

INTRODUCTION

Gadamer – Cheng: Conversations in Hermeneutics

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1 Introduction¹

In the 1980s, hermeneutics was often incorporated into deconstructionism and literary theory. Rather than focus on authorial intentions, the nature of writing itself including codes used to construct meaning, socio-economic contexts and inequalities of power,² Gadamer introduced a different perspective; the interplay between effects of history on a reader's understanding and the tradition(s) handed down in writing. This interplay in which a reader's prejudices are called into question and modified by the text in a fusion of understanding and topic revitalized the study of the printed word. Gadamer's turn to language for understanding the meaning of Being also appealed to the post-modern antipathy toward modernity and metaphysics.³ If the truth and validity of interpretations are limited to communities of language, then our mode of being in history cannot but be historical. This point of view rendered Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics vulnerable to the critique of moral and epistemological relativism. However, Gadamer's

theory of interpretation also stems from re-examination of the beginning of knowledge in the Pre-Socratics and Plato, and on this basis, is receptive to another dimension of inquiry than that which was trending in North America.

At the East-West Center, University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 1982, Chung-ying Cheng for the first time introduced onto-hermeneutics to an audience of esteemed philosophers including Li Zehou, Ren Jiyu, Feng Youlan, and Zhang Liwen.⁴ In contrast to schools of deconstruction and literary theory that had disengaged the interpreter from trans-historical sources of meaning and truth, Cheng explained that interpreters exist within a cosmological order inextricable from responsibility to harmonize Heaven and Earth in creative acts of interpretation. By integrating Chinese cosmology into hermeneutics through ontology, he tacitly challenged philosophers in the West to re-examine assumptions about humanity's place in nature and by implication, Gadamer's recovery of the beginnings of knowledge in Western philosophy.

Cheng's Neo-Confucianism is inspired by the method and goals of Thomé H. Fang. The following words by Fang seem to prefigure, although in an indistinct and bundled way, aspects of Cheng's philosophy including a Mencian theory

1 This article was originally published as an online version before inclusion in an issue, by Wiley-Blackwell Online Library for the Journal of Chinese Philosophy June 18, 2019.

2 I am consulting Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2nd edition (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), 4.

3 For a characterization of influence of post-modernism at Canadian universities in the 1980s and 1990s see Peter C. Emberley, *Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1996), 106–107.

4 In an email message to the author, Professor Anzi Li included a paper titled "The Methodology of Confucius: A Study of his Philosophy from the Onto-Hermeneutic Model." Page 20, note 63 cites the following source: Cheng, Chung-ying. "Chu Hsi's Methodology and Theory of Understanding" (paper presented at the Hawai'i International Conference on Zhuxi, July 6–15, 1982).

of human nature, comprehensive observation, and creativity: "In the very process of living in concord with creative Nature, Man is charged with an ideal to be fully realized in the light of the principle of comprehensive harmony."⁵ Like Fang, Cheng reinvigorates Chinese culture and language, but not solely in order to vindicate the insights of Neo-Confucianism. He has studied Western thought, from pragmatism and the analytic school to German idealism and phenomenology, to unlock and clarify philosophical concepts within the *Yijing* tradition and thereby render them intelligible to Anglophones. The result has been an awakening of Western scholars to the moral and cultural consequences of decoupling their thought from metaphysical foundations that are neither dogmatic nor doctrinal.

Not unlike the dialectic of Gadamer's dialogue form, onto-generative hermeneutics integrates contrary positions on the same topic in order to blend both sides into a world philosophy, or as Cheng says, a "totalizing or integrative theory,"⁶ not to be confused with a theoretical rewording of a theory. On the contrary, the universal scope and relevance of hermeneutics stems from personal experience. Just as Gadamer, in response to faction and strife, immersed himself in Plato during the war years, and developed a method with which to harmonize opposites, so too, according to On-cho Ng, was Cheng moved by faction, strife and political persecution to develop a path toward unity.⁷ Gadamer taught at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, and Cheng at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa among other institutions in North America. They facilitated trans-continental educational and cultural ties. Similar experiences

yield similar insights irrespective of differences of time and place. Hence, authors in this issue who reside in Europe, China and North America, delineate the differences between Gadamer and Cheng, yet also, in light of Cheng's onto-generative method and cosmology, develop integrative theories. Due to the page-budget restriction of the publisher, certain articles of this special theme will be subsequently published in the next issue.

2 Integrative Theory

This special issue of *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* confirms a dimension of hermeneutics that Cheng has both motivated and inspired. The contributors do not abide by the conviction that since thought is mediated by language, interpretations cannot transcend culture. On the contrary, their research exemplifies the fruits of trans-historical onto-dialogical hermeneutics within limits defined by their field inquiry, organized into Parts I and II, around three themes: language, the philosophy of history and ethics.

