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Is Oriental Philosophy an Alternative to the European Civilisation?

The western philosophical climate of God
and the science-based thought

This essay concerns the idea that eastern philosophy could perhaps play a more fundamental role in a modern, multicultural future-world. Someone has said that traditional oriental philosophy should become a very fashionable alternative to conventional Euro—American attitudes and values. But formal comparative studies examining outward similarities between western and oriental thought may lead to a misunderstanding. I want to seek not an external combination through the seeming similarities without historical reflections, but a rational discrimination. The postulation of the rational discrimination between West and East is needed not for a separation but for an inter-cultural communication.

In a broad sense, modern western intellectual culture is rooted in Greco-Roman as well as Judeo-Christian thought. It is therefore important to understand Greek philosophy. The beginning of Greek philosophy was natural philosophy. The comparison of the nature concepts could make a frame of reference to discriminate the difference between western and oriental thought. Nature in the West is represented in atomism as particulate, reductive, material, inert, quantitative, and mechanical. These concepts of nature in the beginning of western philosophy had acceded to Plato's philosophy.

We can, for example, get a philosophical realism to expose general western thought. The subject of philosophical realism is a most important thesis that has wrangled elaborately in the course of western philosophical history. Plato is typical of a philosophical realist. The reality for Plato is Idea, that is unchangeable and truly exists only in heaven. The phenomena which we perceive through our senses are imperfections, as compared with the eternal ideas, the pattern which they dimly reflect. The chief meaning of eternal Idea lay at the substantial paradigm.

We should not overlook the fact that traditional western philosophy was built on substantialism. The concept of substance connotes something fundamental, changeless, atomic, unmoved, and eternal. That is to say, this substantialism is a philosophical congregation of the metaphysical metaphor of heaven. Western philosophy began as astronomy, and the connection has ever since seemed fundamental.

These heaven-minds have been internally connected with the Judeo-Christian tradition. These seem to be the main points which came as follows:¹

1. God – the locus of the holy or sacred transcends nature.
2. Nature is a profane artifact of a divine craftsman.
3. Man is exclusively created in the image of God, thus segregated from the rest of nature.
4. Man is given dominion by God over nature.
5. God commands man to subdue nature and multiply himself.
6. The whole cognitive organization of the Judeo-Christian world view is hierarchical: god over man, man over nature.
7. The image of God in man is the ground of man's intrinsic value. Non-human natural entities have, at best, instrumental value.
8. The teleologically based instrumentality of nature is compounded in the later Judeo-Christian tradition by Aristotelian-Thomistic teleology – rational life is the telos of nature and hence all the rest of nature exists as a means, a support system, for rational man.

The western concept of nature became institutionalized in early modern science (classical Newton mechanics) and was pragmatically translated into an engineering agenda. The so called culture crisis may in large part be diagnosed as a symptom of the atomic-mechanistic image of nature inherited from the Greeks, institutionalized classical science, and expressed in modern technology.

Newtonian mechanics was not just a physical idea. It was an all-embracing philosophy of the natural world. Newton had accepted molecular theory as easily as Democritus' atomism. Atomic thought just expresses the idea that a quantitative method is a criterion of the western modernity. The standing rule of quantitative measurement was a philosophical seed of the Industrial Revolution. In the 20th century scientific technology and industrial capital gave us not only material fertility but also an alienation. The alienation of homo sapiens and our modern culture today is at the bottom of the cultural crisis which committed the environmental crisis. That is to say, our crisis is due to the discord between human rationality and human alienation.

¹ B. Callicott/R.T. Ames (ed.), *Nature*. SUNY, 1989, 4-5.

The organistic thought of the East

Nowdays it is a global problem of all humanity: how to overcome the cultural crisis. Therefore we want to seek cultural alternatives. Among the many plausible alternatives, we can mention constructive system of oriental thought, especially the oriental thought of ancient far-Asian philosophy.

Ancient eastern culture was the source of respect for and veneration of the natural world. Man in eastern thought is not a being to subdue nature. Man is an ontological mirror of all of nature. The man nature relationship was marked by respect, bordering on love, which is absent in the West. Man is not only understood to be a part of nature, but also just nature itself. All of the parts of the entire nature belong to one organistic whole, and they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process. This is a holism, which is an important characteristic of far-eastern philosophy.

Second, far-eastern thought is organistic. All things and processes in the world are related in processes which proceed toward a balance and a harmony. Especially, those two characteristic of eastern philosophy are expressed evidently in the causality.

The model of causality in eastern philosophy is exactly contrary and converse to the mechanical-atomistic model of Newtonian science. Whereas the western scientific concept of causality is atomistic, externalistic, and mechanistic, the far Asian model of causality is holistic, internalistic, and organistic. The very radical differences between them is not easy to explain. Because of these differences, it can be said that eastern causality could not be in the current category of the scientific causality. These misunderstandings come from the discord between western scientific thinking and oriental philosophy.

The holistic and organistic character of the East is revealed even in traditional Korean medicine. Traditional Korean medicine was often evaluated as poor and 'unscientific' owing to the industrialization policy in Korea. Korea is now fully industrialized, and the flagpole of rigid 'scientific' criteria has penetrated the social horizon. However, even presently, the beliefs of traditional medicine are honored in Korea as a great exponent of our culture and moral tradition.

