Values: Reflections on a Cross-Cultural Dialogue
on a Universal Ethics"**

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"Senselessly arrogant would be the presumption that
inhabitants of all parts of the world need to be
Europeans in order to live a happy life."

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 - 1803)
Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind

After the fall of the iron curtain and its great political and ideological barriers, partition of the world according to cultural distinctions seems to have become fashionable again. Samuel Huntington's controversial book highlighted this issue. As the conclusion he draws in his book is indeed highly questionable, his premises - the drawing up of main cultural fault lines - have also come under dispute, being critiqued, on the one hand, from a universalistic point of view as too affirmative of cultural difference and, on the other, from a likewise fashionable postmodern multiculturalist and anti-essentialist view as neglecting the differences within cultures.

It should be possible, though, particularly regarding a discussion on values, to start from these premises, that is, from an affirmation of cultural difference, without coming to the same conclusions which in Huntington's case are marked by an Americo-centric view of power politics. No doubt, the USA, as today's "sole remaining super-power", is exerting a tremendous influence worldwide. This is an essential part of the development called globalization by now; that is, globalization was also initiated - and still is, to a large extent, being fuelled - by American finance, business and the entertainment industry. There is hardly a corner in the world which has not received the imprint of US dollars, Microsoft Windows, CNN, Hollywood movies, TV sitcoms, Madonna and Michael Jackson. Seen from this perspective, it would not be wrong to call this de-facto universalistic development not

globalization but Americanization.¹ How can we in view of this impact discuss the question of universality of values in a fair way, one that gives due consideration to cultural diversity as something worth preserving as much as the diversity in the ecological sphere? In any case, the background picture sketched above should make us aware – at the very outset of this exploration of universal ethics - of the pitfalls of all universalisms, i.e., they always also entail the dimension of power or, as the contemporary philosopher Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich puts it, "I haven't yet seen a universalism that isn't anybody's universalism."² Let us, therefore, first take a look into the origins of this Western universalism, that is, the Christian religion.

1. Christian Origin of Western Universalism

The popular division of a Christian based West and a Confucian oriented East Asia is, of course, a simplification, which, like all simple dichotomies, has been much criticized. But from a historical point of view, it still makes sense, that is, if we allow for changes and modifications in the historical process. Nowadays, Western societies - if I may use this generalization at all – are of course a long cry from being Christian societies in the proper religious sense.³ If we still want to call Western postmodern multicultural societies Christian based - in the face of all the critique of Christian religion from the Enlightenment philosophers, Marx, Nietzsche, Existentialism to contemporary indifference - we have to first take into account a 2000 year long history through which certain Judeo-Christian (mixed with Greek-Roman) ideas have taken a firm root in the collective psyche of Europeans and their American offspring. Second, we have to consider the process of "disenchantment" (Max Weber) in the course of which, beginning with the age of Enlightenment, Christian ideas and values have been transformed into political concepts and secular social values. For example, if we look closer at the values of the French Revolution (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) or the Declaration of Human Rights of 1789 then we can see that they are basically Christian ideals

¹ Some people also speak of Coca-Colonization, others simply of cultural imperialism. For the military dimension of this type of universalism see Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback – The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, New York 2000.

² Klaus Michael Meyer-Abich, "Ganzheit der Welt ist besser als Einheit – Wider den Universalismus" (Entirety of the World is Better than Unity – Against Universalism) in *Eine Welt – eine Moral?: eine Kontroverse* (One World – one Morality?: a Controversy), Wilhelm Luetterfelds and Thomas Mohrs (eds), Darmstadt 1997, p. 207

³ Curiously enough, the US, in spite of its multiculturalism, seems to have most preserved a strong public Christian influence, visible for example both in the form of Protestant fundamentalism - the so called Christian Right - or in public repentance prayers of such confessed Liberals as President Clinton in the wake of the Lewinsky scandal.

turned secular⁴, which - irony of history - were contested against the political power of the church.

On this bedrock of Christian value orientation, thus, a set of secular ideas and values developed: the combination of individualism, rationalism, scientism and ideology of progress, called the "Western synthesis". It became the driving force in turning Western-style modernization into an endeavor with a tremendous global or universalistic impact. In the course of this synthesis not only half of the globe was colonized by the Europeans but a "one-dimensional order of progress" was superimposed upon the world with its multitude of peoples. As Yersu Kim, the philosopher in charge of the UNESCO "Universal Ethics" project, remarks:

"The synthesis had such a preeminence in the minds and affairs of men that nations and societies were practically unanimous in accepting Westernization as the only means of ensuring a viable future. Under the banner of modernization, they abandoned customary truths, values and ways of life, and accepted their degree of Westernization as their measure of progress and regress."⁵

In the historical process towards modernity, the cultural/religious origin of this development got out of sight. But in a discussion of cross-cultural issues it is important to see that certain traits of the Christian religious tradition have survived its metamorphosis into a secular value system. For example, the universal missionary claim that was part and parcel with the Christian religion has been handed on - like a relay baton - from the Christian faith to the new civil religions - be it Liberalism, Marxism, Capitalism, Democracy and Human Rights. Even Liberalism, as Charles Taylor once remarked, is - just as Christianity - also a "fighting creed."⁶ And the idea of human rights, the roots and justifications of which (the notions of "human dignity" and "Divine/Natural Law") go straight back to the Christian tradition,⁷ at least for some of its most ardent if not fundamentalist advocates, has somehow turned into a new form of secular transcendence, that is, an ultimate, absolute and quasi-religious point of orientation.

