

Cultural Flesh and Intercultural Phenomenology: Theory and Practice

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1. Origin¹

The origin of my book *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding. Toward a New Cultural Flesh* (2016) can be traced back to the first international conference I took part in Hong Kong, my place of birth and early education, after 15 years of advanced studies and work in Europe. That conference, entitled *Phenomenology of Interculturality and Life-World*,² was held in April 1996 at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In the age of globalization, the mere fact of encounter between different cultures is nothing new. From the early Twentieth Century on, East-Asians' effort to learn sciences and philosophy originated from the West is a pan-Asian phenomenon. In geographical areas where Chinese is the chief language of higher learning, in particular in Cultural China, not only the discipline of philosophy was introduced in institutes of higher learning, thinking systems and conceptual elements expressed in traditional Chinese classics were reread and researched by incorporating methods of Western philosophy to

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented to the Society for Intercultural Philosophy, Germany, at the University of Tübingen, 19 July 2023.

² Proceedings of this conference were later published as Orth and Cheung 1998.

build the new discipline of Chinese philosophy.³ After a whole century's collective effort, Chinese philosophy becomes now a modern tradition. On the one hand, the birth of the discipline of Chinese philosophy is the result of the encounter and communication between Eastern and Western cultures. On the other hand, the learning of Chinese philosophy is inseparable from a minimal reference to Western philosophy and Western languages. In consequence, philosophical practice in Chinese speaking geographical areas is actually an activity of intercultural understanding from the start.⁴

Since this happened a century ago, there are already four to five generations of Chinese scholars who engage themselves in philosophy as an activity of intercultural understanding. What are the conditions of possibility of such an activity? This is a meta-philosophical question raised from the fact that the practice of philosophy becomes an intellectual activity among others in Cultural China. However, it seems that such a question has never been addressed by the former generations of Chinese philosophers. I had the first chance to reflect on such a question when I took part in the conference *Phenomenology of Interculturality and Life-World* mentioned earlier. At that time, I did not find any inspiration from the works of Chinese philosophers I was acquainted with, not to say from phenomenological works written or translated into Chinese language.

³ And I believe the conditions of birth of Japanese philosophy are grosso modo similar.

⁴ Liang Shu-ming (梁漱溟, 1893-1988), the famous declared ideological critique of Mao Zedong, is the first modern Chinese philosopher who is aware of the fact that the study of philosophy in Chinese language is already an activity of intercultural understanding. C.f., Liang 1921. Unfortunately, there is not yet any translation into English or other Western language of this foundational work. An examination of his role in Chinese Culture's transition to modernity can be found in: Alitto 1979=1986².

2. Philosophical Practice as Intercultural Experience

Yet from the very beginning of my philosophical apprenticeship in The Chinese University of Hong Kong in the mid-1970s, the philosophical education I received was one that included both Eastern and Western philosophies. As an undergraduate, the philosophy courses I had taken include not only History of Western Philosophy from the Pre-Socratics to Existentialism and History of Chinese Philosophy from Confucius to the Qing philosophers, but also Indian philosophy of which Buddhist philosophy is an integral part before it was transmitted to China, Tibet, Japan and other parts of the world. The learning and thinking experience I had acquired is one that is mediated through both the Chinese and English languages, and to some extent through the German language too. I had the great chance of studying in a Philosophy Department in which the three very important and original Contemporary Chinese Philosophers - Tang Chun-I (or Tang Junyi, 1909-1978), Mou Tsung-San (or Mou Zongsan 1909-1995) and Lao Sze-Kwang (1927-2012) - had taught and where each had published their representative philosophical works which are now classics of Contemporary Chinese philosophy. All three of them were in fact exemplary forerunners of intercultural understanding in philosophy as each of them had written abundantly on both Chinese, Indian and Western philosophies, and always from an intercultural perspective.

While I took up my doctoral studies in Paris in the 1980s, the lectures I attended were all delivered in French and the doctoral dissertation I wrote was also in French, yet when I was undertaking philosophical thinking, there

was always an interplay between the Western languages (principally French plus English and German) and the Chinese language (with Classical Chinese as the written language and Cantonese Chinese as the spoken language). While I was pursuing rigorous philosophical conceptual analysis, I always navigated between the several European languages I had access to and the Chinese language. To me, philosophical learning is an intercultural thinking experience: it is simply an activity of intercultural understanding. This is an inter-cultural activity, as I move not only from one language to another and from one culture to another as a one-way traffic; I also commute between two or more languages and two or more cultures in order to arrive to the highest degree of universality of meaning that philosophy aims at. This activity of understanding constantly requires the translation from one language to another in order to capture the meaning of concepts and theories of sufficient philosophical height and depth. I am well aware that there exist all sorts of difference between languages and cultures. Yet we must recognize that the core elements of philosophical concepts and theories possess a high degree of universality, otherwise as non-Westerners we could never understand the philosophical thoughts originated from the West, nor could we undertake translation of philosophical concepts and doctrines into our own mother language. The hard fact is: for a century, Chinese scholars specialized in philosophy have been trying to understand traditional and contemporary philosophical currents originated from the West. They also incessantly undertake translations of traditional and contemporary Western philosophical classics into Chinese. This is the

affirmation of the universality of meaning of philosophical concepts and doctrines originated from the West.

If we look back on the so-called internal historical development of Western philosophy, it is not difficult to find that the transmission of philosophical concepts and doctrines in Europe is realized through the translation of basic philosophical texts from one language to another, and thus by the transplantation of these concepts and doctrines from one cultural soil onto another cultural soil. First written in classical Greek, Western philosophical classics were later translated into Latin during the Roman period. These texts were later transmitted to North Africa and the Middle-East in the 9th and 10th Centuries and translated into the Arabic and Persian languages at the time of the rise of Islamic philosophy. From the time of the Italian Renaissance onwards, these texts were translated into modern European languages such as Italian, English, French and German, etc. If one denies that there is a certain universality in linguistic meaning, if one does not recognize that there is a core of universal meaning in philosophical concepts and doctrines, then she/he is simply denying that philosophy is possible. She/he also denies the fact that the whole tradition of Western philosophy is a cross-cultural tradition which is multi-lingual and has gone through constant changes and mutation.

3. The Duality of Husserlian Phenomenology:

A Closed Idea of Philosophy vs an Open Methodological Attitude

Our reflections start from the observation of a rather common attitude in the community of Western academic philosophy: reluctance to

recognize or simply inattentive to the fact that the tradition of Western philosophy as it is transmitted and sedimented to the modern times is cross-cultural in nature.⁵ This is an attitude of “philosophical ethnocentrism”⁶ which can be traced back to Hegel. Hegel was among the first to have introduced the history of philosophy as a philosophical discipline in its own right. Understood from his standpoint of philosophy of spirit, the whole history of philosophy is basically presented as an internal affair of European culture. The role played by Arabic and Persian thinkers and languages in the transmission and revival of Greek philosophy on European soil during the Middle Ages has been ignored. Even if Hegel mentioned briefly Chinese Philosophy and Indian Philosophy in the opening pages of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, these two non-Western forms of philosophy are stigmatized as being either too sensible or too abstract without reaching the philosophical height of conceptual determination in the proper sense of the term. Chinese Philosophy, in particular, is judged as remaining merely at the “first stage,” i.e. the most elementary level of philosophical consciousness.⁷ Thus to Hegel philosophy outside the European soil is not really qualified as genuine form of philosophy. Hegel’s quasi-monolithic conception of history of philosophy remained dominant during more than a century.⁸ This is also

⁵ Fred Dallmayer shares this observation in Dallmayer 1998, 300.

