

# Making social and historical sense: A Confucian-phenomenological dialogue

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**Abstract.** A meaningful comparison between Western and Eastern philosophical thought demands that not only similarities but also divergences be brought to light. This may facilitate the appreciation of culturally divergent philosophical traditions but no less open up further possibilities for profiting from the different routes taken. Some seminal thinkers from the Western phenomenological tradition, notably Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, have come to understand that their philosophical dispositions seem to converge with important themes and approaches in Asian philosophy. This paper attempts to open a Confucian-phenomenological dialogue by discussing some noteworthy parallels between the traditions, but also by arguing that their contrary tendencies to understand the relationship between sagehood or, indeed, philosophy, and lived human reality lead them onto vastly different paths. The paper concludes with the argument that Western thinkers have much to gain by more serious exploration of the Confucian preference for wisdom acquired through historically informed identities and everyday communal human living.

Since the first Western missionaries began deciphering Chinese culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the big names in Western philosophy have, occasionally, been tempted to flirt with or make uncommitted passes at Asian philosophy. The first Western philosopher to engage seriously with Chinese philosophy was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who presented a number of valid and meaningful comparisons between the Western and Chinese traditions, though the potential productivity of his interest was hampered by his conviction that Confucianism was an alternative expression of the ‘eternal Christian truths’. Leibniz’s contribution could have been developed further by his successors if it had not been for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who, in the section on ‘Oriental philosophy’ in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,<sup>1</sup> dismissed it from the outset as an expression of ‘the spirit of subjectivity’, which to him meant that it was not ‘real’ philosophy. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was probably one of the first Western thinkers willing to engage himself with Asian, especially Japanese, thought, on its own terms. However, he wrote little on the subject, because, as his prominent disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)

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<sup>1</sup> Orig. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, first published posthumously in 1837.

explained, ‘a scholar of the generation to which Heidegger belongs would be very reluctant to say anything in print about a philosophy if he were himself unable to read and understand the relevant texts in the original language’.<sup>2</sup>

Gadamer has also said that ‘Heidegger studies would do well to pursue seriously comparisons of his work with Asian philosophies’.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I want to follow this advice, at least partly, by comparing the phenomenological, in particular the Heideggerian, heritages, on the one hand, and the Chinese or Confucian on the other. The thesis, or one might say pre-judgement from which my discussion is launched, is that despite their obvious differences, they seem to share a common philosophical project or task, and even formulate strikingly similar thoughts on the human condition, existence and being. Interestingly, however, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, an important element that separates them is that the Western phenomenological endeavour has a stronger disposition toward ‘mystical’ conclusions by recourse to introspection and location of (presumably) eternal ‘truth’ in the subject as a pivotal point for experiencing the world and one’s own place in it. The historical and social dimensions of Confucian philosophy exclude the possibility of such eternalization and internalization.

The vagueness of this formulation, ‘the Heideggerian heritage’, is deliberate. My concentration will not be exclusively on Heidegger, but I shall roam, perhaps recklessly, through the phenomenological laboratory in which Heidegger also made some of his most fruitful experiments. I will mostly discuss Chinese philosophy, but take my cues from phenomenology. These are essentially threefold. The first comes from Heidegger’s predecessor, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), and concerns his idea of philosophy, or, indeed, phenomenology, as a ‘perpetual beginning’. The second can be identified as going all the way back to Renaissance philosophy, but is notable in both Heidegger and Gadamer, and concerns the understanding of thinking as thinking inclusive of the Other. The third and last is the notion of *Selbstbesinnung*, a notion conspicuously present in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), as well as Husserl and Heidegger.

### Perpetual beginning

Husserl presented the practice of philosophy (or phenomenology) as an everlasting attempt to find grounding in the world, to think through the wonder of being, through that which is. But he also identified a certain problem or contradiction in the inquiry itself. We find ourselves, to use Heidegger’s formulation, in a situation of facticity

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Parkes 1987, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 5.

and ‘thrownness’ (*Geworfenheit*), whereby we are embedded in an intricate existential web of meaning and always already implicated in the questions we raise. This web corresponds to Husserl’s everyday, experiential ‘life-world’, or *Lebenswelt*, which could be seen as both an obstacle and access to apprehending reality.

