

Lecture 1**The Issue of Particularity**

The title of our course is “The essential character (特質) of Chinese Philosophy”. A few years ago I wrote a short book with the same title, based on twelve one-hour lectures I delivered at the Extension School of Hong Kong University [1962]. Because it was a course offered to the general public, those lectures were relatively simple. Since most of the audience members were not philosophy students, their background knowledge was rather limited. They just wanted some general knowledge about Chinese philosophy, and those lectures were given to meet that need.

There are at least two ways to talk about the essential character of Chinese philosophy. One way is to give a simple and straightforward account of the contents of Chinese philosophy, like I did in that book. Or, we can go a step further and use a more critical method of discussion. To use the terms of general logic, this would be a discussion of the second-order. What I did in that short book was of the first-order, namely, I directly presented the contents without a critical examination of their significance and implications. We can now choose to use second-order discussion in this course, because I assume you, as philosophy students, already have some familiarity with the contents of Chinese philosophy. You can always find a book to get some basic knowledge if you need to. In short, in this course, we will reflect on and evaluate the basic knowledge you already have, and try to go a step further by exploring philosophical issues in those contents. We will also try to determine if these issues were also present in other philosophies and how they were handled there. So it will be necessary to do some comparison among philosophies in order to discern and evaluate these issues.

Before we start our discussion on Chinese philosophy, we must first consider the issue of particularity and universality. When we talk about the essential character of Chinese philosophy, it obviously implies that there are other philosophies, such as Western philosophy, Indian philosophy, and so on. We usually think that philosophy deals with universal truths, so there should not be any difference between Chinese or Western philosophy. But in fact there are differences. On the other hand, there are also people who think that philosophy does not have universality, that there is no universal, common philosophy. For individuals, there is your philosophy, my philosophy, his philosophy; for

nations and cultures, there is only Chinese philosophy, English philosophy, German philosophy, but no common philosophy. Yet all philosophical truths are universal; when you establish a concept, a principle in philosophy, it usually has universality. For example, let's consider Confucius's *ren* (仁). Confucius was a Chinese of the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BCE), but when he talked about *ren* he was not merely referring it to Chinese or the people of Shandong, his native province. He was referring it to all human beings in all times. *Ren* belongs to everyone, isn't this concept clearly universal? On the other hand, Western cultural tradition developed out of three sources: Greek science and philosophy, Roman law, and Judaic religion. However, within this tradition, English philosophy is different from German philosophy, and from French philosophy as well. Both sides have a point. We need to first consider both the particularity and universality of philosophy.

Today we will first look at the issue of particularity. We know that China is a cultural system while the West is another cultural system, and India yet another, and so on. But why are there these different systems? How do we explain the differences? Understanding the particularity of a cultural system will help us understand the particularity of its philosophy. People seldom pay attention to this issue, but it is important. Well, how shall we understand this issue? You may want to enumerate the approaches of the various systems to show their particularities. But this misses the point. What is needed is an explanation for the differences in the approaches themselves. For instance, the history of Western philosophy began with Thales. The earliest Greek philosophers were all natural philosophers. Thales thought the origin of the universe was water. There were others who thought it was fire, or atoms, or the Big Four of earth, water, fire and air. We are all familiar with these approaches. The history of Chinese philosophy began with the Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou down to Confucius and Mencius, and its approach was quite different from that of the Greeks. The purpose of our discussion today is to try to explain why there were these different approaches.