⁶ Dallmayer 1998, 301.

⁷ Hegel 1971, 147.

⁸ In the English-speaking world Ben-Ami Scharfstein’s *A Comparative History of World Philosophy: from the Upanishads to Kant* (Scharfstein 1998) represents a rare exception. It considers the Indian, the Chinese and the Western traditions as “the three philosophical traditions” of equal importance. It also gives an exposition of the thoughts of the Iranian philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037) and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon, 1135-1204) and their role in the reception and transmission of Aristotelian

the position shared by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), though he was well aware that the Europe in which he lived was immersed in unseen political, cultural and spiritual crisis in the history of humankind. To Husserl, philosophy, invented by the Greeks, is a purely theoretical activity of inquiry that coincides with the sciences. Only modern Europeans have the spiritual merit to claim heritage from the Greeks. To him there is no veritable philosophy outside Europe.⁹ As father of phenomenology, Husserl starts from a very narrow Idea of philosophy—philosophy is pure theoretical inquiry and nothing else—and proceeds to make a determining judgment in the top-down manner: all modes of thinking and spiritual inquiries which do not conform to this narrowly and preemptively defined Idea of philosophy are excluded from the domain of philosophy truly defined. The narrowness

and Neo-Platonic philosophies in Europe through their works essentially written in Arabic language (Scharfstein 1998, 293-312). The pioneering work of Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris, 1964), originally published as an independent volume, was collected and republished in two parts in *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade. Histoire de la Philosophie*, I, éd. Brice Parain (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), under the title “La philosophie islamique des origines à la mort d’Averroès”, pp. 1048-1197, and then under the title “La philosophie islamique depuis la mort d’Averroès jusqu’à nos jours” in Vol. III (Paris, 1974), pp. 1067-1188. In doing so the French editors of these three volumes of *Histoire de la Philosophie* have placed Islamic philosophy as a philosophical tradition in its own right within the wider setting of history of world philosophy.

⁹ Husserl expressed this view in his famous Vienna Lecture given in 1935 entitled “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity”. Cf., Husserl 1954, 331 (= Husserl 1970, 284-285). The contemporary German phenomenological philosopher Klaus Held (1936-2023) shows the same position as Husserl: “It has become fashionable to call every achievement of knowledge and every kind of deeper thought within the tradition of the non-European high cultures ‘sciences’ or ‘philosophy’. However, one thereby levels an essential cultural distinction... So long as knowledge remains in the service of life bound within particular horizons, however, and has not yet been carried out by the ‘theoretical’ openness to the world as world that developed out of philosophy and science in their unity, philosophy and science in the original European meaning of these concepts are not in play.” Held 2002, 90.

of the Idea of philosophy consciously expressed by Husserl is, however, in sharp contrast to the open methodological attitude manifested in the great variety of concrete phenomenological researches he had undertaken during his whole life.

In the 1996 conference on *Phenomenology of Interculturality and Life-World*, I presented a paper which begins by a critical analysis of Husserl's Eurocentric Idea of philosophy.¹⁰ My paper generated an animated debate among the many European and North-American participants not only during my session of presentation, but also during the rest of the conference. Part of the participants tried to defend Husserl by arguing that Husserl only aimed at pointing out the essential difference between Western and Eastern philosophies, and should not be accused of intrinsic Eurocentrism. Some other scholars agreed with my diagnosis that Husserl's phenomenology has a Eurocentric tendency. Towards the end, one of the participants, the eminent German phenomenologist Prof. Bernhard Waldenfels (1934-), stood up to say some conclusive words. He said (I report from memory): Phenomenology and Western Philosophy are basically Eurocentric. Now, Chinese colleagues, it is your turn to let us know what is Chinese Philosophy. How can she contribute to establish a truly universal philosophy? These words of Prof. Waldenfels amounted to giving a task to the Chinese scholars then present: to show to the West and to the whole world the universal significance of Chinese Philosophy. These words remain in my mind since

¹⁰ Lau 1998, 229-249 (1st ed.) (= Lau 2016, 21-34, rev. ed.).

then, and became one of the constant motivating forces behind my pursuit for intercultural understanding in philosophy.

If the Idea of philosophy of Husserl, the father of phenomenology, is Eurocentric, why do I still insist in pursuing the study of intercultural understanding in philosophy from the phenomenological approach? This is because in its operation, what phenomenology shows is an open attitude and a rigorous method. Phenomenology's maxim is "going back to the things or the issues themselves" ("*zu den Sachen selbst*").¹¹ It advocates a very cautious attitude of abstaining from any judgment before examining the things or the issues in question. At the same time, Husserl invented the operational procedure of *epochē* as the basic methodological device of phenomenology.¹² It serves to eliminate any prejudices, unexamined presuppositions, or premature conclusions. Thus, in terms of concrete practice, what phenomenology shows is a down-to-earth spirit of openness.

Guided by this open attitude and the spirit of methodological rigor, the phenomenological movement is never dominated by dogmatism. On the contrary, it shows constantly a spirit of radical self-reflection and self-criticism. That is why almost none of the phenomenological philosophers with original contributions after Husserl accepted without reflection Husserl's Eurocentric Idea of philosophy. In particular, Jan Patočka (1907-1977), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) have each developed a vision of philosophy very different from Husserl's

¹¹ Husserl 1901, 6 (= Husserl 1970a, 25; Husserl 1913, 35 (= Husserl 1983, 35).

¹² Husserl 1913, 55 (= Husserl 1983, 59).

Eurocentric Idea. Among the three, Derrida's criticism of Husserl's Eurocentrism is the most severe.

Using his self-invented mode of analysis known as "deconstruction," Derrida puts Husserl's conception of philosophy into the broader framework of logocentrism which Derrida believes has dominated the whole history of Western philosophy since the Greeks. To Derrida, "in an original and non-'relativist' sense, logocentrism is an ethnocentric metaphysics."

¹³ Logocentrism is inseparable from the whole Western tradition of metaphysics of presence and onto-theological tradition. "At the beginning is the Verb," this opening sentence of the Gospel of John has been understood as the basis of the theological conception that God's words are at the origin of writing. This conception has served as a guide to the first Europeans venturing into a general history of linguistic writing. For example, according to Derrida, a sixteenth Century author Blaise de Vigenère considered that the Hebrew script was as a primitive and natural writing given by God, that these characters are "the most ancient of all, formed indeed by the Lord God's own finger."¹⁴ Such a conception of linguistic writing considers that God's Speech (la Parole de Dieu) is the origin of all languages, and the function of writing is nothing other than the record of the original speech, that of the Christian God. Following this understanding of the relation between speech and writing, speech is absolutely prior to writing in fact and in reason. Derrida

¹³ Derrida 1967, 117 (= Derrida 1976, 79).

