

Making social and historical sense: A Confucian-phenomenological dialogue

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Abstract. A meaningful comparison between Western and Eastern philosophical thought demands that not only similarities but also divergences be brought to light. This may facilitate the appreciation of culturally divergent philosophical traditions but no less open up further possibilities for profiting from the different routes taken. Some seminal thinkers from the Western phenomenological tradition, notably Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, have come to understand that their philosophical dispositions seem to converge with important themes and approaches in Asian philosophy. This paper attempts to open a Confucian-phenomenological dialogue by discussing some noteworthy parallels between the traditions, but also by arguing that their contrary tendencies to understand the relationship between sagehood or, indeed, philosophy, and lived human reality lead them onto vastly different paths. The paper concludes with the argument that Western thinkers have much to gain by more serious exploration of the Confucian preference for wisdom acquired through historically informed identities and everyday communal human living.

Since the first Western missionaries began deciphering Chinese culture in the 16th century, the big names in Western philosophy have, occasionally, been tempted to flirt with or make uncommitted passes at Asian philosophy. The first Western philosopher to engage seriously with Chinese philosophy was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who presented a number of valid and meaningful comparisons between the Western and Chinese traditions, though the potential productivity of his interest was hampered by his conviction that Confucianism was an alternative expression of the ‘eternal Christian truths’. Leibniz’s contribution could have been developed further by his successors if it had not been for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), who, in the section on ‘Oriental philosophy’ in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,¹ dismissed it from the outset as an expression of ‘the spirit of subjectivity’, which to him meant that it was not ‘real’ philosophy. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was probably one of the first Western thinkers willing to engage himself with Asian, especially Japanese, thought, on its own terms. However, he wrote little on the subject, because, as his prominent disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)

¹ Orig. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, first published posthumously in 1837.