If we enumerate the approaches in the histories of various cultures, we are merely stating facts, not giving an interpretation. If we want to use the term interpretation, then it is a "descriptive interpretation", generally belongs to the realm of science. As soon as we explain something by giving reasons as opposed to giving descriptions, we come into the

realm of philosophy. Scientific interpretation is clearly different from philosophical interpretation. Science and philosophy belong to different realms, and there is a difference in their interpretations. Scientific interpretation is usually descriptive, whereas philosophical interpretation explores reasons and gives a rational explanation. For instance, science uses atoms to explain this world; this is a descriptive interpretation. Scientists accept this physical world as a given, and try to describe this fact. They do not answer questions about why there is a physical world, where this given came from. These questions are beyond the realm of science and will not be answered by scientists. Some people may say, "God created the world." But this is not necessarily an interpretation, at least not a scientific interpretation. [It is a belief.] Strictly speaking, a descriptive interpretation is not really an interpretation; it merely describes the facts. In this sense, listing different approaches to show the particularities of cultural systems is also merely describing facts. We must go a step further and consider their reasons. Giving reasons is a kind of "rational interpretation", and is clearly a philosophical interpretation.

Then how do we explain the particularity of a cultural system? I addressed this problem at the beginning of my book *Philosophy of History*. But that treatment was too short, and too condensed. I will loosely restate it here in greater detail, so you can more easily understand the idea. First, the concept of particularity can only apply to human beings, not to God. God is an infinite being, and an infinite being does not manifest particularity. God manifests Himself in various ways, e.g., in will, in understanding, and in love, etc. Humans also show will, understanding, and love. Then why do only humans manifest particularity in these areas while God does not? The reason is that humans are finite beings. This concept of particularity only applies to finite beings. But this table is also a finite being; it is a thing. Clearly the concept of particularity does not apply to material things like this table. Furthermore, particularity also does not apply to animals. Animals are animate beings, yet they do not have intellectual expressions or cultures. In Buddhism, animals constitute one of the six modes of sentient beings, all capable of becoming Buddha. But this capability of the animals exists only in theory, not in actuality. The actual attainment of Buddhahood is much more difficult and complicated. Animals must first go through many *kalpas* (billions of years) of self-cultivation and transmigration, and be reincarnated into humans in order to elevate themselves toward attaining

Buddhahood. In Buddhism, incarnation into a human being is most precious, because among the six modes of sentient beings, humans can attain Buddhahood most easily. The *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra* (大智度論) expresses this point in a story about a pigeon. You should not take such teachings in Buddhism as fairy tales. They are in fact truths expressed in Buddhist terms.

We have said that God has no particularity, nor does matter. Sentient beings like animals do not have cultures or [intellectual] expressions, therefore particularity does not apply to them either. This particularity is an issue only for humans. Being human is most prized, so it is most precious; yet being a human is also most problematic, most troublesome. The human being has both a spiritual and a material side. Many Western philosophers have discussed the human position in the universe. The Confucians also value humans when they talk about the three forces (三才). *Zhong Yong* says, “[Man] participates in the creativity of Heaven and Earth, assists in Becoming and Nurturing.” This saying highlights positive contribution of humans. But on the other hand, as a finite being, a man must express his love, understanding, will etc. in a finite way. How do we determine and explain that man is finite? According to Aristotle, man is made up of form and matter, therefore he is a finite individual. All beings composed of form and matter are finite beings. Matter alone, according to Aristotle, is pure potentiality; only when form is added does it become actual. Form without matter is pure form, and that would be God. Humans are somewhere in between: he is a composite, finite being, with a material element. This material element is what Kant called “sensibility”, and what Mencius called “the organ (sense) of hearing and sight.” Mencius also named it “*xiaoti*” (小體). Since humans have sensibility, a man’s will and understanding, his love and spirit are all expressed within this limitation of sensibility. This is a problem intrinsic to humans. The limitations of this sensibility have its necessity; it is not something arbitrary, something that can be removed at will. To use Leibniz’s term, it is a metaphysical necessity. But this does not mean that sensibility is metaphysical. According to Zhu Zi, sensibility pertains to *qi* (氣) and is physical. Physical *qi* is not arbitrary or casually removable. This is a necessary component not only to humans but also to the world. Without *qi*, there would be no world. This is metaphysical necessity, different from logical necessity. Logical necessity is formal, independent of reality, and only has to do with the validity of inferences. When we realize

that both form and matter are necessary in this world, this necessity is metaphysical, not logical. Leibniz made some great contributions in this line of thought, but they are largely neglected now. Nowadays people usually only emphasize logical necessity.

