

Communitarianism and Confucianism – In Search of Common Moral Ground

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"But to live outside the law, you must be honest."
Bob Dylan ("Absolutely Sweet Marie")

1. Old Questions and New Challenges

Critique of modernity is a topic that has been popular for a while, and yet only recently a feeling of crisis has developed in the West. It is basically a crisis of the Western model which hitherto had been such a world-wide success story, manifesting itself, for example, in the crisis of labor and the welfare state. The crisis of modernity, however, also concerns itself with the ambivalence of other highlights of our civilization, such as individual autonomy and value-pluralism. In the Western hemisphere, we enjoy an unparalleled degree of freedom in self-fulfillment and are able to pursue all sorts of self-interests - not only in the economical realm. But we also are beginning to realize that these gains come with certain losses. In the moral realm we experience an unprecedented loss of direction, and there is an increasing anxiety about these developments: If they should continue to grow unchecked, they might indeed have grave consequences for the functioning of the society, even for the political structures of the liberal democracy. The question is, how much fragmentation are our societies able to bear, or, putting it differently, what will hold our societies together in the future? Has the right balance between individual freedom and social responsibility been lost? These questions concerning the proper relationship between individual and society are as old or even older as Western modernity itself; perhaps they have to be posed and answered time and again by each generation.

In most recent times, communitarian social scientists and philosophers began to address the above mentioned problems - the weakening of the social fabric in our societies, brought about by the acclaimed achievements of political and economical liberalism - and suggested new answers to the old questions. Incidentally, at about the same time, particularly after the demise of the Eastern European Communist model (the presumed "end of history"), a new counter-model entered the world stage: the Confucian, or better, Post-Confucian model of the Far-East. It was and largely still is assumed that a Confucian mentality - an orientation in life which grants priority not to the individual but to the community - was at the root of the East-Asian economical miracle. This counter-model is now regarded as the major challenge to the so far unquestioned universal validity of the Western model.

In view of this political and historical background, I will explore a few related issues in the two mentioned ways of thought, communitarianism and Confucianism, a task which, as I am aware, creates a number of methodological problems, because the two are not only separated by belonging to different cultures but also to different ages. But this difficulty

might also offer new chances, that is to engage in a hermeneutic conversation not only with the past but between past and present across different cultures and even disciplines. In spite of the apparent incommensurability of the two, such a conversation might offer new insights not only into the other culture, but also into deficiencies or, as it were, blind spots of our own tradition.

2. Communitarianism

In 1982 a debate arose, later called the "Liberal-Communitarian Debate", with the publication of Michael Sandel's book *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* as a critique of John Rawls' concept of the individual as an "unencumbered self" (in the latter's *Theories of Justice*), that is, a view of democracy which limits itself to merely providing procedural fairness to the conflicting interests of "unencumbered" individuals. Sandel criticizes that liberalism, the view that our polity is simply based on (and limited by) the principles of individual freedom, rights, and self-fulfillment, needs certain social and moral resources in order to function in a society, these are a sense of responsibility and mutual trust. On these resources rested, for example, the American tradition of individualism; but these are resources that a liberal society cannot renew, that are even undermined in a liberal society. Hence there seems to be one basic objective, uniting most of the scholars involved in communitarianism: strengthening the community from the bottom through solidarity, civil virtues, and the preservation of social and moral resources.

Communitarianism inquires into the problem of how to balance the individual good (or rights) with the common good. The same focus is relevant for Confucian, if not Chinese thought in general. Concentrating on three authors, I shall present in the following a few key issues in communitarianism and relate them to Confucianism. My focus will not be on politics; instead I want to pursue the question of "individuation", i.e. ethical identity and how it is gained, according to both schools. I shall begin with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of the Enlightenment paradigm in his book *After Virtue*¹ because his analysis will give us a clearer view on culturally different ways of moral practice such as in Confucianism. In part 2.2, treating the topic of institutions and social ecology, I refer to Robert Bellah's book *The Good Society*². After dealing in part 2.3 with authenticity with reference to Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity*³, I will compare his ideas with Confucian authenticity in part 3. I shall conclude, using the vocabulary and ideas gained from approaching these authors, with a discussion of patterns underlying the Chinese-Western intercultural perception, such as different universalistic concepts, and will offer some thoughts on how to mediate them.

¹MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., London 1985.

²Bellah, Robert, et al., *The Good Society*, New York 1991.

³Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (originally published in Canada as *The Malaise of Modernity*), Cambridge/Mass. 1991.

2.1. Alasdair MacIntyre and the Critique of the Enlightenment Paradigm

In his article "The Enlightenment Mentality and the Chinese Intellectual Dilemma"⁴, Tu Wei-ming has pointed out that it is the incompatibility between traditional Confucian thought and the European spirit of Enlightenment that defines the conflict between China and the West since the last century. If we accept this analysis then Alasdair MacIntyre would indeed be an ideal mediator between the two. He is, of course, not the first and only one who called the paradigm of Enlightenment into question. Nietzsche, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, only to mention a few, have done that, too, and each one with a different thrust. Interesting for our purposes, however, is that MacIntyre questioned the acclaimed "project of Modernity" from a moral perspective, in fact he considers it to have ultimately failed.

