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The *Problematik* of Kant and the issue of transcendence: A reflection on "sinological torque"

There are a few different but perhaps equally fruitful ways of doing comparative philosophy. My preference is to approach it as a mode of questioning, an attempt to raise issues that are evidently crucial in one tradition and yet either relegated to the background or never raised in the other. By focusing our attention on these issues, I suppose, we can eventually gain a clear insight into the limitations as well as the strengths of our chosen way of philosophizing. There is one caveat to be noted, however. It is extremely difficult to find that important "something" which is fully developed in one tradition but completely ignored in the other. Often the alleged absence is no more than an imposition of one argumentative procedure or of one preferred linguistic notation upon another. The result, unfortunately, is no more than an uncritical use of the "straw-man" technique. I am aware that the problem at hand is precisely to probe the underlying reasons behind a pattern of perhaps culturally determined misinformation about Chinese thought in general and of the Confucian tradition in particular. Therefore, the "sinological torque" is actually a study of various distortive interpretations of the Chinese mind, if such a thing ever exists. And those who have committed the fallacy of misunderstanding China are thought to include Kant, Hegel, the seventeenth-century missionaries, the eighteenth-century Levellers, and, of course, contemporary American scholars. However, it is one thing to describe the shape and nature of a particular "torque" and quite another to present an inquiry into the structure of thought behind it with a view to disclosing the central *Problematik* around which its theological and philosophical perceptions are ordered.

THE PROBLEMATIK OF KANT

Although among the five articles under discussion only one addresses itself to Kant against the background of Chinese ethics, I wish to show that a critical appreciation of Kant's mode of questioning can provide a central focus for some of the more interesting but isolated observations made by all of them on comparative philosophy. To begin, I would take Ching's statement that "[f]or Kant, man is by nature bad, that is, conscious of the moral law, and yet frequently deviating therefrom" as my point of departure. For I believe that her assertion about "Kant's basic distrust of human nature and its evil inclinations," especially when it is contrasted with the alleged "moral optimism" of the Mencian line of Confucian thought, can either be accepted as self-evidently true or rejected as dangerously misleading. The reason is complex and thus demands a focused investigation.

Actually, Kant's negative attitude toward human nature, far from being a denial of man's inner ability to be moral, must be seen in the context of his

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belief that "to investigate the idea and principles of a possible pure will" is the real task of the metaphysics of morals.[1] In so doing, he wishes to make a sharp distinction between his intended investigation and the study of "the actions and conditions of the human volition as such, which are for the most part drawn from psychology."[2] It is in this connection that he asserts that only a *good will* can be called good without qualification, despite his recognition that "moderation in emotions and passions, self-control and calm deliberation not only are good in many respects but even seem to constitute a part of the inner worth of the person." Yet the good will is good of itself: "[It] is good only because of its willing."[3] Accordingly, the proper function of reason, which is "given to us as a practical faculty," must be "to produce a will good in itself and not one good merely as a means, for to the former reason is absolutely essential."[4] This logically leads to Kant's concept of duty, as opposed to the propensities of feeling.[5] For Kant refuses to grant that human beings are endowed with a faculty of intellectual intuition.

In a freshly argued book, Mou Tsung-san[b] identifies a most distinctive feature of Chinese philosophy as the examined assumption that all human beings are endowed with the ability of intellectual intuition. His interpretive position, though it results from a critical but general examination of the Three Teachings in China, is singularly relevant to the Kantian problem just mentioned.

At first glance, the Chinese solution, as it were, to the Kantian problem of intellectual intuition is deceptively simple: it is acknowledged not merely as a postulate but also as a manifestation. Ample examples from all Three Teachings in China can be cited to support this claim. For instance, the idea of the goodness of human nature in *Mencius*, the concept of sincerity in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the description of the enlightening experience of the Tao[c] in *Chuang Tzu*[d], and the so-called rounded teaching (*yüan-chiao*[e]) of the T'ien-t'ai[f] school all can be construed as part of the symbolic resources that constitute the spiritual direction of Chinese thought.[6] Actually, it is not farfetched to suggest that the recognition that human beings have the inner ability to transform themselves spiritually as well as intellectually so that they can know and indeed manifest their true nature in the concrete is a primary datum in the thought of the East. Suffice it now to note only one relevant observation. As P. T. Raju points out in his "Metaphysical Theories in Indian Philosophy," the thought of the East has tended to give one-sided importance to the spiritual point of view, has

