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**Thinking in the Gap between the Cultures of Greece and China:
François Julien's Apophatic Universalism**

ABSTRACT: Are there deep differences between these cultures in their ways of thinking? How can they be described? There is no neutral language for doing so. One can doubt all claims to deep essence as being metaphysical illusions and figments. However, the differences are certainly experienced. They can be characterized negatively. This is where Chinese and Western (apophatic) viewpoints meet. Whereas Julien finds the cultural Other (China) enabling him to think otherwise and effectively to keep the recursive self-negating aspect of discourse active and alive in his own discourse, I attempt to do this by reference to the apophatic current underlying Western philosophical reflection in all its most radically critical and especially self-critical manifestations. Especially from consideration of Eastern approaches to universality, the apophatic wisdom that can be gathered here can serve to put us on guard against any universality that can be thought. Universality is not what it is *thought* to be by the universals that we can think. The naïve faith in thought and education as per se emancipatory is belied by history. The universal remains an ideal rather than a manifest fact in the course of history. It cannot be approached except always by way of the negative.

KEYWORDS: cultural differences, discourse, universality

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any universality that can be thought. Universality is not what it is *thought* to be by the universals that we can think. The naïve faith in thought and education as per se emancipatory is belied by history. Nazi Germany sprang from a peak of cultural development in the civilization of the Weimar Republic. Already for Hegel in the wake of the French Revolution, it was all too evident that history manifested no natural necessity to realize the ideals that it projected as possibilities and as regulatory principles. The universal remains an ideal rather than a manifest fact in the course of history. It cannot be approached except always with a margin of the negative. The reality of history is indeed profoundly anti-universalist. Rather than speaking glibly about emancipation, we need to consider the real conditions of freedom.

Cultures are related to one another not just by their mutual difference but more importantly by the gap (*écart*) that makes them heterogeneous and prevents any third term from subsuming them in a synthesis. In this condition, their interaction is not guided or controlled by any superior kind of normativity but is endlessly open to adventure. They cannot as such even be “compared” but must be allowed simply to interact and to transform each other. They are different: The Chinese language and culture excels in its aptitude to express continuous transition and interaction, whereas European languages, beginning with the Greek are capable of envisaging transcendence (of substance, substrate, subject) with a sublimity of construction unattainable for the Chinese.

Whereas Jullien finds the cultural Other (China) enabling him to think otherwise and effectively to keep the recursive self-negating aspect of discourse active and alive in his own discourse, I attempt to do this by reference to the apophatic current underlying Western philosophical reflection in all its most radically critical and especially self-critical manifestations.

In *On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common, and Dialogue between Cultures*, Jullien develops a theory of how Greece forged its brand of universal, logical thinking precisely by abandoning *nature* as its object of concern.¹ Greek philosophical thought constructed the tool of the concept that cuts thought off from its natural relation to and within the world of things, that is, of things without the artificial boundaries that are erected by thought. With the advent of logical thinking, which can be dated precisely from Socrates, thought itself defines and delimits its own field of operation. For all the empowerment that this move brings with it, particularly in its full deployment in the marvelously sophisticated technological development of modern civilization, it also entails a severance of the umbilical cord with nature as the mother of all things. The artificial construction of the concept thenceforth

¹ De l'universel, de l'uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures, Fayard, Paris 2008.

intervenes and mediates thought's relation to everything, including its own natural source and grounds.

Jullien describes the birth of logical thinking in Greece as coming about in Socrates's shift from the pre-Socratics' attempt to think nature or things as a whole to thinking rather formally and "according to the whole" (*kata holon*). He contrasts the conceptual thinking invented by Socrates with thinking things whole in the metaphorical mode of the so-called physiologists, for whom all was water or fire or air, etc. The whole of nature, things as a whole, was erased, as wholeness became rather *a form of thought*. It was thenceforth defined by criteria internal to thought and was cut off from the infinite, from relation with the All of nature, which was simply abandoned as not worth thinking about, since one could not have an overview of it. As Jullien explains, "Socrates is no longer concerned with the "all" of nature, as were his predecessors, the *physiologists*, who are named "pre-Socratics" precisely on account of this rupture; but rather with investigating "according to the whole" (*kat-holou*), he makes of the "whole" from now on a formal (or logical) exigency: to philosophize is no longer to inquire concerning the all of the world, taken as object, nor after the principle of this all, but to think "conformably to the whole," in the mode of the whole. That is to say, in the mode of universality, i.e. conceptually (68)".