MacIntyre begins his critique by probing into the conditions and origins of what he calls the moral catastrophe of present day. This catastrophe has largely gone unnoticed because we not only have lost the linguistic and social context of our moral concepts (p. 2), but also because the appearance of the autonomous individual was considered a major breakthrough. For MacIntyre, however, this is an ambivalent achievement, in his view a "self-congratulatory gain" (p. 34), because the new autonomous individual "has no necessary social content and no necessary social identity" (p. 32). It is freed "from the social bonds of those constraining hierarchies which the modern world rejected at its birth" (p. 34), and it "can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing" (p. 32). It is precisely this ultimately meaningless autonomy that, in his view, has caused the arbitrariness in today's moral philosophy which he calls "emotivism", meaning that "all moral judgements are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character" (p. 12). The foundation of this development had, in his view, been laid in the period of Enlightenment when abstract projects of moral justification were undertaken, albeit without regard for history, living contexts, or experience, but with a claim to universal and timeless validity. But these attempts by the philosophers of the Enlightenment to find ultimate foundations for morality have led to nothing. It was Nietzsche who most honestly and penetratingly realized this insight, and for this reason MacIntyre calls him the ultimate moral philosopher of modernity:

"The rational and rationally justified autonomous moral subject of the eighteenth century is a fiction, an illusion; so, Nietzsche resolves, let will replace reason and let us make ourselves into autonomous moral subjects by some gigantic and heroic act of will." (p. 114)

Consequently, MacIntyre turns away from the mainstream of analytical philosophy, which since the period of Enlightenment has attempted to justify and universalize morals through logic and theory; instead he turns to a hermeneutic approach in order to establish a narrative and historical coherence through tradition and moral practice based on virtues.

The validity of moral thought is transmitted through a "narrative coherence" forming a "living tradition". In this "living tradition", however, certain practices are not simply handed down but are re-created. We not only inherit a tradition but also continuously reshape it (p. 221):

⁴ In: *Perspectives on Modern China: Four Anniversaries*, eds., Kenneth Lieberthal, et al., Armonk 1992, pp. 103-118.

"What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of tradition." (*ibid.*)

For MacIntyre, any attempt, furthered by the culture of individualism today, to detach oneself from the history of a community entails a "deformation" of human relationships, because "the possession of a historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide". (*ibid.*)

"The notion of escaping from it into a realm of entirely universal maxims which belong to man as such, whether in its eighteenth-century Kantian form or in the presentation of some modern analytical philosophies, is an illusion and an illusion with painful consequences." (*ibid.*)

In other words, we all inherit a moral identity by being born into communities (families, neighborhoods, countries, etc.) but this "does not entail that the self has to accept the moral *limitations* of the particularity of those forms of community" (*ibid.*).

A moral identity is conveyed through living in a community in which the question "What is good in life?" is answered through *practice*. Contrary to this view, according to Ronald Dworkin, "the central doctrine of modern liberalism is the thesis that questions about the *good life for man* or the ends of human life are to be regarded from the public standpoint as systematically unsettlable" (p. 119). According to MacIntyre, this position of "the ultimate disagreement" in morals has been "dignified by the title 'pluralism'" in our times (p. 32).

Of all the reflective thinkers of the past, MacIntyre regards Aristotle to be the most consequent representative of a concept of moral philosophy based not on reason but on the view of life as moral practice. Since for him Aristotle's concept has not been debunked by Nietzsche's critique, MacIntyre considers it still to be valid, with due modifications, of course: "Aristotelianism is *philosophically* the most powerful of pre-modern modes of moral thought." (p. 118) This resort to Aristotle by MacIntyre ensues a number of parallels to Confucianism, first of all the inter-relatedness of moral cultivation and the aiming for a highest common good in the Confucian tradition, secondly the parallel to the endeavor of modern Confucian humanists to revitalize a tradition still relevant through its narrative continuity, that is, their attempt toward the "creative transformation" of the Chinese tradition.⁵

⁵ Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, proceeds from a "metaphysical biology" of man: Human nature is directed towards realizing a certain *telos*; this means that the good is defined in the sense of specific and ideal human qualities. Hence, in Aristotle we find, on the one hand, a universal, cosmic, metaphysical precondition for the good of human life in human nature; on the other hand, the good has a local and specific frame and place, it is politically realized within a community: the *polis*. The good is thus enacted in human relationships.

For Aristotle the *telos* of human life is happiness (*eudaimonia*), and virtues (meaning competence gained through practice) enable man to achieve *eudaimonia* in life. But virtues - they are practical wisdom (*phronesis*), justice, courage, and prudence - are not just means to an end, the good life itself is nothing but the practice of virtues.

It has been mentioned already that MacIntyre's book is nothing less than a fundamental critique of Western modernity, and it is possibly just for this reason, that he does not draw any political consequences from his argument, because politically we simply cannot go

In his view these virtues, which he defines as taking the middle way between two extremes, form a unity.

The comparable issues in Aristotelian and Confucian thought first concern the views on human nature and the virtues. Mencius, for instance, also starts from a "metaphysical biology" of man, i.e. the view of an original goodness of human nature bestowed by Heaven. Moreover, in Confucianism, the key virtues "kindness" (*ren*), "righteousness" (*yi*), "propriety" (*li*), "wisdom" (*zhi*), and "trust" (*xin*), likewise form a unity; and "kindness", as Wing-tsit Chan suggested, may be regarded as the all encompassing of these virtues. (Chan, Wing-tsit, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept of *Jen*", in: Chan, Wing-tsit, *Neo-Confucianism. Etc.: Essays by Wing-tsit Chan*, Hong Kong 1969, p. 5. The unity of Confucian virtues is questioned by MacIntyre in his article "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation Between Confucians and Aristotelians About the Virtues", in: Deutsch, Eliot, ed., *Culture and Modernity - East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, Honolulu 1991, p. 104-122.)

Aristotle distinguishes between virtues of intellect and of character. The former can be learned through insight, the latter are to be achieved through regular practice. In his system, the intellectual virtue *phronesis*, enabling the distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, is the central virtue without which no virtue of character can be practiced. We can find a certain similarity here to the Confucian "wisdom" (*zhi*) which, according to Mencius, enables man likewise to distinguish between good and bad (*Mencius*, 6A.6, Legge, James, *The Chinese Classics. The Works of Mencius*, New York 1971, vol. II, p. 402), but there is a difference in the order of priority: For Aristotle, *phronesis*, an intellectual virtue, ranks highest, whereas in Confucianism it is "kindness", a virtue of character. Unlike Kant, who was later to think that to act virtuously entails acting against inclination, Aristotle holds the view that "to act virtuously is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues" (MacIntyre, p. 149). In Confucianism, virtue and inclination are also united through practice. We find the *locus classicus* for this idea in Confucius' well-known line that at the age of seventy he could follow all the inclinations of his heart without transgressing moral boundaries (*Lunyu*, 2.4. Legge, James, *The Chinese Classics. Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean*, New York 1971, vol. I, p. 147). An important similarity is also the emphasis on the way of the "mean": For Aristotle the mean is the quintessence of virtue; in Confucianism, holding the mean, i.e. cultivating an equilibrium between the emotions, is the ultimate origin of harmony and universal peace (*Zhongyong*, 1, "The Doctrine of the Mean", Legge, I, p. 384).

