

Is there no Epistemological Background for the Chinese Philosophy of Reason?

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The general opinion of Westerners writing on Chinese philosophy is that its main interest centers on human relations and ethical questions. In other words, it is difficult to find in Chinese philosophy any epistemology or an examination of the mind in regard to knowledge.

I admit that ever since the Sung period Chinese philosophy has been concerned with *Tao T'ung* (the Apostolic Line of Descent), with self-cultivation by reflective effort, or putting moral convictions into practice, and other related topics which one seldom finds in Western philosophy. None the less Chinese philosophy is intellectual in nature, and is constructed on a rational basis. To show this clearly it is necessary to compare the Greek with the Chinese mentality.

Though China is an Asian country, her way of thinking is curiously much nearer to the West than to the East. She does not belong to the religion-founding nations like India, Arabia, or Israel. Instead she is inclined towards the study of this world, especially human relationships and moral values. Professor A. K. Rogers in his *A Student's History of Philosophy* makes the interesting comment¹ that the Greeks were deficient in religious seriousness, but that they had disinterested intellectual curiosity and the gift of artistic expression. This is why they played a leading role in laying the foundation of philosophy and science in Europe. What Professor Rogers says about the Greeks may be justly applied to the Chinese. For the Chinese were, and are, full of common-sense and passionate seekers of knowledge. The compilation of the *Twenty-four Dynastic Histories* is one example of their mental peculiarity. They have not been inspired to create a new faith or to evolve the idea of a Messiah. They are sober and non-dogmatic. Confucius typified the Chinese character when he expressed his attitude towards other-worldliness in the following words²: Tzū Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. Confucius said: 'While you are not able to serve men how can you serve their spirits?' Tzū Lu added: 'I venture to ask about death.' He was answered: 'While you do not know life, how can you know death?'³ On another occasion Confucius said to Tzū Lu³: "Shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing,

¹) A. K. Rogers: *A Student's History of Philosophy*, 3-rd ed., The Macmillan Co., New York, 1937, p. 3.

²) *Lun Yü* (Legge), Book XI, Chapter XI.

³) *Op. cit.*, Book II, Chapter XVII.

to allow that you do not know it - -this is knowledge." It is plain that Confucius drew a line between the knowable and the unknowable, for which reason he has sometimes been regarded as an agnostic. His investigations were indeed confined to the phenomena of this world. But there is a side in human nature which craves to understand the realm beyond the phenomenal world. Failing to find the desired satisfaction in Confucianism the Chinese have had recourse to Taoism and been converted to Buddhism which is an importation from India.

Confucius, like the Greek Socrates, was a moral philosopher. He was also interested in the rectification of names and in the nomenclature of birds, beasts and plants. This latter interest would seem to imply that biology and zoology engaged his attention. But it would be farfetched to attribute to him an enthusiasm for science in the modern sense of the term. There can be no doubt, however, about his interest in antiquity⁴. "I am not one", he said of himself, "who was born in possession of knowledge; I am one who is fond of antiquity and earnest in seeking it." It is no exaggeration to say that the preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals for the last two thousand years with knowledge-seeking, historical study, historiography, philosophizing, and artistic expression, is the direct outcome of a tradition which was originated by Confucius, and which was carefully preserved by one generation after another.

About a century after the death of the Master came two successors who continued the development of the doctrines of the Confucian School. They were Mencius and Hsün-tzū. Mencius was a rationalist and emphasized the function of mind and thought. Hsün-tzū was an empiricist and stressed the importance of the knowledge of data from outside. The result was two opposing schools of thought, that of Mencius who maintained that human nature was good, and that of Hsün-tzū who was equally sure that human nature was evil. Mencius' contribution to Chinese philosophy was what might have been expected of a rationalist *i. e.* he believed in the existence of innate ideas in the human mind, from which knowledge of the world of phenomena and of good and evil, is derived. Hsün-tzū on the other hand, held that man is dominated by desires and passions, so that his nature is essentially bad, and his mind is merely a *tabula rasa* until it is written upon from the outside by sense-impressions. This philosophical controversy was in many respects similar to the epistemological debate between the rationalist and empiricists in Europe. Whether we may regard this similarity as an example of the affinity between Chinese and Western thought depends entirely upon how we interpret the issues involved.

