

Li Zehou's Ethics and the Structure of Confucian Pragmatic Reason*

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Abstract

Li Zehou believes that human psychology, just like humanness or “human nature”, is not fixed or given, but is rather something characterized by changing developmental forms of human pragmatic reason, which is formed over millions of years, and is still continuously accumulating and changing. However, reason alone is by no means something that would absolutely separate humans from their sensuality and thus from other animals. The difference between human beings and animals primarily occurs somewhere else, namely in the very realm of the specifically human social existence, which is defined by “subjectality” (*zbutixing* 主體性) and includes specific human values. In this context, Li shows that Confucian pragmatic reason is formed and functions within the “emotio-rational formation” (*qingli jiegou* 情理結構), which is deeply rooted in the human world. It is based on actual human conditions and arises from human social emotionality, transforming these culturally integrated general communal emotions through rites in the process of “condensation of reason” (*lixing ningju* 理性凝聚) into rational concepts of right and wrong, good and evil. The rationality of these concepts governs the subjective personal feelings of each member of a community; the pragmatic nature of this rationality, however, is tightly linked to and intertwined with human emotions. In the concrete social life, these rational concepts can nevertheless dissolve—through the process of the “melting of reason” (*lixing ronghua* 理性融化)—in the heart-minds of people and thus become an integral part of individual emotions. This paper aims to posit the Confucian pragmatic reason into the framework of Li Zehou's ethics and political axiology.

Keywords: Li Zehou, ethics, political philosophy, pragmatic reason, emotion-rational formations, Confucianism

Li Zehoujeva etika in struktura konfucijanskega pragmatičnega uma

Izvleček

Po Li Zehouju človeška zavest tako kot »človeškost« ali »človeška narava« ni nespremenljiva ali dana, temveč so zanjo bolj značilne spreminjajoče in razvijajoče se oblike

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človekovega pragmatičnega uma, ki se je oblikoval več milijonov let in se še zmeraj nenehno nalaga in spreminja. Toda sam um nikakor ni nekaj, kar bi povsem ločevalo ljudi od njihove čutnosti in s tem od drugih živali. Razlika med ljudmi in živalmi se pojavi bistveno drugje, namreč v sami sferi specifično človekovega družbenega bivanja, ki ga definira »subjektnost« (zhutixing 主體性) in vsebuje specifične človeške vrednote. Li v tem kontekstu pokaže, da se konfucijanski pragmatični um formira in deluje znotraj »emocionalno-racionalne formacije« (qingli jiegou 情理結構), ki je globoko ukoreninjena v človeškem življenju. Temelji na dejanskih razmerah in nastane iz človeške družbene emocionalnosti, ki v procesu »kondenzacije razuma« (lixing ningju 理性凝聚) z obredi spreminja te kulturno sprejete, splošne skupne emocije v racionalne koncepte pravilnega in napačnega, dobrega in zla. Racionalnost teh konceptov vodi subjektivne osebne emocije vsakega pripadnika_ce skupnosti; pragmatična narava te racionalnosti je tesno povezana in prepletena s človeškimi emocijami. V konkretnem družbenem življenju se lahko ti racionalni koncepti razpršijo – v procesu »raztapljanja razuma« (lixing ronghua 理性融化) –, prenašajo v srčno zavest ljudi in tako postanejo integralni del posameznikovih emocij. Ta članek postavlja konfucijanski pragmatični um v okvir Li Zehoujeve etike in politične aksiologije.

Ključne besede: Li Zehou, politična filozofija, pragmatični um, emotivno-racionalna formacija, konfucianizem

Introduction: Li Zehou and the Importance of Ethics

Li Zehou believes that ethics belongs to the most important philosophical disciplines. He aims to revive, modernize, develop and complement Chinese traditional ethics through what he calls “transformative creation” (*zhuanhuaxingde chuangzao* 轉化性的創造). He takes Chinese ethics, which represents the main pillar of Chinese philosophy, as a vital basis for his elaborations on certain aspects of Kant’s, Marx’ and other Western theoretician’s ethical thought and hopes to contribute in this way to the development of a new global ethics for the entire humankind (Li 2016a, 17).

In ancient and premodern history, traditional Chinese philosophy ascribed a lot more importance to ethics than the general Western philosophical tradition. However, in modern Euro-American philosophy, especially from Kant on, ethics and morality are also seen as discourses of utmost significance, for they are (as Li Zehou reveals) connected to the “substantial root of human beings” (*rende benti* 人的本體). Hence, it is not a coincidence that Li also attaches great importance to ethics and morality. For him, they are results of the long lasting process of those aspects of the humanization of the nature (*zirande renhua* 自然的人化), which pertain to our inner humanness; as such, they are that “which makes human beings human”. Hence, Li emphasizes: “Both logically and practically speaking, ethics and morals have priority in relation to cognition” (Li 2016b, 1107). They are aimed

at something higher than the phenomenal world that can be explained by epistemology. In contrast to Kant, however, Li sees this human substance as a dynamic and changeable entity: he believes that no human moral capacities are inherent or *a priori*, but should rather be seen as results of history and education.