¹⁴ Derrida refers to *Traité des chiffres ou secrètes manières d'écrire* (1586) by Blaise de Vigenère. Cf. Derrida 1967, 112 (= Derrida 1976, 76).

has shown that even for Saussure, who has established linguistics as a science of language, there is an absolute privilege of the *phonè* over writing: “the acts of language is the articulated unity of sound and sense within the phonic. With regard to this unity, writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic.”¹⁵ To Derrida, Saussure’s conception represents a “historico-metaphysical presupposition” that “there would be a *natural order* of relationships between linguistic and graphic signs,” which is a “natural relationship subordinating writing (visible image) to speech.”¹⁶ In consequence, the accomplished state of development of writing, as a return to its pure origin, is, according to this conception, a pure phonetic writing. Thus, any form of writing which could not be developed into the accomplished state of pure phonetic writing is merely a lower form or an underdeveloped form of writing. The position which considers that the most advanced form of development of a writing is the development into an accomplished phonetic writing is the position of phonocentrism. To Derrida, logocentrism and phonocentrism support each other mutually and are complementary to one another: “within this logos, the original and essential link to the *phonè* has never been broken.”¹⁷ Logocentrism in philosophy is the judgment that any form of philosophy or thinking tradition is underdeveloped if it is expressed in a form of writing unable to be developed into an accomplished phonetic writing. Such form of philosophy is to be excluded from being considered as genuine philosophy.

¹⁵ Derrida 1967, 45 (= Derrida 1976, 29).

¹⁶ Derrida 1967, 117 (= Derrida 1976, 35).

¹⁷ Derrida 1967, 21 (= Derrida 1976, 11).

In other words, logocentrism exercises the violence of exclusion from the rang of genuine philosophy on all thinking traditions which are outside the Western form of phonocentric writings.

4. From Deconstruction to Construction

Derrida's deconstruction easily gives the following negative impression to the hurried reader: it is a purely destructive mode of reading and thinking which has not at all any positive contribution to philosophy. For a cautious reader, this is not the case. Based on the research works of some important French Sinologists, Derrida pointed out that Chinese writing (and Japanese writing too, as it utilizes a great number of Chinese characters in its sentence construction) as a non-phonetic writing is an eminent example of a writing which can develop a strong and rich movement of civilization from a writing without the use of phonetic symbols and alphabets: "we have known for a long time that largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese included phonetic elements very early. They remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism."¹⁸ In other words, on the basis of the examples of the capacity of Chinese and Japanese writings as non-phonetic writings to develop into a powerful civilization, Derrida wants to argue that it is possible to exit the logocentric view of civilization. With reference to the positive appreciation of Chinese writing by Leibniz, Derrida also points out that Chinese writing as a non-

¹⁸ Derrida 1967, 138 (= Derrida 1976, 90).

historical writing is close to satisfying the requirement of universality of the universal language in Leibniz's conception. Thus, Chinese writing can fulfill the role of an intellectual and philosophical language, or at least a blueprint of such a language.¹⁹ Derrida has certainly not directly talked about any specific concept in Chinese thought or any doctrine of Chinese philosophy. Yet, through the discussion of the conditions of satisfaction of the requirement of a philosophical language proposed by Leibniz, Derrida has suggested that Chinese language and Chinese writing can satisfy the conditions for a philosophical language: "Chinese characters are perhaps more philosophical and seem to be built upon more intellectual considerations."²⁰ In other words, by recognizing that Chinese language and Chinese writing can fulfill the conditions of a philosophical language, Derrida recognizes at the same time that Chinese philosophy is possible.

However, the way Derrida proceeds to argue that philosophy outside Europe is possible is still too indirect. On the other hand, to recognize that philosophy can be generated in China or by Chinese language and Chinese writing does not necessarily imply that it can shake the self-confidence of defenders of Eurocentrism in philosophy. The latter can still judge, in the manner of Hegel, that Chinese philosophy and all other forms of philosophy generated on other cultural soils are simply low level or elementary forms of philosophy. Let us recall that Hegel, at the beginning of his *Lectures on History of Philosophy*, judges that Buddhist philosophy originated from India and Daoist philosophy rooted in Ancient China represent merely the most

¹⁹ Derrida 1967, 118 (= Derrida 1967, 79).

²⁰ Derrida 1967, 118 (= Derrida 1967, 79).

rudimentary forms of philosophical consciousness in its entire ladder of development.²¹

According to Hegel's ladder of spiritual development, Buddhism and Daoism as prominent forms of Eastern philosophy are in no way comparable to the advanced form of development of Western philosophy. If Eastern philosophies aspire toward a higher form of development, they can only elevate themselves in the ways Western philosophy has gone through. At the same time, to recognize that there exist some forms of philosophy outside the West does not imply that philosophies within and without the West can communicate with each other and understand each other, nor that they need to communicate with and understand each other. This is an attitude of ethnocentrism which is behold often implicitly. It appeared already in early China. From the Pre-Qin era of China (prior to the 2nd Century B.C.), there is already the famous distinction and demarcation between "The Chinese or the Hans and the Barbarians" (「華夷之辨」). This serves as a way to build up the national and cultural identity of the Chinese as Hans, who identify themselves not only as a distinctive ethnicity, but also as more advanced in terms of civilization. In contemporary China, there are still very ethnocentric Chinese scholars who contest the legitimacy of the term "Chinese Philosophy." They deny that there is something called "Chinese Philosophy," as they refuse to judge, to evaluate, or simply to understand traditional Chinese thought according to the philosophical mode of thinking prevailing

²¹ Hegel 1971, 147 (= Hegel 1955, 121).

in the West.²² The ethnocentrism of these Chinese scholars joins hands with Eurocentric philosophers to deny the existence of Chinese philosophy.

In other words, to overcome philosophical ethnocentrism, it is not enough to argue for the possibility and the necessity of intercultural understanding in philosophy by accepting that it is possible to have other forms of philosophy outside the West merely from the perspective of cultural plurality.

5. “Inter-world” and the Necessity of Intercultural Understanding

If we uphold the position of “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet,”²³ or that of “Chinese (Han) is Chinese (Han) and Barbarians are Barbarians,” the mere fact of recognizing the factual existence of cultural plurality will not help to explicate how intercultural understanding is possible and even necessary. It is because such attitude betrays a view that a cultural world is constructed and developed only within the border of a single culture: there is no interplay nor interconnection between one’s own cultural world and the world of cultural otherness, that there is an unbridgeable gap between the two. Yet such a view is challenged by Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the world of perception, developed on the basis of Husserl’s concept of the life-world.

²² Since the very beginning of the Twenty-First Century, there is a vast debate among Chinese intellectuals and philosophers around the problem of “The Legitimacy of Chinese Philosophy”. Some of the most important contributions to the debate are translated into English and published in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Vol. 37 (2005-2006), No. 1-3.

