
From Foundation to Difference
On the Conception of the exteriority and the interiority
in Chinese Philosophy

The good 善 belongs to the *necessary* 必然 and the nature 性 belongs to the *natural* 自然. To return to the *necessary* means to accomplish the *natural*. This is called the acme of the *natural*. The “dao” of the world is none other than this.¹

Dai 戴震 (1724–77) was a grand authority of hermeneutics in the Qing 清 dynasty. He endeavored to reconstruct moral (and political) space by criticizing Neo-Confucianism, not only as a system but also from the standpoint of the history of Chinese Philosophy. Specifically, he regarded Neo-Confucianism as a submission to Taoism, Buddhism, and the doctrine of Xunzi 荀子. On the one hand, he said, like Taoism and Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism fell into the essentialism, which suppressed desire as an accidental evil; on the other hand, like Xunzi, Neo-Confucianism looked for the basis of the good in “the *Sense* or *Principle* 理,” which is beyond the nature.² In contrast to Neo-Confucianism, Dai Zhen tried to open the moral space in the *interiority* by refusing all foundations from the exterior. To that purpose he re-affirmed desire and re-interpreted it; and, at this point he referred to Mengzi, and re-assessed the latter’s theory of “good nature or the goodness of one’s nature 性善.”³

But, what sort of *interiority* did he unfold? Did not this *interiority* risk being reduced to the interiorization that is typical in the history of Chinese Philosophy? If this is not so, how can we consider his theory other

1. CM: chapter “dao.”

2. Therefore Dai Zhen said, “the ‘li’ of Neo-Confucianism kills people.”

3. See CTN: 84–85.

than as traditional interiorization? And, in what way was desire re-affirmed in Dai Zhen? In order to answer these questions, for a starting point, it is necessary to comprehend Chinese formulations concerning *exteriority*, *interiority*, and *desire*.

1. *The Aporia of Neo-Confucianism*

In his program for the emancipation of the spirit or the diffusion of enlightenment, Zhu Xi 朱熹 founded moral space upon the *interiority*. His program was as follows: The “original-illuminated virtue 明德” is almost always hidden and contaminated by carnal desires. Therefore, I have to bring it to light by myself, and do away with carnal desires. But, it is not an illumination from the exterior or from an outer principle, but “self-enlightenment 自明.” After the success of my self-enlightenment, *sponte sua* the light will spread and diffuse among other people. At that time people *must* start to illuminate themselves.⁴

What ideal people these are! They are literally “auto-renewing 自新” people.⁵ In other words, Zhu Xi, in fact, covertly eliminated anyone who did not belong to this program of enlightenment or anyone who would not allow himself/herself to be absorbed into it.⁶

But, we have not yet comprehended how one can enlighten oneself *sponte sua*. To explain this, Zhu Xi turned to the notion of “cheng-yi 誠意.” “Cheng 誠” is a verb signifying “to fill up 實,” and “yi 意” was one’s intention. Therefore, “cheng-yi” is defined as to fill up and accomplish one’s intention thoroughly. By the grace of this accomplishment-fulfillment of one’s own intention, one reached his/her self-satisfaction, and there was no room for self-deception.⁷ This fulfillment was accomplished by oneself, so it must be judged only from one’s *interiority*. This was the reason why “self-control 慎独” was needed, and the nipping in the bud of the tiniest germ of self-deception was praised.⁸ In another text,⁹ Zhu Xi

4. DZ: chapter 1.

5. DH: chapter 2; DH: chapter 4.

6. See DES: 4–8.

7. DZ: chapter 1.

8. DZ: chapter 6; DH: chapter 6.

defined the true character of this self-deception as “human desire 人欲.” He insisted that one should suppress such desire in advance.