Particular Approaches and Specific Concepts

For him, the “substantial root of ethics” (*Junli benti* 倫理本體) is to be found in human free will, which he sees as a part of human psychological formations embedded in the realm of the cultural-psychological formation (*wenhua—xinli jiegou* 文化—心理結構) of the human mind. In Li’s view, free will belongs to the most important mental formations. It originates in the conscious decisions of human beings to sacrifice their own, individual selfish interests for the greater good of a community. Human beings make such decisions when they consciously realize that their individual desires are in a sharp contradiction with the rational social demands of their community. Such decisions are special because they are results of conscious reflection; hence, they belong to conscious human behavioural patterns and attitudes. Precisely because such free decisions are often made in contradiction with individual interests, needs and desires, the free will cannot be seen as a simple result of causal laws or interests. Since it is not something subordinated to the laws of causality, which governs the phenomenal world, it is “free”. Here, freedom is not understood in the sense of being able to do whatever one wants to do, but obviously rather as a kind of freedom similar to the one defining Kant’s deontological ethics. It is a freedom in the sense of being unbound by (or liberated from) the primeval margins (limitations or laws) that determine the phenomenal world. This could also be seen as an expression of humans as supra-biological (*chao shengwu* 超生物) beings: “A human being is not merely a biological entity; to become a human being, necessarily means to possess an inner, conscious rational moral character” (Li 2016a, 20).

Hence, humans possess the capacity to surpass their biological limitations not only because tools (or technology) complete—and thus perfect—their limbs and organs, but also because they possess free will. In this sense, freedom is the opposite of necessity. It enables human beings to consciously decide to carry out moral actions, which can surpass the causal laws of individual harm and benefit. Animals do not possess this kind of freedom.

The crucial point here is that human “free will” as such has a higher, sublime value. It cultivates people’s universal psychological formations, bestowing them with social and cultural contents applicable for themselves and for their fellow human beings (including their descendants). In this

way, it causes that the social existence of human beings is profoundly different of that, which defines animals. This is the so-called “substance of ethics”, which surpasses the phenomenal world. (Li 2016a, 19)

Li points out that in China the process of this cultivation, which is already manifest in the earliest child education, is called “learning to be human” (*xue zuo ren* 學做人).

He admires Kant for his construction of the categorical imperative by which he described this characteristic of ethical behaviour determined by the governance of reason. In its function of an absolute order comparable to a divine decree, which has to be followed even without any additional argumentation, the sublime power of categorical imperative has liberated people from all fears, but also from all instantaneous worldly wishes (*ibid.*, 20).

However, to a certain extent, Li Zehou agrees with Hegel’s critique of this model: Hegel criticized Kant’s ethics as being confined to pure formalism and for lacking any contents. According to Kant, these formal structures (of rational domination over desires) determine ethical action and even represent universal legislative principles for particular ethical norms. However, in specific and concrete historical contexts, this vision is difficult to uphold. Human beings exist in specific social and familial groups, they always belong to certain social strata and they are always necessarily defined by relations to other people and to the society as a whole. In other words, human existence is always conditioned by certain economic, geographical, historical, environmental, cultural and ideological factors. Because of this, the realization of moral actions, and the implementation of ethical relations and norms, have different qualities depending on the concrete circumstances, which defines the existence in which human beings live. Different cultures affirmed numerous different—often mutually conflicting—conceptions of what is moral. In this context, and as the results of particular social conditions, ethics and morality necessarily appear relative. This was the starting point for the evaluation of ethics by most modern philosophers, not only for Hegel and Marx, but even more so for the various streams of utilitarianism. For Li Zehou, it is also clear that ethics evolves with history. He reveals that we have to view it in a context of historicism, because an independent “ethicism” (*lunlizhuyi* 倫理主義) does not exist. On the other hand, however, such a critique is one-dimensional, because in Li’s view benefit and harm alone (no matter if they are individual or group-based) do not suffice for explaining moral actions. This problem seems to point to the existence of a universal value, which exceeds the concrete material conditions of human life. Li proceeds from the question of where does this universality (or absoluteness) come from? For him, this belongs to the most important (and complex) issues of ethics. In Li’s theory, the absolute ethical notions do not originate from an external God, nor from biological or neurological determinable aspects

of human consciousness. These foundations of ethical behaviour are imbedded in individual psychological formations, but these formations are not *a priori*, as in Kant's deontology. According to Li, they are a part of the crucial characteristics that define humankind as such. For Li, humankind as an entirety is a dynamic entity, which is constantly evolving due to its material practice, through which its experiences, modes of interactions and forms of knowledge (including moral knowledge) accumulate and shape mental formations. These universal principles are hence based upon the requirement for a sustainable existence and continuous reproduction of humankind. In this context, it is also important to note that the universal grounds of these principles are based upon Kant's rational categorical imperative, and not on any kind of moral feelings. The latter are secondary, and the former primary. The free will is rational, and not based on emotions.