The idea of philosophy as a ‘perpetual beginning’ is quite congenial to Chinese approaches, both Daoist and Confucian, that present the world as being in continuous flux. Incidentally, the Chinese also observe a tension in living reality as both access and obstacle, to which I shall return later. But first, the Chinese cosmological approach requires some elaboration.

In the ancient Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, which dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, we read about the philosophical sages who preserve their own ‘constancy’ within the flow of things by changing along with them.<sup>4</sup> ‘Constancy’, in this sense, does not imply being static or stagnant, but implies, on the contrary, an ability to continuously reconfigure one’s stance vis-à-vis new circumstances and thereby to handle them productively and successfully. This is precisely what makes them sages. Wisdom is the ability to continuously generate fresh perspectives that accord with the emergent situation. Conversely, one who is stagnant does not change with things, does not adapt to new circumstances, but instead clings to rigid principles, even when these are no longer effective or productive. At the other end of the scale, it is possible to change yet not remain constant, submitting unconditionally to change and becoming its slave.

A continuous reconfiguration, however, does not imply starting from scratch each time. Although the world is in a certain sense ‘new’ in every moment—a perpetual beginning—the present always retains something from the past and there is continuity in time. In this regard the personal appropriation of history and tradition is considered the key to knowledge or wisdom in Chinese thought. New experience is processed, so to speak, into previous experiences and so absorbed into approaches to our surroundings that are already in some sense ‘grounded’. ‘Grounded’ is a particularly appropriate formulation, considering the concreteness of the Chinese view of knowledge or wisdom. To be wise, we may recall, means being able to handle things productively. Those who cannot manage their own lives, no matter what they might know otherwise, are, by definition, simply not wise.

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<sup>4</sup> *Zhuangzi*, 60/22/78. Though Zhuangzi is clearly not a Confucian, indeed rather an anti-Confucian, I make use of him in this regard, because there is little to be found in early Confucianism on cosmology, while most commentators are in agreement that Confucians and Daoists, as well as proponents of most other ancient Chinese schools of thought, largely shared the same cosmological outlook of a world in continuous flux. Indications of this cosmological view can, however, be found in the *Zhongyong* chapter of the Confucian *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), as well as in a memorable passage from the *Lunyu* (9.17), in which Confucius offers us his view of the flow of time: ‘While standing on a riverbank, the Master said with a deep sigh: “Doesn’t time pass by just like this, never ceasing day or night!”’

This is expressed in a particularly clear manner in another ancient work, the *Zhongyong*, a short Confucian treatise that may have been written as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The title, *Zhongyong*, is difficult to translate. In the West, it is best known as *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which, however, is a rather unfortunate translation that evokes Aristotelian ethics. The most successful rendering of the title is, in my view, *Centrality and Commonality*, as translated by the New Confucian scholar Tu Weiming. In this short but pregnant piece, Confucius is purported to have said:

People all say about themselves: 'I am wise', but when driven forward they end up in all kinds of nets, traps and pitfalls without any of them knowing how to avoid them. People all say about themselves: 'I am wise', but when they decide to conform to the practice of centrality and commonality, they cannot adhere to it for even a month.<sup>5</sup>

It is also said in the *Zhongyong* that wisdom consists in bringing things to completion, namely those things that are close at hand. 'Commonality' is precisely seen as the condition for understanding reality. And 'centrality' implies focusing on that commonality, on one's most mundane experiences. Wisdom is not gained by peering into the distance, but by focusing on one's most familiar surroundings, which will, in any case, ultimately serve as a criterion for one's wisdom.

The expression, to *handle* things, and again, things that are close at *hand*, invokes Heidegger's intriguing discussion of thinking as a *handicraft*. Thinking and the use of one's hands, Heidegger suggested, are closely affiliated. Being 'handy', i.e. having the capacity to maximise the multifunctionality of the hand, requires language, and language is the requirement for thinking. Why does it require language? Because the hand is much more than just a tool for grasping, or as Heidegger himself puts it, 'the hand's gestures run everywhere through language, and are precisely purest when the human being speaks by being silent'.<sup>6</sup>