But, is it actually possible to suppress desire in advance? Would it not be a sort of imaginary suppression of a pure origin? That is, would it not be little more than a dream of eliminating the eventuality or the possibility itself of the event? If so, accomplishing the intention will end as pure interiorization without any exteriority. We may say that this is an *auto-foundation*. At this point, the following difficult question arises: *what gives evidence of my success in accomplishing my intention to others?* In other words, if others cannot recognize my result in some way, the program of enlightenment aiming at a politico-moral order might possibly be interrupted.¹⁰

To this question, Zhu Xi tried to respond by introducing the concept of *exteriority*. By inserting “gewuzhizhi 格物致知” as a supplement to the newly canonized text of the *Daxue* 大学, he believed he could resolve the problem of foundation. “Gewuzhizhi” is the praxis that fully recognizes the entire *Sense* of exterior things. But, at the same time, this *Sense* “li 理” equally belongs to the interior “consciousness 心.” In consequence, if one recognizes the entire *Sense* of exterior things, he/she can also testify to others the accomplishment of this intention consisting of “li” in the interior,¹¹ because the recognition of *Sense* must be communicable.

This solution makes use of the double aspect of *Sense*’s belonging to both the exterior and the interior. It seems that there is a certain resemblance here to the methodology of Husserlian phenomenology. It is well known that phenomenology regards things as *transcendence*. This transcendence is not a transcendence of God as the primary cause, but is one that should be constituted as *Sense*. The constitution of things by a transcendental conscience is nothing other than a Bestowal of *Sense* to things. In that case, it would certainly not be a mistake to understand that in the thought of Zhu Xi, *Sense* belonged both to the interior and to the exterior. But, to be precise, there was not yet a dichotomy between the interior and the exterior. There existed only the movement of the constitution of *Sense*.

9. ZZ: chapter 1.

10. See DES: 8–13.

11. DZ: chapter 1; chapter 6.

However, phenomenology itself did not completely succeed in constituting the *Sense* of things. This enterprise was difficult in principle. A thing has so many aspects that a human being, who is not God, can not comprehend it instantaneously and exhaustively. It was almost the same in the case of Zhu Xi. His solution had an inevitable aporia: although *quid juris* one may completely recognize the *Sense* of a thing some day, *quid facti* it is impossible to do so, because a thing only displays its one aspect to human beings.¹²

As an example, we might refer to the famous anecdote of Wang Yang-ming (1472–1528). In his youth, he tried in vain for a week to recognize the *Sense* of the bamboo tree in his garden. Moreover, he nearly went mad. That was why he criticized the philosophy of Zhu Xi, which had made the fatal mistake of resorting to the exterior, and had given up the way of the interiorization. For Wang Yangming, as a legitimate heir of Zhuzi-xue, it was indispensable to reform the interpretation of “gewuzhizhi 格物致知,” and to return again to the interior.¹³

But, this about-turn of Wang Yangming did not resolve the aporia of Zhu Xi. We have to wait for Wang’s disciples to grapple with its difficulty. Before discussing this, we would like to inspect another mode of foundation on the *exteriority* in the history of Chinese Philosophy.

2. The Conception of the Exteriority in Xunzi 荀子

It is well known that Xunzi refuted the theory of the “goodness of one’s nature 性善” in Mengzi 孟子. Specifically, when he said that human nature was bad, he was refuting foundation by or through essentialism. In his eyes, essentialism tends to postulate essence as a ground of the good, and the foundation of the good on the ground of essence annuls any motif of good conduct. It divests any effort of effectiveness against real evils. Therefore, it was necessary for him to “practice against one’s nature and sentiment, which inevitably arrived at bad state of disorder,”¹⁴ and to find a basis for the good somewhere exterior.