Andrew Fuyarchuk introduces the theme of ontology in relation to Gadamer's turn to language. Fuyarchuk argues that Chung-ying Cheng's criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics is informed by Heidegger's concept of Dasein and thereby overlooks how Gadamer's Platonic-Pythagorean problem of the division between the One and Many is harmonized in the event of language, which in turn positions Gadamer in proximity to the presupposed grounds of receptivity in Cheng's onto-generative hermeneutics. Lauren Pfister's contributing article addresses the year 2000 meeting between Cheng and Gadamer in Heidelberg and expands the transhistorical grounds of meaning in Gadamer to matters of theology. Pfister's summary of the written Chinese record of their conversation indicates that Cheng does not address the role of Christian philosophy and hence, the role of the inner word in Gadamer's hermeneutics. This is important not only for detecting changes in Cheng's philosophical development, but also for modifying

5 Thomé H. Fang, "The Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony," *Washington University Law Review* 65, no. 4 (January 1987): 684.

6 Chung-ying Cheng, "Inquiring into the Primary Model: *Yijing* and the Onto-Hermeneutical Tradition," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, nos. 3-4 (2003): 323.

7 On-cho Ng, "Religious Hermeneutics: Text and Truth in Neo-Confucian Readings of the *Yijing*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2007): 15.

his hermeneutics along the lines of a living conversation, possibilities explored by Pfister in a sequel to the article submitted to this issue. Nevertheless, by raising the issue of how Gadamer's turn to language for understanding the meaning of Being extends possibilities in Cheng's thought, Pfister anticipates the article by Katarina Gajdosova. She returns to the roots of Chinese thought during the Warring States period and broadens the meaning of names in recently excavated texts. Contrary to the conventions about how to understand terms, she appeals to both Heidegger's ontology and Cheng's notion of receptivity and creativity to reinterpret naming in relation to cosmology. Along the same lines, insofar as the event of Being is lingual, Jay Goulding captures its emergent structure in an evolving community of scholars and scholarship. He recalls his philosophical journey toward Cheng's philosophy that begins in conversations with Gadamer at McMaster University in Hamilton, leads to Heidegger and Asian thought, expands into turning points with teachers and colleagues from various backgrounds that by increments contributed to Goulding's formulation of "Daoist phenomenology."

Although differing traditions guide their inquiries and research, Cheng and Gadamer recall the wisdom of the past to ameliorate the fragmentation in contemporary life. This leads them to re-examine the origins of philosophy; historical roots and thus sources of creative re-interpretations East and West whose affinities are developed in contributions by Hyun Höchsmann and Friederike Assandri. Höchsmann assesses convergences and divergences in the origins of Chinese and Western philosophy (Confucius and Socrates, the *Yijing* and Pre-Socratics) that culminates in pairing Gadamer's understanding of *paideia* in the context of Plato's political cosmology in the *Timaeus* with moral and social cultivation in *The Western Inscription*. She delineates the limits of this comparison which in turn justifies introducing Vattimo's notion of locality. Assandri's comparative analysis moves between India and China, Buddhism and Tang Daoism. Based on Gadamer's

argument that writing detaches concepts from their cultural moorings, she defines and applies three levels of understanding in onto-generative hermeneutics to Buddhist terms that were assimilated into the *Benji Jing* and in so doing clarifies essential dimensions of Daoism.

Contributions by Stephen Palmquist and Nicholas Brasovan position Cheng in relation to Kant and Gadamer by way of Aristotle's ethics respectively. On the one hand, Palmquist plots Cheng's evolving criticism of Kant's moral philosophy and draws on crucial dimensions of Gadamer's hermeneutics to reposition that criticism in a constructive relation to Kant's emphasis on the philosophical conditions of morality while also indicating how religious dimensions of his thought answer Cheng's concerns for lived moral action. For Palmquist, Gadamer enables a constructive criticism of Cheng. On the other hand, Brasovan compares Cheng's *Yijing*-based account of moral deliberation with Gadamer's Aristotelian-based ethics and reasons that in contrast to Cheng, Gadamer's hermeneutical consciousness is disengaged from practical knowledge. For Brasovan, Cheng is a constructive critic of Gadamer. Palmquist and Brasovan's divergent angles on Gadamer and Cheng map onto a dialectic of contrast and complementarity that constitutes the inner logic of Cheng's philosophy. In other words, Gadamer and Cheng ought to be read alongside one another for the sake of removing discrepancies and contradictions, which constitutes the organic structure of their thinking.

3 Our Mode of Being in History Is Not Historical

The conversations between Cheng and Gadamer in this issue of *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* pivot on language, philosophy of history and ethics within a comparative framework of analysis, but also explore the grounds that make the comparisons possible. Those grounds are informed by Chinese cosmology, and function to wrest

Gadamer from the shadow of Heideggerian facticity and reposition him within the range of Cheng's ideas about our place in nature that is embedded in his question about how mind emerges from inorganic matter.⁸

For Gadamer scholars of Heidegger, human finitude, our ownmost individuating death ensures that hermeneutics is always open to the other as other, always on the way toward understanding the meaning of Being. To arrest the process in a concept of "the Absolute" cannot but represent someone's point of view, and thereby render hermeneutics indistinguishable from ideology. However, insofar as finitude is defined by them in terms of an onto-theological concept of immorality, finitude is a metaphysical concept consistent with epistemologies and confuse beings with the meaning of Being. As a result, the celebrated political value of hermeneutics to always be on the way toward an understanding of the meaning of Being admits subtle variations on the same worldview that are insufficiently self-critical.