After Mencius and Hsün-tzū came the Legalist School, which was the last phase in the history of ancient Chinese thought. It advocated the abolition of feudalism, upheld regimentation, and played power-politics on a large scale. It also disregarded such virtues as filial duty, loyalty, and honesty. The Legalist School

⁴ Op. cit., Book VII, Chapter XIX.

was responsible in making China a universal empire under the rule of Ch'in Shih Huang. It was then that the flowering period of Chinese philosophy came to an end. What followed was an era of scholasticism. Scholars kept themselves busy by trying to rediscover or re-collect the books which had been consigned to the flames by Ch'in Shih Huang. Under Wu-ti of the Han Dynasty the Confucian *Classics* were canonized while the writings of all the other schools were banned. But Confucianism meant no more than an uninspired interpretation and commentary on the Classics, without philosophizing in a living sense. It was then that many scholars became dissatisfied merely with "picking up bread-crumbs" and sought release in the study of Lao-tzū, Chuang-tzū, and Buddhism. For eight centuries — from about the end of the Later Han Dynasty until, and including the T'ang Dynasty — the majority of brilliant scholars were attracted by Buddhism, and did the enormous work of translating the Sanskrit Buddhist texts. Even though their training was still in the Confucian tradition, the mind of these scholars was filled with Taoism and Buddhism. The situation was somewhat similar to that of Mediaeval Europe, when for a while, after the adoption of Christianity, the Greek philosophers were forgotten.

Before proceeding to the Sung philosophy, I must say a few words about what this philosophy owed to Buddhism. The services which the Chinese performed in collaboration with the Central Asian and Indian monks in translating Buddhist texts were tremendous. These texts, now collected under the title *Tripitaka*, number more than 3,000. Buddhist influence in China reached its climax when Bodhidharma, founder of the Ch'an school and Hsüan Tsang, a pioneer of the Yogacharya School, exercised an almost hypnotic effect throughout the empire. For a long period it seemed as if China had completely lost herself, buried in Buddhism. But the philosophical ideas of the Buddhist Schools, such concepts as *Namarupa*, reality, mind, the Twelve *Nidanas*, and *Prajnaparamita*, acted as a shock-cure after Chinese scholars had been for many years in contact with them.

Under the influence of Buddhism, the Chinese mind at last came back to itself. It learned, after wandering in Buddhism for eight centuries, that the life of forgetfulness of the world was not compatible with its genius for affirming life and the world. As a consequence, it came back home and determined to construct its own philosophical system. This indigenous system was the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung and Ming Dynasties — what is generally known as Sung philosophy. It has the appearance of being anti-Buddhistic because its expositors were keenly interested in preserving and carrying on the Confucian tradition, and hence felt impelled to use anti-Buddhist language. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the revival of Confucianism could never have taken place if scholars had not learned copiously from Buddhism. We should be thankful to the Indians for giving us the art of speculative thinking, which, after ten centuries of mental stagnation, set the Chinese mind again on the move.

Neo-Confucianism, though its terminology is taken from the *Lun Yü* (*Analects*), the *Ta Hsüeh* (*Great Learning*), the *Chung Yung* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), and the *Mêng tzü* (*Book of Mencius*), is built upon the foundation of ideas like *ri*^{4a} (reason), *Hsing* (human nature), *Ch'i* (matter) essential nature, physical nature, Supreme Ultimate, Ultimate of Nothingness, etc. The Neo-Confucian philosophy is a system of metaphysical theory, and is more speculative than the *Lun Yü* and the *Mêng Tzü*, which are discussions of family duties, personal cultivation, and political institutions. Neo-Confucianism is pervaded by a unity, while Confucianism, in its orthodox form, is piecemeal, disjointed, concrete and axiomatic in its presentation.