12. DZ: chapter 5.

13. See DES: 24–28; CTN: 69–70.

14. The *Xunzi*: chapter 23.

But, to what sort of *exteriority* does the question refer? In any case, it was not Heaven 天. Xunzi was a philosopher who radically separated human affairs from heavenly movement. The transcendent instance of Heaven was no more than a stronger essence. This was not the *exteriority* to be looked for. The *exteriority* of Xunzi belonged to the instance of the “*poiesis* 偽” of the Sage-Prince or the Sage. The Sage produced and built institutions of rites and language referring to the history of such institutions. In other words, these institutions were not created *ex nihilo*, but were produced out of past institutions. Therefore, a new institution of rite consisted of the “older institution of praxis”¹⁵ and new language of the “older system of language.”¹⁶

The *poiesis* of the Sage concerned the conditions of the possibility of our actions and of our linguistic performance. Thus we could define it as the *quasi-transcendental*. If the *transcendental* concerned only the consciousness, *poiesis* could not belong to it. But, it was not appropriate to place *poiesis* on a transcendent order (as Heaven) or on an immanent order (as human nature). It would be *quasi-transcendental*, as long as *poiesis* was beyond essence, and it was the condition for the possibility of praxis. It could restore the meaning of the Greek and Medieval “transcendental.”¹⁷

However, this *exteriority* of Xunzi has always been called into question: why did Sages have such a *capacity* to do so? Did not they possess it by their own natures? If so, did not the thesis of Xunzi revert to essentialism? But, Xunzi’s criticism of essentialism did not permit such a conclusion, because he was seeking to open the way to *meta-physical exteriority* (in the literal meaning of *meta ta physica*: exteriority that is irreducible to one’s nature and essence). Instead, his core problem was how to communicate constituted rites and language to other people. Unlike the approach of Zhu Xi (which presupposed spontaneity and fundamental communicability), Xunzi appealed to the political *power* of the prince and the *contract* of language made between people.¹⁸ In other words, he introduced a very political dimension to communicability.¹⁹

15. Ibid: chapter 23.

16. Ibid: chapter 22.

17. Cf. “*epekeina tes ousias*” in *Republic* of Plato.

18. The *Xunzi*: chapter 22.

By reversing the Aristotelian hierarchy of sciences,²⁰ we could say Xunzi positioned *poiesis* as a primary philosophy that is superior to all quests for essence.

Nevertheless, this instance of *poiesis* in Xunzi was narrowly limited to Sages. Even if it was possible for ordinary people to become sages through “learning 学,” such *poiesis* must remain difficult for us. Here again, we must reexamine the relationship between the nature and the *exteriority*.

3. Natural Desires and Regulated Desires

As mentioned previously, Wang Yangming 王陽明 brought the ground of foundation back from the exterior to the interior. He interpreted the “gewuzhizhi” of Zhu Xi as a “loss of intention due to a fascination with things 玩物喪志.” He criticized Zhu Xi for distinguishing “consciousness 心” from “Sense 理,” and making them distinct from each other. Contrary to this, his conception of “gewuzhizhi” was “to make ‘a good intelligence-judgment 良知’ of my consciousness extend to each and every thing.”²¹ In short, he thought that it was possible to constitute *Sense* completely in the *interiority*. Because all human beings must share the “good intelligence-judgment” in common, the aporia of Zhu Xi should be resolved.

But, this solution simply replaced the problem that Zhu Xi had designated under the term of the diffusion of “auto-enlightenment” with others or that of “gewuzhizhi.” If we use another phenomenological term, then Zhu Xi had confronted the difficult question of inter-subjectivity: how can the other as another transcendental consciousness comprehend and repeat the constitution through a transcendental consciousness? This is the problem of radical incommunicability with others. But Wang Yangming, by shaking off the problem more rapidly than Zhu Xi himself, threw away the problem of otherness. He reinforced his theory of the “good intelligence-judgment” with the “heavenly principle 天理.” He said: the “good intelligence-judgment of my consciousness is nothing but

19. See CTN: 70–72.

20. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, vol. 6, chapter 1.