The hand speaks; it communicates through embodiment. It is precisely the embodiment of thinking, expressed through the handiness of the hands, that evokes this comparative venture. In fact, the Chinese sage is more often than not someone who is skilled with his hands: a butcher, a woodcutter, a wheel-maker, even a grave-digger. Having been poor when he was young, Confucius himself had to 'acquire many arts', some of which were, according to himself, 'mean matters'.<sup>7</sup> Learning how to think is like learning a handicraft. One must be close to the objects of that learning in order to have an appropriate feel for them. In the Confucian tradition, ritual propriety, in Chinese, *li* 禮, is the 'handicraft of culture', mediating through gestures, movements, even dances, the rhythm necessary for refining and changing tradition according to

<sup>5</sup> *Liji (Zhongyong)*, 32.4/143/1–2.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger 1971, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Lunyu* 9.6.

changed circumstances. One is encouraged to appropriate a certain *sense* for one's environment, an aesthetic feel for the emergent configurations. Both the embodiment of ritual dance and the implication of language are social requirements for thinking. It is through these that we preserve our constancy.

### The Other

Thinking for both Heidegger and the Confucians is therefore not just any kind of mental activity but 'appropriate thinking' that is always social and anticipates the Other. Heidegger observes, perhaps correctly, that in our age we are not yet thinking. To be thinking means to be thoughtful, and the opposite of thoughtfulness is thoughtlessness, a dangerous condition that Hannah Arendt, one of Heidegger's students, has described as the 'banality of evil'—it is the 'authentic inability to think' whereby one's mode of being is dominated by the anonymous 'they' of Heidegger, or *das Man*, by a lack of care closely related to or even derived from technological thinking.

As the Korean-American thinker Hwa Jol Jung has noted: 'If thought is a handy craft, its opposite, thoughtlessness ... is an infliction of cutaneous alagia, the condition of feeling no pain in the skin'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, to be thoughtless is also to lack feelings—to be *numb* to the interest and wellbeing of others. To the extent that we consider them at all, we objectify them as mere tools—or, to use the Kantian formulation, treat them as means to other ends—instead of treating them as ends in their own right.

In Gadamer's formulation, to learn how to think is to undergo edification, or *Bildung*. He stresses the understanding of *Bildung* as a process in which the individual acquires an 'aesthetic' kind of wisdom. That is to say, to be *gebildet*, 'edified', means to have a profound 'sense' (*Sinn*) of one's social and ethical environment, a sense that cannot be derived merely from theoretical knowledge. It rests, at least partly, upon having thoroughly appropriated, through personal experience, one's cultural environment and the tradition and history to which it belongs. It therefore involves the nurturing of such qualities as taste, judgment and tact, which are more often than not ignored in scientific and academic discourse on grounds of their presumed lack of objectivity. Gadamer, however, argues that persons who are *gebildet* in this way have not only moved beyond the narrow scope of their private interests and concerns, but even beyond the limits of the interests of their community or group to adopt a genuine interest in other cultures, their history, and the future development of our communal

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<sup>8</sup> Jung 1987, 223.

living in the world.<sup>9</sup> He says that the essence of edification consists in ‘a general and communal sense’ (*ein allgemeiner und gemeinschaftlicher Sinn*), for it involves:

a general sense for scope and distance with regard to oneself, and, as far as this goes, an elevation of oneself to generality [*Allgemeinheit*]. To view oneself and one’s private aims with distance means to view them as others do. This kind of generality is certainly not a conceptual or intellectual generality. No particularity can be derived from the general; it leads to no conclusive proofs. The general viewpoints to which the edified person remains open are to him no fixed criteria that are always valid, but merely points of view that possible others may have at present. In fact, as far as this goes, the edified consciousness is rather characterized by sense. For every kind of sense, e.g., a sense for faces, is surely general to the extent of the sphere that it comprises and of the field to which it opens itself, by which it then grasps the differences within that opening. The edified consciousness exceeds any natural sense in that the latter is limited to a particular sphere. The former operates in all directions. It is a *general sense*.<sup>10</sup>

This general sense borders on or is formed through a combination of a common sense and a sense for one’s community. The latter is derived from the humanist tradition as *sensus communis*, or, as Gadamer puts it, drawing on Shaftesbury, ‘a sense for the common good, but also *love of the community or society, natural affection, humanity, obligingness*’.<sup>11</sup> Referring to the Renaissance thinker Giambattista Vico, he continues:

What gives the human will its direction, Vico says, is not the abstract generality of reason but the concrete generality which is exemplified by the commonality of a group, a people, a nation or the whole of mankind. The formation of this communal sense is therefore of decisive significance.<sup>12</sup>

With his emphasis on the importance of ‘sense’, Gadamer emphasises the concreteness of the process and, at the same time, takes a clear distance from the Hegelian formulation of *Bildung*, which rests for the most part upon abstract and universal conceptualization.