Our rational characteristics are thus that which makes human beings truly human. In the process of human evolution, the most important formations, which pertain to the human ethical substance, are linked to the "condensation of reason" (*lixingde ningju* 理性的凝聚). However, this cohesion of rationality merely pertains to its structure or its form without any particular content. Its contents are always relative, always fitting to particular requirements of corresponding societies. Hence, the form of human ethics is absolute, but its contents are relative. This view, which is based upon a correlativity (or complementarity) of form and content and, analogously, of absoluteness and relateness also enabled Li Zehou to oppose the (widely spread) theories of ethical relativism or even situationalism.

Li denotes this complementarity as "a dialectical relation between the 'absolute' and the 'relative' ethics" (Li 2016a, 24). In this model, which is based upon Li's important differentiation between the modern social and the traditional religious morality,¹ the absolute ethics shapes the relative one:

From ancient times, human societies have always established various ceremonies, customs, laws, religions and arts. The concrete functions of these systems shaped the concrete "social morality", that is, the "relative ethics". Its wide-reaching substantial function, however, shaped the "absolute ethics" and the "religious morality", which is the breeding ground of the "free will". (ibid.)

1 Li Zehou differentiates between two kinds of morality. He draws a clear demarcation line between religious morality (*zongjiaoxing daode* 宗教性道德), associated with subjective emotions, values, and beliefs and social morality (*shehuixing daode* 社會性道德) which is linked to justice, equality, reason, independence, and human rights. In this schema, modern social morality and public virtue are distinguished from religious morality and private virtue. For Li, the former is primary, and he often emphasizes that "religious morality stems from social morality" (Li 2016a, 35). In several works, and particularly in his paper entitled *Liang zhong daode lun* 兩種道德論 (*Theory of the Two Kinds of Morality*), he explains the distinction between these in great detail (see *ibid.*, 29–57).

In this model, the concrete contents of the social morality, which belongs to relative ethics, construct the psychological formations, which are absolute. In Li's view, this model simultaneously reflects the complementary nature of emotions and reason. The Chinese philosophical tradition, especially the ideational history of Confucianism, is full of examples of how to achieve this absoluteness: while the Confucian *Analects* lay stress on explaining rituality as a return to humaneness, Mencius speaks about the cultivation of one's vital potentials (*qi* 氣) in order to achieve the upholding of one's will (*zhi* 志). Zhu Xi 朱熹 recommends applying the method of the exploration of things in order to reach ultimate knowledge, while Wang Yangming 王陽明 reveals the importance of inner (or inborn) knowledge (*liang zhi* 良知). What is common to all these discourses is their tendency to construct psychological formations of condensed rationality by means of intense and hard moral training (ibid., 27).

Hence, Li's ethical theory, which manifests itself in his theory of anthropo-historical ontology, is tightly linked to traditional Confucian teachings. Through this synthesis, Li Zehou aims to explain his view of the Marxist² term "humanization of nature" (*zirande renhua* 自然的人化). In contrast to Marx, who chiefly dealt with the humanization of external nature, Li enriched the notion by his inspiring elaboration on the humanization of our internal nature.

As a philosopher who is intensely concerned with the future development of China and humankind in general, Li Zehou creates a theory that is not limited to the study of Confucian ethics or the formulation of his own (Jia 2018, 178). He also aims to uncover the "possible contributions that the Confucian ethics of emotion and the renewed emotio-rational structure can make to the development of Chinese and world civilizations" (ibid.).

Because for Li Zehou Western philosophy did not manage to elaborate on the true origins of human ethical substance, his reply (see 2011a, 9) to Nietzsche's famous exclamation "God is dead!" is that this is the exactly reason why it is high time for Chinese philosophy (and ethics) to take the centre stage.

The Ethics of Pragmatic Reason

Li Zehou emphasizes that traditional Chinese social, axiological and political systems were permeated with a rational attitude or spirit (Li 1980, 89), which

2 Because many Western and contemporary East Asian scholars do not see Marxist philosophy as compatible with the Chinese philosophical tradition, several Chinese scholars are making increased efforts to eliminate this prejudice. Tian Chenshan, for instance, often shows that Marxism has provided many opportunities for philosophical conversations with Chinese tradition (see for instance Tian 2019, 13).

defined what he calls “pragmatic reason” (*shiyong lixing* 實用理性). In the first version of his article “A Re-Evaluation of Confucius” (*Kongzi zai pingjia* 孔子再評價), Li initially denoted this kind of rationality as “*shijian lixing*” 實踐理性 (Li 1980, 77).³ However, in Chinese translations of Western philosophical texts of the time, this concept was already widely applied as a translation of Immanuel Kant’s “practical reason”. Therefore, Li explained in a footnote to this text (*ibid.*, 89, footnote 3) that Kant’s “practical reason” differs from his own concept which derives from Confucian rationality.⁴ Later on, he created the term “pragmatic reason” in order to clearly distinguish between the two notions. According to Li Zehou, the Chinese cultural tradition is focused upon this kind of reason because it looks down on pure speculative thinking:

For the Chinese, “transcendental” or *a priori* cannot be the last word. The Chinese mind would ask, why is something “transcendental”, or where does the *a priori* come from? Because of this “one-world-view”, it would also be difficult to accept the idea of something “absolutely independent of all experience”. This is also the reason why Chinese find it difficult to accept the formalism in Kant’s ethics. (Li 1999, 180)

He noted, however, that even though they are different, there is still a certain similarity between Kant’s and his own concept, especially concerning their close connection to ethics, which was a basic characteristic of both (Li 2008, 246).