Gadamer scholars of Heidegger are right. A transformation in ethos and opening to the meaning of Being depends on awareness of finitude. Yet this awareness does not yield openness to more of the same, i.e., discourse structurally incapable of coming to unity but instead, for both Gadamer and Cheng, openness to a distinctly different ontological dimension of reality. As Sandra Wawrytko and So-Seong Park indicate,⁹ this ontological dimension is prefigured in the experience of being-as-a-whole or the totality of all possible relations in both Chinese totemic shamanistic

rituals,¹⁰ and Greek Dionysian festivals.¹¹ Through these religious experiences human ethos and therefore consciousness is expanded and elevated from being centered on one's ownmost concerns toward an affinity with all sentient beings from insects and plants to animals. The channel for this affinity is an auditory disposition and hence, the emotions, compassion, and feeling response.

The capacity for an auditory disposition, or as Gadamer calls it, listening consciousness to respond to the inter-relationality and therefore inherent balance of nature is developed through music, song and dance of the religious rituals and festivals. They facilitate the unity of mind with nature. This use of music, that transforms ordinary consciousness, explains Cheng's emphasis on the receptivity of feeling response in comprehensive observation, and Gadamer's emphasis on openness to the other in attunement. However, an auditory disposition characteristic of pre-literate oral cultures that reveals the "All" need not rely on religion. As theorists about the evolution of language have explained,¹² modern languages preserve their pre-historical past in music or prosody. That is to say, the song and dance that revealed the totality of inter-related beings to an ethos of comprehensive observation and attunement toward beings in classical civilizations is retained in the back-and-forth movement or rhythm of the dialogue form. Our mode of being in history is a mode of being in nature – through the music of language.

While alerting the reader to the limits of a nominalist interpretation, Gadamer expresses the inner law of the nature as follows: "in perishing there is always becoming, and in becoming

8 Chung-ying Cheng, "On Entering the 21st Century: My Philosophical Vision and My Philosophical Practice," in *The Imperative of Understanding: Chinese Philosophy, Comparative Philosophy, and Onto-Hermeneutics*, ed. On-cho Ng (New York: Global Scholarly Publications, 2008), 15–16.

9 Sandra A. Wawrytko, "Aesthetics of Attentional Networks: Chinese Harmony and Greek Dualism." *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 47, no. 1–2 (2020): 12–30; So-Jeong Park, "Musical Metaphors in Chinese Aesthetics." *The Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 47, no. 1–2 (2020): 31–48.

10 See Li Zehou, "The Rites and Music Tradition," in *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 3–6.

11 See Walter Lammi. *Gadamer and The Question of the Divine* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008).

12 Merlin Donald. *Origins of the Modern Mind. Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

there is always perishing.”¹³ Considered in process, opposites generate and blend into each other. This law of nature applies to everything.¹⁴ Hence, in a manner comparable to Pfister’s concluding insights, onto-dialogical hermeneutics is not only open to discrete events of otherness but moreover, to the moving structure of reality expressed, as Gajdosova suggests, in the existential moment of naming. Considered as interplay of tension and resolution with a life of its own, the dialectic of a dialogue is self-similar to the way in which an organism grows (by instinct). There is, therefore, a sense in which the art of interpretation extends the human mind into the eternal cycles of nature such that we participate in the articulation of the inner telos/homeostasis toward which all beings strive and importantly for Gadamer scholars of

Heidegger, within the material limits of energy to which our embodied minds are self-evidently subject. In mortality there is always immortality.

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13 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Continuity of History and the Existential Moment,” *Philosophy Today* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1972): 233.

14 Gadamer appeals to both Plato the pre-Socratic and the biological sciences in *The Enigma of Health* in order to establish that the aim of health is to restore a balance to human life coordinate with harmony of nature. For his part, Cheng goes to the heart of the matter and asks about how mind emerges from inorganic matter (Cheng, “On Entering the 21st Century,” 15–16), which in turn, as indicated by Linyu Gu while criticizing Whitehead, forges interconnection between humans, plants and animals (Linyu Gu, “Waiting for Godot? Contemporaneity, Feminism, Creativity,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 2 [2009]: 329). Perhaps the metabolic process of converting matter into energy in which homeostasis (self-unfolding structure) inheres is self-similar to the structure of reality construed as dialectic of One and many. If so, then there is a repetition of cosmological order at various levels of existence from the organic to the cosmological to even the mathematical description of that order, e.g., in the constellation of the stars to which the Pythagoreans were alert in the intervals between tones. See Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), 99–107, 282–284. Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 2003), 27–54. Evan Thompson, “Life and Mind: From Autopoiesis to Neurophenomenology,” *Phenomenology and Cognitive Sciences* 3 (2004): 384–394.