Lastly, virtues not only play a role in the individual's life but also in the life of the community, because man is, for Aristotle as well as for Confucius, primarily a political creature. The Aristotelian political community is a collective endeavor which aims at realizing the common good through responsibility, ties of friendship, and mutual care of its members. Although the Confucian community is more formed according to the model of the family, we have a parallel in the idea that universal peace rests ultimately on each and every individual's responsibility (outlined in the classic "Great Learning" [*Daxue*]). Thus in both traditions the moral character of the individual and the flourishing of the community, i.e. morals and politics, are closely tied to one another.

back behind modernity.⁶ His vision of finding a unity of the common and individual good, of realizing the *telos* of individual happiness and the flourishing of the community through a practice of virtue in a "living tradition", although going back to our classical roots, still offers inspiration for a meaningful life in modern times. As a correction of the Enlightenment paradigm, finally, which has not only bequeathed to us such noble ideas as universal human rights but has also brought mankind to the brink of self-destruction, his critique provides arguments that will be useful in questioning the universalistic claim of modern Western concepts regarding other cultures, including China (see part 4).

2.2. Robert Bellah on Institutions and Social Ecology

The Aristotelian *and* Confucian concern about the relationship between the good life of the individual and the common good of the community, is at the root of most communitarian writing, also of the book *Habits of the Heart*, written by a team of authors under the editorship of Robert Bellah, which caused quite a stir in America upon its publication in 1985. The book, based on interviews, conveys a mixed picture of the moral outlook of American middle-class men and women. What emerges is that, in spite of - or just because of - all the individualism and social fragmentation in the American society, there seems to be a great need to and want of close bonds and social warmth. The book also attempts to inquire into the American tradition of civil virtues and civil religion (in terms of political participation) as well as the cultural, i.e. moral and symbolic resources supplying meaning, identity, and social coherence in the life of the American people. Its title (taken from the book *On the Democracy in America* by Tocqueville who first observed the tradition of American civil religion) leads back to Aristotle, because in the word "habits" we have the Latin *habitus*, meaning those qualities and traits that have been formed by regular *practice* in thinking, acting, and perceiving. In his more recent book *The Good Society* (1991), with contributions by the same team of authors, Bellah continues with the theme of the good life on the level of the community, elaborating on the idea already mentioned in *Habits of the Heart*, of a social ecology.

In *The Good Society*, Bellah refers to the same topic that has been mentioned earlier in connection with Sandel's critique on Rawls: the concept of moral and social resources. Bellah discusses it within the context of institutions. Institutions he defines as patterns of "expected actions of individuals or groups enforced by social sanctions" as well as "normative patterns embedded in and enforced by law and mores" (p. 10). They can be such simple things as a confirming handshake or rituals (rites of passage or of initiation), but also more complex ones such as paying taxes (in order to have means to finance, for example, a socially relevant infrastructure) or the family. Bellah regards institutions as socially well established metaphors or symbols that help us in interpreting situations or actions in a normative way (i.e. a group works well together like a "family" or like "team-players". It is important in Bellah's strain of argument that institutions are "not just restraining but enabling us", that is, they are the "indispensable sources from which character is formed". As they mostly, for instance within family life, entail ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, they also have a moral dimension (p. 10, 12). They thus help to carry on customs and the practice of what is regarded as good. Currently, though, because of the dominance of individualism in our societies, independence and autonomy are regarded as the highest goods. Therefore it becomes more and more difficult to view

⁶ Reese-Schäfer, Walter, *Was ist Kommunitarismus?*, Frankfurt 1995, p. 65.

institutions as something valuable at all, to understand them as providing the necessary framework within which persons can only become individuals.

This forms the background to Bellah's discussion of social and moral "sustainability", that is of a social ecology. He criticizes, for instance, the Green movement for having a too narrow and one-sided view of ecological contexts, because its promoters are chiefly concerned with the natural ecology and thereby neglect the important connecting link between the individual and the global ecological system. This link is to be found in the ties and bonds between people, or rather in the institutions which mediate between self and world. He thus advocates a new consciousness not only of our natural but also our social and moral environment. Both are intricately connected within an entire ecological system. Seen from this perspective, it should not be surprising that today we are not only squandering our natural resources within our free market economy, but are also squandering our social resources within our liberal societies. Hence we have to gain a new understanding of freedom or rather a new balance between freedom and responsibility. Historically, according to Bellah, we have to learn to understand how we got to the point to believe that freedom is the highest good in life and that institutions are standing in the way of our freedom (p. 50).

For the sake of the moral survival of society, the family is, in Bellah's view, the most important institution. It is the smallest unit of civilization, more important than the school (which ultimately is for him also a moral institution), because within the family the good life can be practiced and exemplified; it is "the first and most important learning community". In today's "job culture", however, in which family obligations, bonds, and loyalties count no longer as virtues but are more and more often regarded as annoying barricades on the road to individual self-fulfillment, the family is an endangered institution.