> delved deeply into our being, transformed what to the West is a matter of faith into ideas of reason, which is carried to its very bounds, until it found its completion and rest, and was transformed into self-conscious spiritual immediacy, in which the provoking strangeness of an "other" was annulled.[7]

This is certainly in apparent contrast with Kant's supposition that all conceptions of the senses are in themselves unknown to us. And thus, "even with the closest attention and clearness which understanding may ever bring to them

we can attain only to knowledge of appearances and never to knowledge of things in themselves."[8] As a result, "we must admit that we cannot approach [things in themselves] more closely and can never know what they are in themselves, since they can never be known by us except as they affect us."[9] It is probably in this sense that Kant, for the purpose of developing a total "refutation of the objections of those who pretend to have seen more deeply into the essence of things and therefore boldly declare freedom to be impossible,"[10] argues that "freedom is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be shown according to natural laws or in any possible experience."[11] The consequence of this line of thinking is obvious:

> A man may not presume to know even himself as he really is by knowing himself through inner sensation. For since he does not, as it were, produce himself or derive his concept of himself a priori but only empirically, it is natural that he obtains his knowledge of himself through inner sense and consequently only through the appearance of his nature and the way in which his consciousness is affected.[12]

It is therefore expected that, for Kant, to know one's true self is just the same as if one sought to find out how, through the idea of freedom, pure reason can be practical: "to explain this, all human reason is wholly incompetent, and all the pains and work of seeking an explanation of it are wasted."[13]

On the contrary, the Chinese thinkers would claim that to know things as they are in order to manifest that which is most genuine in one's own self should be the primary concern of philosophy, for it is the ultimate meaning of being human. To be sure, intellectual intuition so understood is not a kind of discursive understanding; nor is it a sensory perception. For it is not merely a cognitive knowing but also a creative act. But while Kant assumes that this form of pure spontaneity, or, in his words, *intuitus originarius*, is only possible in the divine mind, the Chinese thinkers take it for granted that it is what human beings qua human beings possess as their birthright.

If we transpose Kant's perception into the Chinese field of view, his main thesis takes on a different shape of meaning. The freedom of the will must be rooted in the original mind of humanity. Further, it should be recognized not only as a theoretical postulate but also as a practical manifestation. Intellectual intuition is thus the self-disclosure of the original mind of humanity, which is universal, infinite, and creative. For ontologically it is the same as the mind of Heaven. In the last analysis, the function of the intellectual intuition is to know, in the sense of manifesting (or realizing), that which is its own thing-in-itself.[14]

It is not to be wondered that in this connection the immortality of the soul as a postulate becomes superfluous, because if it really symbolizes the true self, it is identical with the freedom of the will. By the same token, the postulate of the existence of God also becomes unnecessary. Kant himself has remarked, "Even the Holy One of the Gospel must be compared with our ideal of moral

perfection before He is recognized as such." If the concept of God as highest good is, in Kant's words, "solely from the idea of moral perfection which reason formulates a priori and which it inseparably connects with the concept of a free will,"[15] it is in essence a different way of depicting humanity in its ultimate manifestation.

THE ISSUE OF TRANSCENDENCE

Against the background of the Kantian *Problematik*, or if you will the Kantian "torque," the issue raised by Mungello can be analyzed comparatively in a new light. Referring to my work on *Centrality and Commonality*,[16] Mungello first observes, "Tu interprets the Chinese text to mean that human beings can become sincere because their human nature is so endowed rather than because of divine grace. Caballero's view is the Christian one that full development of a force like Sincerity would depend not upon individual endowment, but upon participating in a force which transcends the individual." He then concludes, "However, when one deals with a transcendent force, I am not sure that the distinction between potential development of Sincerity as dependent upon individual endowment versus Sincerity as dependent upon divine grace is as clear-cut as Tu maintains." The issue of transcendence, in this sense, seems to have been raised in the dichotomy of divine grace and individual endowment. According to this line of thinking, Kant's position cannot be characterized as Christian, for the moral imperative, far from being the result of divine grace, is a direct manifestation of the duty of a rational being. Nor did Kant deserve the Nietzschean label as "der grosse Chinese von Königsberg" because his alleged "Königsberger Chinesentum" does not recognize the inherent goodness of human nature.