21. Wang Yangming, *Chuanxilu* 伝習録, vol. 2.

the heavenly principle.”²²

Did Wang Yangming appeal to the old transcendence in order to guard the interiorization? Or, did he comprehend the heavenly principle as the extreme limit of immanence? In either case, he did not succeed in explaining how the foundation of the good could appear through the “good intelligence-judgment.”²³ It was his disciple Wang Longxi 王龍溪 who took a step in this direction, and tried to transform the signification of the “good intelligence-judgment.”

Wang Longxi is well known for his theory of “no good and no 無善無惡.” It means that people are fundamentally beyond the dichotomy of good and evil, so they are ultimately good. This was condemned by his contemporaries, and has been criticized by successive Sinologists for its simple affirmation of desires, and its abandonment of apprentice training 功夫. But, this condemnation misses the point. For, he equally conceived a program that is faithful to the doctrine of Yangming-xue 陽明学: restore the original nature of supreme goodness through training; training will purge the evils engendered by desire.²⁴

His originality existed rather at another place. While he questioned the “good intelligence-judgment” itself again, and reconstituted it radically, he reduced natural desires (appetite and sexual desire) through the constituted “good intelligence-judgment,” and re-affirmed them as regulated desires.

One who only knows that appetite and sexual desire originate from innate nature does not understand that human nature is derived from Heaven. Then, he is driven by such desires and there is no regulation.²⁵

In other words, Wang Longxi did not directly affirm natural desires as human nature. They should be grasped again and anew, not by the simple “intelligence-awareness 知,” but by the “good intelligence-judgment.”

22. Ibid.

23. See CTN: 76–77.

24. WL: vol. 1.

25. WL: vol. 3.

When one sees food, one is aware of appetite. When one sees sexual objects, one is aware of sexual desire. But, this awareness is not the good intelligence-judgment. The good intelligence-judgment must spontaneously have heavenly regulation. So, it is adequate to the moment and is moderate in the fulfillment of desires. Therefore, it is never excessive. Mengzi said: “Tongue and mouth want delicious food and eyes seek beauty. Such an inclination belongs to human nature.” But, at the same time, he added: “At the very moment there exists ‘order 命.’” To set up order is precisely to exhaust human nature thoroughly.²⁶

It is necessary to make human nature come to its end, or to exhaust it through the “good intelligence-judgment.” Only then does “human nature become good nature. And, the intelligence-awareness also becomes the good intelligence-judgment.”²⁷

In conclusion, Wang Longxi discovered regulated desires that exceed natural desires, and only at that moment did he say that human nature was good.²⁸ In contrast to Wang Yangming, he regarded the “good intelligence-judgment” as a constituted intelligence. It never belongs to the order of human nature or the *natural*. It should be discovered as a *meta-physical* pole of intelligence.

But, where are these regulated desires situated? Do they not still belong to the program of the philosophy of Yangming-xue? In my view, they are situated rather at the limit of the movement of the interiorization enforced by the two doctrines of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. That position would be the invisible border of the *interiority*. In other words, it is not a difference between the interior and the exterior, but the *difference itself* that is touched upon here.

Hereafter, we can return to the opening thesis of Dai Zhen.

4. “Everyone eats and drinks, but there are few who taste”²⁹

Dai Zhen refused the recourse to the *exteriority* just as Zhu Xi and

26. WL: vol. 3.

27. WL: vol. 5.

28. See CTN: 77–78.

Xunzi had done. Undoubtedly the implications of the two exteriorities in Zhu Xi and Xunzi are not the same. But, their conceptions of the *exteriority* equally designate the possibility and the necessity of thinking of otherness, communicability, and power other than by essentialism or foundation on some essences. Yet they had their own aporia; that is, the difficulty of explaining the topos of their exteriorities and the relationship between the exterior and the interior. In order to do so, conversely, it was indispensable to transform the conception of the *interiority*.

