

Chinese Thinking in the View of German Idealists and its Critics

Attempted Rapprochement

After reading the missionary reports of the Jesuits in China, Leibniz enthusiastically labeled the Chinese as "people of another globe": "Their language and their character, their way of life, their artistry and their manufactures, and even their games are so different from ours that it seems as if they were people from another globe; it may very well be possible that even a simple, yet detailed description of their practices will give us more substantial and useful insights than the knowledge of the rites and incitements of the Greeks and Romans, to which so many scholars cling."¹ A hundred years later, during the era of German Idealism, the image of China has been altered radically, and one encounters a set of at times appalling prejudices. In his *History of Philosophy*, Hegel writes that within "oriental philosophy" (an antiquated term for "eastern philosophy"), the lack of individuality causes the given religious ideas to take on "characteristics of general ideas"². "Oriental philosophy" reminds one "much more immediately of the philosophical idea" than occidental philosophy. This constitutes the main difference between "oriental philosophy" as essentially "religious philosophy" and Greek philosophy in particular, which preserves the individuality of the gods. Putting it in the terms of his dialectics, Hegel says: "God, the being-in-and-for-itself, the eternal, is mainly understood in terms of the general, and so is its relation to the individual." Hegel goes on: "The spirit may rise in the Orient, but the condition remains such that the subject is not the person but appears to be negative and perishing within objective substantiality. Neither consciousness nor morality exist, only natural order. The result is that no philosophical recognition can take place (...) The Oriental should therefore be cut off from the History of Philosophy." Philosophically, China is also "outside of the history of the world." If philosophical contemplation does not exceed these concepts, it remains on the lowest level." For Hegel, this crushing verdict provides "justification" as to "why we do not have to pay ampler attention to it [Chinese thought]"³.

In retrospect, Hegel's harsh judgment is surprising. After a fascination with China had lasted in Europe for two centuries, enchanting scientists and philosophers alike and nourishing fantasies of a wholly different world⁴, this cultural dialogue came to a sudden end in the

¹ Brief von Leibniz an Antoine Verjus in Paris v. 18. 8. 1705. In: Rita Widmaier (Hg.), *Leibniz korrespondiert mit China*. Frankfurt am Main 1990, S. 213-215.

² Vgl. im Folgenden G. W. F. Hegel: *Geschichte der Philosophie. Orientalische Philosophie*. Einleitung. In: G. W. F. Hegel: *Werke* (ed. E. Moldenhauer, Frankfurt am Main 1971), Bd. 18/1, S. 138ff.

³ G. W. F. Hegel: *Vorlesung über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Stuttgart 1959, Bd. 17, S. 151.

⁴ Montaigne schildert in seinen *Essais* begeistert ein China, das die Möglichkeiten Europas und des europäischen Denkens überschreitet: ein „China, welches Kaiserthum, ungeachtet es keine Gemeinschaft mit uns gehabt, und nichts von uns gewußt hat, uns in Ansehung der Polizey und der Künste in vielen Stücken übertrifft, und dessen Geschichte mich lehrt, daß die Welt ungleich größer und verschieden ist, als die Alten eingesehen haben, und wir selbst einsehn“ (Michel de Montaigne: *Essais*. Bd. 3, übers. v. Johann Daniel Tietz. Zürich 1992, S. 349f.). Von Leibniz ist überliefert, dass er von den Chinesen, wie von „Leuten von einem anderen Globus“ spricht. „Ihre Sprache und ihr Charakter, ihre Lebensweise, ihre Kunstfertigkeit und ihre Manufakturen und sogar ihre Spiele unterscheiden sich fast so sehr von den unseren, als ob sie Leute von einem anderen Globus wären; es ist gut möglich, daß selbst schon eine schlichte, aber genaue Beschreibung dessen, was bei Ihnen praktiziert wird, uns beträchtlichere und nützlichere Aufschlüsse als die

early 18th century. The affair about Christian Wolf is exemplarily for the ambivalent reception of Chinese philosophy: Christian Wolf, professor for philosophy at the University of Halle in Prussia, propagated the philosophy of Leibniz. In one of his academic lectures from 1721 entitled *De Sinarum Philosophia Practica*, he praised the natural philosophy and theology of China. This speech became known as *Causa Wolfiana* in Europe, because Wolf praised the morality of a pagan nation. Wolf was denounced to the Prussian king by a colleague and a religious controversy erupted that resulted in his banishment – upon the pain of strangulation – from Prussia. The anti-Chinese and anti-Jesuit wave reached its epitome when the Papal Bull (?) *Ex illa die* was issued in 1715, which forbade Christians to practice Chinese rites. By the end of the French Revolution it was undeniable that not only Chinese religion and rites, but Chinese thought per se were perceived in a thoroughly negative way. Prior to the French Revolution, a congenial understanding of Chinese philosophy existed in the writings of Leibniz and Jesuit missionaries due to positive missionary reports; however, despite increasing trade relations and the emergence of the *Chinoserie* (a genre of art that was to become famous), a negative image of China emerged towards the end of the 18th century, possibly caused by anti-Jesuit travel writing and biased translations.⁵ Within the progressive thought of the 19th century, China was perceived as an underdeveloped counterpoint to the ‘modern’ west.