Originally inspired by anti-Buddhist sentiment, Neo-Confucianism became a positive, full-fledged philosophy. Its founders were Chou Tun-i (1017—1073 A. D.), Shao Yung (1011—1077), Chang Tsai (1020—1085), and Ch'êng I (1033—1082). Each of these founders made his contribution, though there is hardly space here to go into the details of their respective ideas. On the whole, the course of the Neo-Confucian movement presents a striking analogy to the development of Greek philosophy. In the earliest period the Sung thinkers were interested in setting up a cosmology similar to that of Anaximander, based on the concept of the boundless. Or that of Anaximenes, based on the concept of air and vapor. Both of these Greek cosmologies find their analogy in Chou Tun-i's *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* and in Chang Tsai's *Great Ethereal*. The period of cosmological inquiry was followed by a period of ethical reflection. In ancient Greece this latter was the work of Socrates and the Sophists. In China the Ch'êng brothers played the same role by taking leave of cosmology and striving to find the unchangeable ethical truth behind the flux of sensible appearances. In the *Phaedo*⁵ we find these words: "When returning to herself the soul reflects, then she passes into the realm of purity and eternity and immortality and unchangeableness which are her kindred; and with them she ever lives, and is not let or hindered. There she ceases from her erring ways and being in communion with the unchanging, is unchanging, and this state of the soul is called wisdom." This world of purity, eternity, and unchangeableness was also the objective which the Sung philosophers sought. In their terminology it was named the world of *ri* (reason) or *Tao* (the Great Way), which is metaphysical. I cannot see that there is any fundamental difference between this type of thinking and the ancient philosophy of the Occident. There are, of course, differences in doctrinal detail, and emphasis. But if the basic character of Chinese philosophy in general and of the Neo-Confucianist philosophy in particular is recognized, it will be clear

^{4a}) Throughout this essay the term *ri* will be substituted for the more usual *li*, as the romanization of the Chinese character meaning "reason". Thus confusion with the word *li* meaning "etiquette" or "decency" is thus avoided.

⁵) B. Jowett: *The Dialogues of Plato*, in 4 vol., C. Scribner's Sons, 1890, vol. 1, p. 408.

that the dissimilarities are not great between philosophy in the East and philosophy in the West.

In an comparative study of Chinese thought with modern European philosophy one will also find much in common. Chou Tun-i, Shao Yung, and Chang Tsai suggest Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza, because both groups were builders of metaphysical systems and rationalists. In the development of Sung philosophy some thinkers attached especial importance to the effort to seek knowledge, or to knowledge-seeking, as I have usually called it. They believed that the mind is not sufficient unto itself; it must depend upon knowledge acquired from the outside. Other thinkers believed that the mind is born with innate ideas and that is thus itself the criterion of right and wrong. Those who sought knowledge from the outside were kindred to the European empiricists, who held the *tabula rasa* theory. The others were of the same category as the Western rationalists.

More striking than any of these similarities between Chinese and Occidental thought are the resemblances between Chu Hsi and Aristotle. Separated from each other by an interval of fifteen centuries and without any possibility of ever having seen, or heard of, each other's writings, they nevertheless present a remarkable series of identical conclusions. (1) Chu Hsi and Aristotle agree that the idea as one, apart from, and in addition to, the many, does not exist. (2) They concur in denying independent existence to the universal apart from the individual. (3) According to the Stagirite, matter cannot exist absolutely deprived of form. Chu Hsi says that no *ch'i* (matter) exists without *ri* (reason or form). (4) Aristotle holds that an immaterial form-principle exists, while the Chinese philosopher asserts that *ri* is prior to *ch'i* in principle. These points of agreement between Aristotle and Chu Hsi will be dealt with in detail in my forthcoming book, *Neo-Confucianism*.