In general, most people see reason (*lixing* 理性) as an epistemological category. In Li’s system, however, it is also a fundamental concept pertaining to his philosophy of ethics, because epistemology arises from ethics and hence the latter defines the former: “Ethics is primary, and epistemology secondary. Cognitive laws (like linguistics or logic) evolve from ethical imperatives. This is immensely important” (Li 2016a, 260).

Ethical norms develop in accordance with the principles of pragmatic rationality, which are tightly linked to particular historical and social contexts and to *qing* 情, i.e. the shared emotional realms that arise in human beings in these contexts.⁵ In

3 Prior to that, already in the 1960s, he simply applied a more general term “Chinese rationalism” (*Zhongguo lixingzhuyi* 中國理性主義) in order to highlight the specific nature of this kind of reason (Li and Liu 2014, 4).

4 In fact, Li Zehou viewed this kind of rationality as belonging to the central paradigms determining Confucianism, which he hence even defined as “a Chinese philosophy of pragmatic reason” (see Gu 2018, 77).

5 Li often exposes that instinctive human feelings had to be cultivated and molded into norms by reasonable, sensitive regulations. However, he never clearly defines the standards of such reasonableness, failing thus to demonstrate the actual criteria of determining what is actually “crazy”, “evil”, “ugly”, or “deconstructive”, and hence must be eliminated by the activation of

this sense, pragmatic reason is a product of human material practices. Li explained that pragmatic reason could therefore not be equated to the modern Western notion of cognitive (*renzhi lixing* 認知理性) or ethical reason (*lunli lixing* 倫理理性), which are both rooted in a strict separation between subject and object, neutrality of values, objective truth, natural rights, independent individual or formal justice. In this context, it has to be seen as a different kind of reason (Li 2016a, 304), one that simultaneously pertains to material practice and to cognitive patterns or laws (Li 2008, 246).

A detailed elaboration on pragmatic reason and its relations to other crucial concepts such as the “culture of pleasure”,⁶ was first published in Li Zehou’s book *On Ancient Chinese Intellectual History* (*Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun* 中國古代思想史論), which came out in 1985. At that time, it was popular to be anti-traditional, and many Chinese scholars harshly criticized him for promoting such ideas and thereby advocating a revival and transformed continuation of Chinese traditional culture, not only in terms of its superficial forms and patterns, but also in terms of its cultural “spirit”.

Li Zehou elaborated further on the concept for many years in different ways. He explained it (as well as its connection to the specifically Chinese type of culture, i.e. “the culture of pleasure”) in detail in a book entitled *Pragmatic Reason and the Culture of Pleasure* (*Shiyong lixing yu legan wenhua* 實用理性與樂感文化), which was completed in 2004, but first published in January 2005.

Typical for China, the pragmatic reason as a form of a non-transcendental moral reasoning was a product of the one-world-view, which is paradigmatic for traditional Chinese thought. It arose through the practice of its early shamanistic-historical

pragmatic reason. Even though he emphasizes the importance of the dynamic nature of pragmatic reason, its utilitarian tendency, and especially its openness toward innovations and alternations, it still remains difficult to understand what underlies such regulations, which chiefly appear in restrictions. Although Li mentions that (similar to Dewey’s pragmatism), the truth is determined by what is positive and useful for a society, and although the concrete content of this usefulness is subject to continuous alternations, the question about what (or who) has the actual power of determining this usefulness (or this truth) remains open. The concrete contents of these regulations and restrictions changes according to the nature of power structures and relations existing in actual, changing cultures and societies.

- 6 With this term, Li denotes the characteristic spirit, which defined traditional Chinese cultures and societies. In his view, it was a product of the fact that its cultural psychology was not focused upon any kind of transcendental reality, but rather took human life as its elementary substance. Against such an ideational background, people could maintain their life as their ultimate ideal and goal, without suffering under burdens resulting from a division between body and mind (Li 2016a, 158). He emphasizes “‘The culture of pleasure’ does not separate the soul from the flesh. It affirms human existence and human life in this world. Even in the most devastating and difficult situations, people could still firmly believe that in the end, everything will turn around toward a bright future. This brightness did not come from any Heavenly kingdom, but was rather a part of this world” (ibid.).

tradition. Pragmatic reason is characteristic of classical Confucianism and a crucial element of the traditional Chinese culture of pleasure (D'Ambrosio, Carleo and Lambert 2016, 1063). "Li believes that this pragmatic reason and the Confucian humanistic tradition have formed China more than anything else and have contributed to its long and uninterrupted civilization" (Pohl 2018, 65). Hence, it is not a coincidence that this form of reason not only belongs to, but also determines and permeates all five major factors defining traditional Chinese culture, which can be found according to Li's analysis and interpretation of the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) in the following features:

1. Blood (kinship) relations;
2. Psychological principles;
3. Humanism;
4. Ideal personality;
5. Pragmatic reason.

The characteristic feature of this kind of reason was its pragmatic orientation towards the actual, material world in which people live. This kind of reason was not limited to an abstract, cognitive, or theoretical kind of rationality.⁷ The dominant cultures in ancient China were more or less indifferent towards such speculative reason. Already the earliest Confucian scholars mainly believed that abstract reasoning without a straight connection to actual life was meaningless. In this sense, pragmatic reason primarily means that the practical undertakings in actual society have to be governed by rationality. In such a framework, emotions and desires are cultivated by means of rational principles. Li Zehou believes that at the beginning of human evolution people's operative accomplishments in the form of making and applying tools offered them prospects for controlling the environments in which they lived. In the course of historical development, the accumulation of such experiences enabled them to surpass other species and become supra-biological beings. Such developments shaped this kind of specifically human reason, which sedimented in the vibrant formations of human mind. Even though this exclusively human feature was still rooted in our animal nature, it also allowed people to transcend their physical limitations. For Li, the making and using of tools is the original human practice and from this, through a long historical process of accumulation and sedimentation, a cultural-psychological formation takes shape that eventually operates beyond discrete practices (Ames and Jia 2018, 14).

7 Li also claims, however, that even though material practice is the very origin of any kind of rationality, human reasoning is evolving further and it surpasses such an origin. However, human societies and their specific conditions are always its concrete historical foundation, for "laws, standards, and values come from the historic building up of pragmatic reason, and they do so in the interaction of humans with the world; they do not depart from it" (Lynch 2016, 719).

In his anthro-historical ontology, Li therefore argues that human rationality is generated from empirical reasonableness. The operational labour (*laodong caozuo* 勞動操作) of making and using tools shaped the specifically human forms of knowledge (logic, mathematics, dialectics and so on). When such labour advanced in human societies, it also generated ethics and morality.

The Confucian Roots

In this context, Li Zehou highlights that Confucianism has always laid stress upon the ethical practice. Even though for most Confucians, there is no supernatural or metaphysical source of human cognition, pragmatic reason still cannot be seen as functioning in a simple one-to-one correspondence with the empirical world (Lynch 2016, 718). To a certain extent and in certain aspects, Li's theory of pragmatic reason can be compared to Dewey's pragmatism, for both theories see usefulness as a measure for determining reasonable behaviour. However, there is a very important difference between them as well, and Li Zehou emphasizes that his ethics is not a form of pragmatism, but rather belongs to anthropological ontology⁸ (Li 2011a, 159). The basic approaches of this theory can also help us to clarify a question that was raised in this context by Andrew Lambert, namely how can the categorical imperative (which Li Zehou unquestionably endorses)⁹ be a foundational principle, given that he—on the other hand—rejects Kant's category of the *a priori* in human cognition.

More specifically, given that such a form of rationality is not crucial to the Confucian tradition—a tradition in which, according to Li, pragmatic reasoning (*shiyong lixing*) dominates—then how could it come to hold a dominant place in the psychological formation of a subject immersed in that tradition? (Lambert 2018, 103–4)

Lambert finds the answer to this important question in the unboundedness of the cultural-psychological formation, which represents the central concept of Li's

8 Regardless of this, some Western scholars (such as Catherine Lynch) still believe that Li's ethics belongs to a wider field of pragmatism, and that Li is one of the most creative representatives of this current: "Lynch concludes that while Li's historical ontology fits within the scope and aims of pragmatism, it also steers pragmatism into some new, productive directions" (Ames and Jia 2018, 14).

9 He admires Kant for his construction of the categorical imperative by which he described the most fundamental characteristic of ethical behavior determined by the governance of reason. Li often emphasized that its function is comparable to the one of an absolute order or a divine decree, which has to be followed even without any additional argumentation. In this sense, Li believes that the sublime power of categorical imperative has liberated people from all fears, but also from all instantaneous worldly wishes (*ibid.*, 20).

theory of mind. This means that this formation is open to all influences “as long as these can be integrated into existing social practices and categories of understanding” (Lambert 2018, 104). In Lambert’s view, this is also the reason why in Li’s system globalized psychological formations could gradually emerge in the cultural-psychological formations of different cultures. In this way, the Chinese tradition could absorb numerous initially foreign influences, including the idea of the categorical imperative. “In a global marketplace of concepts and ways of thinking and feeling, the categorical imperative could emerge as the acme of reason, something to which subjects feel a strong commitment” (ibid.).