Yet back to Hegel. Hegel’s image of China is in not at all unique or isolated within the history of philosophy, even though it shows obvious traces of his concept of history as progress of reason. Later philosophers also expressed serious doubt about the existence of a Chinese philosophy – though their criticism may not have been put as harshly. Amongst them are Wilhelm Windelband, Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Even in the present time, Otfried Höffe (Tübingen) writes: “Outside the realms of academic philosophy, people commonly talk of a genuine Asian or eastern philosophy. It would be better to talk of eastern thought, and still better to talk of eastern teachings or religion; despite certain overlappings, they fall only marginally into our concept of philosophy”.⁶ The traditional image of China in the humanities portrays Chinese thought as interested in “practical competence,” in the “ethical education of the individual” and in a close connection between “political and moral practice,” yet showing little concern for “useless” theoretical discourse, paradigmatic thought and a methodization of truth.⁷ Early language philosophers – starting with Herder and Hegel – make the argument that Chinese is an “unphilosophical” language due to its lack of grammar.⁸ According to Hegel, who explicitly argues against Leibniz, “the alphabetical writing system is in and of itself the more intelligent form of writ-

Kenntnis der Riten und Beweggründe der Griechen und Römer geben wird, an die sich so viele Gelehrte klammern“ (Brief von Leibniz an Antoine Verjus v. 18. August 1705. In: Rita Widmaier (Hrsg.), *Leibniz korrespondiert mit China*. Frankfurt am Main 1990, S. 213ff.).

⁵ Nicht nur Hegels Chinabild, sondern auch Kants wurde in den 80er Jahren durch negative, anti-jesuitische Stereotypen erschüttert. Die Quelle hierfür ist: Pierre Sonnerats *Voyage aux Indes Orientales et à la Chine* (1782); deutsch: *Reise nach Ostindien und China* (Zürich: Orell 1783).

⁶ Vgl. Frankfurter Rundschau vom 30. 9. 97. Vgl. auch Tilemann Grimm: *Sinologische Anmerkungen zum europäischen Philosophiebegriff*. In: *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Phil.-histor. Klasse*. Heidelberg 1981.

⁷ Vgl. Michael Friedmann (in: *Dangsai* 65, 1991/9) und Joel Thoraval (in: *Lettre International* 41, 1998, S. 61-67).

⁸ Vgl. Humboldt: *Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung* (1822); ders.: *Ueber den Einfluss des verschiedenen Charakters der Sprachen auf Literatur und Geistesbildung* (1821).

ing.”⁹ Leibniz’ enthusiastic exclamation that Chinese script is “comparable to the analysis of thought” is nowhere to be found. Instead, Hegel criticizes Leibniz, stating that the “hieroglyphic writing system” of the Chinese is “adequate for the statutes of Chinese intellectual development.” The main disadvantage of “hieroglyphs” or pictography – in comparison to alphabetical writing – is that the essence of the former is bound to the “sensuous-concrete”, while only the latter manages to capture the abstract and the formal.¹⁰ Humboldt makes a somewhat similar argument, too. Moreover, even modern comparative studies of language conclude that the pictorial traces of Chinese writing keep the thought in the realm of “worldliness” while it is the very lack of pictorial representation within the alphabetic writing system that constitutes “transcendence”.¹¹ The argument concludes that the peculiar way in which Chinese writing makes the very material of imagination visual must necessarily have produced a different type of intellectuality than the use of the alphabet – it must have fostered a “semantically oriented way of thinking” and obstruct the formal way of thought created by alphabetical writing “downright systematically.”¹²

In reaction to the perception of Chinese thought within a tradition mainly influenced by German Idealism, a counter-movement formed within modern philosophy, attacking said traditional views on the basis that they are euro- and ethnocentric. Nietzsche already mentioned an “occidental bias”¹³ within the historic German thought – the bias of the occident.¹⁴ Moreover, Wittgenstein emphasizes that the duty of modern philosophy is not to “erect new edifices or build bridges, but to describe the geography the way it presently is.”¹⁵ Starting with the life-philosophy of the 19th century and spanning all the way to modern intercultural philosophy, European philosophical thought increasingly opened up towards ideas that modify the pre-existing philosophical point of view. This is especially pertinent in the late 20th century. After the era of political ideology, now cultures are supposed to determine the world order. Even in the phenomenology of Husserl and Merlau-Ponty, philosophy is subordinated to the primacy of the lifeworld (Lebenswelt), constituting merely a product of its historical differentiation. Orientation within the world and other cultures is only made possible through a philosophy that yields to the primacy of the lifeworld.

⁹ Hegel: Enzyklopädie, S. 459; ähnlich argumentiert auch Derrida in seiner Grammatologie (Frankfurt am Main 1974, S. 45ff.).

¹⁰ Hegels Kritik an Leibniz richtet sich gegen die These, dass eine nichtphonetische Schrift, wie die des Chinesischen, rein geistig sei: „Leibniz hat sich durch seinen Verstand verführen lassen, eine vollständige Schriftsprache, auf hieroglyphische Weise gebildet (...), als eine allgemeine Schriftsprache für den Verkehr der Völker und insbesondere der Gelehrten für sehr wünschenswert zu halten. (...) Dieser Umstand der analytischen Bezeichnung der Vorstellungen bei der hieroglyphischen Schrift (...) ist es vielmehr, der dem Grundbedürfnisse der Sprache überhaupt, dem Namen, widerspricht“ (Hegel: Enzyklopädie III. Stuttgart 1959, Bd. 10, S. 273. 275). Derrida greift diese Kritik in der Grammatologie auf: „Die nicht-phonetische Schrift zerbricht den Namen. Sie beschreibt Relationen, nicht Benennungen“ (ebd., S. 47).

¹¹ Christian Stetter: Schrift und Sprache. Frankfurt am Main 1997, S. 50f.

¹² Christian Stetter: Schrift und Sprache. Frankfurt am Main 1997, S. 473f. In ähnlicher Weise argumentieren auch Goody, Watt, Gough: Entstehung und Folgen der Schriftkultur. Frankfurt am Main 1997.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche: Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen. Zweites Stück, KSA Bd. 1, S. 256.

