

Seeking wisdom

YIH-HSIEN YU COMPARES WESTERN PHILOSOPHY'S
PREOCCUPATION WITH GOD AND MATTER TO
THE CORE CONCERN OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell says, “Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science ... All definite knowledge – so I should contend – belongs to science; all dogma as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology.” He then left the no-man’s-land between theology and science to philosophy.

For some Chinese philosophers, however, “philosophy” can never thrive in this no-man’s-land. In fact, many Chinese philosophers who have become acquainted with the history of

Western philosophy would be amazed by how Western philosophy can be so closely associated to either theology or science, such that the real distinguishing feature of philosophy – the search for human wisdom – becomes hidden and even begins to disappear from view.

One can see wisdom fading from view in both traditional and modern Western philosophy. Among the ancient Greeks, Aristotle crowns theology – the knowledge of God – as the highest science in his metaphysics. He then calls God the “unmoved Mover”, the first cause from which all other movements start. Characterising the divine

Philosophy was no more than the handmaiden to theology

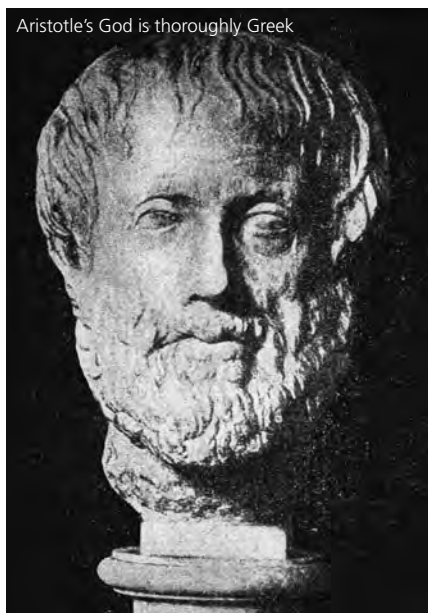
nature he attributes to it perfect goodness and eternal life, pure actuality, pure form, independence without parts, and necessary existence. Obviously, Aristotle's God is thoroughly Greek. It is a philosophical God, a presupposition to his metaphysics; it is not "God" in the Christian or indeed in any religious sense – it is not the creator of the world nor is it revered as the proper object of human worship.

However, after Christianity was introduced into Western civilisation, early in the rise of the Roman Empire, and once it became the dominant religion in the West, philosophy was no more than the handmaiden to its queen, theology. Philosophers asked, can we justify our faith in God by reason? Can the existence of God

be proved? What are the attributes or what is the nature of God? How can we have knowledge of God? Does belief in God entail belief in a future state (after death) and a belief in the immortality of the soul? As one of the creatures created by an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent and perfectly good God, can we still possess free will? Have we been given free will at the cost of being able to choose evil, because freedom is so valuable? And how can God, with all the knowledge and power required to prevent evil from happening, be exempted from taking the responsibility of allowing evil into the world? All these questions became major issues of philosophy and theology for centuries in the West, and the controversies are ongoing. Agreement still eludes both philosophers and theologians.

Western philosophy's involvement with science is no less deep than its involvement with theology. It also began with the ancient Greeks. From the beginning of Western philosophy, philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Leucippus and Democritus were all interested in inquiring into the nature of reality. They asked, "What is this world made of?" Water, "the unbounded", air, fire, earth, seeds, and atoms – either one or many elementary substances turn out to be the candidates for the reality that underpins the world behind appearances. Here natural philosophers mostly consider human beings as one of many members of the universe, in that they have the same sorts of qualities as other things which exist.

Aristotle's God is thoroughly Greek



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Hobbes's mechanistic vision has been fully realised

Following this strand of thinking, Aristotle develops his doctrine of four causes, or the four explanatory features of a thing: the material cause or what something is made of; the formal cause, its shape; the efficient cause or what created it; and the final cause, its purpose. The understanding of a substance as a thing's material cause combined with its formal cause had a large effect on Western philosophy. As it passed down through the Middle Ages, Aristotelian substantialism transformed into a kind of mechanistic materialism in the modern scientific sense as understood by Thomas Hobbes.

