

# Looking for the Golden Ratio of the Philosophy of Ancient Civilizations (review)

Melanie Guj\*

The current article presents a short review of the first 4 volumes of the book series *Ancient Worlds in Comparison* as edited by *Giulia Massaro* (August, 2020). An attempt through multiple researchers is being made to identify the common intersection of various philosophical schools in different periods of time, from Ancient Greece, China, India to Roman Empire until the Medieval Period in Europe. The research is becoming multidimensional, recognizing the ambiguous concept of the philosophical evolution of human mind within different social, cultural, and geographical contexts.

## 1. Transnational Sovereignty

For long periods of time stable sovereign principles structure the international system and create various international orders. When that equilibrium does break and the types of units proliferate numerous scholars have provided fairly clear, if not contradictory, explanations for why one unit will tend to prevail over competing units.

Conflicts between growing and contracting social systems make certain types of sovereignty more or less efficient and in turn dictate the structure of the international system, a theory that could be summarized into the following, three parts:

- World order is determined by the dominant type of sovereignty.
- Sovereign principles are efficient and stable when they mediate the conflicts between the spatial limits of the underlying subsystems.
- Therefore unit types and international order vary when the sovereign principles become inefficient and norms entrepreneurs begin to experiment with alternatives.

This volume discusses the evolution of the hierarchical sovereignty as it developed in first the Roman Republic and subsequently collapsed late in the Roman Empire. The early modern state system and its shift from the feudal system in France are used to show how an international order changes from bartered sovereignty to administrative sovereignty. The Zhou Dynasty in China will be used to illustrate the formation of transborder sovereignty and its evolution to absolute sovereignty.

Case studies reviewed in the first volume *Issues of Transnational Sovereignty* showed that over time sovereign principles are stable because they act as mission statements for the polities that create them. Discussing the long histories of these principles had two goals. One was to show that over time there are some remarkable continuities in the narratives on rule. The other was to show that various theories ought to predict collapse at numerous points yet the sovereign principles are remarkably resilient.

Long-term solutions are often pragmatic about the limits of the ruler's power given the existing conflicts between the subsystems. King Wang's imprint upon the Zhou Dynasty established the Mandate of Heaven at the same time that it recognized the material limitations of its feudal system. Each fief was strong enough to assert itself if it did not buy into the essential legitimacy of the mandate. The transborder sovereignty

\*Melanie Guj is an archaeologist specialized on research of post-classical antiquities in excavation sites in Italy and Greece.

of the Zhou Dynasty played to the strengths of the Zhou rulers. The remarkable continuity in the case studies suggest that policymakers are often aware of the principles around which their rule is founded, but are quite unaware of why those principles exist. At a certain point elites and policymakers become uncritical of their position and their system of rule and merely accept it as a given. In the French case vassals and lords sought to protect their fiefs long after the fiefs were outmoded by growing infantry armies and improving agricultural production. Bartered sovereignty thus continued even when the inherent logic in it had begun to crumble. Similarly, Roman emperors simultaneously continued to undermine the principle of hierarchical sovereignty through expanding citizenship willy-nilly, slowing colonization, and stagnating the military at the same time that they demanded submission from new and more outside tribes and polities.

The noticeable superficial similarities between medieval Europe and the Zhou dynasty are more remarkable because of the deeper similarities in their revolutionary periods. As demonstrated in the first book volume, both the Zhou Dynasty and medieval Europe employed feudal arrangements, but those feudal arrangements were only superficially similar. In Europe there were overlapping authorities and no easily demarcated boundaries. In ancient China there was a strict hierarchy and legally defined borders. On the surface the revolutionary periods in early modern Europe and ancient China were quite different, but in one case different international institutions proliferated and competed for dominance while in the other case the international institutions remained fairly stable. The periods of instability and experimentation may be prolonged as they were in the European and Chinese cases, or quite short as they were in the Roman case. Therefore, these cases studies seem to support two conclusions about the international system:

- Sovereign principles are resilient and domestic policy or institutional changes are not a sufficient condition for change in the international order.
- Subsystems are highly fluid, but changes in the principles or patterns of the subsystems are not a sufficient condition for change in the international order.