Among the most stalwart of the champions of a basic difference between Chinese thought and Occidental philosophy is Professor Northrop of Yale University. Some of his evidence he derives from such quotations as the following, from the *Lun Yü*⁶: "A gentleman is careful about three things: in his youth, when his blood is strong, he is careful about sex. When he is grown up and his blood is full, he is careful about getting into a fight. When he is old and his blood is getting thinner, he is careful about money." Upon the basis of this quotation Northrop concludes that in Oriental philosophy concern with the immediately apprehended, and use of the concrete imagery of the aesthetic experience, are obvious. Now I agree that Orientals do, in their thinking, use abundantly the concrete imagery of the aesthetic experience. But this quotation from Confucius is just a warning for youths, adults, and old men, and has little

⁶) *Philosophy — East and West*, edited by C. A. Moore, Princeton University Press, 1944: Northrop's essay, p. 206.

to do with the fundamentals of his philosophy. Let us read another remark of Confucius⁷: "The Master said: 'Shên, my doctrine is that of an all-pervading unity.'" Here he speaks of his philosophical system, which consists of a set of concepts and propositions, and which possesses logical principles and abstractions. Where is aesthetic imagery to be found here? If one looks far enough one will find conceptual elements in Oriental philosophy as well as in Plato and Aristotle. Here more similarity than dissimilarity is to be found between the thought of the East and West.

I come now to the role of thought and reason in Chinese philosophy. Philosophizing begins, of course, with the work of the mind: *i. e.* with thought. Once Confucius said⁸: "Learning without thought leads to no result. Thought without learning is adventurous." He meant that knowledge is based upon *data* and method of thinking. If one has no *data* with which to work, and if one merely plays with phantasms of one's imagination, thought will be unreliable or adventurous. If one collects many *data*, scattered, piecemeal, and unrelated, no principle will run through the congeries like a thread to string them into a system. One may know much but will be unable to reach a goal, or to set up an ideal pattern for life. Mencius was a rationalist because he saw clearly that mind is the source by which knowledge of this and that, and of right and wrong, comes into being. Subsequently he became known in the history of Chinese philosophy as the founder of the School of Mind.

One of his disciple, after pointing out⁹: "All are equally men, but some follow that part of themselves which is great, and some pursue that portion which is little," asked: "How is this?" Mencius replied: "The senses of hearing and seeing have nothing to do with thinking, and can be obscured by external things; when one object comes into contact with another, the effect is to lead a man astray as a matter of course. To the mind belongs the office of thinking. By thinking the mind acquires the correct view of things. By neglecting to think it fails in this. These, the senses and the mind, heaven has given us. Let a man first stand firmly in the supremacy of the nobler part of his constitution, and the inferior part will be incapable of taking this from him. Here alone is that which makes the great man." In this discussion, the words "portion which is little" is the counterpart of "perception" in Plato's *Theaetetus*, and the words "part which is great" refer to what Socrates meant by "what the soul perceives". As in the case of the Athenian thinkers the position of Mencius and of the Confucian thinkers in general is essentially dualistic.

Elsewhere Mencius said¹⁰: "Men's mouths agree in cherishing the same taste, their ears agree in enjoying the same sounds, their eyes agree in recognizing the

⁷) *Lun Yü* (Legge), Book IV, Chapter XV.

⁸) *Op. cit.*, Book II, Chapter XV (My own translation).

⁹) *Mencius* (Legge), Book VI, Part I, Chapter XV.

¹⁰) *Op. cit.*, Book VI, Part I, Chapter XVII.

same beauty — shall their minds alone be without that which they similarly approve? What is it then by which they similarly approve? It is, I say, the principles of our constitution, the determination of righteousness. The Sages only apprehended before us that of which my mind approves along with other men. Therefore, the principles of our constitution and the determination of righteousness are agreeable to my mind just as the flesh of grass and grain-fed animals is agreeable to my mouth.” What is vital in this dialogue is the attribution to all men of universal agreement in the matter of the principles of moral valuation and logical judgment. Mencius’ idea brings to mind also the words of the British moralist, J. Butler¹¹, “That which renders beings capable of moral government”, he remarked, “is their having a moral nature, and moral faculties of perception and of action . . . But additional to this we have a capacity of reflecting; upon actions and characters, and making them an object of our thought; and on doing this, we naturally and unavoidably approve some actions under the peculiar view of their being virtuous and of good desert.” What Butler called “natural” and “unavoidable”, and what Mencius denominated as “similar” is a universally acknowledged standard of should be, and of right and wrong. Again, it is what Mencius meant by “determination of righteousness” or “reason”. In the view of the Oriental, theoretical principles, principles of logical judgement, and principles of moral valuation, all provide the foundations for the structure of civilization. Here again we have an area of agreement in the nature of philosophy, between the East and the West.