⁴ See Detlef Horster, *Der Apfel faellt nicht weit vom Stamm. Moral und Recht in der postchristlichen Moderne* (The Apple Does not Fall Far From the Trunk: Morality and Law in Post-Christian Modernity), Frankfurt 1995.

⁵ Yersu Kim, *A Common Framework for the Ethics of the 21st Century*, Paris 1999, p. 9

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*, Princeton 1992, p. 62

⁷ Charles Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus on Human Rights" in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge 1999, p. 125. For a different approach on the question of justification of Human Rights see Taylor's paper. He distinguishes between norms (that we can

If we thus want to strike a balance of the impact of Christian based Western culture on the globe, it would be a mixed blessing: Some people, focusing on the universal belief in material and social progress, science, democracy, the idea of Human Rights and "free" trade (between unequal partners), might see it positively, thus affirming the view, that "our [European/American] way of thinking is still much more overwhelming than our military and economy."⁸ But we should not overlook the costs of this global *conquista* (or Adorno's and Horkheimer's "Dialectics of Enlightenment") that is, the victims of colonialism, imperialism, various stages and forms of genocide and, last not least, the degradation of the environment, such as global climatic change, through a ruthless ideology of progress and economic growth. This is the broader – historical and contemporary - context within which we also have to evaluate the idea of a universal ethics.

Summarizing we can say:

1. Christian ideas and values still form the basis of Western societies, although now mostly in a secularized fashion and therefore not easily recognizable; hence we might better call them post-Christian values.
2. The West has successfully universalized its originally Christian based value system. This was achieved in the age of colonialism and imperialism with the development of science and (military) technology and driven by a quest for discovery.
3. Concerning the universalistic ideals of the new Western civil religion, the original missionary zeal and absolutist claim seem unbroken.⁹

Do we then need in the age of "globalization" also a global or universal ethics? Are Western core values, post-Christian values, the secular values of the French Revolution or of the American Constitution, the model values, and Western societies, consequently, the model societies for the rest of the world? Or isn't this universalistic endeavor of a universal ethics rather an – appropriate – attempt of crowning the eurocentric imprint on the world through a suitable ethical universalism?¹⁰

interculturally agree on) and their justification (e.g. the Buddhist notion of "non-violence" or on the pursuit of "material and spiritual well-being").

⁸ Meyer-Abich, p. 204

⁹ See, for example, William Pfaff, "In America, Radical Globalizers Talk Like Missionaries", *International Herald Tribune*, July 9, 1998.

¹⁰ Meyer-Abich, p. 203

2. The Confucian Vocation: Ethical, Social and Political Dimensions of Confucianism

If we compare the impact of Confucianism in East Asia to that of Christianity in the West, the balance sheet would also show a mix of positive and negative factors. First of all, Confucianism - even though it is not a religion in the strict sense and historically as heterogeneous as Christianity - can certainly be regarded as a functional equivalent of the Christian faith: Confucian values have exerted a profound and lasting influence on China (and East Asia) over a period of even more than 2000 years. Confucianism also claimed universal relevance of its teaching (seen in such catch phrases as *tianxia wei gong*, "Commonwealth under Heaven" or *tian ren he yi*, "unity of Heaven/universe and man"). Compared to Christianity, it lacked, however, the zealous missionary spirit. Instead, it spread to the rest of East Asia as an exemplary teaching of a harmonious social and moral order. Although Confucianism as an institution, unlike the Christian churches, disappeared with the end of imperial China, it formed and, to a certain extent as post-Confucianism, still forms the ethical basis of Chinese society.

As already mentioned, in the 18th century, the philosophy of European Enlightenment challenged, under rationalistic and scientific claims, and in the end "disenchanted" the contents of the Christian faith - a process of secularization through which first a separation of church and state occurred, leading in the end to the marginalization of the churches. A similar process of secularization never took place in China. This does not mean, of course, that Confucianism, as its dominant ideology, has not been criticized. As is well known, it was blamed for all the ills of the traditional Chinese society during the May 4th period (1919) and, from a social-Darwinist point of view, was made responsible for China's backwardness in terms of economic, technological, military and political developments. Although critiqued, and for certain features – just as Christianity – rightly so, it never had to go through a process of secularization as such, because Confucianism - as a form of social and political ethics - had always been a secular way of thought. Thus, lacking the supernatural, miraculous and legendary contents of the Christian religion, which make it so hard to accept for modern man, Confucianism as a value system survived the major anti-traditionalist upheavals in mainland China and even the Cultural Revolution.

Both the Christian faith and Confucianism thus seem to stand for the best and the worst in the respective traditions, and it might only depend on the ideological bent whether one tips the

scale in favor of either the positive or negative side. Let us dwell for a moment, for the sake of a quest for a universal ethics, on the more positive aspects of Confucianism, which have become in view again with the belated recognition that the wholesale dumping of Confucianism 80 years ago might have caused as much bad as good.