¹⁴ Nietzsche schreibt in Die fröhliche Wissenschaft: „Oh dass doch viele (...) neue Sonnen noch geschaffen würden! Auch der Böse, auch der Unglückliche, auch der Ausnahme-Mensch soll seine Philosophie, sein gutes Recht, seinen Sonnenschein haben!“ (Friedrich Nietzsche: Die fröhliche Wissenschaft. Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA) in 15 Bänden, Bd. 3, hrsg. von G. Colli und M. Montinari, Berlin, New York 1988, S. 529).

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein: Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik. Bd. 6 der Werkausgabe in 8 Bänden, hrsg. von G. E. M. Anscombe, R. Rhees und G. H. von Wright, Frankfurt am Main 1993, S. 302.

Especially poststructuralist approaches during the second half of the 20th century attempt to escape the alleged logocentrism¹⁶ by virtually reversing it. Jacques Derrida, for example, interprets the Chinese writing system as an antipole to the “ethnocentric metaphysics of logocentrism because structurally, it is determined by the “ideogram” rather than the word¹⁷. It views philosophy essentially as a form of literature. For Foucault, the peculiarity of the Chinese writing system is constituted by the fact that it still “erects the recognizable images of the things themselves.”¹⁸ The “imperialism of the logos” (Derrida)¹⁹ should be interrupted; “logos is not a special case within the infinitude/endlessness of codes any longer: it is the code that puts an end to endlessness; it is the discourse of enclosure that puts an end to the poetic and para- and anagrammaticity (Jean Baudrillard).²⁰ In their book “What is Philosophy” (1991), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari present the project of a re-invention of a philosophy that does not fall within the trap of logocentrism as the hardest, yet most important challenge of philosophical thought: to formulate a ‘philosophy of becoming’ that does not result in dialectics, that is, in an argumentation of enclosure (*Argumentation der Einschließung*).²¹ The addressee is the human, rather than the subject. In his obituary for his friend Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida addresses this new problem of a subject that is open towards the subject, yet depersonalized: “We are not, in fact, sure that we are persons; a draft, a breeze, a day, an hour of a day, a river, a place, a battle, a disease each have their individuality, which is not personal. They have proper names. We call them ‘hecceities’. (...) Everyone speaks on the level of opinion, one says ‘I,’ I am a person, the same way one says: ‘the sun rises.’ (...) If anything, we have the individuality of events.”²²

The term for this new type of philosophy that counters the historiographical form of Hegelian thought is “geophilosophy” – a philosophy that, by referring back to Nietzsche, attempts to return to “the earth as its medium.” Within this argumentation, concepts like ‘subject’ and ‘person’ are superseded by ideas of the affiliation with a milieu of philosophical thought, constituted by more or less coincidental conjunctions of free expressions of opinion: the problem not of a history of events, but of a history of contingency. The French social historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) related the quest for freedom of thought within the realms of a “geohistoire” back to the basics of free trade and thereby rejected Hegel’s momentous subordination of geography to history as obsolete.²³

¹⁶ Als Logozenismus bezeichnet Derrida in der *Grammatologie* (1967) begriffliche Konstruktionen, die auf binären Oppositionen sowie auf einem externen Referenzpunkt, wie Gott, Transzendenz, Wahrheit, Ursprung etc. beruhen, wobei all diese Begriffe als Metaphern entlarvt werden, die ohne eigentlichen Inhalt sind, weil das transzendente Signifikat, auf das diese Signifikanten jeweils verweisen, nicht darstellbar und somit sinnlos ist. Für Derrida ist die *différance* das Gegenteil des Logozenismus.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Grammatologie*, ebd. S. 90

¹⁸ Michel Foucault: *Die Ordnung der Dinge*. Frankfurt am Main 1974, S. 21.

¹⁹ Vgl. Jacques Derrida: *Grammatologie* (1967). Frankfurt am Main 1983.

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard: *Der symbolische Tausch und der Tod* (1976). Berlin 1982.

²¹ Vgl. zu dieser These Stephan Günzel: *Immanenz. Zum Philosophiebegriff von Gilles Deleuze*. Essen 1998.

²² Gilles Deleuze: *Über die Philosophie* (Gespräch mit Raymond Bellour und François Ewald). In: ders.: *Unterhandlungen. 1972–1990*, a. d. franz. von Gustav Roßler. Frankfurt am Main 1993 [1990], S. 197-226 [1988], hier: S. 205f.

²³ „Was die Chinesen von ihren Philosophen erwarteten, waren Motive, die zwangloses Nachdenken begünstigten, nicht aber Ideen oder gar Dogmen. (...) man [sah] das Ideal in einer alles umfassenden Weisheitslehre“ (Marcel Granet: *Das chinesische Denken*. Frankfurt am Main 1985, S. 315).

I will now end this very short characterization of a line of thought that refuses to follow the logics of identity, truths or transcendence, but instead rejects this concept as authoritarian, one-dimensional, hierarchical, immanent and even totalitarian and hostile towards pluralism. It is, of course, much more complex and multi-layered than can be outlined here. The main issue, however, is the different way in which poststructural theories position themselves towards 'Chinese thought' – whatever that may entail. Like many of his contemporaries, Jean-François Lyotard detects a force within logocentrism that "demands of thought to partake in a process of rationalization. Any other way of thinking is judged inferior, and hence is rejected."²⁴ But is not the attempt to understand the Other within philosophy, and to even label it an alternative way of thinking, an endeavor that inevitably ends up producing the very result one set out to criticize? The suspicion that even an attempted reversal or a negation stays indebted to the very position one seeks to attack is especially obvious when Chinese thought is characterized as an 'other,' namely a pre-philosophical line of thought. At this point, even the postmodern critics must fall back on a Hegelian line of argumentation, which says that – to put it in Hegel's terms – "in Asia the light of the spirit and therefore world history had risen."²⁵ Deleuze, too, defines philosophy as a "matter of the Greeks"²⁶ while Chinese thought was "in the narrow sense not philosophical, but pre-philosophical."²⁷ Merleau-Ponty also reserved the term "pre-philosophical" for Chinese thought: "The 'child-like constitution' of the East," he writes, "can teach us something, and be it the narrowness of our adult way of thinking."²⁸ This 'pre-philosophicality' is now even expected to be rooted "deeper within the center of philosophy"²⁹ than philosophy itself. Outer- or pre-philosophical thinking marks the position of the truly wise man, rather than the (scholarly) philosopher. Therefore philosophy, by erecting its system of immanence over pre-philosophical thought like a "screen clutched over chaos,"³⁰ in fact opposes wisdom.