It is certainly true that Li Zehou seems to present the categorical imperative as a universal ideal toward the realization of which all people and cultures evolve. However, Li never seems to have seen this form of reason as something that could be (*via* modernization and globalization) introduced from other cultures to the cultural-psychological formation of the “Chinese mind”. Firstly, in Li’s system, particular forms of human mind were shaped and accumulated through much longer periods of history. Secondly, categorical reason is not merely “a form of thinking and feeling” (see the above quotation), but a basic formation of human mind; hence, it cannot be limited to methods of cognition or a cognitive means to decide upon discrete moral actions. Thirdly (and perhaps most importantly), in Li’s view, Confucianism certainly contained absolute principles that could have evolved through nothing else but a specifically Chinese version of categorical imperative. Here, we have to note that in contrast to pragmatism, Li Zehou’s pragmatic reason not only accepts, but also respects, follows in and even underlines its correspondence with objective principles, laws or codes, which are independent from concrete, situationally conditioned human inclinations or experiences. The Confucian philosophical tradition denoted these objective orders and principles as “the Way of Heaven” (*tian dao* 天道) or the “decree of Heaven” (*tian ming* 天命) (Li 2008, 247). Although Li’s pragmatic reason is by no means a transcendental instrument, it still governs human behaviour in accordance with absolute norms, which are certainly comparable to Kant’s categorical imperative. Li namely repeatedly emphasizes that its sublime power is something, which is in principle shared by all human species, for it belongs to those special foundational principles, which make human beings human.¹⁰ Hence, pragmatic reason can be seen

10 In fact, Li confirms the absolute nature of the categorical imperative and even of the free will. These two elements represent the first and third principles of Kant’s deontology. However, Li denies such universal validity in regard to the second principle, which Kant still regarded as absolute; this principle reveals human beings as ends in themselves. In contrast to Kant’s view, Li shows that this second principle is not absolute, for it is a product of its time, defined by different social conditions and different contents of concrete historical situations. However, he emphasizes its overall importance and argues that China could benefit from assimilating Kant’s idea that “humans should be treated as ends” into its moral culture (D’Ambrosio 2016, 725).

as a philosophical generalization of reason, but one that negates the pure form of speculative reasoning *a priori*. Although it considers the influences of relativity, uncertainty, and non-objectivity, it is by no means a kind of relativism, for it is still determined by absolute norms and principles.

This amalgamation of historical and categorical elements comprised in the concept of pragmatic reason is often difficult to understand through the lens of Western philosophy. This is because Western academia mostly proceeds from an approach which includes a strict division between the absoluteness of psychological forms on the one side, and multifaceted, changeable features of human historical development on the other. In Li's view, however, such a separation is a necessary result of the so-called "two-world view" (*liangge shijie guan* 兩個世界觀), which prevailed in Western philosophical discourses. Hence, Li highlights the double ontological nature of this kind of rationality: "Pragmatic reason ... manifests itself on the surfactant levels of cultural features, but simultaneously, it also constructs deep physiognomies of human mind" (Li 2016a, 119).

In Li's view, the basic principles of Confucian ethics are hence comparable to those constitutive to Kant's categorical imperative. Both models are systems of self-inflicted restrictions or guidelines, standing in a stark contrast to those forcibly imposed on people from outside. In this context, Li emphasizes that such standards are not only an integral part of Kant's categorical imperative, but also represent a core part of Confucian ethics. He points out that this can be found in numerous well-known Confucian quotations (*ibid.*, 208), such as in the following dialogue in which Confucius tried to explain to his disciple Yan Yuan that moral principle is a part of the inner nature of human beings, and not something enforced upon them from outside.

Yan Yuan asked about humaneness. The Master replied: "Humaneness can be achieved through self-control and a revival of rituality. If you can control yourself and revive rituality only for one single day, all under heaven will return to humaneness. (Lunyu s. d., Yan Yuan: 1)

Li believes that such statements belong to rational categorical imperatives. In terms of their emphasis upon such characteristic features of moral psychology, Confucius and Kant are entirely equivalent (Li 2016a, 208).

Li emphasizes that in both Confucian and Kantian models such categorical imperatives belong to morality, which is internal and represents a crucial part of human psychological formations. In his view, categorical imperative is hence a mental form described by both (i.e. Confucian and Kantian) moral philosophies, which equally emphasize that while human beings (as individuals) are educated and cultivated by ethics, that is, by different systems and orders, they

all still possess psychological formations that have an absolute nature (Li and Tong 2012, 172).

Therefore, Li still considers Confucianism as comprising certain “semi-religious” elements, although the Confucian teachings are not based on any idea of an external (anthropomorphic) God.¹¹

In this context, Li Zehou highlights that such a theoretical foundation pertains to agnosticism, which was philosophically quite mature for ancient times, because the existence of supernatural deities is difficult to confirm or to falsify. Hence, in his view, such an agnostic principle is a strong evidence for the “clear rational spirit” inherent to the Confucian ideational system (Li 1980, 89). Therefore, the rationalization of emotion, which took place in China in the course of transforming natural religions into the ethics of humaneness (*ren* 仁), was not based upon the restraint of human desires. In the traditional Chinese “culture of pleasure”, people were instead offered a regulated way of satisfying their wishes and needs.