An entirely different attempt to confront Kant, just to make the issue more intriguing, is found in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger argues that his analysis of Kantian philosophy compels him to conclude that "only a philosophical anthropology can undertake the laying of the foundation of true philosophy, i.e., *metaphysica specialis*."[17] In substantiating his claim, Heidegger begins by a critical examination of the metaphysical meaning of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Then, after an elaborate presentation of what he characterizes as "the stages of the realization of the projection of the intrinsic possibility of ontology," he introduces the notion of the "transcendental imagination as the formative center of ontological knowledge."[18] However, Heidegger observes that Kant's alleged recoil from transcendental imagination suggests the possibility of extending the philosophical inquiry to "the problem of a finite, human pure reason [which] assume[s] a more comprehensive form and thus approach[es] nearer to a possible solution."[19] And, I suspect, it is in this sense that Heidegger places much emphasis on the concept of time in his discussion of the finitude in man and the metaphysics of *Dasein*. However, needless to say, it is difficult

to accept that a meditative reflection on Kant, without a significant restructuring of the central *Problematik*, naturally leads to the conclusion that "in a laying of the foundation of metaphysics, therefore, the problem is the 'specific' finitude of human subjectivity."[20] Yet, undeniably, Heidegger's distortive interpretation of Kant is philosophically significant because the torque he has produced is of great transforming effect in the sense that it redefines for some of us Kant's *Problematik*.

The kind of influence of cultural preoccupations on seventeenth-century missionary interpretations of Confucianism, with varying degrees of sophistication, is significantly different from Heidegger's conscious attempts to philosophize in the spirit of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For one thing, none of the missionaries, including the highly esteemed Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest, ever intended to theologize in the tradition of Confucian thought. However, by raising the issue of "transcendence," they inadvertently converted Confucianism from a holistic philosophy of life into a secular ethics. And the interpretive torque they have actually exerted has been so dazzling that contemporary scholars of Chinese thought are still under its effect. Otherwise, how can we account for the fact that quite a few sinologists still subscribe to the view that problems such as God's existence and spiritual immortality are not only relevant but really inseparable from a systematic and comprehensive inquiry into Confucian ethics? How can we explain the general impression that, since the Confucians have reduced "religion" to "morality," they are at best moral teachers, definitely falling short of becoming spiritual leaders or, from Hegel's point of view, "speculative philosophers"? Indeed, how can we imagine that a conception of divine grace still features prominently in the interpretation of a tradition when an ontological separation between the Creator and the created is not even recognized as a possibility? Of course, this is not to deny that the grafting of Christian symbols onto such indigenous ideas as *shang-ti*[g], *t'ien*[h], and *ch'eng*[i] may have actually turned out to be a fascinating example of *ko-i*[j] (matching concepts).

It is difficult to know what particular form Confucianism would assume after an "encounter" with Christian theology. The abortive attempts of the early missionaries to arrive at a compromise with the scholar-officials and the deliberate efforts of more recent missionaries to avoid raising theological issues in the intellectual community have not set any significant historical precedents. A genuine dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity is yet to be realized. If such an opportunity should come, the question of transcendence would inevitably arise again. I wonder: if Caballero's literalism that Adam and Eve were the chronologically first man and woman and thus parents of the human race and de Prémare's fundamentalist claim that the reverence shown to spirits, ancestors, and sage-teachers ought to be considered qualitatively different from that shown to *shang-ti* should be seriously challenged or even rejected in Christian theology, what would the status of God as the "wholly

other" become? By contrast, if the self-realization of the Confucian sage should be interpreted as "a gift from *t'ien-chu*[k]," rather than as the inner illumination of the human mind, what would the belief in the perfectibility of human nature be changed into? In a deeper sense, is it possible to conceive that the Christian God is ultimately the true manifestation of sincerity inherent in human nature or that the Confucian sage is really the blessed one who can say with complete faith that "the life I live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me"?[21]