This thesis is rendered questionable not because of its differentiation between wisdom and philosophy, but by its attempt to pit wisdom and philosophy against each other. By doing so, the bias against the other tradition is merely transformed into a bias against one's own tradition. If, for example, Roland Barthes – like many other poststructuralists – presents the Socratic method as a prime example of European logocentrism, its only aim being to push the "other into the utter disgrace of self-contradiction,"³¹ his conclusion is similarly blind as was Hegel's, when he concluded that although Confucius reached the "highest reputation of philosophy" amongst the Chinese, he was, in fact, no better than a bad Cicero, for his conversations with students were limited to moral teachings and "tasteless" regulations.³²

In his work *La pensée chinoise* (1934), sinologist Marcel Granet (1884-1940) is especially adamant in pushing the idea that the Chinese did not produce their own thread of philosophy, but instead preserved a way of thinking influenced by wisdom (*sagesse*) until the very

²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard: *Das Inhumane. Plaudereien über die Zeit*. Wien 2004 (3. Aufl.).

²⁵ Hegel, ebd. Bd. 11, S. 145.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Was ist Philosophie?* Ebd. S. 107.

²⁷ Ebd. S. 106.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *L'Orient et la philosophie*. In: ders., *Signes*. Paris 1967, S. 175.

²⁹ Ebd. S. 49.

³⁰ Ebd. S. 52.

³¹ Roland Barthes: *Die Lust am Text*. [Originaltitel: *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris 1973] Frankfurt am Main 1984.

³² Fortsetzung des Zitats: „Ciceros *de officiis*, ein moralisches Predigtbuch, gibt uns mehr und Besseres als alle Bücher des Konfutsé. Aus seinen Originalwerken kann man das Urteil fällen, daß es für den Ruhm des Konfutsé besser gewesen wäre, wenn sie nicht übersetzt worden wären“ (Hegel 18/1, S. 142f.).

presence.³³ The sage would then take on the role of a 'priest' of philosophy, but – and this is what differentiates it from the realm of religion – he does not become its prophet. Even Max Weber wrote that Confucius, "in whose temple even the emperor himself performs the kowtow," mainly educated and was therefore a "teaching philosopher" like Plato – not, however, a prophet: "the lack of an active and emotional sermon is what makes them differ from prophets."³⁴ Would it not be reasonable, then, to say that "in China, a way of thinking with wisdom" was discovered, "which may have constituted itself as such merely because of its (rapid) deviation from religion, though it never contradicted religious thought (like European reason did), a way of thinking that did not know any theology than the Other of philosophy?"³⁵ One can, however, conceive of another thesis as well: wisdom might be a form of natural theology, which – as Leibniz would have agreed – does not need to turn itself into philosophical thinking because it is not concerned with truth, but with transformation, hence a form of (non-theological) belief. Whichever conclusion one may prefer, most Europeans might be prone to bias or limited discernment in the matter due to their philosophical tradition of separating myth and logos, believe and knowledge, theology and philosophy. Confucius leaves truth ambivalent, appearing almost unwilling to pronounce it: "the people can be coerced to follow him, but they cannot be coerced to understand it (zhi)" (Spruch VIII, 9). And Lǎozǐ (老子) [吾不知其名。字之曰道] writes: "I do not know it, therefore I call it 'Dao'" in chapter 25 of his *Dàodéjīng* (道德經). To understand this form of wisdom as a way of thinking or acting in the confidence that everything will go its way might be a possibility for believers, but it is an impertinence for anyone who is used to think reasonable and within the categories of logic contradiction. Confucius, however, exclaimed calmly: "Does the sky speak? The seasons come and go, all things flourish: does the sky speak?"³⁶ The sage who goes beyond contradiction, does not rule out anything and possesses himself in utter silence, creates a grand image of dispassionateness; yet from an 18th century point of view of the enlightened reason, this is indefensible. The light of the orient – the natural light of the sun, as Hegel calls it – is not the light of reason: "The owl of Minerva does not start to its flight before twilight falls."³⁷

The re- or devaluation of this pre-philosophical condition of wisdom is hence a matter of perspective: namely, if the beginning is to be interpreted as the abundance of wisdom or as lack, and hence as a deficient mode of the mind. "At this decisive point, there is a split between the Chinese mind and the occidental mind of modern times, which is characterized by its critical differentiation between subjective freedom and objective nature – or the free subject and the natural object – and which finds one of its main adherents in Hegel."³⁸ One might therefore agree with Hegel's interpretation of Chinese thought as an expression of the

³³ Vgl. Marcel Granet: *La pensée chinoise* (1934). Statt Philosophie habe China „Weisheit“ (sagesse) besessen: „L'Univers n'est qu'un système de comportements, et les comportements de l'esprit ne se distinguent pas de ceux de la matière. On ne fait point la distinction de la matière et de l'esprit. La notion d'âme, l'idée d'une essence entièrement spirituelle et qui s'opposerait au corps comme à l'ensemble des corps matériels est tout à fait étrangère à la pensée chinoise" (Marcel Granet: *La pensée chinoise*. Albin Michel, 8ème édition 1968 [1ère édition 1934], p. 319).