²³ This is the opening verse of the well-known poem entitled “[The Ballad of East & West](#)” written by the British poet Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936).

First of all, let us consider the issue from the perspective of an individual human subject, i.e., that of an individual subject of perception. All perception is deployed and enacted in the life-world, an intersubjective world in which an individual perceiver can only see the world and things of the world from a determinate perspective at one point of the spatio-temporal continuum. Such perspective is always limited. The appearance of the world and things of the world to the perceptual subject under any one single perspective is thus always only a partial appearance. For example, we can never see the things and the scene of the world behind us. In order to let the world and things of the world appear to the perceptual subject under another perspective, she ought to move her body. But in doing so, she has to give up the former perspective under which the world and things of the world appeared to her. Thus no single perspective is a total perspective. We can certainly imagine that in the infinite spatio-temporal process we can exhaust all possible perspectives that a finite perceptual subject can take up in such a way that we can have an exhaustively total view of the world and things in the world. At the end of this infinite spatio-temporal process, an ultimate, highest and complete synthesis of all possible perspectives is realized. But in reality this last and ultimate moment never arrives to a finite perceptual subject as a being-in-the-world unless the world comes to an end. Thus in reality, at any single moment, our comprehensive view of the world and things of the world relies on the information provided by the perspectives of other perceptual subjects who are situated in different spatio-temporal positions in the world. One of the famous phenomenological observations of Jean-Paul Sartre is: we can never

eliminate or replace the scenes of the world which appear to the other perceptual subjects under their perspectives. In consequence, the perspectives of the Others cause the decentralization (*décentration*) of my own original perspective.²⁴ In other words, no single perceptual subject can monopolize all the perspectives under which the world and things there-in are revealed to us. The perspectives of different perceptual subjects occupying different spatio-temporal positions in the world are thus irreplaceable with respect to the formation of a possible total view on the world. This is an irrefutable consequence for anyone who accepts that a perceptual subject is a finite carnal subject.

However, that the perspectives of different perceptual subjects are irreplaceable by one another does not mean that they are necessarily in contradiction or in complete conflict with one another. As Merleau-Ponty points out very clearly, the world for sure never appears completely under my own perspective, but neither does it appear entirely under the perspective of the other; rather, the world appears at the intersection of my perspectives and the perspectives of the others. To Merleau-Ponty, the world appears under a “system of perspectives.” As a total spectacle, the world does not appear before me, “but at the intersection of my views and at the intersection of my views with those of the others, at the intersection of my acts and at the intersection of my acts with those of the others.”²⁵

This is the structural characteristic of the appearance of the world as a total spectacle. Instead of simply using the term “world” unreflectively,

²⁴ Sartre 1943/1980, 301 (= Sartre 2018, 351).

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 116 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 84).

Merleau-Ponty proposes the term “inter-world” (“l’inter-monde”)²⁶ to understand the cultural world, the social world and the historical world, as these are worlds in which the interconnection and interaction between myself and a plurality of others take place. These are worlds which involve the inter-relationship between I as carnal subject and other carnal subjects. To understand the cultural world, the social world and the historical world as “inter-world” signifies not only that we must recognize the co-existence of the plurality of others and other cultures, but also the prior existence of the plurality of other subjects and of cultural otherness. What Merleau-Ponty wants to convey is the following message: concerning the appearance of the world and things of the world, my perspectives and the perspectives of other perceptual subjects are complimentary. Though I may be the first one to have perceived certain spectacles of the world or things in the world, the world is never discovered by me alone. This is because the world never appears to me alone; the world always appears already to a plurality of others. The intertwining of my perspectives on the world with the perspectives of a plurality of others constitutes the system of perspectives of the world. To speak in the language of Hegel, if we want to elevate the perspectives of the world and those of the things of the world perceived by me from the state of subjective certainty to that of objective truth, we need help from the perspectives of other perceptual subjects to accomplish such a task. The perspectives of the others are thus the structurally necessary

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 73, 90 and 116 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 48, 62 and 84). The English translation renders the term “inter-monde” by “intermundane space”, in which the term and concept of “world” disappears entirely.

condition of possibility of the becoming truth of my own perspectives. Even in daily life, without the help of the perspectives of other persons or other things (such as the mirror), our self-observation or self-image will never be and can never be complete.

At the level of cultural perception, the situation will be similar. Any perspective generated in a particular culture must entail a certain unilateral character specific or inherent to this very culture. This is its privilege, but also its weakness. It is its privilege, because to other cultures, the particular perspective unique to that culture may represent some sort of “imperceptions,” which is a lack or an absence in perception in other cultures. These are the perspectives that other cultures are unable to take up, which thus reveal the blind spots of the perception of other cultures. The unique perspective a particular culture enjoys is also its weakness, because this particular culture has its own blind-spots too. In fact every culture has its own cultural blind-spots. It needs the perspectives of other cultures as supplements to fill up its own cultural imperceptions and render visible what is invisible to it in order to construct a global world image or world picture. At the same time, since a perspective generated in any single and particular culture has its unilateral character, it needs to be proved that its cultural perception could also be valid in other cultures; only in this way it can claim its universality. Even Western culture cannot be exempted from this search for complementarity from other cultures. Thus Merleau-Ponty points out the following observation about the condition of the truthfulness of Western culture in general:

The West has invented an idea of truth which requires and authorizes it to understand other cultures, and thus to recover them as aspects of a total truth. There has in fact been this miraculous turning back upon itself of an historical formation, through which Western thought has emerged from its particularity and “locality.” A presumption and an intention which are still awaiting their fulfillment. Western thought must prove it by understanding all “life-worlds.” It must bear factual witness to its unique significance beyond “anthropological specimens.”²⁷

In other words, though since the Greeks Western culture has developed the Idea of truth with a view and a mission to establish universal truth, this Idea remains to be realized. The concrete way to realize such an Idea is through intercultural understanding. It is only through intercultural understanding that a philosophical concept or theory can overcome its particularity and locality born on its own cultural soil, such that it can acquire a greater explanatory power or validity, i.e. to enhance its universal validity to a higher degree. In distinction to traditional idealism or intellectualism, which establishes universality in the top-down manner, this kind of universality is built on a lateral universal,²⁸ a kind of universal obtained through reflective judgment in the bottom-up way starting from concrete empirical cases, in distinction to determining judgment obtained in the top-down manner from

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1960, “Partout et nulle part”, 173-174 (= Merleau-Ponty 1964b, “Everywhere and Nowhere”, 138).

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1960, “De Mauss à Claude Lévi-Strauss”, 150 (= Merleau-Ponty 1964b, “From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss”, 120).

a priori ideas or principles, as explained by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.²⁹ Thus intercultural understanding is the touching stone of truth, in particular philosophical truth. It is the new way to establish truth.