Since there is metaphysical necessity in the limitations of sensibility, a person must express his spirit and love, his will and understanding within these limitations. These limitations are like a small hole, what he expresses is from the perspective of a hole. In *Tianxia Pian*, Zhuang Zi said, "The world is filled with people who are pleased with themselves for possessing a narrow glimpse." A glimpse is just a slit, a small hole. You examine from this hole, I examine from that hole; everybody does it. Yet Dao is an integral whole. Because people are self-satisfied with their one-sided glimpses, "The knowledge of Dao will be sundered by all in the world." Zhuang Zi's *Tianxia Pian* put it very well indeed. This essay was very well written, exquisite and melancholy. But this is exactly what we have today: everybody is pleased with his narrow glimpse, but, as Zhuang Zi said, "few can embrace the beauty of heaven and earth, accord with the countenance of the divine." People today have no appreciation for the beauty of heaven and earth, because everything is swayed by technology. Where can people find any beauty of heaven and earth, or the countenance of the divine in technology? Today people regard these sayings as unscientific, as mystic. But in truth, humans must revive their ability to "embrace the beauty of heaven and earth and accord with the countenance of the divine" if they are to achieve true happiness. Otherwise there is no hope of happiness for mankind.

We have said that man expresses his spiritual life through a slit, that he is subject to the limitation of sensibility. This is the limitation intrinsic to human life. There is also external limitation, namely, the world around him. Most people usually only notice the external environment and overlook the intrinsic limitation. But the environment is only an external condition, not the main cause. If everything is determined by the environment, then why is it that within the same environment you have this response and I don't? This is exactly why Marx's historical materialism does not make sense. How can the external environment decide everything? It is only an external condition. Here I think that Toynbee's theory about "challenge" and "response" is inadequate. For example, the Sino-Japanese War [1937-1945] was a major historic event, and the insurgence of the Communists in China was a great calamity for the Chinese people. Such great crises were

major historical challenges, but how many people rose to these challenges? How many responded to them adequately? There were all kinds of responses. Therefore it is not enough to merely heed to the external environment. Most importantly, you must face the limitations intrinsic to your life.

It is through this dual limitations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that you express your spiritual life. You express it through a hole, an aperture. "Expressing through an aperture" is a metaphysical necessity. This is where we find all the pain and hardship in human life, this is also where we find the tragic and the heroic in human life. If men were completely free, completely without limitation, it would be wonderful. But then men would not be men, they would be gods, or God. However, even God cannot manifest Himself except through Jesus. Without Jesus, no one would know or understand God, for He would only be an abstract idea to us. When someone asked Jesus, "You talk about your Father in heaven all the time, could you show us what He is like?" Jesus replied, "You are with me every day, have you not seen Him already?" That means God manifests Himself through Jesus and you should understand God through Jesus. Isn't God completely manifested through Jesus' love, his crucifixion, etc? In this sense, this limitation also has a positive meaning. At first it seems that the limitation we mentioned is only negative, as if the limitation prevents us from fully expressing *Dao* and Truth. But actually, if we look at it from another perspective, once you understand that this limitation has its metaphysical necessity, it also has a positive meaning. That is: truth must be expressed through this limitation; without this limitation there can be no manifestation of truth. In other words, while this limitation limits you, it at the same time enables you to manifest truth through this opening. The Neo-Confucians of Song and Ming Dynasties placed great importance on *qi*. For although *qi* is physical, it obstructs and limits you, the *Dao* cannot be manifested without *qi*. *Qi* therefore has both positive and negative functions. Of course our physical body is a limitation, but it has its function, namely, *Dao* and Truth can only be manifested through this life in this physical body. This is the tragedy of man; this is also the poignant and heroic dimensions of man. Life is an aperture, through which *Dao* can be manifested. An aperture is clearly a limitation. *Dao* cannot be completely manifested through this aperture. When a life is manifesting *Dao*, it is at the same time also limiting *Dao*. This is what Zhuang Zi called a "paradox" (弔詭). The "dialectic" appears out of such paradoxes.