³⁴ Max Weber: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie* (1922). Vgl. § 4 „Prophet und Lehrer“.

³⁵ François Jullien: *Der Weise hängt an keiner Idee. Das Andere der Philosophie*. Aus dem Französischen von Markus Sedlaczek. München 2001.

³⁶ Konfuzius: *Gespräche XVII*, 19.

³⁷ Hegel, ebd. Bd. 7, S. 28 (= Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts).

³⁸ Günter Wohlfahrt: *Hegel und China*. In: *Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung*. Hrsg. v. Helmut Schneider 3 (1997), S. 135-156, hier: S. 154.

natural intellect, had he not made this judgment in the context of a Philosophy of History and henceforth concluded that in the case of the Chinese, the mind had not yet elevated itself above nature ("the undeveloped, natural unity is lack of spirit"; "a state of nature is one humans should not dwell in. Nature is inherently evil" (19, 100.f)).

Nevertheless, there might after all be a way to resolve the contradiction that arises in the instance when thinking becomes philosophical – even in the case of Hegel. Taking up a basic thought of Jacobian philosophy,³⁹ Hegel – as he expresses in his Science of Logic (1812ff.) – saw the beginning in the very simplicity and immediacy of existence prior to any qualitative determination: "for the sake of this simplicity nothing more should be said about quality."⁴⁰ It is beyond any determination of reason (Vernunftbestimmung): simple, immediate and positive. When examining this primordial experience [das Unverborgene] as the roots of metaphysics, Heidegger also writes: "The idea of 'logic' itself dissolves in the whirl of a primordial questioning."⁴¹ But – as Hegel continues – by taking existence as its very beginning and thereby subordinating it to a critical determination, logic reassesses existence to a status of pure negativity, because all determination is negation. To put it in more technical terms: The Doctrine of Being is anti-positivistic because it takes the pure positivity that characterizes existence in its beginnings and negates it during the process of the development of thinking. This first being (Sein), if isolated from a dialectically developed idea of existence is, according to Hegel, unutterable. Expressed in the terms of the Chinese sage: It can only be understood by not being understood; it can only be pronounced if it remains unpronounced. Hegel would agree too, that existence contains both the determination of being and of nothingness – the unity of being and nothingness.⁴² Elevating it into consciousness is, in the European tradition, equivalent to its epistemological determination.

Yet this phenomenon did not remain undiscovered. In contrast to the speculative idealism of Kant and Fichte, Jacobi's philosophical dualism [Doppelphilosophie] had already made clear that speculative reason lacks a basic experience that is essential for human praxis: "to discover, to reveal existence [daseyn]."⁴³ From the position of speculative idealism, Jacobi's critical perspective towards German Idealism, expressed through statements such as "Has man reason, or has reason man?," must therefore remain unseen. His perspective entails a kind of openness that requires the limited cognition which distinguishes the inner perspective of speculative reason to develop into a cognition, a "Wahr=Nehmung" – a way of "taking in the reality" – of the radical Other; or, put in Schelling's words: the unconscious. The construction that unfolds in Jacobi's philosophical dualism [Doppelphilosophie] and that Hegel attempts to overcome in his 'logic of existence' [Daseinslogik] will by its very character acuminate in a contradiction that cannot be solved with the tools and methods of philosophy. The rigid formal criteria of philosophy, as Jacobi understands them, prohibit even the question

³⁹ Vgl. auch Hegel: Enzyklopädie (§§ 61-78).

⁴⁰ Hegel 5, 118 (= Wissenschaft der Logik).

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger: Was ist Metaphysik?. In: Wegmarken, ebd. S. 14.

⁴² Vgl. § 134 der Daseinslogik: "Das reine Sein und das reine Nichts ist also dasselbe. Was die Wahrheit ist, ist weder das Sein noch das Nichts, sondern daß das Sein in Nichts und das Nichts in Sein – nicht übergeht, sondern übergegangen ist. Aber ebenso sehr ist die Wahrheit nicht ihre Ununterschiedenheit, sondern daß sie nicht dasselbe, daß sie absolut unterschieden, aber ebenso ungetrennt und untrennbar und unmittelbar jedes in seinem Gegenteil verschwindet. Ihre Wahrheit ist also diese Bewegung des unmittelbaren Verschwindens des einen in dem anderen: das Werden; eine Bewegung, worin beide unterschieden sind, aber durch einen Unterschied, der sich ebenso unmittelbar aufgelöst hat".

⁴³ Jacobi: Über die Lehre des Spinoza, S. 29 (= 1. Auflage v. 1785).

for the unconditional, since philosophy would here "act outside its vocation."⁴⁴ Should there be an intersection that is able to grasp the unconditional, it could take place not through thinking but only through a radical invalidation of "logical reasoning," that is: through a leap that would – by virtue of its very performance – turn around and eventually dismantle the condition that prohibits thinking from going beyond itself. Only the event of this leap – always necessarily the decision and act of an individual – can dissolve the aporia which creates obstacles through philosophical questions, and allow for the true subject to emerge.