While Hegel conceived of history as the continuous progress of freedom, his notion of freedom was ultimately subjected to the abstraction of the concept itself and its ostensible universality. This universal truth inherent in language, Hegel believed, also contained a certain kind of moral vocation. So *Bildung* consisted for Hegel in the promotion of abstract universality: ‘Those who tie themselves to the particular and lack the ability to abstraction and generality are “*ungebildet*”, and such a failure can only be understood as moral failure’.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Warnke 1987, 157ff.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer 1990, 22f.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 30. Italics and English in original.

<sup>12</sup> Gadamer 1990, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Schmidt 2000, 166.

As a process through which one learns how to think—concretely, in the Heideggerian-Gadamerian sense—*Bildung* has a striking resemblance to the early Confucian outlook on the process of learning. It is a process that derives quite logically, or, more appropriately, naturally, from the fundamental Chinese perception of the human being's mode of existence in the world. What characterises this mode? First of all, the assumption of a world in a perpetual process of change prevents a reified view of the human self—a self is always a self in the making. Secondly, and consequently, a self cannot be defined by reference to itself only, but must be understood in the context of its surroundings and, in particular, circumstances of environing persons. One's movements in and toward the world always involve others and cannot be abstracted from them. Indeed, one might even argue that the self is merely the sum of all its relationships. This Geir who writes these words is son to his parents, husband to his wife, teacher to his students, student to his teachers, and friend to his friends. There *is* nothing as such that can be nailed down and identified as Geir; he is constantly making and remaking himself by virtue and means of his relationships.

### *Selbstbesinnung*

European phenomenologists have used the term *Selbstbesinnung* as a different formulation of the practice of philosophy as perpetual beginning, that is to say, phenomenology. It could be understood as meditative or contemplative thinking directed toward oneself; it is to be mindful of oneself, to arrive at self-understanding, which, according to Husserl, is precisely the task of phenomenology. In the final words of the *Cartesian Meditations*, he writes: 'One must first lose the world through *epoché* before one can win it back in the act of universal *Selbstbesinnung*'. He then quotes Augustine: *Noli foras ire, in te redi, interiore homine habitat veritas*. 'Do not go outside, go back into yourself, truth lives in the inner human being'.<sup>14</sup>

Leaving aside that the Confucian thinkers, or for that matter, Chinese thinkers in general, did not share in Husserl's and Augustine's quest for 'truth', they certainly seem to be able to help them a little on the 'way'. According to the correlative scheme of Chinese thinking, the 'inner' human being is always already a product of the 'outer', of the 'other'; there is no absolute border separating them. Such a correlative scheme refrains from absolute dualism, and so the inner always implies the outer, and vice-versa. In this sense, there is surely something important to be found in the 'inner human being', but only insofar that this 'inner' is a perpetual expression of that which the human being has received from the outside.

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<sup>14</sup> Husserl 1995, 161.

This becomes clear when considering the practice of self-cultivation or personal cultivation (*xiushen* 修身), which could be identified as the crux of the Confucian philosophy. The idea of cultivating or refining oneself, of analysing one's own character, stance and bearing, is pervasive in ancient Chinese writings. But self-cultivation is never confined to the self—which is why *personal cultivation* may be a more appropriate description.

The most expressive discussion of self-cultivation is found in yet another ancient treatise, the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), which dates back to around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. It outlines a moral processual scheme that is as brief in length as it is expansive in scope. What it seems to present, especially when translated into Western languages, is a step-by-step teleological program beginning with the investigation of one's environment, going through personal cultivation, and consummating in achieving peace under heaven. Universal peace thus begins with the single individual's effort to better him- or herself. A typical translation of the part that describes this process is, for instance, that of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century missionary James Legge, who, despite his overall brilliant translations, essentially makes the same mistake as most others:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. The extension of knowledge is by the investigation of things.<sup>15</sup>

Then the process is described again, but from beginning to end, culminating in *tianxia ping* 天下平, or 'world peace'. The description, as it appears in English translation, is misleading to say the least. It gives the impression that before we even can start thinking of entering the second stage and strive to be sincere in our thoughts, we must first extend our knowledge to the utmost. However, such an understanding effectively prevents us from concluding the first stage. In practical terms, the translation conveys a mere lapse into a purely theoretical orientation toward dedicating one's entire life to the accumulation, or, in this case, extension of knowledge. When on earth have we ever extended our knowledge to the *utmost*?