Thinking according to the whole rather than thinking the All entails a subtle but momentous shift from the all of nature to the all of thought itself. Thought takes this step because the latter alone is within reach and can be defined rigorously in terms of thought and nothing else. But thought thereby also renounces the poetic saying of the All in a metaphorical word, such as one finds in the pre-Socratics, reaching beyond thought towards the All that exceeds it. Thought thenceforth rigorously limits itself to itself, to what it can encompass with its concepts, and forgets the open, circumscribable mystery of all that it had previously endeavored to sound by a poetic word, a word for all, words such as water, air, fire, used by Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus respectively to fathom the abyss of beings and the unencompassable circumambient "sea" of nature. "In so doing, in learning to think 'according to the all,' or universally, Socrates makes us forget the dream of saying with a word the total truth and forms (forces) thought to conform to the hard path of its rigor"(69).

Logically, thinking becomes universal by elimination—by suppressing all that is one's own in order to think only what is the same for all. This is the rigor of logical thinking such as it was forged in Greek philosophy. It requires a rupture of one's own personal relation to what is thought: one's own thought thereby becomes equivalent to what can be thought by anyone else in any other circumstances and relations within the world. This seems to be an advance

towards universality. However, there is another kind of thinking of universality that is lost in this “advance,” one that remains connected with nature. This other universality is what Eastern models can help us to recover.

Aristotle describes how generally or universally valid knowledge is to be attained. He theorizes the passage from unique, individual sensation through experience, in which abstraction is made from a series of cases and their diversity, in order to reach universal knowledge (*Metaphysics A*, 1). This idea of knowledge attained through abstraction from the particularity of experience becomes canonical in Western philosophy. This process of abstraction has been an object of concerted critique in recent continental philosophy, with its rejection of metaphysics. François Jullien has mounted a kindred critique specifically from an intercultural perspective and suggests that, without such an external perspective, the critiques of abstraction are not going to be able to effectively exit the closures of Western metaphysics that they are attempting to critique.

Far-Eastern, typically naturalistic philosophies seem more apt than Western philosophies to avoid abstraction. Nature provides a kind of normativity in Eastern philosophies and in pantheistic religions. It answers to the universal and supplies a universally and necessarily valid standard for all that is. Nature has often been summarily dismissed in critical forms of Western philosophy: only by exiting from natural contingency does man become master and establish necessary norms and laws. But if it is understood more apophatically, as in the East, or even more in line with *natura naturans* than *natura naturata* (to invoke Spinoza’s terms), then it can perhaps provide the kind of normativity that has been tortuously sought along the paths of abstraction to the universal in the West. In other words, perhaps the great All, as fathomed by pre-critical thought and still ensconced in the natural world, when not reduced to a concept, is what we need in order to make good on the claims of universality still felt to be necessary, even if so very problematic, in the Western philosophies that have resorted to constructive systems that become merely formal and arbitrary. There is something in pre-critical naturalistic thinking that even sophisticated philosophical thinking needs to reconnect with in order not to suffocate in its own self-generated, self-enclosed sphere of autonomous activity. Apophatics can open insight into the nature of this nature that is beyond thought and speech and yet is more essentially nature than any manifest phenomena can possibly be—and more universal than any universal concept that can be devised.

Nature in Chinese thought is an all-encompassing reality and in this capacity provides a kind of universal standard for validity. The quest for universality in the West has to be evaluated in terms of the effort aimed at corresponding with nature in the East: the issues, concerning nature map on to

those concerning universality, notably that of its transcendence or immanence. Nature in classical Chinese thinking is in crucial respects transcendent and also immanent to the world. The question of nature is the question of whether a source and norm for our life and action is given in the nature of things or is arbitrarily imposed. Or can it be elicited in some way that breaks down the seeming exclusiveness of these alternatives?

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