According to Tu Wei-ming, one of the central ideas of Confucianism is to view the individual as standing in the midst of partly concentric, partly overlapping circles of relationships - family, seniors/juniors at work, friends, community, country, universe¹¹. This kind of interrelatedness is characterized by a sense of mutuality, responsibility and obligation. The Confucian vocation is thus, in the words of the great Song dynasty literatus Fan Zhongyan, "to take everything under Heaven as one's responsibility" (*yi tianxia wei ji ren*). The path towards this goal of social, if not universal, harmony begins with oneself but aims at transcending oneself – the "self" standing not only for the individual, but also for the family, clan, community, and nation. This is the message of self-cultivation in the short classic *Daxue - Great Learning*. It is in a way a religious message in the worldly context of human relations; and it is, as Fung Yu-lan once said, the main tradition of Chinese philosophy, aiming

"at a particular kind of highest life. But this kind of highest life, high though it is, is not divorced from the daily functioning of human relations. Thus it is both of this world and of the other world, and we maintain that it 'both attains to the sublime and yet performs the common tasks'."¹²

Accordingly, the good that one wishes for oneself should also be made available for the other: "Now the man of perfect virtue (*ren*), wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others."¹³ This is the positive version of the Golden Rule (the negative one is found in the classics as well). Each human being realizes oneself in the network of human relationships. To realize the highest good in daily life, thus, is to be, or rather to become, truly human(e) (*ren*). This kind of social virtue of Confucianism is not an absolutist, universal and egalitarian command (like Christian charity) but has a very concrete psychological nucleus: the love between parents and children. According to Mencius,¹⁴ this elementary - and universal - experience can be enlarged and

¹¹ Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany 1985

¹² Fung Yu-lan, *The Spirit of Chinese Philosophy*, London 1962, p. 3. The last words in this quote are taken from the Confucian classic *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)*.

¹³ *Lunyu (Analects)*, 6.28

¹⁴ "Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated: do this and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm." (*Mencius*, IA.7)

spread throughout the whole world, but with the special love relationship between parents and children remaining of central importance. Summarizing, we can characterize Confucian thought as an ethics based on ideas such as self-cultivation, self-transcendence, mutual responsibility, family values and relationships.

As the ideology of the ruling class, Confucianism did not only have an ethical and quasi-religious but just as much a political function. Its political ideas derive both from Mencius and the *Great Learning (Daxue)*. Mencius' central political messages are concern for the well-being of the people (in contrast to this, the ruler is of least importance) and giving righteousness/justice (*yi*) priority to the gaining of profit¹⁵. The political message of the *Great Learning* is that of unity of morality and politics: People who are in charge of public affairs should show – through self-cultivation - exemplary moral conduct and a sense of social responsibility (*nei sheng wai wang*). In the course of history, this led to a ruling by a meritocracy, selected through government examinations, that inspired the French and German philosophers of the Enlightenment (contrasting to European rule by the nobility and clergy) but which with its hierarchical structures - seen from the standard of modern democracy - also had its grave drawbacks (apart from its own intrinsic problems of a rigid formalism which have been pointed out by critics from the early Qing Dynasty up to May Fourth). Be that as it may, the goal of Confucian inspired government was ruling by an educated elite through moral example and consensus - through the Way of the Mean (*zhongyong zhi dao*) - in order to reach a common good and an harmonious social order. This intellectual elite, because of its engagement in the administration of the country, did not develop an antagonistic attitude towards government, but rather assumed a paternalistic, care-taking function for the entire populace. Unlike in the West, where in terms of social thought we have the dominant view of a social contract through which autonomous individuals are able to handle their colliding rights and interests, in the Chinese tradition, society was considered an extension of the family, for both of which contention was believed to be detrimental, leading to break up and eventually chaos (*luan*). With values that make sense in a family environment taking first place, such as responsibility, duty, loyalty, authority, status, mutual trust and reciprocity in human relationships, the Confucian scholar worked towards the goal of keeping the family-like community as harmoniously together as possible. His foremost political "virtue" in this endeavor, as a member of a "fiduciary community" (Tu Wei-ming), was an extension of his kindness/benevolence (*ren*), that is, a "sense of social concern" (*youhuan yishi*) or, as was said

¹⁵ Mencius, IIA.4, VIIB.14 and IA.1.

of the famous Tang poet Du Fu, to "worry about country and people" (*you guo you min*). The already quoted Fan Zhongyan put it in the well-known line, "To be the first to worry about the world's worries and to be the last to enjoy the world's joys" (*xian tianxia zhi you er you, hou tianxia zhi le er le*)¹⁶. In terms of politics, "humane government" (*ren zheng*) should be (according to Mencius¹⁷) his goal to strive for, and for the realization of benevolence a "scholar of right purpose" should even be willing to sacrifice his life¹⁸.

Whereas in Western societies contractual social theories as well as the idea of antagonism between state (government) and individual (citizen) - evolving rather late around the period of Enlightenment and French Revolution - brought about the concepts of civil society and public sphere with the notion of citizens or intellectuals being critically and independently opposed to the state, the intellectual in the Confucian tradition should be concerned about the welfare of the people and was always supposed to serve within the government; at the same time he ought to be a loyal critic of moral misconduct, an attitude which certainly is still alive and well in China and other East Asian societies. Thus we have, in Thomas Metzger's terms, a tendency toward a "top-down" (*zi shang er xia*) civil society in China in contrast to the ideologically correct "bottom-up" (*zi xia er shang*) version (which accords with the democratic idea) in the West.¹⁹ The question remains open, though, if these particular cultural resources of unity of morality and politics and a "top down" civil society still have a significant role to play for the further development of democracy in China or East Asia.²⁰