It is very interesting that Dai Zhen criticized Zhu Xi and Xunzi simultaneously. He was a successor of the re-affirmation of desires as regulated ones, and lived in a period when Chinese norms had been shaken by an invasion of barbarians. For this kind of man, any recourse to the exterior equally lacked stability, and failed to open up a space of communicability. The space of communicability (which is primarily the space of the moral and of politics) should be opened in the *interiority*. Naturally, the topos of the *interiority* here must not belong to the interior in the style of Wang Yangming, which pretended to oppose itself to the exterior, but in fact had joined hands with it. The topos was situated at a crossing of the way of the exterior and of the interior. One could name it a “transcendental difference.” Yet, what does this mean exactly?

In the heading of this paper, the words of Dai Zhen concerning the *division* of the concept of nature were quoted. On the one hand, Dai Zhen distinguished the good from the nature and the *necessary* from the *natural*. But, on the other hand, these two terms cannot be separated. He gave us the following account:

On the one hand, desire is the *natural* of the physical body, constituted of blood and energy 血氣之自然. On the other hand, to rejoice in excellent virtue is the *natural* of the intelligence-judgment of consciousness 心知之自然. The above is exactly what Mengzi meant by the term of “good nature 性善.” The *natural* of the intelligence-judgment of consciousness is inclined to rejoice in “the regulatory *Sense* of things 理義,” but in fact it is difficult to attain and exhaust the regulatory *Sense* of things. *Begin with a minute examination of the natural of the physical body*

29. The *Zhongyong*: chapter 4.

constituted of blood and energy; after that, one can comprehend the necessary of it. This is precisely to attain the regulatory Sense of things. The natural and the necessary are not two different things. It is the necessary that makes the natural entirely clear with nothing remaining. Only then can there be no regret, and man can attain calm. This situation is the supreme law of the natural. In case one let the natural run its course, it would result in losing itself. Such a forfeiture of the natural would not be adequate to the natural itself. That is why one accomplishes the natural by returning to the necessary.³⁰

The necessary is nothing else but the natural *quid facti*. But, *quid juris*, the former is the “supreme law” or the “deployment 扩充” of the latter. The same structure is also found between the good and the nature, still more between human beings and other living things. For example: “what makes human beings different from other living things is that the former can make the necessary clear, while the latter only realize the natural of their own;”³¹ “the nature 性 is a common name for living things, but good nature 性善 specifically refers to human nature;”³² “even if they [some actions of animals] eventually correspond to so-called human virtues (benevolence and justice), they derive from human nature. Only human beings can deploy his/her own intelligence with marvelous clarity. As a result, human virtues will be perfected.”³³

To sum up, the necessary that Dai Zhen endeavored to open was situated neither in the interior nor in the exterior of the natural, because the necessary was none other than the natural. But, the two theses were never the same. Therefore, we might say that the necessary belonged to the instance of difference. Insofar as it implicated the condition of the possibility of the natural, the necessary would be transcendental difference. The content of transcendental difference was the “regulatory Sense of things 理義” opened through the “intelligence-judgment of consciousness 心知.”

30. CM: chapter “li.”

31. Ibid.

32. CM: chapter “xing.”

33. Ibid.

Mengzi said: “That which everyone judges identically so 同然 in their consciousness is called ‘li’ and ‘yi 義’ [the regulatory Sense of things]. Only the Sage apprehends previously that which my consciousness judges identically so.” Mengzi always refuted the discourse putting “yi” in the exterior. He wanted to say that the “regulatory Sense of things 理義” belongs to the nature. However, this does not mean that the nature in general always has a regulatory Sense. The nature is organized as a physical entity (blood and energy), and as the intelligence-judgment of consciousness based on the “yin-yang and five elements 陰陽五行” [laws of Nature as so regarded in China]. On this level, human beings and other living things are divided and distinguished. Yet the regulatory Sense of things is only comprehended in the intelligence-judgment of human consciousness. Therefore, if his intention attains to it, he will never be embarrassed in his actions.³⁴