It is a usual phenomenon in the history of thought that, when philosophy and science flourish, the importance of the rational mind is recognized. When they are on the decline, the role of reason becomes less important. Reason was a forgotten factor in the Mediaeval period of both China and Europe. But with the modern period it was revived. When rational philosophy first began to develop in Europe, Descartes made “*cogito*” his starting point. And in China, several centuries earlier, the Neo-Confucianist movement laid its cornerstone with the discovery of *ri* (reason) by the Ch’êng brothers¹². “Reason”, said Ch’êng Hao, “in all things consists of opposites. It never stands alone. This is naturally so and is not the effect of artifice. When I first grasped this idea in my midnight thoughts I was so happy that I wished to dance with my hands and feet.”

Such was the joy that attended the coming into being of the basic concept of Sung philosophy! The meaning of the term *ri*, however, is ambiguous. It is used in two senses: (1) rationality in, or of, the mind, in the same sense as the Pure and Practical Reason of Kant are in, or of, the mind; (2) rationality as the law of the physical and moral worlds: *i. e.*, rationality as order of nature. The Sung

¹¹) *British Moralists*, edited by L. A. Selby Bigge, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1897, Butler’s essay, vol. 1, p. 245.

¹²) *Sung Yüan Hsüeh An* (Philosophical Records of the Sung and Yüan Dynasties), Ch’êng Hao, Chapters XIII—XIV.

philosophers frequently used the term in this latter signification. Thus, they said that everything in the universe has reason, namely, the principles of its constitution. For example, a boat can only sail on water; a cart can only drive on land. The sailing of the boat, and the driving of the cart, are their respective reasons. On the whole, the Sung philosophers seldom used the term in its other meaning, as the reasoning power of the mind. For them, it denoted the principles of the phenomenal world. Sung philosophy is called *ri hsüeh* (the science or philosophy of reason); also *hsing ri hsüeh* (the philosophy of human nature *qua* reason). The school of the Ch'êng brothers and of Chu Hsi held that mind, operating on the natural level, does the work of consciousness. The labor of discrimination between this and that, between right and wrong is achieved at a higher, transcendental level, where the four cardinal virtues: *Jên* (human-heartedness), *i* (righteousness), *li* (principles of decency), and *chih* (knowledge or wisdom), are innate. Human nature consisting of these four cardinal virtues, is the source of moral and logical sense. Since the Chinese were especially concerned with moral values, they attached peculiar importance to the transcendental level of *hsing* (human nature), and combined the two terms *hsing* and *ri*, because they thought of rationality as lying in human nature.

The Sung philosophers have thus definitely stated their *formula*: "Human nature is reason." This was first propounded by the Ch'êng brothers, and repeated a thousand times by Chu Hsi and later generations. Why did they state this principle? The question is worthy of careful study. The Sung philosophers considered that human nature is a high level of mind in which forms of thought are stored, while mind, in the sense of consciousness or awareness, exists at a lower or natural level. The Sung philosophers attacked the Buddhists as being ignorant of human nature, that is of the four cardinal virtues and being aware only of mind's function at the natural level.

Let me return once more to Mencius' doctrine of the four cardinal virtues. I shall limit myself to the first of these, namely, *jên*. What Mencius meant was that there are four forms *a priori* in the human mind. These forms are the standards to which all human approval and disapproval must be referred. But, to quote the words of Mencius¹³: "When I say that all men have a mind, which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus: — if a man suddenly sees a child about to fall into a well, he will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. He will feel so, not because he may gain the favor of the parents, nor because of any dislike for having the reputation of being unmoved by such a thing." Mencius asserts that every man re-acts in the same way when he sees a child about to fall into a well. He is not prompted by any ulterior motive, or by any desire to gain favor or praise; it is simply the expression of a sense of commiseration — *jên* (human-heartedness) on

¹³) *Mencius* (L e g g e), Book II, Part I, Chapter VI, Paragraph III.

its emotional side. In other words, the essence of the moral life consists in obedience to a law: the Categorical Imperative, which is absolute and universal, and this obedience is free from any intermixture of personal interest or self-gratification. This reverence for the law as such grows out of a pure and unselfish will. Mencius' belief was the same as Kant's fundamental principle of Practical Reason: "So act that you can also will that your action should become a universal law."