Whereas MacIntyre stresses the identity forming forces of history and a "living tradition", Bellah, as a sociologist, puts accent on institutions, that is those partly symbolized patterns that order human life, make it meaningful, and thus give the individual its ethical identity. This view on the process of individuation is also valid in a Confucian environment where a moral identity is acquired through partaking in the institutions - mainly in terms of ritual and the family - of the community. In fact, Bellah's discussion of institutions comes across as a direct translation of Confucian values into the language of modern social thought: All the points he mentions - institutions as symbols that convey meaning, the family as the smallest moral unit and vital nucleus of society, education and schools understood as moral institutions, habit forming practices of civil virtues - could be taken straight from a handbook of Confucian ethics. It could indeed be argued that the Chinese way of networking, the ritualistic conduct of life, including the stress on politeness, face, and respect, which is often bewildering to critical Western minds conditioned by individual autonomy and independence, are all part of a still much alive social ecology. It provides a feeling of warmth and togetherness which the Chinese cherish as their *renqing wei'r*, "human touch", and which they feel nostalgic about when they are living abroad

Since Bellah's civil virtues and institutions also concern the active participation of citizens in politics (local and national), there remains the question to which extent the Confucian tradition also provides a frame for political participation, a question that would also be relevant for the transformation from Confucianism to Post-Confucianism in today's China.

2.3. Charles Taylor and the Ethics of Authenticity

Similarly to Bellah, Charles Taylor also inquires into the sources of character formation, the *Sources of the Self*, as is the title of one of his major works. Taylor approaches this goal on a somewhat different road than Bellah's, that of a fundamental historical and philosophical critique (reminiscent of MacIntyre) of the modern atomistic view of man which has produced the current ideal of self-fulfillment. In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor argues that this culture of self-fulfillment "lives an ideal which it is systematically falling below" (p. 57) or which, because of certain developments in society, has slipped into triviality and narcissism. Consequently, he pleads for a different understanding of self-fulfillment: an ethics of authenticity.

Taylor traces the origins of the (misunderstood) ideal of authenticity back to philosophers both of the ages of Enlightenment (Locke) and Romanticism (Herder). In their times, particularly during the 18th century, authenticity implied the central notion that man possesses a moral intuition (conscience) and that this intuitive inner source entailed a connection to God or the idea of the good. In its contemporary form, this originally moral accent has been repressed or lost (p. 26). Moreover, the notion of freedom that virtually constitutes the ideal of authenticity today is no more understood in its positive form (freedom *and* responsibility); its standard even goes beyond its negative variety⁷, it rather is a "self-determining freedom" which demands, "that I break the hold of all such external impositions, and decide for myself alone" (p. 27).

This contemporary concept of self-fulfillment is morally justified by one single value: "to be true to oneself" (p. 15). But since all the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self have been eliminated, even to the extent that love relationships and care of children are being sacrificed to pursue one's own career, this ideal has become more and more shallow, and it has led to the paradoxical situation that "new modes of conformity arise among people who are striving to be themselves" (p. 15).

Uncovering the reasons for the loss of these ideals, Taylor first points out the primarily dialogical quality of human existence. We are what we are through intense dialogical relationships which we have entertained since our childhood with all sorts of people. This dialogue can carry on for a whole lifetime and can even continue when people (through death) have disappeared from our lives (p. 33). In addition, people with whom we entertain a dialogical relationship can become part of our identity. Thus, defining our identity or originality with sole recourse to ourselves, we cannot live up to the ideal of authenticity. Defining our identity presupposes a sense of what is significant outside or beyond ourselves. We need a "background of intelligibility" (p. 37) in order to make sense of our identity, a background which Taylor calls "horizon of significance" (p. 52). In an atomistic society, however, this horizon is in danger of getting out of view. The contemporary culture of self-fulfillment starts, for example, from the central and thus *meaningful* notion of freedom of choice. Significant is here the *right* of choice; the alternatives from which we can choose, however, thereby lose their significance. They are all equally significant, and hence they are themselves insignificant and trivial. The modern "subjectivism about

⁷This is the so called "negative liberty", which is to be "free to do what I want without interference by others because that is compatible with my being shaped and influenced by society and its laws of conformity" (p. 27). The distinction between positive and negative liberty goes back to Isaiah Berlin ("Two Concepts of Liberty"). See also Taylor's article "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" in, Taylor, Charles, *Philosophical Papers*, Cambridge/Mass. 1985.

value" thus denies the existence of a horizon of significance which makes the alternatives that we can choose from more or less valuable.⁸ Contrary to this trivialization of the ideal of authenticity, Taylor suggests that a meaningful life has to be lead in a horizon of important questions (p. 40). Genuine authenticity presupposes certain key questions which are transcending the self. This concerns also questions of bonds between human beings as well as the relationship between the individual and society, such as political citizenship, a sense of duty, and allegiance to a political society. If we are lacking this horizon of significance, then any bonds in our lives are ultimately insignificant. They become only means for self-fulfillment or are nothing but a "modality of enjoyment" (p. 53).

Taylor recommends not simply to discard the ideal of authenticity but "to articulate the shortfall of practice, and criticize it" (p. 77). But in an age of greater freedom, from which we cannot and ought not return, people can sink lower or rise higher; we are left with more self-responsibility; ours is an age of "responsibilization" (*ibid.*). Taylor leaves us on a somewhat ambivalent but realistic note when he asserts that the struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom will never be over, but "through social action, political change, and winning hearts and minds, the better forms can gain ground, at least for a while" (p. 78).

Living, however, in an age, which is driven by the forces of a globally growing consumerist economy based on the principle of personal gain, the "self-centered modes" and atomistic tendencies in society will surely be furthered. Here the ideal of authenticity as Taylor understands it, still will have to stand its test.

Taylor's attempt to question the modern atomistic view of man, seeing him instead in the light of his relationships, which give significance to his life, has much in common with basic Confucian views. In addition, Taylor's discussion of authenticity bears a certain resemblance to Confucian notions which we first encounter in the classic "Doctrine of the Mean" (*Zhongyong*), i.e. the Confucian concept of *cheng*, most often translated both as "sincerity" and "authenticity". The meaning of *cheng* implies not only the idea of honesty or being "true to oneself" but also involves the relationship of the "authentic" person to his fellow man: "The truly authentic not only completes himself but completes other men and things also."⁹ This concept shall be discussed in more detail below.