This intelligence-judgment of the consciousness is not limited to that of the Sage. We ordinary people surely possess it, but cannot use it sufficiently. Similar to the radical “good intelligence-judgment” of Wang Longxi, we must completely rejoice in and taste the regulatory Sense of things in the midst of our daily lives. The passage of Mengzi cited above was followed by these words: “the regulatory Sense of things makes our consciousness rejoice; just as flesh makes our mouth and tongue enjoy good taste.”³⁵

Therefore the *Zhongyong* said, “Everyone eats and drinks, but there are few who taste.”³⁶ To eat and drink is a metaphor of our daily lives; to taste is a metaphor of an action without any fault. Thinking of the “dao” while abandoning daily life would be like looking for taste outside of eating and drinking.³⁷

For Dai Zhen, “li-yi 理義” was the regulatory Sense of things that would be unfolded through “eating well;” the “intelligence-judgment of

34. Ibid.

35. The *Mengzi*: vol. 6 A7.

36. The *Zhongyong*: chapter 4.

37. CM: chapter “dao.”

consciousness 心知” was a sort of judgment of taste (an esthetic judgment) in the Kantian meaning.³⁸ Kant (1724–1804), who was a precise contemporary of Dai Zhen (1724–77), endeavored to open a space of communicability that is “subjectively universally valid”³⁹ through the use of the judgment of taste as a bridge across an abyss between the natural and liberty. Similar to Kant, Dai Zhen also hoped that the *necessary* as the topos of *transcendental difference* could have a “subjectively universal validity” for everyone, under the name of “to judge identically so.”

If so, parallel to the effect of the thought of Kant (and that of Hannah Arendt as well), was it not difficult for Dai Zhen to escape a humanist teleology? As long as a line of division between human beings and animals is always folded back onto the human being himself/herself, what about a person who in principle does not participate in the judgment of taste? But, this is already the beginning of the next question at hand.

38. Dai Zhen attached importance to the faculty of judgment, and considered it in particular through the concept of “quan 權.” See CM: chapter “quan.” For example: “on the level of daily life, the Sage knows the sentiments of all people well, and satisfies their desires. That he judges what is or is not important does not lose shared *Senses* 分理, it is the significance of ‘li 理’”; “quan 權’ is a means to judge what is or is not important. Elucidated consciousness with ‘quan 權’ can distinguish things and attain their equilibrium.”

See also Nakajima Takahiro, “Attitude towards Different Souls or the Scrupulous Mind: Killing, Eating and Animals,” in *Non-Occidental Viewpoints* edited by Sueki Fumihiko and Nakajima Takahiro, Taimeido, 2001.

39. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, A 215: „eine subjektiven Allgemeingültigkeit.“

Texts and abbreviations:

CM: Dai Zhen, *Critical Commentary on the Meaning of Terms in the Mengzi*, in the *Complete Works of Dai Zhen*, Huangshan Shushe, 1995.

DZ: *Daxue Zhangju*, in Zhao Xunsun, *Commentaries on the Daxue and the Zhongyong*, East China Normal University Press, 1992.

DH: *Daxue Huowen*, in Zhao Xunsun, *Commentaries on the Daxue and the Zhongyong*, East China Normal University Press, 1992.

ZZ: *Zhongyong Zhangju*, in Zhao Xunsun, *Commentaries on the Daxue and the Zhongyong*, East China Normal University Press, 1992.

WL: *Complete Works of Wang Longxi*, in *Series of pre-modern Chinese Texts*, edited by Okada Takehiko and Araki Kengo, Chubun Shuppansha, 1975. [『龍溪王先生全集』]

CTN: Nakajima Takahiro, “Chinese Thought and Nihilism: from the *natural* to the *necessary*,” in *Starting from Nihilism*, edited by Takeuchi Seiichi and Koto Tetsuaki, Nakanishiya Shuppan, 2001.

DES: Nakajima Takahiro, “Delimitation of the *Spontaneity* for a Deconstruction of Neo-Confucianism,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, No. 9, the Society for Chinese Philosophy in the University of Tokyo, 1995.

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