3. Western and Chinese Values in a Cross-Cultural Context

Christianity has certainly lost a great deal of its public influence in many European societies today, leading to a somewhat ambivalent situation, though. For it has not only been the origin of eurocentric universalism with respective global consequences for which Pope John Paul II

¹⁶ Fan Zhongyan, "Inscription on the Yueyang-Tower" (*Yueyang-lou ji*), *Guwen guanzhi* (The Finest in Ancient Prose), Taipei 1981, p. 520

¹⁷ Mencius, IIIA.3

¹⁸ *Lunyu*, 15.8

¹⁹ For the different concept of civil society in China see Philip C. C. Huang, "'Public Sphere'/Civil Society' in China? The Third Realm Between State and Society", in: *Modern China*, 19 (1993) 2, p. 216-240. For the distinction between "top-down" and "bottom-up" models, see Thomas Metzger, "The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History", Hoover Essay: <http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/he/21/a.html>

²⁰ See the interesting scenario that Daniel A. Bell sketches for the development of democracy in China in Daniel A. Bell, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A Political Proposal for the Post-Communist Era", *Philosophy East and West*, 49/4, p. 451-493.

– for the Catholic side – recently made a remarkable apology. It has also been the main, if not the sole institution for moral/ethical education, and there does not seem to be any institution having taken its place in this regard. Although schools now offer "ethics" and "civics" in which the new civil religion has to be taught as much as previously the catechism, this type of schooling does not seem to convey a similar sense of commitment. Yet not only moral education is affected by further marginalization of the Churches, but also charitable organizations, which are largely being carried - at least in my country - by the two main Christian confessions. Given the notable willingness to donate money abroad on a *global* scale for relief purposes which have been made public through TV, the traditional Christian ideal "love thy neighbor" seems to have been replaced by a somewhat universalistic but distanced (and by remote control easier to manage) "love thy fellow man" – no matter if he or she lives in Rwanda, East-Timor or wherever. Common charity, however, for the homeless, elderly, sick, handicapped also for kindergartens, is still by and large organized by the churches. Thus, although on the wane, there still seems to be plenty of space – on a *local* basis – for Christian motivated engagement in modern society.

Ironically, but interestingly from a cross-cultural point of view, the Christian religion now seems to be most firmly rooted not in the post-industrialized Western countries but in those areas to which it was transplanted in the process of colonization: Africa and South-America. Apart from that, it has been steadily gaining in attractivity during the last twenty years in mainland China. In this process of cross-cultural appropriation we can observe an intriguing pattern: What is cast away as dregs by one side is picked up as pearls by the other. For we can find the same picture vice versa: The popularity of Chinese religions or certain features of Chinese culture in the West - from the prominence of Chan/Zen and other forms of Buddhism as well as Daoism to the cult status of the *Yijing (Book of Changes)* – concerns elements that have been linked to "superstitious practices" of the "feudal" tradition and thus were thrown, together with Confucianism, on the garbage pile of history by "progressive" Chinese intellectuals from the May Fourth Era up until today. This pattern of mutual cross-cultural appropriation is particularly striking around the time of the May Fourth Movement itself: When Chinese intellectuals most fervently advocated a "total Westernization", their European, especially their German counterparts, called upon their fellow-citizens to learn from the "holy Tao" of the Chinese.²¹

²¹ The German expressionist poet Klabund (in the wake of a craze for the just discovered poetry of Li Bai and others, inspiring for instance Gustav Mahler to his monumental "*Das Lied von der Erde*") went so far as asking his compatriots "to become the Chinese of Europe." Wolfgang Bauer, "Die Rezeption der chinesischen Literatur

Today the interest in such things as Zen and Daoism is even more striking in the West. There is no community college which does not offer some Daoist inspired *Taijiquan*, *Qigong* or *Fengshui* courses; and looking at the bookstores there seems to be an overwhelming offer of Daoist inspired advice-literature which - from the "*Dao of Money*" to "*The Tao of Sex*" - covers all aspects that (not only) Western hearts desire.²² The increasing attractiveness of Daoism and Zen can thus be explained that their practices, insights and wisdoms seem to be compatible with the individualized life patterns of today, where one chooses a religion (including a corresponding identity) like a commodity on a global spiritual supermarket.

Conspicuously absent in this cross-cultural appropriation is Confucianism as the dominant Eastern spiritual and ethical tradition, matching, as already said, the influence of Christianity in the West. This has not always been the case: As already mentioned, during the age of Enlightenment a few of the European philosophers gained considerable inspiration from China, seeing in the ethical teaching of Confucianism and its politico-social system a form of "enlightened government". Cross-cultural borrowings and appropriations are, thus, *zeitgeist* related. It seems to be this incompatibility with the *zeitgeist*, which makes Confucianism, as a moral and social teaching, so cumbersome and misunderstood in the West today.