3. Confucian Authenticity

With MacIntyre's, Bellah's, and Taylor's thought as a background, some of the parallels to Confucianism have already become clear. These are: emphasis on moral practice, identity through institutions such as family and rituals as well as values that provide a horizon of

⁸ According to Taylor, the tendency today that the ideal of authenticity is lapsing into a trivial and narcissistic state is being furthered by certain fashionable theories of high culture (post-structuralism) which also deny any horizon of significance. Taylor points out the paradoxical nature of these "Neo-Nietzschean philosophies": The subject, for example, the very notion of the self, is, on the one hand, being deconstructed; the self is left, on the other hand, "with a sense of untrammelled power and freedom before a world that imposes no standards, ready to enjoy 'free play'" (p. 61). Such theories, which deflate the ideal of authenticity, further the "self-centered modes" and give them "a certain patina of deeper philosophical justification" (*ibid.*).

⁹ *Zhongyong*, 25; Legge, I, p.418, with modifications.

significance. Some more issues need to be further explored, though; they are the questions concerning the value of the individual, including the process of individuation, and political participation as a "civil virtue".¹⁰

If we understand "individual" in its modern atomistic sense as an autonomous entity, marked by its ability and right to choose freely between equal alternatives as well as its potential for unhindered self-fulfillment, then there is no equivalent in Confucianism to the modern Western notion of the individual. And yet we find in Confucian thought the individual standing at the very beginning of all social and moral considerations. The Confucian self is not an "unencumbered self", it is rather defined through the social institutions and relationships in the midst of which it stands and which are instrumental in forming its character. It is also considered part of a narrative continuity, a "living tradition", in which the ideas of a common good are transmitted. It thus grows within or rather into a horizon of significance that reaches from the notion of the original goodness of human nature to the idea of the moral nature of the entire universe.

The maturing process of the individual (the gaining of an ethical identity) involves, in particular, the claim for moral self-cultivation. This cultivating process does not simply entail overcoming egocentric desires, it rather means that the individual fulfills itself (its potential) when it assists others in their self-fulfillment, in the realization of their respective potentials:

"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."¹¹

In *Mencius* we find the metaphors "great body" (*da ti*) and "small body" (*xiao ti*) describing the different states in the process of self-cultivation: The individual has to develop his or her "great body" (an all-inclusiveness) in order to grow from a "small person" (*xiao ren*) to a "great person" (*da ren*)¹².

In the Confucian tradition, this concept of maturing to a "great self" or "authentic" (*cheng*) person even comprises metaphysical notions: It is precisely the "Way of Heaven" to be authentic, that is, great, all-inclusive, and true to itself. Confucian authenticity thus puts man into a sequence of responsibilities which lets him or her partake in the process of self-fulfillment of the entire universe:

"It is only he who is possessed of the most complete authenticity that can exist under Heaven, who can give its full development to his nature. Able to give its full development to his own nature, he can do the same to the nature of other men. Able to give its full development to the nature of other men, he can give their full development to the natures of animals and things. Able to give their full development to the natures of creatures and things, he can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth. Able to assist the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion."¹³

¹⁰This section is inspired by the writing of Tu Wei-ming, particularly his book *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, Albany 1985.

¹¹*Lunyu*, 6.28, Legge, I, p. 194.

¹²*Mencius*, VIA.15, Legge, II, p. 417f.

¹³*Zhongyong*, 22, Legge I, p. 415f, with modifications.

Understood from this point of view, Confucian authenticity - and that is not a minor difference to our modern culture of self-fulfillment - neither emphasizes individual autonomy nor is it simply realized within the network of human relationships. By transcending individual interests and even anthropocentric views in a most comprehensive way, that is, by playing a responsible part in the functioning of the entire universe, the individual self ultimately forms a union with the universe/Heaven (*tian ren he yi*).

This, exactly, is the Confucian horizon of significance which has inspired some of the finest features in Chinese culture: the notion of an all-embracing sense of care, as expressed in Fan Zhongyan's (989-1052) famous line, "To take everything under Heaven as one's responsibility". It also comes out in Zhang Zai's (1020-1077) influential "Western Inscription" which inspired the Chinese intellectuals for the last millennium:

"Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. The great ruler (the emperor) is the eldest son of my parents (Heaven and Earth), and the great ministers are his stewards. Respect the aged - this is the way to treat them as elders should be treated. Show deep love toward the orphaned and the weak - this is the way to treat them as the young should be treated. [...] Even those who are tired, infirm, crippled, or sick; those who have no brothers or children, wives or husbands, are all my brothers who are in distress and have no one to turn to. [...] One who knows the principles of transformation will skillfully carry forward the undertakings [of Heaven and Earth], and one who penetrates spirit to the highest degree will skillfully carry out their will. [...] Wealth, honor, blessing, and benefits are meant for the enrichment of my life, while poverty, humble station, and sorrow are meant to help me to fulfillment. In life I follow and serve [Heaven and Earth]. In death I will be at peace."¹⁴

Finally, what about political participation? Serving under a just ruler in the administration of the country has always been the central vocation of the Confucian trained intellectual. Thus he was participating in the polity in a very basic sense, albeit not in a political environment, such as our modern democracies, that is based on a notion of antagonism between the individual and the state¹⁵. 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. 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 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

¹⁴ Chan, Wing-tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 497f.

¹⁵ For an illuminating study of the particularity of the relationship between state and society in China see Philip C.C. Huang, "'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China. The Third Realm between State and Society", *Modern China* 19/2 (April 1993), p. 216-240.

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". In terms of politics, "humane government" (*ren zheng*) should be (according to Mencius¹⁶) his goal to strive for, and for the realization of benevolence a "scholar of right purpose" should even be willing to sacrifice his life¹⁷.

