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# ON THE TRANSFORMATIONS AND ANTINOMIES OF EUROPEAN AXIOLOGY

## 欧洲价值论的转型与矛盾探究

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### ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to analyse the transformations and antinomies of European culture from the perspective of values. I focus on the aspects that allow us to understand the differences and convergences between European and Chinese culture. I analyse some of the axiological changes that took place after the Enlightenment, which led to the successes of Western civilization, but also have become the source of the crisis of the identity of Europe and Europeans. As the most important change, I indicate the emergence of modernist conceptions that emphasize the need for progress and reject the value of tradition. I also discuss the difficulties in the concept of the individual, created in the Enlightenment and developed by liberalism. I point to new directions of axiological research carried out by European philosophers, which can be a bridge between our culture and Chinese culture. In this perspective, I analyse the possibilities of enriching both cultures, by acknowledging the values that they cherish, and indicating the dangers that they can avoid. In this perspective, I highlight the advantages of the existential personalism, represented by K. Wojtyła and J. Tischner, who emphasized the role of community and family relations in the integral development of human being.



VALUES IN THE ANCIENT AND CHRISTIAN  
MODELS OF REALITY

For every culture based on agriculture, the regularity of the seasons and the rhythm of nature were an inspiration to consider the order of the world. For the Greeks, as well as for the Chinese that lived in such an ordered reality, the world seemed simple in its structure, and its order clearly extended to the entire sphere of human life.

In Greece it was thought that at all levels encompassed by the human mind there is an omnipresent order. And just as there is cosmic harmony, it is possible for man to achieve spiritual harmony, and in the *polis* – an intermediate link between man and the cosmos – social relations should create a harmoniously developing community. Unlike other agricultural cultures, the Greeks developed by using good climatic conditions, as well as by improving plant strains and farm animals. This “breeding” model of agricultural culture was transferred to human culture – man was regarded as a unit that could be improved through education. The ideal to be achieved was individual development, which aimed at improving the body and spirit to express the value of *kalos kagatos*. This concept combined, in the imagination of the Greeks, the inseparable values of beauty and good. Only by shaping the person ideally balanced in being beautiful (shaping the body) and good (shaping the mind), could perfection be achieved. The pursuit of perfection was a process that enabled man to achieve happiness (see Aristotle, 1999, Bk. 1, p. 11).

Such individual improvement could not be detached from the interest of the community, and every concrete decision of a person had to be related to the good of society (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 122). In the Greek *polis* man knows his role, knows who he is, what he deserves and what he owes to others. Social order gives identity to the members of the community (Ibid., 2007, p. 122-

123). We should recognize here the similarity with the traditional Confucian system, which placed great emphasis on the proper fulfilment of social roles assigned to each person.

Karol Wojtyła, developing a personalistic conception, acknowledged the necessity of satisfying the most essential needs for full human development, among which he mentioned the needs of security, recognition and respect, belonging and a sense of community, self-fulfillment and development, and the need for meaning in life.

In fact, the vision of the world and ethical duties of ancient Greeks were not much different from the Confucian model. The differences in determining the role of physical labour were mainly due to the existence of a slave system in Greece. However, the value of work for individual self-improvement, serving the good of the community, was similar. Apart from the value of individual self-improvement serving the good of the community, the virtue of selflessness was also understood in a similar way. The aristocracy in ancient Greece considered trade and the pursuit of getting rich to be small-minded and improper activities for a free man. Selflessness was also visible in the attitude of Greeks to technology. Science could not have practical value, because its purpose, as Greeks believed (following the Pythagoreans), was to purify the soul. It was thought that knowledge should serve the contemplation of nature, not the conquest of nature. The motive of all cognition was not usefulness but truth. The Greeks’ caution about technology reflected their sense of responsibility for the natural order. Every action and every

choice had a moral dimension, whose aim was to preserve harmony. Maintaining it was guaranteed by the principle of a “golden mean,” helping to make choices between extremes, between cowardice and bravery, miserliness and extravagance, etc.

The model of a Christian world differed from the ancient, static vision of the world. Here, the whole reality that was created by God constituted a certain dynamic order. The purpose of the world, subject to human will, was to create conditions for the spiritual development of man. The highest goal ceased to be comprehensive self-improvement—it was replaced by the striving for spiritual unity with God. Nevertheless, Christianity retained many of the ideals of antiquity. St. Augustine developed Platonic themes. In his conception, however, God’s illumination replaces enlightenment with the idea of the Good. The goal is no longer intellectual contemplation but a union in love with God. St. Thomas Aquinas, after Aristotle, developed the conception of virtues and emphasized the social nature of man (see Dyson, ed., 2002).