Today, we are living in an age in which ideas such as responsibility, character cultivation, virtues, duties, overcoming self-interest, etc., don't seem to be high on people's agenda anymore.²³ The Confucian unity of morality and politics (*viz.* political responsibility only through morally exemplary people) appears hopelessly outdated in times of a media democracy in which the outward appearance is more important than substance. Today, the failure of public morality and moral failings of politicians in the West seem to even have entertainment value, beefing up TV ratings or leading, temporarily, to a break-down of internet sites. The situation in China with rampant corruption by the – ideally exemplary –

in Deutschland und Europa" (The Reception of Chinese Literature in Germany and Europe), *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft. Ostasiatische Literaturen* (New Handbook of Literary Studies: East-Asian Literatures). Guenther Debon (ed.), Wiesbaden 1984, p. 184 (quoting Ingrid Schuster, *China und Japan in der deutschen Literatur 1890-1925* [China and Japan in German Literature 1890-1925], Bern 1977)

²² As can be seen from this "*Dao-fever*", there seems to be an essential element of religious Daoism which, in fashionable disguise, is at work here: the seeking for an elixir of longevity. According to today's *zeitgeist*, this elixir is to be found in a unity of meditative and quasi-sportive (alternatively sexual) activity. See Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Spielzeug des Zeitgeistes - Kritische Bestandsaufnahme der Daoismus-Rezeption im Westen" (Play-thing of the Times - Critical review of the Reception of Daoism in the West), *minima sinica*, 1/1998: S. 1-23; published in Chinese in *Zhexue yanjiu* (Philosophical Research), 7/1998, S. 36-46.

officials doesn't seem any better. And yet, we may ask, where should we get impulses for ethical behavior when even those who are politically prominent in society (not to mention the idols and icons of the entertainment industry) do not serve as examples in their conduct?

Already at the time of May Fourth, "progressive" Chinese intellectuals blamed the tradition of Mencius (placing righteousness and morality before profits) for China's not having developed a form of capitalism as aggressive as the one experienced by the Western colonial powers. Roughly hundred years later, as companies are down-sizing by laying off people in order to increase their shareholder value - or as unimaginable amounts of money are being suddenly pulled out of countries leading to a break-down of regional economies - capitalism has reached a quality where the "single conception of the highest good" seems to be to "maximize profits."²⁴ As this type of attitude is also swapping over to China with more and more people, from the commoner to the official, being mainly interested in embezzlement (according to Deng Xiaoping, "getting rich" is now "glorious"), one quaintly wishes that the May Fourth intellectuals, with a sense of foresight, had preserved at least a bit of Mencius' thought.

The emphasis on the family as the nucleus and model of society also seems to be outdated, as we can observe a trend in Western countries towards a disintegration of this institution. But confronted with the Confucian point of view we might again feel like thinking over this kind of "social progress" - after all, we have been forced, lately, to question also other developments, for example in the environment, which not long ago have been hailed as "progress"²⁵. We get our sense of ethical orientation primarily from our parents in families. But with more and more families being defunct, this important service for a functioning society can no longer be guaranteed. Moreover, the crisis of the family seems to be a result of an increasingly self-centered way of life. It is not unlikely that - just as in the question of environmental degradation - preceding generations might have to apologize to the later born for the selfish exploitation not only of our natural but also social and ethical resources. In this context a former judge of the German highest constitutional court (Ernst Wolfgang

²³ In fact, Confucianism *and* Christianity are at odds with today's *zeitgeist*. I am aware that the similarity of Christian and Confucian moral teachings would need to be further explored within the broader context of tradition and modernity.

²⁴ Henry Rosemont Jr., unpublished "Commentary" to Charles Ess' paper on the "Philosophy East-West" conference in Hawaii, January 2000, p. 10. Rosemont adds that at the time his panel was in session, Bill Gates increased his wealth by roughly 4 Million Dollars.

²⁵ Henry Rosemont relates the interesting story that the *Scientific American* in 1914 had a header "Automobiles Will End Pollution in New York City". The article behind this unbelievable header mentions that 31,000 Gallons of horse urine and equal amount of horse manure were deposited daily in the streets of New York. Hence

Boeckenfoerde) already years ago warned that our democratic and value-neutral polity is living on certain (social and ethical) resources which, once used up, it cannot regenerate²⁶ - a warning that has also been brought forward lately by communitarian thinkers. Hence, the task ahead would consist in an, as it were, social ecology, i.e., householding – instead of squandering - certain local ethical resources.

4. From Virtue Ethics to "Quandary Ethics"

Textbook explanations usually have it that ethics, as a philosophical discipline, is an "objective science" of moral principles about good and bad. Contrary to that, morality has always had a culturally particular manifestation. As a "scientific" philosophy of moral principles, ethics is, however, not free of cultural influences and preferences. It was shown, for example, that Western ethical thought possesses universalistic traits, emphasizing throughout history certain universal and egalitarian principles and laws. As already mentioned, this universalism has its historical and cultural origins in the Christian religion, i.e.

- an exclusivist monotheism (being valued as "progress" compared with polytheist religions),
- the idea of equality of all human beings before God,
- an absolutist claim for the truth of its religious message,
- a missionary zeal with which this message had been spread all over the globe.

During the age of Enlightenment, when this religious absolutism of faith was replaced by an absolutism of reason, we encounter in the field of ethics a development towards legification: Codified law (going back to the Roman tradition) and a language of rights, beginning with John Locke, came more and more to substitute unwritten rules of moral conduct.²⁷ Thus, as Charles Taylor once remarked, "Instead of saying that it is wrong to kill me, we begin to say that I have a right to life."²⁸ The language of rights was reinforced at the time of the French Revolution when rights were understood as claims of the citizens against the state. Because of the history of the *ancien régime*, the state (government) was – and still largely is - conceived

automobiles as "horseless carriages" were thought of as a great break-through in ending environmental pollution. Rosemont "Commentary", p. 17

²⁶ See E. W. Boeckenfoerde, "Fundamente der Freiheit" (Foundations of Freedom) in Erwin Teufel (ed.), *Was haelt die moderne Gesellschaft zusammen?* (What Keeps Modern Society Together?), Frankfurt 1997, p. 89.