There was no need for an external God, whose orders, which were based upon irrational authority, should be blindly followed. On the other hand, people still possessed hope for salvation (humanism) and self-fulfillment (individual sense of mission) without rejecting this world or humiliating themselves. [...] Everything could be left to the balanced measure and regulative function of the pragmatic reason. (*ibid.*, 89)

Similar to most other concepts of Li Zehou’s ideational system, which is based on paradigmatic foundations of Confucianism and some other Chinese philosophical traditions, pragmatic reason is also a dynamic notion (Li 2008, 250). Its dialectical logic is by no means “fatalistically deterministic” (Lynch 2016, 719), but rather opens enough space for considerations of situationally determined necessities and contingencies, including the “potential and accidental elements of human choices and decisions” (*ibid.*). Li often writes that in applying pragmatic reason, people have the choice to modify and regulate their own lives: “Pragmatic reason’ is situational, it arises from a certain situation, but it does not belong to the situational ethics” (Li and Liu 2014, 214).

11 Confucianism was clearly defined by agnosticism (see Rošker 2019, 143). In the Confucian *Analects*, we can come across several passages in which the existence of deities is questioned, even though never explicitly denied. The Confucian *Analects* clearly state that Confucius does not teach about “strange powers and irrational deities” (子不語怪力亂神) (Lunyu s. d.: Shu Er, 490). Allegedly, he also claimed that “we are not even capable of serving humans, so how could (or why should) we serve ghosts” (未能事人，焉能事鬼) (*ibid.*: Xian Jin, 569), and that “we even don’t understand life, so how could we know anything about death” (未知生，焉知死) (*ibid.*). Hence, the most reasonable thing one could do was to “keep a respectful distance from spirits and ghosts” (敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣) (*ibid.*: Yong Ye, 459).

In this way, the correlative dialectical interactions between eventuality and necessity, potentiality and factuality define the concrete operating dimension, and thus they came to be the historic keynote of human existence.

The Role of Emotions, Experiences and Practices

Although it operates in accordance with objective principles, pragmatic reason is not absolute in the sense of transcending all time and space; in this sense, it is not entirely *a priori*. Even though—as we have seen above—Confucian pragmatic reason includes the cultivation and the development of moral formations, which belong to human inwardness and can be regarded as a kind of categorical imperative, it also comprises emotions.

There is also another famous reply, ascribed to Confucius, namely “a person who possesses humaneness loves human beings”. That, which is emphasized in this reply, is indeed something emotional. We also saw that quotations such as “self-control and revival of rituality” lay stress upon reason. However, in general, we can see from numerous descriptions of humaneness given by Confucius that he mostly referred to human emotio-rational structure, which consists of both reason and emotion (*qing*). Kant, on the other hand, only speaks about reason. His concept of reason surpasses and outgrows the humankind, whereas the Confucian emotio-rational structure explicitly belongs to the humans. This is a fundamental difference. (Li 2016a, 208)

Because for Li Zehou material existence is fundamental, this kind of reason is necessarily a product of material practice and arises from it. According to him, the operative processes of work and its products provide the basic contents of experiences. However, symbolic operations abstracted from this foundation come to possess an independent character that can be separated from concrete experiences (Lynch 2016, 719). In this sense, reason cannot be hypostatized; it is just a manner of cognizance or an instrument that can be used by people when dealing with various issues and objects in their lives.

Reason is merely a tool, and the ultimate goal of “pragmatic reason” is the sustainable preservation of human existence. Not only it does not possess any transcendental nature, it also never departs from experience and history. In the scope of such rationality, there can be no separation between “the Way of Humans” and “the Way of Heaven”. They are both the same, and besides it is the “Way of Humans” which generates the evolution

to higher stages. This implies that development does not proceed from Heaven toward humans, but in the opposite direction. (Li 2016a, 157)

On the other hand, pragmatic reason is a part of human universal necessity, because the human mind, which is an objective factor of that which makes us human, is rooted in natural biological instincts, which accumulated and were shaped through history (regarding humankind as a whole) and education (for the individual), respectively. Hence, it is also an outcome of rationalization. Such a process includes the condensation of reason, which is tightly linked to the shaping of moral consciousness and free will.

In this context, Li Zehou explains that because according to his theory human reason was originally generated out of the making and using tools in communities, he simultaneously proceeds from two well-known ancient definitions of humans: “humans are rational animals” and “humans are animals that create tools”. For him, these two definitions are tightly linked to one another. Hence, his return to and modification of Kant’s rationalism shows, on the one hand, that reason is a significant element of humanness, while on the other, it clearly shows that the notion of pragmatic reason cannot be seen as one that pertains to inherent and *a priori* mental structures.

When I interpreted Kant in the past, I talked about “objective sociality”. Now, I can confirm that it is an empirical rationality. The notion of pragmatic reason is a philosophical epitome of such “empirical rationality”. One of the chief characteristics of Chinese philosophy and culture is that it denies the existence of *a priori* reason and it does not raise reason to the highest position. (ibid., 157)

In his view, pragmatic reason is rather something modifiable and mouldable that not only preserves, but also develops, humanity. It arises from practical initiatives and from practices that are based upon initiatives. It is a kind of empirical reasonableness, which does not rely on any kinds of transcendental formulas, but rather on the mere fact of human life, from which it arises and evolves, continuously discovering and accumulating new experiences (ibid., 163).