Because of the importance of another basic virtue, loyalty to his sovereign, there often was conflict between the demands of benevolence and loyalty. Caught in this dilemma, the loyal but, for the sake of humanness, dissenting scholar's life was often at stake. He could even go so far as to reprimand his ruler through his own death (*si jian*). This tradition of loyal dissent that goes back to the example of the famous Qu Yuan in the 4th century BC has survived, although not in such dramatic form, into the 20th century¹⁸. Hence it is participation in a family modeled paternalistic government - "for" (the welfare of) the people, and not "by" the people as in our democracies - which used to be the "civil virtue" of the Chinese intellectual. Although the present situation allows no easy comparisons, it seems to me that it is this type of political vocation which still is the dominant and very much alive tradition of political participation in Post-Confucian China.¹⁹

What is the quintessence that we can draw from this brief exposition of Confucian authenticity? There are a few similarities but also some important differences to Communitarianism. Authenticity, as Taylor understands it, consists in regaining a horizon of significance for the modern autonomous individual. In this undertaking he is largely committed to basic values of the European Enlightenment, understanding authenticity, in an age of "responsibilization", as assuming greater responsibility for oneself. In the view that the authentic self fulfills itself in being part of a larger body, within a horizon of significance that transcends the self, there is a basic congruence between Confucianism and Communitarianism. In Confucianism we only have a different accent, even a metaphysical dimension: There is also "responsibilization", but understood as assuming greater responsibility for others in an endeavor of universal scale. Or putting it differently, the ideal of individuation in Confucianism was not self-fulfillment but self-transcendence. This ideal was furthered by the influence of other philosophies on the world-view of the Chinese intellectual elite, such as Daoism and Chan/Zen-Buddhism. In the latter schools (or religions), the very notion of the self was regarded as the ultimate illusion. The goal there could thus be described as self-forgetfulness.

Just as we have a different view of the self, we also have a different view of the community. As pointed out already, the community of man was seen by Confucians as an integral part of an interdependent organism, which functioned, and had to be taken care of, like a family, with Heaven and Earth being the ultimate parents. Basic to this Chinese concept of universal order is that it is not a conflict model (individual vs. state power) that

¹⁶ Mencius, III.A.3, Legge, II, p. 243.

¹⁷ Lunyu, 15.8, Legge, I, p. 297.

¹⁸ Schneider, Lawrence, *A Madman of Ch'u - The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent*, Berkeley 1980; see also, Pohl, Karl-Heinz, "Dichtung, Philosophie, Politik - Qu Yuan in den 80er Jahren", in: Pohl, Karl-Heinz et al., eds., *Chinesische Intellektuelle im 20. Jahrhundert: Zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, Hamburg 1993, p.405-426; in Chinese: "Qu Yuan he bashi niandai zhishifenzi", in: *Ershiyi Shiji* 18/1993, p. 83-92.

¹⁹ For a more in-depth treatment of the difference between Confucian and modern Western political thought, see Tu Wei-ming's article "Konfuzianismus und Demokratie", in: Michalski, Krzysztof, ed., *Europa und die Civil Society*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 222-246.

is at the root of Western political ideas, but a model based on the notion of social harmony and consensus, that is togetherness, inseparability, balance, and also complementarity, very much like the *Yin-Yang* model.

4. Incommensurable Universalisms?

What can we extract from this "conversation" between Confucianism and communitarianism, past and present, Chinese and Western ways of philosophizing? The sharp contrast between Confucianism and the European tradition of Enlightenment, which Tu Wei-ming has stressed, appears, indeed, to be the dividing line between the two. Perhaps we have to start from this contradiction if we want to mediate between Chinese and Western thought.

Both China and the West had and still have certain universalistic concepts that seem incommensurable or, according to our preferred either/or way of ordering things, mutually exclusive. Let us first try to identify these universalisms. Western universalism first grew out of the Christian missionary claim to the absolute validity of its religious truth. During the period of Enlightenment this absolutist pretension of religion had been challenged and replaced by an absolutism of reason, which evolved out of scientific, causal thinking since the Renaissance. Although this new universalism of reason was to be likewise questioned later in the age of Romanticism and in modern times, the basic tendency of setting up universally valid principles, theories, and philosophies based on logic and reason, has in the Western history of ideas prevailed until today. Along with this, we have experienced in the realm of ethics and morals a process of legalization. Public morals, which used to be an unwritten code of conduct, have given way to or turned into law and procedural justice according to principles of equality and rights, with an equal universalistic claim. Likewise, Locke and Kant gave us new definitions of the now autonomous individual, cut off from such "contingent" matter as history, lifeworld, social relationships, and institutions, rationalizing instead according to abstract principles and possessing rights bestowed by natural law. These tendencies have led, politically, to our modern liberal democracies and pluralistic societies, based on the principle of procedural justice, i.e. fairness in the face of multifarious individual interests and preferences. These features, as we know, form the very center of the globally successful Western model.

As an ideology, in its Marxian sense, however, Western universalism has had other global consequences, cementing Western positions of power and supremacy. This comprises Western universalism in its two basic varieties²⁰: its absolutist kind - Christianity and Marxism - as well as its liberalist kind, mainly in terms of political liberalism, liberal market economics, and global free trade. The latter had already been promoted in the past by such seafaring powers as Spain and England, whereas today the US is the agent of global economic liberalization. But liberalism also has another face. It can be credited as a virtue of tolerant interpersonal conduct, and as such it belongs to the finest achievements of Western civilization. But, as Taylor once remarked, "liberalism

²⁰For two different kinds of universalisms see Walzer, Michael, *Nation and Universe* (The Tanner Lectures on Human Values), 1990. See also Buck, David, "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies, Editor's Introduction", in: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 50, 2/1991.

can't and shouldn't claim complete cultural neutrality", it is rather also a "fighting creed"²¹ that emerged out of our Christian heritage; it is, in fact, a "particularism masquerading as the universal", and as such a "pragmatic contradiction"²². Lastly, it is to be considered, whether colonialism, imperialism, world-wars, and global ecological damages are not also outcomes of Western universalism. Be that as it may, it might be worth while to look at Chinese universalism, to compare it and to examine its qualities.