The passage certainly expresses, in some sense, a step-by-step process, but it proceeds in a rather different manner. The *linguistic* problem with the translation

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<sup>15</sup> Legge 1967, 2: 411f. What I have referred to as 'all under heaven' (*tianxia* 天下), and certainly could be understood as 'the whole world' as it is, in fact, by He Baihua (*The Great Learning. Daxue* 大學. *A Chinese-English Bilingual Edition*, Jinan: Shandong youyi chubanshe, 1992), is translated by Legge as 'throughout the kingdom'.



is the use of the word ‘first’ followed by a past tense verb, e.g., ‘wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons’, suggesting that they had to finish cultivating their persons before they could turn to the task of regulating their families. In classical Chinese, there are no tenses that indicate such a process of moving to the next step only after having concluded the previous one. There is, to be sure, the word *xian* 先, indicating ‘first’, which, however, should rather be understood in the sense of ‘first things first’, without implying that previous steps have been brought to conclusion. *Xian* is thus more appropriately translated as ‘to begin with’, upon which the following verb should take gerundive form to indicate continuity of the action. It is therefore much more appropriate to translate the sentence pattern as ‘wishing to regulate their families, they began by cultivating their persons’. In this formulation, none of the steps will ever be concluded, which amounts to saying that they are all simultaneous. In short, one brings peace to the world by extending one’s knowledge to the utmost.<sup>16</sup> However—and this is the decisive point—one does not work on the extension of one’s knowledge without also making one’s thoughts sincere, without self-cultivation, without regulating one’s family, etc. The stages are certainly consecutive, but they are not isolated, separate processes. The point of the sequence is that without, say, reflecting on ways to improve one’s own character and attitude, one will not succeed in bringing accord to one’s family. One must start from the right end. It is worth recalling that knowledge in the Chinese context always involves the ability to handle real situations.

There are weightier philosophical arguments for my interpretation other than the linguistic. In the *Confucian Analects* (*Lunyu*), Confucius describes persons of humanity (*ren* 仁), morally the most advanced, as those who ‘establish themselves by establishing others and promote themselves by promoting others. To be able to correlate one’s conduct with those who are close could be said to be the method of becoming a person of humanity’.<sup>17</sup> The following passage, the only one in the *Confucian Analects* where self-cultivation (*xiuji* 修己) is explicitly mentioned,<sup>18</sup> reinforces this insight:

Zilu [a disciple of Confucius] inquired about *junzi* 君子 [exemplary persons]. The Master replied: ‘By cultivating themselves, they are respectful’. ‘Is that all?’ asked Zilu. The Master replied: ‘By cultivating themselves, they bring accord to others’. ‘Is that all?’ asked

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Mencius* 7B.32, where this idea of fulfilling the ultimate task by beginning with the first is explicitly expressed, though, as is often the case in the Confucian literature, *xiushen* 修身 and not *zhizhi* 知至 is taken as the first step: ‘A *junzi* adheres to [the process of] bringing peace to the world by cultivating himself [君子之守修其身而天下平]’.

<sup>17</sup> *Lunyu* 6.30.

<sup>18</sup> *Xiushen* 修身 and *xiuji* 修己 can be considered synonymous in this context.

Zilu. The Master replied: 'By cultivating themselves, they bring accord to all people. Even a Yao or a Shun would find such a task extremely hard'.<sup>19</sup>

The reference to the semi-divine sage-heroes Yao and Shun is to emphasize the ultimate grandness of the task of bringing accord to all people. While Confucius is essentially describing the same process as that depicted in the *Great Learning*, he is more explicit in pointing out that although the cultivation of oneself requires effort, commitment, determination, persistence and diligence, all crucial qualities for becoming a *junzi*,<sup>20</sup> it is, all things considered, not an individual but a social process, consisting in one's continuously enhanced ability to induce others to contribute to harmonious communal living: in effect, self-education is achieved by educating others.