Revolutionary change on this scale is very difficult to achieve and only happens intermittently. The analysis presented on the book shows a stagnating security subsystem and an ideological subsystem declining relative to a still expanding trade subsystem. This suggests that the while absolute sovereignty remains a stable principle in the international system that the system is actually evolving to favor an administrative sovereignty. This need not end in Louis XIV or his modern-day equivalent claiming, "*L'état c'est moi.*" What it does suggest however is that the expanding trade subsystem and the stagnating security subsystem have created a new space which Americanization cannot fill. Globalization in this analysis lacks any cohesive ideology to link its various aspects together.

## **2. Roman Empire/Byzantium and Ancient China**

The study of relations between the Roman empire and China (or Greco-Roman world and China) has been a fascinating subject to scholars from various disciplines for a long time, in particular to the sinologists. The study is both multi-disciplinary and multi-layered, as it focuses on the interactions between two of the greatest civilizations in ancient world in the fields of trade, diplomacy, literature, art and religion. As the subject covers vast geographical areas as well as a significant time span, it is necessary to consult a multitude of sources to verify each piece of information. Yet Western evidence is scarce, since, except for some details about the commerce of Chinese silk

and some geographical information given by Ptolemy, there is almost nothing else in the Western sources. In reality, from the Classical period until the end of the early eastern Roman empire, a great Far East state named Seres, Thinae, Tzinitza, and Taugast was recorded in Greek and Latin sources with little and unclear information. Even so, after long-term research of various kinds of sources and linguistic comparisons, sinologists almost agreed that this state is ancient China.

Da-qin (ancient Chinese name for Roman Empire) is believed to have had relations with China because its culture can be compared with the one of China and its name originated from the name of ancient China. Even though there have been many different theories concerning the name Da-qin, the only certainty is that it originated from the name of the Qin Dynasty and has the adjective Da (Great). The name was most likely heard by Gan Ying, who was the first Chinese to arrive at the Western Sea, which was on the frontier between Parthia and Da-qin. The crooked Western Sea, through which one arrives to Da-qin, cannot be identified with the Caspian Sea or the Mediterranean Sea. Its identity is most probably the Persian Gulf or the river system of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which was called "Sea" in Western and Middle East sources.

Among the information from the Chinese sources on Da-qin which have been discussed in the second book volume *The Interconnection Between Eastern Roman Empire and Ancient China*, it is clear that some information is mythical and utopian; however, we should not take this kind of information to be the rule, as some scholars have believed it is, of whom Shiratori is the representative. There are not a small amount of realities in this image of Da-qin, and even where some descriptions seem mythical and fanciful, they contain clues reflecting the reality. As an important example of this, the descriptions of the cities of Da-qin and its capital have much accurate information, as well as some mythical elements which contain seeds of truth. Another example of this mixture is the description of the behavior of the king of Da-qin, which, while containing exaggerations, contains many truths. In addition, there is much truth in the description of Da-qin's postal system, which probably came from the Parthian system that was also popular in the ancient Greek world. The Parthian system of measurement had international influence at least in the first centuries of the Common Era. It is natural that Chinese knowledge of the Da-qin monetary system was also reliable, since coins of the Roman empire (mainly belonging to the eastern Roman empire) were found in China, which were taken there by foreign merchants, and also probably by the people of the Roman empire.

The way that China envisioned Da-qin within their world order and dealt with it was not limited to Da-qin, but was also applied to other peoples and states. It forms part of the basic method that ancient China used in its relations with the rest of the world (in modern terms, Chinese international relations). This Chinese world order system was developing and improving continuously until the Ming-Qing period (from the 14th to the 17th century) when it arrived at its peak. In the twentieth century, with the rise and coming of Western powers, it was challenged and finally substituted by the Western system of international relations. In the 21st century, with the quick development of globalization and the increasingly close relations between Europe and China, how to strengthen the mutual relationship between them has attracted a lot of attention. Benedetto Croce proclaimed that "all history is contemporary history", hence, in this study, the history of the relations between the Roman empire and China, in particular the image of the Roman empire constructed by the Chinese, will be valuable for modern international relations. The book was conducted mainly on the basis of

Chinese sources concerning Da-qin with a diverse perspective than the conventional Western point of view, but, in addition, Western sources and the materials from archaeological findings also provided significant evidence to support the study.