Chinese universalism (*tianxia zhuyi*) also has two faces, a political and a moral one. From a political and cultural point of view, Chinese universalism manifested itself in the belief that China, because of its alleged high standards of ethical thought and its sophisticated culture, formed the center of world civilization, radiating its civilizing influence into all directions, yet without any missionary zeal. In the first clash of civilizations during the last century, however, China was defeated by the martially and technologically stronger West (which was Christian in belief but at the same time a lot more aggressive than the heathen China). In this way it was virtually forced to give up its political and cultural universalistic pretension.²³

On the other hand we have a moral universalism. The universe was not considered as functioning according to universal physical but according to moral laws. It was an interdependent universe, a natural and moral ecological system, in which the cosmic, human, and moral realms were *qua* analogy connected and corresponding with one another. To understand the functioning of this universe, not scientific or causal reasoning was needed, but aesthetic, that is metaphoric, analogous, or correlative deliberation. As has been said already, human beings were viewed - at least in the orthodox Mencian tradition - as partaking in this universe by possessing a "metaphysical biology", that is a moral nature bestowed by Heaven (the moral ground of the universe). This means that one needs, in order to realize the good in life, only to follow one's nature. Then he or she acts in accordance with the moral principles of the universe and forms a unity with Heaven, Earth, and the Myriad Things. It was the *practice* of the moral good which counted in this moral universalism (practice meaning a "know-how"), not cognition or theory (a "know-that"). In

²¹Taylor, Charles, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*, Princeton 1992, p. 62.

²²Taylor, *Multiculturalism*, p. 44. Also Robert Spaemann has pointed this out, criticizing Western liberalism as an universalistic ideology, which can be just as dogmatic and intolerant as other ideologies. See Ritter, Henning, "Doppelspiel - Religion im säkularen Staat", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7. 12. 94, p. 5. Spaemann's remark was made on a conference in Vienna on "The Europe of the Religions - Between Religious Wars and Civil Tolerance".

²³What remained was and still is a lasting minority complex facing the West that seems to manifest in the fear of being considered backward. As I see it, this fear can be seen at work, for example, in the field of Chinese humanities where, since the May Fourth Movement, the newest Western theories are eagerly embraced by Chinese scholars as they are considered to be the forefront of theoretical progress. In this regard Zhu Weizheng, Professor at Fudan University, jokingly commented on the popularity of *Houxue* ("Post-studies", that is Post-Structuralism, Post-Modernism, and Post-Colonialism) in China, saying that in Chinese *hou* also has the meaning "behind", "rear end", so *Houxue* might as well be understood as "studying behind [the West]" or "studying the [West's] rear end". The remark was made at a conference on International Sinology at Qinghua University in Peking, January 1997.

terms of education, the moral "know-how" was first transmitted through rules within the narrative continuity of the tradition, derived from the canonical teaching of the Classics, that is, in emulation of the wise men of old. On its highest stage of cultivation, though, the goal was to transcend the rules (not unlike the learning process in the Chinese arts, such as calligraphy, painting, and the martial arts). This means that moral cultivation should reach a stage of intuitive mastery, very much in the vein as was already quoted (in footnote 6) of Confucius when he reflected upon his development at the age of seventy, or which we have *in nuce* in the Mencian concept of "innate/intuitive knowledge" (*liang zhi*)²⁴, later to be elaborated by Wang Yangming (1472-1529) in his view on "unity of knowledge and action".

In contrast to the aesthetic ordering²⁵ of the universe and the intuitive ideal of moral practice in the Confucian tradition, the focus of ethics in the Western tradition since Kant was on the autonomous individual that follows the rules of reason in deriving principles for making moral judgments. However also the Confucian tradition, as has been pointed out, puts emphasis on the individual as the final and most important element guaranteeing the flourishing of the human community. We have a different accent, though: The individual in the Confucian tradition does not realize its destiny in independence and freedom from other people's interests, but through responsibility and care for his fellow man and the social environment, by "taking everything under Heaven as one's responsibility". The world was seen as an extended family environment in which "all people between the four seas" were one's brothers and sisters²⁶ and which was to be "shared by all alike" (*tianxia wei gong*). Thus the Confucian moral universalism does not have rational and absolutist features but is more a responsible and caring universalism. Using an "aesthetic way" of ordering the differences, one could call it a "soft" universalism, in contrast to the rational or "hard" Western universalism.

At this point we may connect again with communitarianism that developed precisely as a critique of occidental "universalistic" moral theories from Kant to Habermas, built on rational principles and theories of rights. It has been shown by Carol Gilligan that the newest Western universalistic moral theories, allegedly derived from empirical studies and "psychological facts" (cognitivist models of moral development such as by Kohlberg), in reality are one-sided²⁷. She pointed out that (also in our cultural hemisphere) high moral qualities need not manifest in a "post-conventional" breakthrough to rational and universal principles, but that they can show just as well in the *caring* for others in daily life (actually an integral part of our Christian heritage). Where some people may lay stress on being "just" and "principled", the moral quality of others may be described as simply "being

²⁴ *Mencius*, VII.A.15, Legge, II, p. 456.

²⁵ The difference between rational and aesthetic order has been pointed out by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, Albany 1987. I understand aesthetic ordering in a slightly different way, that is as a metaphorical or analogous way of thinking.

²⁶ *Lunyu*, 12.5, Legge, I, p. 253.

²⁷ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge/Mass. 1982; see also Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Dreyfus, Stuart E., "What is Morality? A Phenomenological Account of the Development of Ethical Expertise", in: Rasmussen, David M., ed., *Universalism vs. Communitarianism*, London 1990, p. 252ff.

good" and may manifest as an "authentic" kindness resulting from a maturity of the heart and not the mind. We have thus on the one hand a concept of morality based on the rational ability of moral judgment in *general* situations, and on the other a morality (not only confined to women as Gilligan points out) based on the ability to respond intuitively, that is not with reasoning but with a moral competence acquired in daily life and practice, to *unique* and contextually relevant situations²⁸.