Such a process of education is best realized through the performance of ritual propriety, 'the handicraft of culture', a performance that is no less social than personal, that demands as much attention to the pre-established patterns of the action as to the particular and ever-changing circumstances of the moment, and that is therefore a means of communicating and conveying to others one's understanding of and contribution to tradition and culture.

### Concluding remarks

In the opening section of the Confucian *Zhongyong* it is stated: 'There is nothing more visible than what is secret, and nothing more manifest than what is minute. Therefore the exemplary person is mindful of himself when he is alone'.

Our mundane reality, the most conspicuous reality beheld by us every single day, holds the key to the 'secret'. The tiniest, seemingly most insignificant, gestures, acts and practices are those that manifest the way more clearly than any other. In solitude, however, these observations are easily forgotten. One runs the danger of excessive mystification, of searching in the most distant, obscure aspects of human thought. The obvious is then forgotten: facticity, embeddedness in society, culture and tradition—all the dimensions of human life that make ongoing, evolving sense of it. Dilthey said that *Selbstbesinnung* consists in bringing the past to the present in a 'just' manner. This seems to resonate with the Chinese point of view, seeing tradition as an endless way, *dao*, to be travelled. But Dilthey, as so many of the subsequent phenomenological thinkers, not the least Husserl, located the crux of reality in the subjective experience of the individual self: 'The experienced condition is tied to our person like a predicate to our subject; no matter how obscure, it always refers to the context of our life within which it takes place'.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> *Lunyu* 14.42.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Fingarette 1979, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Dilthey 1924, 276.

Now, Heidegger, and, even more so, Gadamer, certainly expand the horizon by fusing the phenomenological tradition with hermeneutics, whereby human existence as a whole is portrayed as embedded in a network of meaning and therefore as interpretative.<sup>22</sup> In Heidegger's vocabulary, *Dasein*, the specific mode in which humans exist, is really always Being-in-the-world, i.e. being with things and with others—a 'with-world' (*Mitsein*). Nevertheless, *Dasein* voices itself mostly as a solitary consciousness, a thinking being that is (or ought to be) constantly analysing its relation with its world and with others, and, in my reading, should realise its own authenticity and wholeness as a living self by avoiding the 'fall into the public'.<sup>23</sup> One does not establish oneself by establishing others, but on the contrary by overcoming them.

The Confucians, on the other hand, while acknowledging the importance of self-awareness and self-cultivation, ultimately bring both into the social arena. The way forged by us and our forerunners and on which we have travelled is the way that has made possible the meaningful experiences of our existence. However, many seem to miss out on this way, as Confucius says in the *Analects*:

I know why the way is not travelled. The wise overstep it while the simple-minded fall short of it. I know why the way is not evident. Those of superior character overstep it while the unworthy fall short of it. There is no one who does not eat and drink, but the ability to savour [*neng zhi wei* 能知味] what one eats and drinks is rare indeed.<sup>24</sup>

The key to understanding this passage is the final remark on eating and drinking. Everyone must eat and drink, but those who claim to be 'wise' do not even know how to distinguish good food from bad, do not *savour* it.<sup>25</sup> They disregard the importance of the routine nature of daily life, claiming to be aspiring to a higher level of wisdom, and therefore their mind is elsewhere. 'Overstepping the way', then, is to probe the unusual and mystical, those things that we do not and probably cannot even hope to comprehend. It is to look far and high, or, indeed, deep inside oneself in search for eternal answers rather than accepting the continuously evolving web of meaning contained in and expressed by our daily life and activities. It is here that phenomenologists might profit from further 'serious comparisons' with savoury items on the Chinese philosophical menu.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. Moran, 234f.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>24</sup> *Liji* (*Zhongyong*) 32.2/142/27–9.

<sup>25</sup> The verb 'to savour' derives from the Latin *sapere*, meaning 'to be sensible', thus, 'to taste', from which the word 'sagacity' is also derived. This wordplay, I believe, does reflect the implications contained in the *Zhongyong* passage: one whose knowledge 'oversteps' ordinary reality, who is unable to know things belonging to the routine of everyday life, is not really knowledgeable.

<sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Fiona Dunne and an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments and suggestions that helped to improve this paper.

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