The most interesting synthesis of ancient and Christian axiology can be found in the Rule of St. Benedict (see O. Zimmermann, 1950, p.11-36; R. Hanslik, 1977), which was created around 529 CE. It united the ideal of self-improvement and the intelligent use of God’s gifts. The goal of St. Benedict in formulating his Rule was to introduce order into the life of the community. Working for the community was supposed to release its members from earthly restrictions and to pave the way to God. Many of the principles set out in the Rule were aimed at improving the atmosphere between the members of the community and eliminating situations that aggravated this atmosphere. According to the Rule, pride, greed, and the excessive use of goods should be rejected. Lack of egoism and envy were for St. Benedict the expression of a healthy spirit grounded in other-worldliness. It was the conviction of St. Benedict that humility and obedience to superiors were important in shaping spiritual development. At the same time, he imposed on

his superiors a number of duties. The purpose of the religious organization—St. Benedict’s monastic communities—was to provide good conditions for spiritual development and to develop resources for further activities.

#### BREAKING WITH TRADITION: THE AXIOLOGY OF MODERNISM

At the end of the Middle Ages, colonial conquests and the development of trade challenged the stable vision of the world created on ancient and Christian foundations. Renaissance and Enlightenment gave impetus to the formation of a new model of reality, which replaced the world of peaceful harmony with a model of reality that was developing through constant conflict. Thomas Hobbes contributed to this breakthrough in a significant way, claiming that the state of nature was a state of war of all against all (Hobbes, 1651, p. 76-77). The history of Europe was undoubtedly an inspiration for this conception. The Enlightenment thinkers and their heirs observed that development can only take place under the condition of struggle among antagonistic forces.

The modernist conceptions of the philosophers of Enlightenment and their liberal continuators were meant to change the existing order in the name of freeing the creative possibilities of the individual (cf. Bobbio, 1998, p. 25). The individual, in the opinion of liberals, is able to recognize his interests and strives to achieve them in accordance with his nature. This belief was accompanied by faith in the progressive improvement of humanity. This progress was to be achieved through the mechanisms contained in human nature. Tradition, which in antiquity and Christianity, as in China, was considered a treasury of collective wisdom, now was considered by many to be an obstacle to the development of the individual.

Modernists emphasized that progress, understood as a value in itself, thus leads to the inevitable realization of a newer, better world. Modernism and related values, however, were

criticized by postmodernists. Some of them, emphasizing an anti-system approach, pluralism and anti-totalitarianism, exposed the threats posed by faith in the progress of individual freedom. They alleged that modernist conceptions are responsible for imperialism, fascism, communism, and link them to totalitarianisms that would transform societies into panoptic systems, subordinating everything to the norm of utility by increasing the scope of obedience and self-control of citizens (see Foucault, 1993).

The basics of individualism are undermined by communitarians who oppose the promotion of relativistic attitudes and behaviours

existential personalism, which was developed in Poland by Karol Wojtyla and Jozef Tischner. Personalism contrasts the ideal Enlightenment individual with the person who, as Emmanuel Mounier—one of the creators of personalism—emphasized, “is a lived-up activity of self-creation, communication and belonging” (Mounier, 1964, p. 10). The fundamental difference between individualism and personalism is that “the first concern of individualism is the centering of the individual on its own.... [In personalism] the person exists only by turning to the other human being, only through the other person he can get to know himself, only in another person can he find himself” (Ibid, p. 37).

Such attitudes are difficult to imagine in the present world, but possible, as Poland witnessed, however briefly, with the appearance of the Solidarity movement in 1980. It is worth returning to tradition and looking there for solutions to our contemporary problems—especially because we find there values held in common by such different cultures as Europe and China.

by contemporary liberal culture (see MacIntyre 2007). They protest against the subjectivisation and individualisation of reality and they oppose the recognition of the individual and his preferences as the only source of the legitimacy of ethical judgments.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE TO “PROGRESSIVE” MODERNISM

Although the clash of modernist or post-modernist ideologies dominate the narratives of the mass media, alternative philosophies have been gaining importance since the second half of the 20th century. Existentialism, the philosophy of dialogue or personalism, sharing many common premises with Confucianism (especially with the views of Mencius), have restored a concern for the value of social relations in the spiritual development of humanity.