In the intercultural context, it is important to stress the equivalence of both approaches, because this is by no means accepted in the mainstream of contemporary Western moral "discourse". There universalistic theories based on reason are clearly dominant. The question is, however, to which extent this rational and universalistic pretension is or isn't imbued with eurocentrism, a question which can also be posed to Habermas if he claims "that our Western European morality of abstract justice is developmentally superior to the ethics of any culture lacking universal principles"²⁹. We might finally ask, if the values and basic concepts underlying both universalisms - the autonomous versus the caring individual, the liberal Western and the communal Confucian orientation - are, in fact, incommensurable and mutually exclusive according to the either/or model, or if they could not in some way or the other complement and inform each other³⁰.

5. Re-Interpreting the Humanistic Traditions

What results can we derive from the above juxtaposition? From an assessment of the present state of affairs in our Western societies we should hesitate to judge our Western moral philosophies as having greater worth than those of other cultures; at least their effect on public morals is negligible.³¹ The current situation in China, however, which has radically changed within the last decades mainly by importing Western acquisitions (such as liberal market Economy and consumerism), is likewise not a very encouraging example

²⁸ Dreyfus, p. 254.

²⁹ Quoted in Dreyfus, p. 251. As to Habermas' view of communitarian thought see David M. Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas*, Cambridge/Mass. 1990, p. 67ff.

³⁰ It would be worth-while, in this context, to generally question the validity of our long cherished thinking according to either/or dichotomies in finding solutions for (not only philosophical) problems. Is it possibly a certain cultural conditioning that lets us prefer this model, precluding a more harmonizing inclusive approach? Being caught, however, in the "dead-end streets of late modernity" (Theisen), the prevalent but by its very nature absolutist either/or model - not only in politics - appears making less and less sense. It seems to trigger mostly ideological battles or stalemates instead of furthering pragmatic solutions. The way I understand communitarianism, at least in the thought of the three authors exposed above, it aims at finding just this balance: to combine liberal *and* community orientated ideas and ideals in a complementary relationship. Leszek Kolakowski, not labeled a communitarian but a reflective thinker transgressing normal boundaries such as progressive and conservative, left and right, has once succinctly put this inclusive approach in a "Credo", calling himself a "conservative-liberal-socialist"; Kolakowski, Leszek, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Chicago 1990, p. 225.

³¹ That the West because of its deranged public morals has no right to lecture other societies is an argument that is also brought forth by proponents of so called "Asian values".

in moral terms, not to mention politics. Be that as it may, we might ask if we do need new philosophical inventions in the realm of ethics at all in order to work towards "sustaining" our social and moral ecology. Michael Walzer, who is generally classified as belonging to the communitarian camp, has in this regard distinguished between three types of moral philosophy: that of discovery (like the prophets in the Old Testament), that of invention (Kant, Marx, Habermas, etc.), and that of interpretation³². The latter is based on the notion that we do already possess a moral "philosophy" in terms of common, although partly lost, deranged, or buried values (those "things" that have proven to be valuable in interpersonal conduct over a long period of time and through different ages). We are, in fact, able - in the West as well as in China - to go back to certain views of the common good, that is to a morality that is lived and practiced in daily life. This practice of ethical mastery in daily life may actually form the common ground on which we can join with people from other cultures. It is a common ground, it seems to me, which even has a somewhat universal quality, but which might resist being defined as a universalistic theory³³.

Any attempt of intercultural understanding has to find its passage between the Scylla of absolutist universalism and the Charybdis of arbitrary relativism. As both in China and in the West we see people still being committed to a deeply humanistic *telos*, forming their respective horizon of significance, we might, in search of a compass for this Odyssey, not have any better choice but to reinterpret our humanistic concepts, both European and Chinese ones, instead of waiting for new discoverers or inventors. Out of the global growing together and faced with the very same problems that are mainly caused by Western modernity, there might even develop a "new covenant" of which Ferenc Feher once spoke, a covenant "in which the moral earnestness of a commitment is more important than the philosophical accuracy of a new definition", which inventors of every kind have always - and in vain - elaborated on. "Living under time duress", he says, "we need to act towards common understanding, instead of common destruction, and we simply cannot wait until a new definition with a consensual validity has established itself"³⁴.

What may be needed then in terms of intercultural understanding is neither a theoretical nor an ideological but rather a pragmatic and hermeneutic point of view. In merging Taylor's and Gadamer's metaphors we could put the task like this: To approach the horizon of significance of the other culture in full consciousness of one's own horizon of significance. If this endeavor is pursued in an open-minded fashion, we may actually arrive, if not at a "fusion", then at least at an overlapping of horizons. This would possibly enable us to regard the other concept of the human *telos*, colored by a specific cultural

³²Walzer, Michael, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Cambridge/Mass. 1987.

³³As Charles Taylor once remarked, "there has never been an age so theory-drenched as ours" (according to Robert Young, *Intercultural Communication - Pragmatics, Genealogy, Deconstruction*, Clevedon 1996, p. 169). Apart from this, theories, particularly highbrow ones as are in fashion today (discourse ethics and such), have never had and probably will never have enough appeal to cause major changes in society. If we look at the state of moral philosophy today, it appears as if it is a self-sufficing "discourse", very much removed from the realities of daily life (I include my own attempt, although it is not philosophy in a strict sense). At least in this regard, communitarianism is markedly different in that it is directed towards making an impact in society.

³⁴Feher, Ferenc, "Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Hermeneutics as Europe's Mainstream Political and Moral Tradition", in: *Deutsch*, p. 186.

background, as not simply a different but rather an enriching concept of the human enterprise on this planet.

If this task should also comprise learning from each other's moral practice, we find in the Confucian tradition, yet not without relevance to an intercultural context, some good advice in a well-known passage in the *Analects*, "The Master said: 'When I walk along with two others, they may serve as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.'"³⁵ In the intercultural encounter between China and the West there appears to be - and mind you, in both directions - a lot of bad to be avoided, but also quite a bit of good to be followed.

³⁵ *Lunyu*, 7.21, Legge, I, p. 202.