Hegel, however, attempts to bridge this irrational and completely anti-logical leap through a purely logic continuity of thought, thereby opening up a possibility for speculative thought to enter a path of reasonable infinity. While in Jacobi's case, the becoming apparent of existence cannot be expressed conceptually but only through a feeling/emotion of coherence, hence requiring a reality of 'being carried' (Getragensein), for Hegel this reality is the most questionable issue of all. Yet this point that lies furthest apart from its destination is also the origin of thought; only because of that it is possible for thinking to return to it while continuously striving further. This circle of self-intervention (Selbstvermittlung), that manages to grasp the becoming of the mind to itself conceptually, is able to fly over the world and unlock the world simultaneously. It transmutes reality into ideality through the famous threefold step. Transmutation possesses a threefold meaning: to destroy, to re-create in a new form, and at the same time to elevate. Speaking of anything as transmuted means that it disappears in its given form, but reappears in a new form, and that the new form always represents a higher point of view and a substantial progress in thought. When Hegel affirms that in essence being (Dasein) is transmuted, he means that it has lost its independence only to regain it in a form of dependence with the peculiar characteristic of not being subordinated to anything which is foreign to its own notion or idea, but instead being one with the initial being itself; otherwise the relation would be external and valueless.

To define this process as pure philosophy of immanence, as done by Gilles Deleuze,⁴⁵ may abridge the problem significantly; yet the entire process is aimed at breaching the level on immanence. It is moreover impossible to think of it as a sort of linear progressive thought (in view of a historization of philosophy). Precisely because of the very fact that striving further above itself also encompasses a return to itself means that the (eternal) progress possesses an open perspective and not a linear development. The act of going beyond in an infinitely fulfilling circle of self-intervention (Selbstvermittlung) can be accompanied by rather conflicting experiences: it also entails regression. Hegel's significance for modernity is partly due to his discovery of the substantial meaning of crisis within the process of modernity.

If one sets out to criticize Hegel's mediational thinking, the most obvious problem might be his overly theoretical emphasis, which manifests itself in the fact that by assuming the theoretical transmutation of reality into ideality, the actual world has to dissolve into pure illu-

⁴⁴ Jacobi: *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, S. 258 (= 2. Auflage v. 1789, Beilage VII).

⁴⁵ „Eine Immanenzebene aufzustellen, ein Immanenzfeld abzustecken – das haben alle Autoren getan, mit denen ich mich beschäftigt habe (selbst Kant, wenn er den transzendenten Gebrauch der Synthesen anprangert, aber er beschäftigt sich mit der möglichen Erfahrung und nicht mit dem wirklichen Experimentieren). Das Abstrakte erklärt nichts, es muß selbst erklärt werden: Es gibt keine Universalien, keine Transzendentalien, nicht das Eine, kein Subjekt (kein Objekt), keine Vernunft, er gibt nur Prozesse (...)“ (G. Deleuze: *Über die Philosophie*. In: ders., *Unterhandlungen (1972-1990)*. Frankfurt am Main 1993, S. 212). Jacques Derrida hat die Probleme eines nicht-dialektischen Denkens in seinen Versuchen, 'gegen Hegel' anzuschreiben, in seinem Text „Das Theater der Grausamkeit und die Geschlossenheit der Repräsentation“ (Jacques Derrida: *Die Schrift und die Differenz*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, S. 351-379) dargelegt.

sion.⁴⁶ His theoretical emphasis might further be the reason why he does not manage to grasp the dialectics of practical thinking in Chinese philosophy. Hegel translates the “Laws of Tao”⁴⁷ as “laws of reason,” or “logos” – and not as “path.” The practical essence within Chinese thought – which is actually better described as an act of realization – escapes his awareness. Wisdom is entirely without history; in Hegel’s understanding, however, philosophy is not: it can only analyze historical events after they already happened. It hence is always too late to instruct in the Chinese sense.

It is common knowledge that while western philosophy is build on the separation of nature and man, subject and object, Chinese philosophy aims at a middle path, a harmony between heaven, earth and man; this mean is seen as the root of all wisdom. According to Chinese thought, discovering the middle amongst the mutual dependencies of opposites, at a point where contradictions do not foreclose anything anymore and one can be seen within the other, is not an act of recognition, but rather an exercise and instruction in emptiness. Within western philosophy, which assumes a primacy of subjectivity (as an epistemological principal), this ‘mean’ has been repeatedly perceived as mythical and irrational phenomenon. A prime example can be found with Immanuel Kant’s short work *Das Ende aller Dinge* (1794), in which he warns against “brooding people,” who concern themselves with mysticism. The result, so Kant claims, are philosophical monsters, because “reason understands neither itself nor what it wants, and it (...) tends to gush rather than staying restricted within its own bounds. The system of Laozi is one of these monsters because his highest good is supposed to be nothingness.” In order to prepare themselves for this final stage, Chinese philosophers shut themselves in dark rooms where they, their eyes tightly closed, tried to think of and feel the nothingness. Kant resumes: This stage of feeling “eternal calmness” is not an end of all things, but only the end of thinking. It is the total loss of personality.

The loss of personality outside of the realm of recognition, which is so heavily emphasized by Kant, has a more serious background than his polemics against Chinese thought give away. For Kant, subjectivity is not a substance in which the capacity to think dwells, but it is an entity of cognition that is not produced by its own virtue but rather antithetically and through its very opposite, namely non-subjectivity. According to Kant, the transcendental subject also should not be understood as substance – like the psychological concept of ‘soul’ – because it is “merely a consciousness which accompanies all conceptions,” an “X, which is cognized only by means of the thought that are its predicates, and of which, apart from these, we cannot form the least conception. Hence we are obliged to go round this representation in a perpetual circle, inasmuch as we must always employ it, in order to frame any judgment respecting it.”⁴⁸ If subjectivity is supposed to function as “condition of all recognition,” it can only be understood as a pure act or execution. Kant uses this argument to differentiate between pure, formal subjectivity and the single, individual person. Both Fichte

⁴⁶ Karl Marx hat diesen Schwachpunkt offengelegt: „Hegel geriet daher auf die Illusion, das Reale als Resultat des sich in sich zusammenfassenden, in sich vertiefenden, und aus sich selbst sich bewegenden Denkens zu fassen“ (Karl Marx: *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (Rohentwurf) 1857-1858, Anhang 1850-1859. Berlin 1974 (2. Aufl.), S. 22).