Li Zehou’s understanding of the pragmatic reason is comparable to the approaches of the second period of Confucianism, which took place during the Han period and in which the more rationalistic tradition was in the forefront. In his book *On Ancient Chinese Intellectual History* (*Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun* 中國古代思想史論), Li points out that in this second period Confucian philosophy transformed the structural pattern *li* 理 (which can, to a certain degree, be compared to the Western notion of reason) from the previously cosmologic

concept to one that refers to human inwardness, which is permeated with ethical connotations (Li 1985, 220–22). In the third period of Confucianism, (that is during the Neo-Confucianism of the Song period) this concept was further modified. At first glance, its main representative Zhu Xi's 朱熹 understanding of *li*, according to which it is inherent in every object of the factual world, stands in sharp contrast with Li's belief that reason is something impeded by or applied to objects from outside.

However, recent research into its semantic development showed that in the post-Han era the Chinese notion *li* was gradually understood as the mutually compatible, dynamic structure of the external world and the mind (Rošker 2012, 8). In the scope of Neo-Confucianism, the notion *li* was seen as both a particular structural pattern as well as the all-embracing, overall structure determining the universe. Cheng Hao 程顥, for instance, argued that “the basic structure of each single thing is also the basic structure of everything that exists” (一物之理即萬物之理) (Cheng and Cheng 1981: I, Yi Shu, 13).

Hence, Li points out that the moral foundations of human mind originated from the progressive internalization of rationality, which was imposed onto the human mind from outside, through rites and codes of ethical regulations (Li 1980, 85) and that being a result of this continuous process, pragmatic reason was never an unchangeable, fixed, or purely abstract entity. It must rather be seen as a flexible and dynamic formation, which allows humans to adapt to and regulate issues connected to historically different circumstances and requirements. Against such a background, it is even easier to understand the question why and in which way pragmatic reason could include a functional combination of emotion (*qing*) and rationality.

Conclusion

Such an amalgamation of reason and emotions is in the scope of pragmatic reason—in contrast to various religious approaches—possible without the help of any outward dogmas. This fundamental characteristic also enables pragmatic reason to permit (and even encourage) people to remain open to new insights and new things. In this way, pragmatic rationality inspires people to adopt historical experiences and adjust them in a way such that they could best serve the requirements of their concrete societies. Precisely due to such openness and dynamics, many contemporary Chinese scholars regard Li's concept of pragmatic reason as a most valuable contribution to the establishment of a modern Chinese ethics:

Li Zehou's philosophical ethics, which is based upon “pragmatic reason”, is permeated with openness and developmental potential. It thus offers

us huge new spaces for research and at the same time, it invites the academic world to attach an even greater importance to investigating his ethical thought. (Zhao 2013, 19)

In this context, Li points to the destiny of science and technology in China. Even though the dominant intellectual history never established abstract foundations of scientific thought to any significant extent, the Chinese people nevertheless rapidly (and most capably) embraced all these methods of thought as soon as they came to understand their pragmatic value after Western thought was introduced to China:

Due to “pragmatic reason”, technology developed very rapidly in ancient China. But on the other hand, it was never able to produce a system of mathematical axioms or an abstract speculative philosophy like those that were developed in ancient Greece. Hence, in the modern times, it was confronted with enormous challenges. But precisely due to its pragmatic nature, it began effectively accept and assimilate them as soon as it became clear that abstract reasoning and scientific methods are beneficial to people. (Li 2016a, 157)

Hence, pragmatic reason is a most suitable tool for reasonable human development:

Representing the structural principle of the cultural psychological activities of the Chinese people, pragmatic reason is by no means a static, unchangeable formation. What it values is precisely change, expansion, renewal, and development. Hence, Chinese tradition, Confucianism, and pragmatic reason cannot be seen as obstacles to modernization. (Li 2008, 251–52)

Li Zehou firmly believes that within the contemporary anti-rational trend China should put forth the reconstruction of rationality, although not one that is based on transcendental reason (Li 2016a, 1143). Instead, it should rather revive and employ the elementary potencies of traditional pragmatic rationality.

Therefore, Li’s anthro-historical ontology rejects post-modernism and promotes a re-establishment of the authority of pragmatic reason. It highlights that the traditional Chinese culture of pleasure discards nihilism. Instead, it encourages the belief in human life. Li Zehou argues that a creative transformation of such Chinese cultural characteristics could obtain universality and serve as new universal ideals. As Wang Keping (2018, 225) notes, Li has specifically been preoccupied with both the human condition in general and China’s reality in particular. Hence, through his conceptualization of pragmatic reason, Li has

established a coherent theory for a new interpretation of human “becoming”, which is not only important for future developments in China, but also in the world in general.

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