For Hobbes, everything is just material, including human beings and their minds – he even suggests that God is also material. So he claims that all matter, without exception, is in constant motion following mechanical or physical laws. In this materialistic worldview, human beings can be seen as animal machines or automata. As Hobbes remarks in *Leviathan*, “For what is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings and the Joynts, but so many Wheelles, giving motion to the whole Body, such as intended by the Artificer? Art goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, Man.”

Hobbes's mechanistic vision has been fully realised with the development of physiology, biochemistry, neuroscience, cognitive science and genetics, flourishing alongside the tremendous

progress of many other related contemporary sciences. So not only can the biochemical processes in the human body be understood in great detail, but all our common-sense mental states can also be understood in terms of brain states. Materialism came to dominate nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy.

Western philosophy's connection to theism and theology on the one hand, and materialism and science on the other, makes sense since both groups attempt to seek out the “ultimate cause” of the universe – theism and materialism just have different approaches and answers. Roughly speaking, theistic thinkers in the Middle Ages were convinced that the Christian God is a supernatural power, which created the universe and all creatures, including human beings, so God is the ultimate cause of everything. Materialist thinkers, bolstered by discoveries in cosmology and astronomy, conclude that all things are made of “matter”, and there is no God.



Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons
(By Kanō Eitoku (狩野永徳) and his father Kanō Shōei (狩野松栄))

In contrast to the Western traditions of theism and materialism, ancient Chinese philosophy – typified by the *Yijing* or the *Book of Changes* – has not been entangled in questions about God and matter. It understands “the ultimate” in terms of function and process, not substance. In a paragraph in one of the *Ten Commentaries of Yi*, “the Great Treatise”, that explains the cosmic process and its relation to human beings, it says, “*Yi* has or possesses the supreme ultimate, which generated the two forms [– and —, symbols for sun and moon, masculine and feminine]. Those two forms generated the four images [symbols for spring, summer, autumn and winter respectively] which again generated the eight Trigrams [*Qian* ☰, *Kun* ☷, *Zhen* ☳, *Gen* ☶, *Kan* ☵, *Li* ☲, *Xun* ☴, and *Dui* ☱, symbols for heaven, earth, thunder, mountain, water, fire, wind and lake respectively]. The eight trigrams serve to reveal the auspicious [events] and the ominous [events] in the future, and the auspicious and the ominous result in great enterprise [of humankind].”

In this well-known passage of the “Great Treatise”, the term “*Yi*” is the first character of the sentence, and it is said to “have” or “possess”

the *Taiji* that is construed as the beginning of the universe. So “*Yi*” must be something before the Big Bang – it initiates the whole beginning. And the term “*Yi*” is also defined in the “Great Treatise” as “generating after generating unceasingly” (*Sheng Sheng zhi wei Yi*) or we may say “incessant creativity”. Accordingly, we may well argue that for the authors of the “Great Treatise”, nature or the universe is a self-generating, self-creative, sporadic, novel, organic and living

The universe is self-generating

system initiated by the cosmic function of change, of creativity, namely *Yi*.

The ancient Chinese were an agricultural people, and what concerned them most was the natural environment they relied upon for their livelihoods. They saw themselves as standing on the earth and looking up to the heavens. They could see everything around them growing and flourishing in accordance with a natural order.

Seasonal weather and temperature, timely rain and wind, fertile land, fresh air and water – all of this allowed them to plough in the spring, weed in the summer, harvest in the autumn and store in the winter.

All of these agricultural experiences are thematised, patterned, and symbolised by the authors of the *Yijing*. They conceived of the universe as something that evolved from regular patterns of the sun and moon, day and night, which then bring about the return of spring, summer, autumn and winter. They took



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There is nothing like the idea of mechanical causality in the ancient Chinese mind

eight of the natural phenomena most visible to them – Heaven, Earth, Thunder, Mountain, Water, Fire, Wind and Lake – as the basic components of the universe. In the end, they thought that the chances of fortunate or unfortunate outcomes when interacting with each of these natural phenomena, either symbolically or literally, would decide the success or failure of their lives.