I said I would limit myself to the first of Mencius' four cardinal virtues, *jên*. But if I should go further I might also say that these four virtues are the four forms *a priori* of Chinese moral valuation and the theory of knowledge. The first three belong to the field of moral valuation; the last, *chih* (knowledge), is the source of the cognitive consciousness.

Whether these forms are denominated "innate ideas"; according to the general usage of rationalists, or whether they are called "categories" or "forms of the understanding", according to Kant's usage, is of secondary importance. What is necessary is that there be constitutive factors in mind making our experience, whether of one another as human beings, or of the natural world, possible. Since this doctrine concerns a fundamental problem of life and knowledge, the Sung philosophers attached supreme importance to the *formula*: "Human nature is *reason*." Accent should be laid on the last word "*reason*", or "forms of thought", rather than on the first two words: "human nature." Of course, this aphorism is often cited as evidence for the goodness of human nature. But its real meaning is contained in the word "*reason*", because without reason no common knowledge, indeed no human relations whatever, would be possible. These four cardinal virtues constitute a universal standard, or a universal mind, in regard to human relations and knowledge.

After the Ch'êng brothers and Chu Hsi, this *formula* which we have been considering was changed into "Mind is reason" — a transformation traceable to *Ch'an* (*Zen*) Buddhism, which magnified the role of mind to the greatest possible extent, and more than any other group of thinkers has ever done. Lu Hsiang-shan and Wang Yang-ming were convinced that reason is in mind. They believed that mental awareness or judgment passes through mind, and hence there is no sense in attributing the function whereby judgments comply to the form of thought to a supposedly higher level, called "human nature" by the Ch'êng brothers and Chu Hsi. This step has always been regarded as revolutionary in Chinese thought because the Lu-Wang School combined the natural level and the transcendental level into one. Which was correct, the Lu-Wang School, or Chu Hsi? This fascinating question cannot be discussed in the present essay, as it would carry us too far afield. I wish merely to stress that "*reason*", in either of these *formula*, signifies forms *a priori*, or forms of thought, which constitute the categories of all possible valuational and logical judgments.

Throughout the history of Chinese thought there has been a conspicuously drawn line of demarcation through the word "reason". Some have interpreted it in the rationalist sense, as innate ideas. Among these belong Mencius, Lu Hsiang-shan, and Wang Yang-ming. Others have interpreted it in the empiricist sense, e. g., Hsün-tzū, the Tung-lin School, and Tai Chên (Tai Tung-Yüan). The great synthesizers were Chu Hsi and the Ch'êng brothers, who emphasized both the knowledge acquired by learning and the intuitive facts of consciousness. Chu Hsi's achievement was similar to that of Kant, who tried to reconcile empiricism with rationalism.

In this connection, if I may be permitted, I should like to touch upon the question of continuity of the philosophical tradition. Presentday mainland China, it seems to me, looks down contemptuously upon the long intellectual heritage founded by Confucius, Mencius, Chu Hsi, and Wang Yang-ming. I feel certain, however, that if human thought continues to exercise its function, the Chinese will some day re-discover their ancestors' accomplishments. In my opinion, a synthesis of Chu Hsi and Wang Yang-ming will take place, because scientific knowledge acquired from the Book of Nature, and a humanitarian spirit growing out of the inner heart — in other words, *chih* and *jên* in Confucian terminology, or wisdom and mercy in Buddhist terminology — should be the parallel guides for the world-community, or for mankind on a global basis.

s.129 道統
子路
s.130 荀子
s.131 秦始皇
武帝
武玄奘
論語
s.132 大學
中庸
孟子
理性

氣
本然之性
氣質之性
太極
無極
周敦頤
邵雍
張載
程頤
朱熹
s.133 理學
s.136 性學

s.135 仁義
禮智
s.137 性即理也
心即理
禪
陸象山
王陽明
s.138 東林學派
戴震
戴東原