²⁷ The connection to morality is still visible in the word "right", meaning both "not morally wrong" and "a subjective right to something".

²⁸ Charles Taylor, "Conditions for an Unforced Consensus" p. 127

of as an, at least potentially, evil force which the citizens had to be protected against with rights. Today we have reached a status in which everything is permissible which is not explicitly prohibited by law or, put in terms of a minimalist ethics: "I can do whatever I want, so long as no one gets hurt". Morality as an unwritten code thus has, as it were, dissolved into written rights and laws and has become, more or less, superfluous.

Starting from its earliest beginnings, we have in the field of Western moral philosophy first a development from virtue ethics – via the idea of a "divine law" - to a formalistic deontological ethics. For Aristotle, virtue meant a competence of keeping the middle between two extremes (e.g. the virtue of courage as the middle between recklessness and cowardice). Such competences had to be exercised and gained through practice, reaching a stage that they became natural inclinations; then they helped in realizing the good in life, that is, a happy life within human society. In Kant's deontological ethics (ethics of duty), however, as a further development, obligation and inclination mutually exclude each other: An act is considered to be morally good only when it is done out of obligation and not out of inclination. Also, for Kant, bringing forth the good in acting does not play an important role any more, as he is more concerned with formal principles: universal laws and a foundation of moral acting on the basis of reason. The Golden Rule, simply put, was turned into the Categorical Imperative: The maxim of my own acting should now serve as a basis for a universal law. After Kant, utilitarian ethics developed for which the criterion of the good is "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people", i.e., judging the good now by its consequences or success. Today we have discourse ethics, contractual ethics and ethics of rights. The realization of the good now means not to limit the possibilities for self-realization of the other and thus to guarantee unforced procedures according to which people can negotiate their respective interests and problems. This is a consequential development from the concrete to the abstract, from lived, contextually relevant morality to rational, universal principles. It also shows the mainstream of Western history of ideas to be the evolution of the concepts of liberty and individual autonomy, i.e. of the emancipation of the individual subject from the confines of church and state.

Procedural rules sure are fair enough in order to safeguard a complex, pluralistic polity made up of individuals who are regarded as standing in contractual relationship with one another. The problem is that the good gets out of view in an ethics of rights. If there still is a common good, it only consists in the guaranteeing that each individual interest ("I can do whatever I

want, so long as no one gets hurt") is being treated fairly. Ethics thus has turned into a problem-solving ethics, or in Edmund Pincoff's words a "quandary ethics".²⁹ Such ethics might guarantee a minimal ("thin") ethical standard under which a society may not fall. In contrast to this, there would be a virtue ethics aiming for a high ("thick") standard.

When we look at Confucian ethics in comparison to the development sketched above, it has, of course, also come a long way from Confucius, Mencius, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, Dai Zhen to Tang Junyi and Mou Zongsan. Although Confucian ethics in its modern form has gone through and changed with the encounter of Western philosophy, it has not experienced a comparable process of abstraction. It has remained, by and large, a holistic and socially based role and virtue ethics, i.e., seeing human beings not isolated but in contexts of relationships, including the whole universe. (It is interesting to note in this context, that the modern Chinese rendering of the Western concept of "ethics", *lunli*, can be retranslated as "principles of human relationships".) Moreover, for Confucius the Kantian conflict between duty and inclination does not exist, as can be seen from the words of the Master: "At seventy, I could follow all of my heart's inclinations without transgressing what was right."³⁰ In Confucian ethics we also encounter universalistic traits, i.e. in the already mentioned maxim "to feel responsible for everything under Heaven" or to extend "humaneness" (*ren*) in such a way that "all human beings between the Four Seas are my brothers and sisters,"³¹ we also have rational principles, such as mutuality (*zhongshu*, as in the Golden Rule), but the emphasis is not on abstract principles but on concrete endeavors and cultivation: care, benevolence, humaneness, overcoming of self-centeredness, cherishing human relationships and social harmony. Confucian thought, thus, could be classified as belonging more to a soft (aesthetic) universalism in contrast to a hard (rational) universalism in the West.³²

5. Global Ethics for a "Glocalized" World?

²⁹ Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," *Mind*, vol. 80, pp. 552-71. Reprinted in Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (Eds.) *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, p. 92-112

³⁰ *Lunyu*, 2.4

³¹ *Lunyu*, 12.5

³² See Karl-Heinz Pohl, "Communitarianism and Confucianism - In Search of Common Moral Ground". In: K.-H. Pohl (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp. 262-286.

The question remains if we do need today, as we are "globalizing" in the economic realm, a new global or universal, that is, *one* ethics? As already mentioned, I'm afraid such unifying tendencies are very much in the tradition of Western Christian monotheism and absolutism in terms of a single universal and quasi-religious truth;³³ moreover, as Meyer-Abich remarks, there is the danger that the idea of a universal ethics might just keep us from doing the only necessary thing according to our own moral views.³⁴ And yet, universal ethics is an idea, which has a certain appeal and should not be totally dismissed. It might be worthwhile trying to find a suitable "both-both" kind of middle way.