6. The Flesh: The Ontological Concept that Inter-world needs

If our analyses above are valid, the soil upon which philosophical knowledge and philosophical truth of genuine universal validity are generated is not that of the pure thinking world of a solipsistic subject, but that of an inter-world, in particular that of an intercultural world. How is such a world constituted? What is its ontological foundation? It is not a world projected by all species of dogmatic metaphysical monism or dualism, but a world which admits cultural plurality. A world-view which admits cultural plurality and which can provide explication of cultural plurality should be a disenchanted world-view which tolerates different accounts, religious or non-religious, of the genesis, destiny or meaning of the world. A disenchanted world-view is not necessarily anti-religious. For example Kant is the Enlightenment philosopher who is the pioneer of the disenchanted world-view. Kant advocates “religion within the mere boundary of Reason alone.” What Kant criticizes is not religion in itself, but religious fanaticism. The extremist thoughts and deeds of religious fanatics are often the most serious obstruction to intercultural communication.

The ontological foundation of an inter-world and an inter-cultural world is neither that of a world projected or determined from the heaven by

²⁹ Kant 2000, 66-68 (Introduction, IV [5:179-5:181]) and 15-20 (First Introduction, V [20:211-20:216]).

some sort of pure ideas. Nor should it be understood in the manner of a world of pure material nature. This is because what this ontological foundation needs to explicate is precisely how a cultural world, a world of meaning and ideas, can be born on the soil of a world of mere material nature. To fulfill such a requirement, traditional substantialist metaphysics is of no help. For this is a mode of thinking which understands itself always within the framework of binary opposition inherent in all forms of traditional metaphysics, namely the opposition between mind and matter, subject and object, the intelligible and the sensible, nature and culture. But this binary oppositional mode of thinking is a mode dominated by the intellectualist mode of metaphysical thought. It always considers matter, object, the sensible and Nature as either inferior to or derivative from the mind, the subject, the intelligible and the spiritual. Thus it is unable to understand how meanings and ideas are generated from the sensible primordial Nature and have found their way into culture.

On this question, which concerns all researchers of philosophy, —how are ideas born?—the late Merleau-Ponty proposes the concept of flesh (*la chair*) through which our probing gaze is brought back to the ontological ground of the world in view of understanding the order of primordial beings. The primordial order of beings is the sensible in general, or the sensible par excellence.³⁰ This novel concept of flesh should not be understood in the anthropological usage as a term to describe activities of the human order.³¹

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135). C.f. also Merleau-Ponty 1960, “Le philosophe et son ombre”, 217 (= Merleau-Ponty 1964b, “The Philosopher and His Shadow”, 172).

³¹ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136).

Flesh is an ontological term, but not in the traditional metaphysical register. Merleau-Ponty explains: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element' ..., that is in the sense of a general thing, mid-way between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being."³² If the flesh as an element of being at the primordial order mid-way between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, that means it is a "two-dimensional being."³³ As such it can bring us in touch with the things themselves which are things in depth and not merely flat beings. For flesh is a kind of carnal being which is itself a being of depths bearing with itself the ontological character of a being "of several leaves or several faces, a being of latency, and a presentation of absence."³⁴ Thus flesh is "a prototype of being," and the body—our body, itself a two-dimensional being as both the sentient (being with capacity to sense) and the sensible (being of receptivity to senses)—is one of the most remarkable variants of flesh.³⁵ Since flesh is the "exemplar sensible,"³⁶ Merleau-Ponty names it the "Sensible in itself,"³⁷ or the "sensible in general."³⁸ Thus it is only on the basis of flesh as two-dimensional being that there is the distinction between mind and matter, subject and object, the intelligible and the sensible, as well

³² Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 184 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139).

³³ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136).

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136).

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136).

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 179 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135).

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 182 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 138).

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 187 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142).

as culture and Nature. In other words, flesh comprises in itself moments of materiality which carries the potentiality of development into spiritual being, the kind of being which expresses itself or transmits meanings by means of ideas. But in this way, this primordial order of being should not be understood as materiality in the manner of traditional metaphysics or in the mode of modern natural science. This primordial order of being should be understood as the sensible. The sensible is an order of being which is pregnant with meaning and is capable of development into the intelligible; it is an order of existence with subjective character. In brief, it belongs to the order of primordial Nature and yet capable of transcending itself into culture.

Contemporary French philosophers such as Deleuze³⁹ and Derrida⁴⁰ express reservation with regard to the term flesh. It is certainly true that the term flesh reminds us of the theological usage of the term in the Christian religious tradition. Under this tradition, flesh, in opposition to spirit, is the

³⁹ Deleuze, with Guattari, wrote, a propos Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh of the world and flesh of the body, the following pejorative comment: "A curious Fleshism [*Carnisme*] inspires this final avatar of phenomenology and plunges it into the mystery of the incarnation. It is both a pious and a sensual notion, a mixture of sensuality and religion, without which, perhaps, flesh could not stand up by itself." Deleuze et Guattari 1991, 168-169 (= Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 178).

⁴⁰ Derrida has never thematically discussed Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception nor ontology of flesh. Yet he expressed his criticism of Merleau-Ponty's concept of body-proper and flesh in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* while he commented on Husserl's description of the phenomenon of double-sensation of touching and being-touched in *Ideas II*, a phenomenon on the basis of which Merleau-Ponty has developed his thesis of the reversibility as the ontological characteristic of flesh. To Derrida, Husserl has the restraint of limiting the reversibility thesis to merely the phenomenon of touching and being-touched, whereas Merleau-Ponty has extended this thesis to the phenomenon of reversibility between the seeing and vision as well as that between affectivity and vision. To Derrida, Merleau-Ponty has committed an act of theoretical transgression. Cf., Derrida 2000, 218 (= Derrida 2005, 191).

origin of sin, object of salvation from spirit, especially the Holy Spirit. However, this resonance from Christian theology is absent in the Chinese term 肌膚存在 proposed by the present author to translate “la chair.”

Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh is in direct opposition to modern materialistic reductionism. To Merleau-Ponty the flesh is a being of intertwinement: it is the gathering of characters which are apparently contradictory in terms. To the mode of thinking of formal logic which underlies the objective sciences, a being of intertwinement is incomprehensible. Yet without such a being, it is impossible to understand the birth of ideas and the genesis of culture from Nature. Merleau-Ponty proposes a new mode of understanding: it is not from the mechanistic Nature of Galilean sciences that ideas and intelligibility are generated, but from the sensible order of primordial Nature. Husserl's unfinished manuscript on “The Origin of Geometry” has provided an excellent guidance to Merleau-Ponty: the status of ideality of geometric propositions and their meaning is grounded upon writing which is neither a purely material being nor a purely spiritual being, but a sensible being of intertwinement.⁴¹

It is precisely because writing is a sensible being and not a material being that the ideality of geometric propositions will not disappear following the disappearance of the material medium of writing. That is why we should not understand the sensible as derivative from the material and reduce the sensible to the material. On the contrary, materiality is the result of

⁴¹ Husserl 1954, 365-386, especially 371-372 (= Husserl 1970b, 353-378, 360-361). Merleau-Ponty, in one of the lecture courses given at the Collège de France in 1959-60, has translated and commented in detail this set of Husserl's manuscripts. *C.f.*, Merleau-Ponty 1998 (= Merleau-Ponty 2002).

abstraction and unilateralization of the more primordial sensible order. It is only from the sensible being of the primordial order that we can comprehend the genesis of ideas, and hence the genesis of culture. And it is from the starting point of the order of primordial Nature that we can understand why culture can be developed out of Nature. In view of its sensible basis, culture is never completely separated from the primordial Nature, and is thus irreducible to a mechanistic conception of Nature. The theoretical function of the concept of flesh as being of chiasm is to provide explication for the ontological duality of the order of primordial Nature. The ontological duality of primordial Nature does not fall into the mutually exclusive oppositional characteristics of traditional metaphysical dualism.