⁴⁷ Hegel 12, 171 (= *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*). Diese falsche Übersetzung des Dao mit *λογος* geht auf Abel Rémusats Übersetzung des *Tao Te King* zurück. Schelling kritisiert in der *Philosophie der Mythologie* diese Übersetzung als fehlerhaft und schlägt selbst vor: „Tao heißt nicht Vernunft, wie man es bisher übersetzt hat, Tao-Lehre, nicht Vernunftlehre. Tao heißt Pforte (...)“ (zitiert nach *Deutsche Denker über China*. Hrsg. v. A. Hsia, Frankfurt am Main 1985, S. 238, Anm. 3). Schelling hat die französische Übersetzung von Stanislaus Julien gekannt.

⁴⁸ Kant *KdrV* B 404.

and Schelling pick up and extend this line of thought. Man is able to reflect upon and even question his subjectivity precisely because man is not only person but also subject. This subjectivity alternates between being bound to the world and completely lacking it, between relying on the world and fearing it at the same time, and therefore adds an idealizing perspective to reason.

If one understands the necessity to put the subject prior to recognition and further assumes it to be the "condition of all recognition," thereby distinguishing it from the concept of the person, it suddenly becomes apparent that postmodern theorists, who radically criticize the subject and even try to get rid of it per se, are forced to hold on to the concept of the subject after all and therefore end up proving its very indispensability. Whoever reflects upon the subject – and be it with the intention of negating it – reflects on himself as subject. Every theory of the subject – even a deconstruction of transcendental subjectivity – presupposes a subject of the theory.⁴⁹ Be it in Michel Foucault's lecture on the "Death of the Subject" or in Jean-F. Lyotard's "Myth of the subject" – the subject remains the basis of any reflection. A way of thinking that would identify this logical place as the "transfixed fundamental error of reason" (Nietzsche) or reassess it as the expression of 'metaphysical,' 'dogmatic' or 'hierarchical' thought must – by destroying the basis of its opponents' arguments – simultaneously disclaim itself.⁵⁰ The assumed decentering of the subject that is supposed to allow for the Other of occidental rationality and is further supposed to take on the perspective of any Other, turns out to be a form of subversive depersonalization.

This paradoxical reversal⁵¹ of staying indebted to the concept of subjectivity – even if it is used as a means of its own negation or as an entity of its own disavowal – has especially grave consequences in terms of questions concerning the recognition of the subject as an acting agent of attributable actions. The deep mistrust of the postmodern towards the privilege and acceptance of moral laws is then opposed by freedom in terms of moral orientation and a pluralism of value free translations; yet this subtly aids a depersonalization of the subject, which creates arbitrariness rather than pluralism and indifference rather than esteem. Any moral standpoint and human dignity are lost in such constructions of polar opposites.

It seems that more often than not, questioning the existence of the autonomous subject by stressing its alleged metaphysical origin appears to be nothing but polemic demarcation. A poignant example is the frequently referred to moral law of Kantian ethics. The categorical imperative connects the subjective attitude of the person and an impersonal perspective with a supposedly universal meaning, because moral law – conditioned by human sensuousness – is fallible. Kant speaks of an "invisible self of my personality."⁵² Instead of just being an abstract stipulation, moral law is thus characterized by the tension of it being only possible to be thought of from a subjective point of view, while the thought of moral autonomy can only be constructed under the conditions of an impersonal point of view.⁵³ In order to act reasonably in a world of events while involving the other, morality therefore constitutes a point of

⁴⁹ Vgl. Peter V. Zima: *Theorie des Subjekts. Subjektivität und Identität zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne*. Tübingen u. Basel 2000, S. 31.

⁵⁰ Vgl. Terry Eagleton: *Ambivalenzen*. In: Terry Eagleton, *Die Illusionen der Postmoderne. Ein Essay*. Aus dem Englischen von Jürgen Pelzer. Stuttgart und Weimar 1997. S.37-59.

⁵¹ Auch Jürgen Habermas charakterisiert die „paradoxe Arbeit“ der Dekonstruktion als eine „Traditionsfortsetzung“, „in der sich die Heilsenergie einzig durch Verausgabung erneuert“ (Jürgen Habermas: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. 12 Vorlesungen*. Frankfurt am Main 1985, S. 216).

⁵² Kant VI, 223 (= *Metaphysik der Sitten*).

⁵³ Vgl. Dieter Sturma: *Philosophie der Person. Die Selbstverhältnisse von Subjektivität und Moralität*. Paderborn u.a. 1997, S. 211.

view that lies outside of the individual, empirical subject, but enables that subject to “act as a person within the world of events.” Doing so, the categorical imperative fosters a transformation from self to person. To characterize Kant’s moral philosophy as a (deontological) formalism, which is deduced from a metaphysical cohesion of motivation⁵⁴ – for example that of an actor of pure morality – does not recognize that very tension between morality and reflection.