These are the so-called “dialectical paradoxes”. The Chinese understand this kind of dialectical discourse very well. Zhuang Zi understood it exceptionally well; his *Qi Wu Lun* is full of such dialectical paradoxes. Furthermore, not only is an individual person subject to limitations both intrinsic and extrinsic, so are a people, a nation. Every people consist of the collective activities of many individuals. Whenever any people express its spiritual life, it is expressed within these two limitations. Both the intrinsic and extrinsic limitations here have metaphysical necessity.

We have said that only humans have particularities. Humans necessarily have sensibility, sensibility necessarily limits us, and the manifestation through limitation is also necessary. This applies to individuals as well as to peoples. If you understand this, then you would further ask: “Since all humans express themselves within limitations, why did the Chinese begin this way? Why did the Greeks begin in that way? Why did the Hebrews and the Indians begin in those ways?” In other words, you may wonder why the Greeks from the beginning expressed its culture through natural philosophers like Thales. Why did they choose this aperture? Why did the Chinese, the Hebrew go through other apertures? Well, there is no metaphysical necessity, nor logical necessity. If there were logical, metaphysical necessity, people could never change. The Chinese would not be able to learn from other cultures, nor can other people learn from us. There is no logical explanation here, only historical explanation that a certain culture developed through this aperture and not another. To still loosely use the term “necessity”, we may call it “historical necessity”. Nowadays historians often think that history is accidental, a collection of random phenomena, without any necessity. Some are more modest in admitting that there are some underlying principles in connecting these random phenomena. Most of them agree that there isn't any principle, at least not some principles of natural science. It doesn't make sense to say that you use scientific method to study history. You cannot use scientific method in studying history. For instance, one of the main scientific methods is the method of induction. Clearly, you can induce historical data, materials, but you cannot induce history itself. Many historians study historical materials, records, artifacts, but not history itself. You cannot understand history through the study of these materials. You will just be collecting, memorizing a lot of data. I think I understand history, but I don't remember a lot of materials. History itself cannot be induced. For example, in the battle of Kungyang,

Wang Mang boasted of million soldiers, giants, and beasts, but he was defeated by Liu Xiu, who later became Emperor Guangwu of the Han Dynasty, with only a few thousand men. Can you claim that because Han Guangwu won that battle, you can also win now under similar circumstances? Of course you cannot. There is no certainty here, nor is there the law of cause and effect. Then what do we mean by “historical necessity”? You cannot understand it through scientific inquiries, or through the collecting and collating of materials. Historical materials (e.g., the histories of the 25 Dynasties) are not history itself. They are literature recording historical events. Records are not history itself. The only way to understand history is to view it as the expression of spirit. That was the method Hegel used. Hegel's philosophy of history discussed history itself, not historical events or materials. What was his view on history? Hegel considered history as the processes of the development and expression of the human spirit. It has a kind of rhythm, a kind of intrinsic law. It is the inner rhythm or pulse of the development of human spirit. If you are merely engaged in material collection and textual verification, you will not be able to explain many major turns of events in history. For instance, you cannot explain through the collection of historical materials the reason why Ming Dynasty collapsed, and why the Manchurians could come in through Shanhai Gate and conquered China. Because the Manchurians conquered and ruled China militarily for over three hundred years, the intelligentsia all but abandoned the right and ability to think. This trend continued well into our present time. The intelligentsia was despicable and shallow, and therefore paved the way for the insurgence of the communists. This is still the situation we are in today [1978]. Looking at the data and recordings, how would you explain the happening of this chain of events? But examined through the development of spirit, there is an intrinsic rhythm that these events unfolded step by step. This is what we mean by “historical necessity”. It is clearly different from logical necessity, from mechanical, causal necessity. We may also call it “dialectical necessity”. Historical necessity is dialectical. When we look at the last three, four hundred years of our history from this perspective, you can see that these events did not happen randomly or by accident, but one followed another necessarily until where we are today.