There is nothing like the idea of Western mechanical causality in the ancient Chinese mind, occupied as it was with real, concrete, transient and complicated life-situations, all of this intimately connected to the natural environment they were living in. So on the one hand, they meticulously observe the order of nature, the patterns or regularities of natural phenomena, and try to conform harmoniously with them. On the other hand, they ascribe their fortunes and misfortunes to chance, something unpredictable and inexpressible, because there were so many complicated factors, so many accidents or unexpected events involved in their lives. They sometimes communicated with a nameless “deity”, and through divination hoped to have a glimmer of future events. They were convinced that there must be some superhuman beings, but no all-powerful deity that knows everything. As to their knowledge of the supernatural, basically they took on an attitude of agnosticism. As Confucius says, “Whatever you know then you admit you know it, whatever you don’t know then you admit you don’t know it; that is real knowledge.”

So one may argue that there is a half-truth in what Carl Jung says in the “Foreword” for the English translation of *The Book of Changes*, “The Chinese mind, as I see it at work in the *I Ching*, seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of events. What we call coincidence seems to be the chief concern of this peculiar mind, and what we worship as causality passes almost unnoted.” (Jung later developed the idea of synchronicity as opposed to causality, which means meaningful coincidence that “takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective [psychic] states of the observer or observers.”)

Indeed, what concerns the Westerner most, namely causality, never gains the same position in the Chinese mind, preoccupied as it is by creativity and by the thought that one ought to prepare for the future. However, for the Chinese, most things are nevertheless still predicable and calculable. Ancient Chinese has the concepts of both order and chance, but no concept of mechanical causality. So another half of the truth is that there is also natural order and cosmic rhythm in Chinese thinking, which makes the universe comprehensible and predictable.

Above all, for the ancient Chinese the universe is limited in its scope but unlimited in its function. Everything is always changing, but it is a self-generating, self-creative, and novel process; there is no need for a personal God to exercise his supernatural power to create

The nucleus of Chinese philosophy is the Trinity of Heaven, Earth and Man

everything from nothing, nor can all things be reduced to elementary particles. Both theism and materialism have no place in ancient Chinese philosophy.

The real nucleus of Chinese philosophy – based on the *Yijing*, is in fact a Trinity of Heaven, Earth and Man. As our common sense tells us, human beings survive in between heaven and earth; they stand out among other natural species. As it says in the “Great Treatise”, “The Book of *Yi* is comprehensive and encompassing. There are in it the principle/way of heaven, the principle/way of man, and the principle/way of earth. By doubling three lines of the trigram [the sage made] the hexagram composed of six lines. What these six lines signify is nothing else but the principle/way of Three Calibres.” The “Three Calibres” refers to heaven, earth and man. They are gifted with “talents” and stand together performing a most miraculous, amazing, incredible show. Heaven and earth gave birth to human beings, just like the other natural species, but human beings are the only species capable of imitating the creative powers of heaven and earth, able to create a humane world for themselves.

The Principle of Three Calibres indicates man’s place in the universe, his close relation to nature, and his unique participation in the cosmic process of creation. Separately, heaven, earth and man each have their own principle or way. And this is explained by another one of the *Ten Commentaries*, the “*Shuogua*”. It says, “The principle whereupon heaven is established

is called *yin*/moon and *yang*/sun; the principle whereupon earth is established is called hardness and softness; again, the principle whereupon humanity is established is called benevolence and justice.”

Heaven “holds the principle of time” – the alterations of yang/sun and yin/moon result in temporality. So by our observation of heaven, we know time is passing. And with the help of other heavenly bodies, we know the timing of the four seasons. So “Heaven” symbolised by “*Qian*” represents time.

The principle of earth is established upon the qualities of softness and hardness – agricultural activities rely heavily upon the quality of the land for farming. Different degrees of softness or hardness of the soil are fit for different kinds of crops, so people must know the quality of the soil. Working in the vast field naturally gives people a sense of immense space. So “Earth” symbolised by “*Kun*” is in fact understood as the concept of space.

To situate himself in the middle of heaven and earth or in the middle of time and space, man has to establish his own principle of humanity, i.e. benevolence and justice, so as to join together with the principles of heaven and of earth, and to be one of the Three Calibres. This is what we might call “primordial humanism”, and it is deep-seated in the traditional Chinese mind. It seems to me to be the core value of Chinese philosophy.

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