In consequence, the concept of flesh as chiasmic existence is the ontological concept that the inter-world and the intercultural world need. Only such a concept can provide explication of cultural plurality and the possibility of intercultural understanding. Merleau-Ponty points out that reversibility is the other ontological character of flesh.⁴² In the tradition of Western metaphysics, passivity is understood as preceded by activity, the object preceded by the subject, and the *natura naturata* preceded by the *natura naturans*. Yet the reversibility thesis reverses all these: passivity is prior to activity, the object transforms itself into the subject, and the *natura naturata* is itself the *natura naturans*.

The meticulous phenomenological descriptions of the double sensation of the sense of touch by Husserl in Part II of *Ideas II* can be seen as

⁴² Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 188, 189 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142, 144).

the theoretical model of the reversibility thesis.⁴³ In these well-known and widely commented paragraphs, Husserl draws our attention to the fact that when we touch with one of our hands on our other hand, it is the sensation of the being-touched which structurally and genetically renders possible the consciousness of touching. This is the reversibility of the sense of tactility. The reversibility of the sense of vision can be seen in Sartre's description of the feeling of shame in *Being and Nothingness*.⁴⁴ We feel shame when our act of peeping is surprised by the awareness of some other person who is looking at us at our back. The feeling of shame arises on hearing the footsteps or some other movements of another person who is behind me: I realize that I am looked at or seen without at that moment seeing others seeing me. But my consciousness of being-seen entails that some other is seeing me prior to my actual seeing of this other. This reveals that the being-seen is the condition of possibility of seeing. The experience of mirror image in daily life is also an eminent example of the fact that being-seen is the condition of possibility of seeing.

As to the reversibility between the sense of hearing and speaking, this is first of all shown through the experience of language acquisition. The acquisition of the capacity to speak is based on the capacity to hear clearly the speech of others. Clinical studies show that those born deaf are unable to speak because they are unable to hear the speech of others.⁴⁵ Music

⁴³ Husserl 1952, 150 (= Husserl 1989, 157). For Merleau-Ponty's analyses, C.f.: Merleau-Ponty 1960, "Le philosophe et son ombre", 210 (= Merleau-Ponty 1964b, "The Philosopher and His Shadow", 166).

⁴⁴ Sartre 1943/1980, 305-306 (= Sartre 2018, 284-285).

⁴⁵ C.f.: <https://www.northeastohioparent.com/aging-stages/hearing-loss-affect-speech-language-development/>. Retrieved 30/04/2019.

composers and players of musical instruments often express that they first hear a melody before they note it down or play it out. The auditory sense is a sense of passivity and hearing is a passive capacity—what a paradoxical expression! But this shows that hearing is the condition of possibility of speaking, singing and playing of musical instruments. In other words, there is reversibility between hearing and speaking.

From the reversibility between hearing and speaking, we understand that speaking is never a purely self-to-self relation. Speaking is never an activity of pure self-affection. The activity of speaking always involves an Other: the acquisition of the capacity to speak begins by the capacity to hear the speech of Others; otherwise a person can never acquire the capacity to speak. In order that the speaker can hear, even in a monologue, the speaker has to split herself into two and posit another self in order to hear herself speaking. When we think in silence, we are listening to the Other inside our self who is speaking to us.

Thus, not only speaking implies necessarily hearing as the condition of speaking; to hear also implies being heard. When we respond to a voice or a speech, it is only by being certain that we are heard that we are sure that we are responding. Thus the speaking subject is first of all a hearing subject. But she is also a subject being heard. Thus she is a being who can hear that she is being heard (*un s'entendre-entendu*. In French “entendre” means at the same time to hear and to understand.). Understood in this way, it is only in dialogue that speaking is possible, and through which meaning is instituted. In consequence, dialogue is the original phenomenon of the institution of meaning. A space of meaning is instituted and opened in dialogue.

Since it is only in dialogue that one can hear oneself speaking, voice becomes speech which carries with itself meaning and expresses meaning only through dialogue. Dialogue does not take place only between two speaking subjects, but also within a single speaking subject which is the dialogue with oneself. In the dialogue with oneself, one splits oneself into a self and another self who hears oneself and responds to oneself. Without dialogue, voice is meaningless sound and not meaningful speech. Understood in this manner, it is only in dialogue that meaning is instituted, and that thinking as intelligible activity can be expressed.

7. From Reversibility to Cultural Flesh

Reversibility as the ontological character of flesh and its phenomenal manifestation have immense implications for the philosophical investigation into the conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding. If speech in the proper sense of the term, which involves the institution of meaning, must be realized in dialogue with the other, thoughts in the sense of theories or doctrines are realized under similar conditions. If the speech and thoughts of an individual have to be heard by another in the dialogue with others, the thoughts or doctrines born in a culture also have to be heard and understood by another culture in order to be established fully: the objectivity, validity and truth value of thoughts and doctrines of a certain culture can be established only when they are heard, discussed, criticized and received, in short, understood by other cultures.

However, how can the thoughts and doctrines of my own culture be heard and understood by other cultures? We should first of all hear the voice

of another culture and undertake intercultural communication. But how to proceed intercultural communication? How to promote understanding among different cultures? How to hear voices from cultural alterity? In my book *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding: Toward a New Cultural Flesh*, I forge the concept “cultural flesh” as a conceptual tool to understand the conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding.

What is cultural flesh? It is a concept inspired by the Merleau-Pontian concept of flesh. If my activity of perception is not operated by a pure mind but conducted with the complicity of my carnal existence, i.e., my flesh, the cultural perception of cultural alterity is likewise not accomplished by a pure intellectual thinker without the participation of the incarnate subject. The exercise of cultural perception on other cultures needs the participation of the whole cultural flesh, and not a purely intellectualist cultural consciousness cut off from its carnal existence. Merleau-Ponty has said: “The body is our general medium for having a world.”⁴⁶ Following the same line of thought, we propose that cultural flesh is the ontological disposition which enables us to enter into the world of other cultures.

Why is intercultural understanding in philosophy so difficult? Philosophical thinking understood from the perspective of idealism, intellectualism or transcendentalism considers that thinking activity is activity of pure intelligible nature. It neglects the reversibility between hearing and speaking which is essential to the activity of meaning institution presupposed by philosophical thinking. The movement of reversibility

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1945, 171 (= Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147).

between hearing and speaking is carried out between two or more carnal subjects and not by disincarnated and purely intelligible minds. Since philosophical thinking presupposes linguistic activity, while linguistic activity presupposes in turn hearing and speaking, these in turn are based on my carnal existence as flesh; in consequence, philosophical thinking and philosophical dialogue presuppose my flesh. Flesh is the ontological basis of philosophical reflection and dialogue.