There sure still are some virtues, such as charity and justice, that do have universal relevance, but ironically, as they have become the cornerstones of the modern Western welfare-state and the Rule of Law, they seem to have disappeared in common discourse. There also are few moral criteria that do possess a universal quality but, because they are simply common sense or can be refuted by logic and contrary examples, they, likewise, have gone out of sight. One is the Golden Rule, another is the question which we might remember from reprimands of our parents in childhood: "What if everyone would do that?", that is, the principle of generalizability or universalizability – the common sense version of Kant's Categorical Imperative. As for the Golden Rule, Amitai Etzioni has recently proposed a thoughtful extension, trying to bridge the gap between social responsibility and individual autonomy: Respect the moral order of society to the same degree as you would like society to respect your individual autonomy.³⁵ The principle of universalizability, although the yardstick for common sense fairness, has become untenable in an age of individual and minority rights as well as through power politics in the international arena. It would, for example, also have to address the question of fairness between the developed and underdeveloped countries: What if everyone on this planet would use up as much energy and natural resources, drive two or three cars, pollute the environment, etc. as the average European and American? Thus failing here but using this criterion in other contexts would look like tailoring moral principles for selfish interests. Be that as it may, the way we exercise our freedom and live on the cost of others, particularly of the later born, is not universalizable. "Only a part of mankind can live on the cost of others, not all of mankind."³⁶ Here, in environmental degradation, our concept of

³³ It is interesting to note in this context that the main champion for Global Ethics in the West is a catholic priest and renegade professor of theology: Hans Kung.

³⁴ Meyer-Abich, p. 203

³⁵ Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule – Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, New York 1996

³⁶ Meyer-Abich, p. 203

freedom (which is closely allied with that of rights) might indeed have reached an end point.³⁷

Meyer-Abich, therefore, concludes:

"We don't need a universal morality, it would be absolutely sufficient if we wouldn't permanently and systematically offend against our own principles of morality in that we are living on the cost of others – the Third World, the later born and our natural environment."³⁸

He further argues that morality must have a home base; for it is located in a special environment, in a cultural tradition. The universalistic point of view is too abstract to exert any attraction or to convey a sense of commitment. This aspect is also commented on by Michael Walzer:

"Societies are necessarily particular because they have members and memories, members *with* memories not only of their own but also of their common life. Humanity, by contrast, has members, but no memory, and so it has no history and no culture, no customary practices, no familiar life-ways, no festivals, no shared understanding of social good."³⁹

Hence, universality and particularity, the global and local significance of ethics, do not mutually exclude but complement each other - according to a view already given by the medieval philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) who held the idea of "unity in plurality", maintaining that each individual thing is a manifestation of the totality of the universe, that it, in fact, even contains this totality.⁴⁰ It is a view which is, interestingly, also shared by Neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song-period, as by the Cheng brothers who maintained that "the principle is one but its manifestations are many" (*li yi fen shu*).⁴¹ This also illustrates that we find a *global* relevance as much in the teachings of such *local* thinkers as Plato, Kant, Hegel and Marx as we do in the Chinese tradition with Confucius, Mencius, Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. The latter ones only escaped the notice of European and American intellectuals because – unlike their Eastern counterparts – Westerners were, and largely still are, familiar with only one, i.e. their own tradition.⁴²

³⁷ Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus", p. 129; Charles Taylor refers here to ideas of the Thai Buddhist Sulak Shivaraska.

³⁸ Meyer-Abich, p. 210

³⁹ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, Notre Dame, Ind./London, 1994, p. 8

⁴⁰ *De docta ignorantia, On the Learned Ignorance*, II.3

⁴¹ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton 1963, p. 499, 544

⁴² We shouldn't forget that Chinese intellectuals - and generally those of other than Western countries - possess a more than 100 year long history of learning from the West. They have gone to our schools and are thus

If we want to pursue further the idea of a universal ethics in an intercultural context, it would be appropriate, if not mandatory, to also stress the universal relevance of other than Western values, particularly of those complementing the core Western ideas of individual liberty and rights. The Korean scholar Hahm Chaibong, defending Confucianism from just this universalistic perspective, emphasizes that limiting Confucianism to China or the East Asian world would be detrimental to its message. After all, as he points out, the Pope does not limit the meaning of the Christian faith solely to Europe, nor do Liberals see the relevance of individual rights alone for Western countries.⁴³ Now we shouldn't, of course, expect Confucianism soon to take a hold in Western societies as certain Daoist inspired practices did; but, interestingly, the issues raised in Confucianism have been taken up in the West within the last decade or two - independently – also by communitarian thinkers. They thus do already possess a trans-cultural impact and quality.

It is important, though, that such universal relevance is not defended in an *exclusivist* way. For example, to claim universal relevance alone for Western secular values and to dismiss Confucian values from a modern Western point of view as those of yesterday would not only be missing the point of complementarity (or of unity in diversity), it rather would be just another sign of ethnocentric cultural arrogance, that is, of seeing the whole world, in the wake of Hegel's eurocentric philosophy of history, as developing towards European ideals in the form of "self-realization of the *weltgeist*". Another popular way to discredit the Confucian heritage (e.g. in the Asian values debate) is to see Confucian values solely as a means to back autocratic rule (a function that they certainly did fulfill in the past and which still is a problem today); but to singularly focus on this certainly important aspect and to neglect the ethical dimension of Confucianism would be just as misleading as criticizing someone defending the relevance of Christian charitable values today for backing the inquisition.