A useful example is the philosophy of

It is worth noting that Wojtyla and Tischner, who were brought up in communist Poland, had great hopes for Poland’s political transformation after the fall of communism. Both of them pointed to the convergence of liberal ideas with Christian values. As Tischner wrote, “The Church should not fight liberal democracy, because it is closer to the Gospel than any other political system. And in essence, the Church has always preached the liberal message to the world.... The Church reveals a deeper sense of liberalism, criticizes its extreme figures, but does not question its essence” (Tischner, 1999, p. 49). While he contended that “the source of the idea of human freedom is the Bible” (Ibid., pp. 196-199), he also saw that freedom in a wider human dimension: “A human person is more than just an individual whose freedom ends where the freedom of another begins. The human person is a special being, capable of giving and receiving. The person is destined for communion. Another person

remains for everyone a guarantee of friendship, which Aristotle already considered the most perfect social good” (Ibid., pp. 199-200). Starting from this assumption, both philosophers stressed the necessity of supplementing the liberal project with community elements. Wojtyla, as Pope John Paul II, contributed largely to the initiation of the “Solidarity” social movement, and Tischner tried to give the movement a theoretical foundation in numerous publications and speeches.

Karol Wojtyla, developing a personalistic conception, acknowledged the necessity of satisfying the most essential needs for full human development, among which he mentioned the needs of security, recognition and respect, belonging and a sense of community, self-fulfilment and development, and the need for meaning in life. Both in his early writings, and in the ones that he promulgated as Pope, he emphasised the role of the family in both the formation of persons and in the creation of social relations.

Jozef Tischner pointed out that in his active life man fulfils the need to seek the truth as well as the need to create. He emphasised that a man who works in the world must confront the truth discovered in his action with truths obtained by others. In the course of joint activities, we create a common social space. Our cooperation creates meanings that are our common value. Our common good is not only defined by what we have done together, but it is also the agreement itself, the memories of common effort and mutual respect built in action.

#### LESSONS FOR CHINA AND THE WEST

These thoughts make us look optimistically at China’s reemergence on the world stage. Both China and the West need each other and will continue to inspire each other, but they should also support eliminating the disadvantages in the current system and the threats that are caused by socio-economic changes. Some of the disadvantages have already been diagnosed (alienation, atomization, exclusion), although we

still have not found adequate methods to prevent these defects and cure the resulting so-called diseases of civilization. Many of the threats that I have described above are also slowly becoming a part of Chinese experience—such as the question of the alienation and loss of the spiritual dimension by individuals taking part in modern production schemes.

Many of the ideas that shaped modern Europe have been adopted by China, but they have also been adapted to a model based on Confucian tradition. For example, according to Duncan Foley, the free-market concept of Adam Smith boiled down to balancing market mechanisms and state institutions in order to achieve sustainable economic development, achieved thanks to the stimulation of these two poles (Foley, 2008, pp. 39-40). The ability to maintain balance remains one of the important sources of Chinese economic success. This observation is confirmed in Brook’s opinion that “East Asian cultures will shape and even process capitalism... allowing it to become more genuinely universal than its European version” (Brook, 2002, pp. 19-20). Perhaps, seeing our mistakes through the prism of Chinese successes, we will be able to assimilate many elements of economics, forgotten in the neo-liberal world.

Among the disadvantages of the current version of liberalism, there is the liberation from the control of capital markets, as a result of which the financial sector dominates the production sector in economics, or the economization of all spheres of human reality. Thirty years after the liberal reforms attempted in Poland, I can see not only their advantages, but also the damage inflicted in the sphere of social relations. Perhaps, therefore, Polish reflections on the flaws of a system based on modernist ideas will be a warning to Chinese people.

In the article, I mentioned only a few values which were common to both cultures at their dawn. Elements of these traditions remain, although sometimes they are a bit forgotten. It is worth recalling them and restoring them to

their former rank, especially since the challenges of modern times are calling for increasing our concern for harmony both in the global, intercultural and individual dimensions. It is also worth reminding and, if possible, restoring the ideals of a comprehensive pursuit of self-improvement and disinterestedness, both in our aspirations and in our relationships with others. Such attitudes are difficult to imagine in the present world, but possible, as Poland witnessed, however briefly, with the appearance of the Solidarity movement in 1980. It is worth returning to tradition and looking there for solutions to our contemporary problems—especially because we find there values held in common by such different cultures as Europe and China. In conclusion, let us recall the wise words of one of the most outstanding theoreticians of liberalism of the 20th century F. A. von Hayek, who also postulated a return to forgotten values:

“The important thing now is that we shall come to agree on certain principles and free ourselves from some of the errors which have governed us in the recent past.... The first need is to free ourselves of that worst form of contemporary obscurantism which tries to persuade us that what we have done in the recent past was all either wise or inevitable. We shall not grow wiser before we learn that much that we have done was very foolish. If we are to build a better world, we must have the courage to make a new start—even if that means some *reculer pour mieux sauter*” (falling back to make a better leap forward) (Hayek, 2006, p. 245-246).



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