Hegel may have undermined the Confucian possibility for transcendence when he asserted that Confucian moralizing was a set of "highly tasteless prescriptions for cult manners" and that all the works of Confucius put together were perhaps less interesting than Cicero's *De Officiis* (Kim). And the Levellers in England may have overestimated the Confucian penchant for cultural elitism and the Confucian concern for "bookish learning in theoretical matters" (Leites). It is in this sense that I personally find Herbert Fingarette's analysis of *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* a most thought-provoking recent contribution to sinological scholarship.[22] To be sure, many of Fu's critical reflections on the book are justified. But before the ambitious "creative hermeneutics" he has boldly outlined toward the end of the essay has taken any recognizable shape, I dare say that what Fingarette has accomplished in that eighty-four page monograph will most likely remain a landmark in Chinese philosophy for many years to come. Especially noteworthy in this connection is Fingarette's reformulation of the whole issue of transcendence. It is of no serious consequence whether the word itself has been employed to demonstrate a new vision concerning, among other problem areas, the idea of "human community as holy rite."[23]

So far as "sinological torque" goes, I propose that we try to transcend an improved continuity in order to recapture, indeed, to repeat, a beginning. Therefore, I fully agree with Heidegger:

> we do not repeat a beginning by reducing it to something past and now known, which need merely be imitated; no, the beginning must be begun again, more radically, with all the strangeness, darkness, insecurity that attend a true beginning.[24]

The problem then is our inability or simply our impatience to begin anew. To paraphrase Fu, it is no easy task to know what Kant *did* say, let alone to know what he really *intended* to say. If we are serious about determining what Kant *could* have or even *should* have said, we may have to "internalize," so to speak, all the footnotes to Plato. Even then, there is no guarantee that we will know what we *should* say, despite what Kant (and Kantians) did, intended to, and could say. For "creative inheritance," if I understand the term correctly, can never be programmed no matter how ingenious the proposed mechanism to do so happens to be.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1959), p. 7.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 10.
4. Ibid., p. 15.
5. Ibid., pp. 13–17
6. Mou Tsung-san, *Chih te chih-chüeh yü Chung-kuo che-hsüeh*[l] [Intellectual intuition and Chinese philosophy] (Taipei: Shang-wu Press[m], 1971), pp. 216–325.
7. P. T. Raju, "Metaphysical Theories in Indian Philosophy," in *The Indian Mind: Essentials of Indian Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967), p. 59.
8. Kant, *Foundations*, p. 112. For Kant's discussion on the ground of distinction of all subjects into phenomena which we are capable of knowing and noumena (or things-in-themselves) which are beyond human comprehension, see his *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. F. Max Müller (reprinted, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1966), pp. 187–202.
9. Ibid., p. 69.
10. Ibid., p. 79.
11. Ibid., p. 78.
12. Ibid., p. 70.
13. Ibid., pp. 80–81.
14. Mou Tsung-san, *Chih te-Chih-Chüeh*, pp. 200–201.
15. Kant, *Foundations*, p. 25.
16. Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung-yung* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976), p. 116.
17. Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 215.
18. Heidegger, *Kant*, pp. 134–141.
19. Heidegger, *Kant*, p. 176.
20. Heidegger, *Kant*, p. 177.
21. Galatians 2:20.
22. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
23. Fingarette, *Confucius*, pp. 1–17.
24. Heidegger, *Kant*, p. 32.

[a] 杜維明
[b] 牟宗三
[c] 道
[d] 莊子
[e] 圓教
[f] 天臺
[g] 上帝
[h] 天
[i] 誠
[j] 格義
[k] 天主
[l] 智的直覺與中國哲學
[m] 商務