In studying history we should not lightly use “what ifs” to second-guess historical characters or events. Doing so can only serve a literary purpose but has nothing to do with

history. For example, it makes no sense in saying, “what if Kang Youwei did not do this” or “what if Sun Yat-sen did this and this instead, then things would have been very different”. You cannot use “what ifs” to hypothesize history. People often say, “Wouldn’t it have been great if it had started this way?” This kind of talk is irresponsible, and shows that the person does not realize the difficulties in history. This is why I don’t like the works of many renowned essayists, e.g., Su Dongpo of the Song Dynasty. Su’s essays on history were full of such “what if” questions. They might be good essays, but not true discussions about history. Certain characters would emerge under certain circumstances or environment, and they in turn would determine the era. There is a certain necessity. In this way we could see why three hundred years of Manchurian rule lead to the insurgence of communism in China. It is not purely accidental. They did not appear out of nowhere or suddenly materialize like magic. This is what we mean by “historical necessity”.

However, we cannot merely consider historical necessity when we discuss history. If there is only historical necessity, then Hegel was right in saying, “what is actual is rational.” Of course “rational” here refers to dialectical reason, within the realm of dialectical development. It is different from logical reason or scientific reason. If indeed “what is actual is rational” as Hegel said, then the first Emperor of Qing was rational, the communists were rational, etc., since their appearance in history was necessary. Hence in discussing history we must also consider moral necessity in addition to historical necessity. In other words, we need to have both historical judgment and moral judgment in discussing history. This issue has come up before, most notably in the debate between Zhu Xi and Chen Tongfu in Southern Song Dynasty. Master Zhu emphasized only moral judgment, and neglected the historical aspect; therefore his arguments could not explain history proper. Chen Tongfu on the other hand insisted on historical significance without moral evaluation. Strictly speaking, the basis for Chen’s historical judgment was not the dialectical development of spirit, but hero admiration. He wanted to champion the Han and Tang Dynasties, to emphasize their importance. He thought that Chinese history did not stop with Yao, Shun, and the Three Dynasties; after that period the world was not “a leaky frame to pass time” and people were not merely “getting by with makeshift patch work”. If we did not recognize the value of Han and Tang, then wouldn’t all the years after the Three Dynasties be empty and futile, and everything be makeshift and wasting time? Chen

therefore vigorously championed the Han and Tang Dynasties. But his view was not based on the dialectical development of the spirit, but on his admiration for the grand accomplishments during those times. Despite the long and intense debate between Master Zhu and Chen, neither of them could establish historical judgment proper. But you should study their arguments in this debate. It was a major issue in the Southern Song Dynasty. The arguments are really heuristic.

So far we have been talking about particularity in cultures. Each cultural system from the very beginning has to emerge from an aperture. There is a metaphysical necessity to go through an aperture. But that it originated through this particular aperture has no metaphysical or logical necessity, only historical necessity within the dialectical development of the spirit. Furthermore, we must consider both historical and moral judgments in evaluating history.