Thus, in order to undertake intercultural philosophical dialogue and to promote intercultural understanding in philosophy, we must strengthen our cultural perception with regard to cultural otherness. The secret lies in strengthening our cultural flesh in view of enhancing our cultural sensibility and sensitivity toward other cultures. To achieve this, we must not approach the issue from the merely pure intellectual aspect. A well-known example is the difficulty of understanding the concept of “Dao” in Chinese philosophy. For professional philosophers of the West or other cultures who have no knowledge of Chinese language and the Chinese system of writing, if they only rely on the phonetic transcription of the word “Dao” and take it as the literal translation of the concept of “Dao,” they will easily follow the conclusion of Hegel: Chinese philosophy represented by Daoist philosophy is entirely abstract as it has no conceptual content. We can try to understand the reason behind Hegel’s negative judgment on Chinese philosophy and Chinese culture in general: he certainly had no knowledge of Chinese language, but also probably no or very little knowledge of other aspects of Chinese culture, such as basic knowledge of the almost three thousand years of Chinese history, forms and development of Chinese literature, poetry,

painting, architecture, and varieties of Chinese religions, etc. A thinker of East-Asian origin with no knowledge of Greek language, Greek history and other aspects of Greek culture with face similar difficulties if she/he wants to grasp the rich conceptual contents of the term “logos” with merely the intellectual resources of her/his culture of origin. That is why we believe that in order to better understand philosophies of other cultures, we must also approach the problem from the sensible aspects, such as learning the language and history of these targeted other cultures, listening to their stories, undertaking activity of appreciation of the art-works, literature, poetry, music and painting of these other cultures in order to enhance our sensibility and sensitivity toward cultural alterity.

In order to strengthen our cultural sensitivity and cultural sensibility toward other cultures, we can think of undergoing a surgical operation of replacing our original cultural body with a new cultural body. To change the entire cultural body of our own and replace it with an entirely new one is very difficult, even impossible, but also uncommendable. This is because in so doing we only substitute one culture with another culture, without promoting mutual understanding between two different cultures, and hence draw ourselves further away from the task of intercultural understanding. To strengthen our sensitivity and sensibility toward cultural alterity, we must cultivate a new cultural flesh on the basis of our cultural flesh of origin. The key to intercultural understanding is, on the basis of sensibility and sensitivity toward one’s own culture, to open oneself to the affectivity of cultural otherness, to learn to feel and experience what is specific within another

culture in order to understand cultural otherness. All this is possible on the basis of a new cultural flesh.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the incarnate subject has shown that our body "is eminently an expressive space."⁴⁷ Our body plays a primordial role in all activities of expression such that "it is the very movement of expression."⁴⁸ Translated into the language of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, we can say that my flesh is first of all a subject of expression. If we follow this line of thought,, the concept of cultural flesh has another significance for intercultural understanding: cultural flesh is on the one hand the power of affectivity with regard to activities and forms of manifestation of cultural otherness. On the other hand, cultural flesh is the power of expression inseparable from its being of affectivity. Activity of expression is not limited to that of the intellectual ideas of philosophy, but includes also expressive activities shown through the various aspects of the flesh. The late Merleau-Ponty has proposed the audacious notion of "sensible ideas."⁴⁹ Examples of sensible ideas can be found in the kind of existence which is mid-way between a pure image and a pure idea, such as image-ideas in literary work and poetry, and in particular in the form of musical melody. These are existence not accessible by the pure thinking mind, yet their accessibility is rendered possible by the cultural flesh. Intercultural understanding has to be undertaken not only through pure intelligible ideas, but also by way of sensible ideas such as those expressed through literature

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1945, 171 (= Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147).

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1945, 171 (= Merleau-Ponty 2012, 147).

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 195-204 (= Merleau-Ponty 1968, 149-155).

and poetry, as well as art works such as music, painting, sculpture, drama, and even architecture.

My proposal of the concept of cultural flesh intends to rectify our hitherto idealist or intellectualist understanding of the nature of intercultural understanding. With the concept of cultural flesh, intercultural understanding is no longer understood as the assimilation or refutation of pure intellectualist ideas, but as the need and the desire of expression of our cultural flesh after being affected by cultural otherness. Expression is the activity of the carnal subject affected and motivated by the desire to express. Cultural flesh is thus the space of expression of sensibility and sensitivity to cultural events and cultural objects. Intercultural understanding is the expression of the desire of cultural otherness. Cultural flesh, as the ontological disposition which enables the carnal subject to express her desire of cultural otherness after being affected by other cultures, is thus the basic ontological condition which renders possible and enhances intercultural understanding.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ One of the reviewers raised the following question: “is each individual a part of one body of cultural flesh or is a single individual body already a complete unit of cultural flesh?... whether culture as a whole has a flesh to it, or if it is only in each individual human body that culture is ‘incarnated’?” When the late Merleau-Ponty used the term “flesh”, he conferred to it an ontological meaning and not the habitual physiological or psychological sense. Likewise, when I use the term “cultural flesh”, it refers to the ontological character of our carnal existence which accounts for our cultural sensibility and sensitivity to cultural otherness. Every human subject as carnal existence has her/his own cultural flesh. Just like the pre-reflective body-schemata which are partly naturally developed (such as basic bodily movements) and partly acquired through learning (such as acquisition of bodily techniques in order to play sports and musical instruments), our cultural flesh is also partly developed pre-reflectively while we as carnal subject is immersed in a determinate cultural atmosphere (such as the generation of an attitude of attraction, aversion or indifference when affected by natural and cultural objects) and

8. The Practice of Intercultural Understanding

Besides than laying out theoretical reflections on the conditions of possibility of intercultural understanding, my book *Phenomenology and Intercultural Understanding. Toward a New Cultural Flesh* includes also practical parts: concrete exercises of intercultural understanding in philosophy. Below is the summary of some basic results of such exercises.

- 1) With reference to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in particular to his concept of primordial Nature, we suggest a new understanding of the notion of "Dao" in Laozi's *Daodejing*, the oldest Chinese philosophical work, as "inchoative Nature." The advantage of such a new comprehension is that the "Dao" is no longer understood, as by some popular interpretation, as Nature in the pure materialistic sense of the term. This sense of Nature is in opposition to spirit and culture, and thus is in no way able to understand the birth of culture. To understand "Dao" as inchoative Nature, close to the notion of "natura

partly acquired through learning (e.g. appreciation of works of art such as poetry, music, drama, painting, architecture, etc.). In so far as a human subject is willing and ready to learn, her/his sensibility and sensitivity to cultural otherness is open to the possibility of modification and enhancement. In so far as we exist in a world open to cultural change and intercultural encounter, it is unlikely that an individual person's cultural flesh remains unaffected by the encounter with new cultural events and new cultural objects. Thus, it will be difficult to envisage that an individual possesses a complete unit of cultural flesh such that she/he grasps every aspect of the very vast cultural world. According to Merleau-Ponty, cultural objects understood from the ontological perspective are sensible and carnal (charnel) in nature and not merely materialistic or ideational. Culture is not a possessive subject but the term used to designate the realm of events and activities and their products peculiar to human beings which make them distinctive from the natural existence of other animal species. Thus, to say that "culture as a whole has a flesh to it" betrays rather a misunderstanding about the relation between culture and flesh.