Is there a pure subject causing ethical acts within Chinese tradition? It is noticeable that the ethical capacities and the accountability, which are ascribed to a moral subject in the European tradition, are obviously not matters of recognition in Chinese tradition, but rather matters of imitation. In Chinese tradition the role of the sage is therefore of special importance. In the *Zhong yong* (§ 33) – the unique summary of Confucian philosophy⁵⁵ – the persuasiveness of the sage, which seems hard to comprehend for Europeans, is presented not just as mere instruction: the sage does not have to “instruct to be respected;” he does not have to “speak to be believed;” he does not have to “reinforce to be encouraging” and he does not have to “become angry to be feared.”⁵⁶ The actor is not seen as the cause of his action (in the sense of spontaneity) but as transformer of an action. The change between inner principle to outer effect of action is apparently fluent – and not tied to rational decisions. This might explain why customs and scholarship are valued higher than critical reflection. For western understanding this sort of decisive behavior is not seen as autonomous behavior or as a manifestation of freedom of man as a creature of reason. To give an example: In book XV, 23 (*We Ling Gung*) – translated by Richard Wilhelm as *Practical Imperative* – Kung-futse answers the question for a single word which should guide one’s actions throughout one’s life with: “The principle of sympathy: to not ever do something to someone else that you have personally experienced to be unjust.” Though this may sound very similar to Kant’s categorical imperative, it is completely unrelated and different. For Kant, the categorical imperative is not a guideline for conduct expressing man’s understanding in the reciprocity of a reasonable form of action (like the Golden Rule), but it is rather the opposite: a test for the “principle of intention” when man asks himself according to which maxims he should act.⁵⁷ Kant is concerned with the decision about the form of action, not with the contents of the action itself, and this decision should dictate the effectiveness of the action. In contrast, Chinese tradition stresses the (favorable) situation – the condition – that will determine the success of the action. Its “indirect effectiveness dissolves the subject. It does so, however, in favor of the category of action.”⁵⁸ This opens up oppositions that are grave enough for one to get the impression that a form of action based on decision would interrupt or even destroy the Chinese order of things. The *Book of Change* does not talk of a destination, but of an opportunity; of effects, which are not forced, but simply happen; of an effect that

⁵⁴ Vgl. u.a. Bernard Williams: *Moral Luck*. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980. Cambridge 1981, S. 2; ders.: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London 1985, S. 64: „Kant started from what in his view rational agents essentially were. He thought that the moral agent was, in a sense, a rational agent and no more, and he presented as essential to his account of morality a particular metaphysical conception of the agent, according to which the self of moral agency is what he called a ‘noumenal’ self, outside time and causality, and thus distinct from the concrete, empirically determined person that one usually takes oneself to be”.

⁵⁵ “It can readily be seen that the doctrine of the Mean is a philosophical work, perhaps the most philosophical in the whole body of ancient Confucian literature” (Chan Wing-sit: *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963, S. 96).

⁵⁶ Zitiert nach der Übersetzung von François Jullien: *Über die Wirksamkeit*. Ebd. S. 84.

⁵⁷ Vgl. zur Kantischen Argumentation: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* IV, 430.

⁵⁸ François Jullien: *Über die Wirksamkeit*. Berlin 1999, S. 78.

grows bigger in relation to its covertness; of the balance of opposites (of yin and yang) and the acceptance of change. Much more could be said about that, but let me move towards a conclusion.

In the European tradition, action has always been the material of narratives, from the ancient epic to the modern novel. The Chinese tradition does not know the great epic or the mythical narrative. Here, effects are caused by transformations rather than decisions. They are invisible and hence not proper material for drama. Postmodernism predicted the end of the "great narratives" of freedom and enlightenment. Yet to exclaim the end of history follows the very logic one tries to reject. Jean Francois Lyotard was especially adamant in defining idealism, historicism and the Enlightenment – in its function of legitimizing science – as "frame narrative" and characterized postmodernism as an era that would bring about the end of this grand narrative.⁵⁹ It does not provide a new "narrative" of history; instead, it argues against the very idea that history can take on the form of a narrative. That characterizes postmodernism as a culture of protest, as wanting to rise from the collapse of its antecessor,⁶⁰ but refusing to enter dialogue with it. It does not deal with the modernity of idealism at all. It can therefore not be a precursor for the recognition of a new way of thinking because it propagates (universal) relativism, which simply passes by such precursor.

If one dismisses idealism as dogmatic metaphysics, one easily runs danger of also losing the finiteness and historicity of one's own thought, falling into the trap of a dogmatism of a different kind. The demand for something 'wholly new,' a completely different modern reason would also be labeled dogmatic. If one asks today for the modern significance of idealism, it could only be achieved by regaining the transcendental question – in opposition to the seemingly idealistic or scientific 'overcoming.'⁶¹ Modern theories of rationality cannot ignore the Kantian insight into the basic conditions of our finiteness of thought. Even a modern philosophy cannot account for our self-conception as acting and responsible creatures without an a priori, namely a concept of autonomy. Furthermore, it will neither be able to omit towards Hegel's accomplishment – to think of historicity of mind or reason as logical and consistent. This, however, can be reconciled with the highest possible pluralism of the modern cultural ways of life.

⁵⁹ Jean F. Lyotard: Das Postmoderne Wissen. [franz.: La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir. Paris 1979]. 1986, S. 7-14.

⁶⁰ Eine Variation dieser Immananzthese liegt auch der Leitthese von François Jullien zugrunde. Kann man eine Unterscheidung treffen, wie sie François Jullien vorschlägt, wenn er das europäische Denken – über den Umweg China – mit seinen, ihm selbst unzugänglichen Voraussetzungen konfrontieren möchte? „Das heißt, auf einem Umweg, ausgehend vom chinesischen Außen, die impliziten, verborgenen Entscheidungen zu erhellen, die die europäische Vernunft getragen haben und die diese gerade deswegen nicht hinterfragen kann: denn es gibt das, was ich denke, aber auch das, von dem aus ich denke und das ich gerade deshalb nicht denke“ (François Jullien: Vortrag vor Managern über die Wirksamkeit und Effizienz in China und im Westen. Berlin 2006, S. 15).

⁶¹ Herbert Schnädelbach: Philosophie in der modernen Kultur. Frankfurt am Main 2000, S. 48.