### **3. Ancient Greece and India**

Ethics is often concerned with evaluating different modes of living, in an attempt to determine the best possible way of life. The third volume *The Roots of Philosophical Thought in Ancient Greece and India* aims to create a dramatic impression of a series of lives well-lived: the life of the student of the Brahmanical ritual, the life of the Upanisadic student, the life of Yajnavalkya, the life of Socrates, and finally the life of a Socratic student (Theaetetus). The researchers attempt to get inside the perspective of these characters as they are formed by a range of philosophical practices examining different ways in which these practices promise freedom. This freedom is presented as either a given, which can be directly inherited, or as something that must be fought for and grasped independently.

In this study different systems of ancient ethics are discussed in which the individual was not considered responsible for their own self-formation by seeing the value of alternative practices of freedom not based on conscious choice or deliberation, but on freeing individuals from responsibility for themselves. This volume aims both to inherit Foucault's emphasis on philosophy as a practice that leads the individual to become free, and to completely question the idea of freedom on which he bases his theory. Throughout this book, it is evident that the source of truth is often characterized as a womb. This womb can be seen as inside the student or outside the student (inside the teacher). It can be seen as an enclosing structure or as an internal latency. Each system of ethics that is examined, whether it is understood as pre-determined or as self-fashioning, finds itself by setting out its relation to its own womb. The systems of ethics discussed could thus almost be judged matriarchal, except for the fact that they all depict a womb that is not female, but male.

An additional innovation of philosophical research is being made by asking whether any kind of mediation was possible between these extremes of different schools of philosophical thinking. It seemed that the freedom from fear achieved by Yajnavalkya excluded the possibility of resting only on Socratic courage in the face of the unknown. Likewise, the student born of the midwife could never experience the truth of mantra. It is debated whether freedom should be understood as experience of completeness or potential, trust or resistance, conscious choice or unconditional commitment, agency or non-agency. It is observed that later traditions, such as the Epic tradition in India and the New Testament tradition in Greece, presented texts in which characters demonstrated perfect confidence in tradition whilst at the same time calling into question the 'letter' of the law. It has been argued in the conclusion that some kind of paradoxical union between perfect confidence in tradition and perfect humility with respect to truth could be seen to exist in these later texts. In both the Bhagavadgita and the New Testament, perfect obedience does not rest purely on an innate or inherited faith, it rests on a faith that maintains itself in an equal balance between perfect confidence and perfect humility.

Foucault defined ethics as 'the conscious practice of freedom', while this book encounters straight away the problem that there are many different ways of practicing freedom. In the traditional Upanayana the student gave himself over to being completely predetermined (in order to know the power that pre-determines all things). In the midwife analogy the student gave himself over to aporia. In this study, it has

been argued against the Socratic position that all forms of transcendence should be called into question and all forms of commitment be resisted; there is such a thing as too much freedom and that commitment to tradition can be seen as a form of 'ontological medicine'.

Throughout this study, Foucault was challenged because his ethics is based purely on the 'care of the self'. The main benefit of tradition is that it protects the individual from identifying with personal power. Foucault's ethics asserts that the greatest possible experience of freedom is found in self-fashioning: 'to make of one's existence, of this essentially mortal material, the site of the construction of an order held together by its internal coherence.' It has been illustrated that there is much more to freedom than the imposition of the individual's will on their own existence. Human defense of principles of transcendence has been motivated by a wariness of any ethics founded purely on the direct self-relation. Foucault makes each individual God over themselves, and thus a principle of personal power is given the status of transcendence. All philosophical practices of freedom rest on a central principle of power that upholds the individual and makes their freedom possible. At the beginning, it is assumed that ethics is concerned with evaluating different ways of life in order to discern the best possible life. The conclusion of the book reveals finally that the best possible life is completely opposite to the style of life advocated by Foucault. The best possible life is one in which the individual identifies with perfectly ordered power, not with will-to-power.