naturans,” can render comprehensible the pregnancy of meaning and the birth of culture from Nature and within Nature. Such understanding has the advantage of avoiding the interpretative difficulties of most of the current interpretations of the meaning of “Dao.” For example, it will not present Nature as substance in the sense of dogmatic metaphysics as, say, some sort of noumenon of metaphysics of the Heavenly Dao (天道), and in particular not as a moral noumenon as in some Contemporary Confucianist interpretation.⁵¹ This is because the interpretation of “Dao” as noumenon or substance of the Heavenly Dao confers to it a constancy and even immobility. Projecting such an understanding on “Dao” renders it unable to both explain precisely the genesis and evolution of culture from Nature, and to make sense of the phenomenon of cultural plurality and historical contingency. Neither can it account for the prevalence of all kinds of evil—moral and non-moral—in natural phenomena as well as in human civilization. In a word, the understanding of “Dao” as inchoative Nature allows for a wider possibility of understanding of the most diverse cultural phenomena. (Ch. 3)

- 2) To provide a new understanding of the basic attitude of Buddhist philosophy from the indication of Husserl’s phenomenology. Buddhist philosophy’s attitude of surrendering all mundane life-interests is

⁵¹ MOU Tsung-San 1985, Ch. 6, Section 4, 280-305.

comparable to the practice of phenomenological *ēpochē*. The Buddhist attitude is thus close to that of the transcendental reflective attitude advocated by Husserl. But the Buddhist attitude also differs from the Husserlian phenomenological attitude in the following way: the latter serves primarily for the theoretical-cognitive interest, whereas the Buddhist attitude serves primarily the purpose of ethical practice. The abstention from mundane life interests is a spiritual exercise which orients the Buddhist practitioner towards the liberation of the soul. This is an eminent example of Eastern philosophy as “orientative philosophy” as thematised by the contemporary Chinese philosopher Lao Sze-Kwang mentioned earlier. (Ch. 4)

- 3) On the basis of the framework of philosophical anthropology embedded in the Pre-Socratic mythical thoughts of the Greeks unveiled by the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka (1907-1977), we propose a new reading of the famous doctrine of the “four roots or faculties of the human mind” (「四端說」) of Mencius’ Confucianism: the faculties of benevolence (仁), justice (義), propriety (禮) and wisdom (智). We suggest that Mencius’ doctrine is not merely a moral theory based on the affirmation that human nature is intrinsically good, as is traditionally accepted, but also contains elements for a philosophical-anthropological framework in Early Chinese philosophy: the capacity of human being to realize truth and justice in spite of the fact that humans always commit error and

act of injustice. This new understanding of Mencius' doctrine of the "four faculties of the human mind" shows that the latter has not merely produced a more sophisticated moral theory on the basis of Confucius's teachings, but a philosophy of broader scope which includes a philosophical anthropology in the Chinese way. (Ch. 6)

- 4) The contemporary Chinese philosopher Lao Sze-Kwang has proposed in his later writings the meta-philosophical concept of "orientative philosophy" to capture the specific characteristics of traditional Chinese philosophy, shown in both Confucianism and the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, in contra-distinction to the "cognitive philosophy" of the West. The purpose of orientative philosophy, which aims at self-transformation and transformation of the world, has a surprising resonance with the late Foucault's thematization of the spiritual exercise in Greek-Roman philosophers. The latter also aims at the self-transformation of the ethical subject. In addition, the final Husserl thinks that the practice of phenomenological *ēpochē* is comparable to an act of religious conversion, because both aim at self-transformation of the subject. Thus orientative philosophy is not limited to the Chinese philosophical tradition; the practice of moral cultivation through self-transformation of the subject is a common concern in Ancient Western Philosophy and some Contemporary Western philosophers. The latter are forms of orientative philosophy too. (Ch. 8)

The above are case studies as examples of lateral universals.

- 5) Revisiting of the “Chinese Chronology dispute” and “Chinese Rites dispute” within the European Catholic Church and the wider intelligentsia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Europe provoked by the first hand discovery of Chinese history and culture by the Jesuit missionaries. These missionaries travelled to China; some eventually died there after decades of missionary work, and sent back to Europe writings which record and report their observations and understanding of the historical origin, customs and ways of life, as well as thoughts of the Chinese people of the time. The “Chinese Chronology dispute” and “Chinese Rites dispute” resulted on the one hand in the challenge of the hitherto authoritative account of the birth of humankind given by the Book of *Genesis* of the *Holy Bible* as the genuine documentary record of human history. On the other hand, these two intellectual disputes among Europeans resulted in the acceptance by the most open-minded European intellectuals and philosophers of the time that Chinese culture as a non-Christian culture, or even an atheist culture, can develop an advanced human civilization. This is an eminent example of intercultural understanding initiated by Europeans in the history of Modern West. (Ch. 7)

Conclusion

My proposal of the concept of cultural flesh has a double aim. On the theoretical side, it aims at providing the ontological foundation of the

conditions of possibility for intercultural understanding. On the practical side, it is a call launched to all those who want to undertake the work of intercultural understanding in philosophy: a call to cultivate a new cultural flesh in order to facilitate the entrance into the cultural mood (*Stimmung* in the Heideggerian sense of the term) of cultural otherness. The practice of philosophy can proceed by guiding the readers into the sensible situation or the cultural atmosphere in which the philosophical question is embedded, prior to the deployment of argumentation or theoretical discourse. There are such examples in both the history of Western and Chinese philosophies. Plato's dialogues are close to the form of drama with frequent use of allegories and myths (such as the famous allegory of the cave in *The Republic*) to introduce and articulate theoretical demonstration. In Ancient China, Zhuangzi often uses parables and non-formal logical reference to present his philosophical ideas.

To cultivate a new cultural flesh will enhance our sensibility and affectivity towards cultural alterity. Through this, we can also distinguish in what way elements of a foreign culture could possibly be something familiar in our own culture of origin, but appear in different forms. It is also possible that, through observation and understanding of cultural otherness, we can look back at our own culture and discover some unfamiliar or unknown aspects of our own culture which we believed to be well-known or familiar, but which in fact are not yet well understood. This two-way discovery and knowledge is the truth brought about by intercultural understanding.

The present state of the study of philosophy in the world-scene is still often dominated by the mere study of Western philosophy. Under such circumstances, one of the essential tasks of promotion of intercultural understanding in philosophy is to learn and study non-Western philosophies in order to discover and develop further lateral universals. Yet the multiplicity and complexity of non-Western philosophies is intimidating. Every living philosophical tradition, such as Indian philosophy, Islamic philosophy, Jewish philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Japanese philosophy, Korean philosophy, African philosophy, etc., is constantly rewriting its own complicated history. This renders impossible the totalization of all aspects of intercultural understanding by a single thinking effort of synthesis. This can only be the end of a collective effort. But this will also be an infinite task.

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