There are then indeed important universal messages not only in the Western (Christian *and* post-Christian) but also in the Confucian tradition, not to mention contributions from other cultures. Particularly in view of the global dominance of Western secular values, they fulfill at

thoroughly familiar not only with their own but also the Western tradition – a remarkable advance in terms of intercultural learning.

⁴³ Hahm Chaibong, "Confucianism and Western Rights: Conflict or Harmony?", *The Responsive Community. Rights and Responsibilities*, 10/1 (Winter 1999/2000), p. 56. Also Li Shenzhi, the former Vice-President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Peking, made a strong plea for the universal value of Confucian thought as a contribution to a world civilization. Li Shenzhi, "Quanqiu hua yu Zhongguo wenhua" (Globalization and Chinese Culture), *Chuantong wenhua yu xiandaihua* (*Chinese Culture: Tradition and Modernization*), 4/1994, p. 3-12

least a locally valuable compensating or complementary function. Both the social problems in Western countries and the ecological crisis which we are facing today due to the dominance of the eurocentric development model should make us aware that the whole world might benefit considerably from alternative ways of thought, and we should therefore welcome the contribution of intellectuals from other cultures to offer their views on the solution of those problems that concern us all. For a good society and for human flourishing on this planet, these non-Western values are probably just as important as human rights. The point is that an ethics of rights, as a minimalist ("thin") ethics, is simply lacking certain valuable aspects. For example, issues such as care, love, relationships, marriage, family, trust, responsibility, etc., cannot be solely posed as questions of rights.⁴⁴ If we do so (which is increasingly done today) important parts get lost. We certainly do need a language of rights, but we also need a language of care and of responsibilities.⁴⁵ With other words, as necessary the rule of law is as a universal or global concept, it cannot completely substitute the local particulars, that is, an ethical basis of society.

Coming to a conclusion, not only with relevance for Western societies, a middle way might possibly be a position, in Anthony Giddens' words, "beyond left and right",⁴⁶ or, as John Gray, another British political scientist, recently noted, a harmonious blend of liberal and communitarian/Confucian ideas. In practice this means that Western ethical (and political) ideals (for example the mentioned key notions of liberty and autonomy) could be interpreted in such a way that they would also accommodate Eastern thought. Thus, maintaining individual liberty as a high good would not necessarily entail believing in the abstract and fictitious notion of the "freestanding individual chooser [...] modelled on the illusion that people could pursue their economic self-interest at the expense of their interests as social beings - as parents, friends, lovers or neighbors". Instead, the notion could be strengthened that, being born into unchosen families, we are, first of all, social beings with an identity gained by a "patrimony of historical memory". Moreover, though valuing autonomy and fairness, we would not need to turn these notions into universalistic theories or principles of justice and rights. Seen from this perspective, autonomy might entail more than a mere defence of negative liberal rights - the unconditioned freedom to choose. Instead it could be "enriched" by affirming the "dependency of individual autonomy on a strong network of

⁴⁴ Taylor, "Conditions of an Unforced Consensus", p. 124-146

⁴⁵ In this context see also the attempt of a group of elder statesmen (InterAction Council) under the guidance of Helmut Schmidt to add a declaration of Human Responsibilities to that of Human Rights.

⁴⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right. The Future of Radical Politics*, London 1994

reciprocal obligations."⁴⁷ In short, instead of claiming universal authority for some treasured Western concepts we could just as well see them as articulations of particular/local social lives,⁴⁸ thus possibly arriving at the idea of a "contextualized universalism", a concept which appears to be a contradiction in terms only as long as we operate in a logically exclusive (either-or) and not an inclusive (both-both) pattern.

In today's world we have on a global scale an inter-penetration and cross-fertilization of local knowledge and cultures so that some people even speak of "glocalization". This development affirms the view of cultural differences, but it also shows these differences - because of manifold cultural exchanges - not to be static but, in an ongoing process of balancing global and local forces, to be dynamic. Actually, this kind of cultural exchange has been going on throughout history, it was only not as clearly noticeable,⁴⁹ partly because the intercultural exchange took place, thus far, mainly on a one-way street. (This can be explained – but not justified - by the asymmetric patterns of power politics, going back to the age of imperialism and colonialism and extending to the present ways of "globalization".) There is then still some insight to be gained in an encounter with cultural difference. For to open up to Confucianism – or to any other cultural tradition through intercultural dialogue – means to become aware of the own conditioning through collective memories, experiences, history, *zeitgeist*, i.e. culture, and to be able to view one's own standards as only relative – or better, as merely provisional and incomplete. With other words, intercultural openness and dialogue might help us – and this, of course, also holds true for the Chinese - in making us aware of the blind spots in our respective cultural, political and ideological orientation.

⁴⁷ The above quotes are all from John Gray, *Endgames. Questions in Late Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1997, p. 17-18, 78-80.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of these issues see also Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (originally published in Canada as *The Malaise of Modernity*), Cambridge/Mass. 1991, and K.-H. Pohl, "Communitarianism and Confucianism - In search of Common Moral Ground".

⁴⁹ In the cultural hybridity of the US today one can see the dynamics of this process most clearly; and it is possibly also for this reason that the American immigrant-based multicultural society – rightly or wrongly - is exerting such a model function worldwide.