Now we can narrow down this issue from culture in general to philosophy within a culture, and take a look at the particularity of Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophy began with Kings Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, and Duke of Zhou; their focus determined the aperture through which Chinese philosophy developed. These people were all philosopher-kings. Whether or not you agree that they were philosopher-kings, they were certainly different from the early Greek natural philosophers. Then why did we start this way? In other words, why did these kings focus on these issues and express through this aperture? There is no logical necessity that it had to be this way. It could have as well started in some other way, expressed through another aperture. But it did start this way and none other. This is the historical reason. Chinese philosophy started through this aperture to express its spirit, and in the process manifested its intensional truths. Western cultures started with Greek natural philosophers. They initiated and determined the Western philosophical as well as scientific traditions. Chinese culture did not have this kind of philosophical tradition, it also did not develop a scientific tradition. In spite of the many scientific and technological accomplishments, it did not develop complete systems of science. Chinese classics often mentioned *di* (帝, God) and *tian* (天, heaven), but these also did not develop, like Christianity, into religion.

Then, what is the main concern of Chinese philosophy?

The main concern of Chinese philosophy as it developed out of this particular aperture is life, human life. This is what I called “the learning of life”. With this focus, the main concern of Chinese philosophy has been how to situate our life, how to elevate our life. This is very different from the focus of the Greek natural philosophers. Their concern was the natural world, and it determined the development of cosmology and ontology, or Aristotelian metaphysics, or what Kant later termed theoretical metaphysics. This was the Greek tradition. Chinese tradition is quite different. Virtue was the dominating idea emerged out of this main concern. Again, in Kant’s terms, practical reason has primacy, it has superiority over theoretical reason. The ancient Chinese had a clear idea of virtue and morality, but not of knowledge. Knowledge is difficult to acquire: you must go outside yourself and have contact with the external world; you need to understand external objects. This is not something I can always accomplish by myself. On the other hand, the attainment of virtue is entirely within my control. “If I decide to be *ren* (virtuous), then I can indeed be *ren* (virtuous).” This is common sense, very easy to understand. The ancient Chinese had a very clear idea on this. Since the quest for virtue is entirely in one’s control, they emphasized simplicity on the issue of practice and attainment of virtue. That is why later in the Song Dynasty Lu Xiangshan also emphasized simplicity. To be virtuous, you don’t need a lot of external knowledge, and the knowledge would not help even if you accumulated a lot. That is why Master Zhu’s knowledge-oriented approach could not work. Kant also made this distinction very clear; we can use it to fully explain Lu Liangshan’s emphasis on simplicity. Kant said that to act out of the autonomy of the will, even ordinary people would know what one should do. But to act otherwise, as determined other than autonomy, you have to go outside yourself and search for knowledge to determine your action. This would not be an easy task, for you have to study many subjects, consult with specialists, in order to gain knowledge. Using knowledge to determine one’s action is what Kant called heteronomy of the will. The focus of ancient Chinese was life, and their attention was always directed inward, not outward. If nature was your main concern, you had to look outward. If it was not nature, but religion, like Hebrew religion, you still need to look outward, upward to God. It is still heteronomy. Well, the ancient Chinese also looked upwards at *tian*, but it meant “heaven sees what our people see, heaven hears what our people hear”, then it was not dependent on *tian*, but on

the people. Further, what the people saw or heard was dependent on what you [as king] did. Therefore you [as king] must first *ming ming de* (明明德, illuminate luminous virtue). If you wanted the support of your people, you must first fulfill your duties, cultivate your virtues, etc. The focus was therefore always turned inward. The focus of Christians is always outward and upward. Needless to say, so is science. This is the main direction of Western philosophy and its essential character. Once the direction is fixed, it is very hard to change. Now when we are trying to study science and technology, to learn from Western culture, it is so easy to forget the original focus of our culture. Our ancestors since the beginning emphasized the cultivation of life, but few people now still pay attention to it. Modern science divides the study of life into psychology, physiology, anthropology, sociology, etc. Each discipline looks at humans from a different scientific perspective, yet the person as a whole is lost in the process. This is the problem of modern science. Although scholarship and truth cannot be measured in size, there is a difference in its significance and value that must be distinguished. There are issues that science cannot determine. I am not against science, but I am against making science the sole criterion for everything as many people often do now. Science is only one aspect. There are other aspects beside science in human life.

We will stop here today. Next time we will consider the issue of universality.