#### **4. Ancient/Classical Greece and Ancient China**

As different as the ancient Greek and Chinese worlds must have been, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Xunzi all set out to identify parameters for optimum human flourishing. In essence, what each points to is a communicating community, where the ongoing process of, and sensitivity to, linguistic interaction among its members is understood as the defining operating principle. Where they differ, however, is how this interaction is best practiced. Still, these four philosophers all believe there is an important relationship between the position a community takes with respect to linguistic practices and how that community can be expected to flourish or flounder. In other words, each was sensitive to the connection between what is said, how it is said, the context in which it is said, and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of what is said. Despite their many philosophical differences, they are united in sharing such a "rhetorical sensibility", a sensibility that understands linguistic practices to be significantly more complicated and interesting than, for example, the "language is a map" theory postulated by the early Wittgenstein.

The fourth book volume *New Perspectives of Philosophical Rhetoric in Ancient Greece and China* analyzes four key aspects: dialogue and dialectic, rhetoric, authority, and the relationship between philosophy and community. The book begins with a discussion of 13.3 from the Analects, while then dialectic is examined as it is employed in a number of different Platonic dialogues. Platonic dialectic is compared with dialogue as it appears, for example, in the Analects. Therefore, researchers begin to explore how different means of practicing philosophy intimate different underlying philosophical presuppositions and agendas. A discussion of rhetoric follows, beginning with Confucius and then Xunzi. Confucius advances a compelling, holistic program that resists differentiation into rhetorical and philosophical components. With Xunzi's critique of the bianzhe, on the other hand, stronger parallels are observed with Plato's critique of the sophists. Then Plato's denigration of, and subsequent reconciliation

with, rhetoric is closely examined. Finally, Aristotle's sophisticated treatment of the subject is reviewed.

It is important to distinguish persuasion for persuasion's sake, where the goal is mere winning, or toward selfish ends, from persuasion that issues from the authentic presentation of self with more noble aspirations. Can the means of persuasion ever be considered the message itself? Is the how of communication more significant than the what? It is shown that Aristotle tends to locate authority in ideas, through logical defense grounded in *logos*, much more than Confucius or Xunzi, who locate authority with exemplary persons and inherited tradition. Although at times Plato seems to uphold the ultimate authority of dialectic as it aspires to knowledge of the Forms, it is argued that many of his most significant ideas receive their most compelling presentation through myth.

On the aspect of philosophy and community, a modern theory of pluralism is presented to what extent our four philosophers might embrace it. Pluralism is an important philosophical alternative to relativism and absolutism. Although Plato is often construed as a philosophical absolutist, it is mentioned that our understanding of him as such must be tempered by viewing him through the Confucian lens. Similarly, in the case of Aristotle, his position seems somewhat less *logos*-driven when approached from a Chinese perspective. Instead, his emphasis on practical wisdom navigating the world while attentive to the particular situation at hand emerges into the foreground. Along the way of the book, it is speculated about possible contemporary applications of these philosophical views. Should certain modes or uses of language be privileged over others, or does a healthy community attempt to incorporate them all? All four philosophers share at least some commitment to pluralism, and further that this means they would resist the permeation of economic vocabulary into our modern discourses.

It should be acknowledged that there must be something nascent in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy that prompted their intellectual descendants to construe them as embracing the notion that truth is universal, a position which is exclusive, not inclusive. At the same time, reflecting on possible applications of *zhengming* brings to light certain features that could be subject to authoritarian abuse, leading to exclusivity, not its opposite. With both the Greeks and the Chinese, however, these interpretations represent misunderstandings, if not outright abuses, of the positions in question. In each case, the movement towards clarity and certainty with respect to their ideas has resulted in what appears as some semblance of dogmatism, when in fact they all recognized ultimately that the ongoing challenges posed by the intricacies of human conversation and community constitution are never fully conquered. Ultimately, the point is not that Plato and Aristotle fail to offer us anything resembling the Confucian emphasis on *zhengming*. Nor is it that this is precisely what they offer. By examining this salient dimension of Confucian thought, we must exercise our philosophical imagination to make sense of what is otherwise easily misconstrued. We are also prompted to interrogate and become more cognizant of our own intellectual heritage in the process. In so doing, we are afforded a fresh perspective from which to derive insight into our own philosophical views. We may even come away with novel and more effective ways of living and speaking with each other in the world.

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