Traditional Korean medical thought differs from modern western thinking in a crucial way. The Korean view of relationship between nature and man is considered in terms of concepts that have no real western parallel, although misleading resemblances are inevitably seized on by the ill informed. The traditional medical world view may differ significantly from western substance-philosophy².

² During a long period of armed Western colonial imperialism, Western philosophy, religion, and especially science and technology have made considerable cultural inroads in the East.

For example, the dictionary definition of the Korean Word *kan* as 'liver' may be dangerously misleading in a modern context as opposed to an ordinary one; the names of things recognized as physical organs are used in Korean medicine to refer to functional systems of which the liver is merely the physical substrata. *Kan* does not refer merely to the physical substrate, but the embracing function. This does not, however, mean that Koreans were so bad at anatomy that we imagined an organ where there is none; rather we were not really talking in a western anatomical sense.

This situation is the same in the concept of life. The medical criteria of death are mainly the cessation of the heart-beat or breathing. But in traditional Korean medicine death means that *chi* (life energy), *chung* (organic power, or *shin* (holistic organizer) is choked or disperse (not exhausted). Nowadays Koreans can often recognize that the meaning of life can be founded in the traditional concepts such as *chi*, *chung*, or *shin*.

These traditional concepts unfortunately cannot be submissive to the terminology of western science. Especially, the meaning of *chi* is not static, but continuous, non-*loci*, interorganistic. So the life concept in traditional medicine is not bounded by the life of one man, but can be extended over the interorganistic and relational social-life. This meaning of relational life is known as 'global life'³ in Korea. According to *chi*-philosophy, the medical explanation for life is inevitably linked with the social and traditional philosophical worldview.

Eastern thought is much more devoted to a directly given, organistic continuum view of reality, while western thought is much more centred on theoretic constructs, such as individual objects. The philosophical distinction between organistic continuum and individuality may relate to the problem of how internal order arises in a homogeneous system.

An alternative or a inter-dialog?

We have to ask the question as to how western philosophers can dialectically engage eastern thought in the absence of shared goals and evaluative standards. Whatever the answer to this question may be, the first task is to appreciate the full degree of difference between western and eastern thought. A common understanding of the philosophical enterprise may or may not be attainable. However to organize eastern philosophy by means of western

Likewise, it is, of course, dangerous to view the situation of Korean medical culture through solely traditional spectacles. During the colonial period of Japanese hegemony, Japan carried out an obliteration policy against Korean traditional medicine.

³ Hoick Chang, *Science and Metascience*, Seoul, 1989

philosophical categories and to evaluate it by western criteria of evidence, argument, and proof is as idle as it is parochial. Likewise, it is absurd that man interprets the modern scientific thinking with eastern philosophy, despite the dissatisfaction with a western mechanical worldview.

The dissatisfaction with a mechanistic worldview and the appeal of eastern organistic alternatives is not arbitrary or accidental. A dialectic internal to western intellectual history has fostered the recent interest in eastern philosophy, an interest that goes well beyond merely a passing fascination with the exotic.

It is very unlikely that the West will ever become radically "Easternized". The West has profitably borrowed from the East in bits and pieces, and borrowed elements have been both benign and readily absorbed. When the turning to Asian thought for inspiration might be confined in Asian mysticism, we can not achieve anything. These confusions arise apparently from the so-called 'new age of science movement'.

During the past 15 years the 'new age of science movement' has enhanced the status of eastern traditional concept medicine, but social prejudice from this enhancement has confused the concept 'chi' with mysticism. For these reasons:

1) industrialization, 2) concept-difference between East and West, 3) hegemony of western science, 4) influence of the 'new age science movement' (or new science), the meaning of life should be a) a social individualism owing to the particular life, b) self preservation. When we understand the inter organic life (or global life) along with the particular life, we can then understand properly traditional eastern medicine and eastern philosophy further.

There is no denying that western science and the science based industry have made life easier, more comfortable, and, in some ways, more satisfying. This satisfaction is, however, gradually turning out to be a dissatisfaction, especially by those who have begun to realize the threat to natural phenomena posed by the increasing demands of the technological world. However, the so-called cultural crisis of today is not a western phenomenon alone. The East today has no more lived up to its highest ideals than has the West. But it is also apparent that a great deal of the cultural crisis stems from western-based technology and the philosophical attitude that has sustained and nurtured that technology. Therefore it is plausible for western philosophers to turn to the East for philosophical inspiration.

When we can accept the worldview of the oriental philosophy, inversely the concept of 'interorganic life' would be a 'therapy' of the rigid science-based European civilization. Nobody can be sure whether oriental philosophy is an alternative to the European civilization: nevertheless, man has to make an attempt to find a new philosophical therapy.

The difference between East and West is not a geographical difference. Today we can lay the cultural crisis not only on European civilization, but also on the industrialized Asian climate. The alternative is not a revolutionary solution but just a concentration of a small cultural improvement. Therefore there is not in the least an alternative. We can not judge by predominant comparison between the West and the East but have to reconcile both cultures philosophically.

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