

Too much honor.

A response to Ricardo Duchesne's ethnicist critique of the "Chinese mind"

Heiner Roetz

In a recent „deconstruction“ of my 25 year old book *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, Ricardo Duchesne attacks me as one of the Western academics who lay the „intellectual groundwork“ for the „silent invasion“ of the West – above all Canada, Australia and New Zealand – by the Chinese (Duchesne, “On the ‘Unreflected Substantiality’ of the Chinese Mind“, <https://www.eurocanadian.ca/2019/02/unreflected-substantiality-of-chinese-mind.html>, <https://www.counter-currents.com/2019/02/on-the-unreflected-substantiality-of-the-chinese-mind/>, quoted below as RD, CM). The exact connection between the book and Asian immigration eludes me, although it presumably lies in the attempt to interpret Chinese culture – or, in this case: classical Chinese philosophy – on par with the West, which would no longer allow one to dismiss it as something inferior that White culture should not be polluted with. As a matter of fact, to argue against such inferiority claims that have been raised again and again in the Hegelian tradition that Duchesne defends was a concern of the book. And I would be proud if I had been successful in the attempt to achieve more openness for the enlightened heritage of China. I regard being attacked for it by an ideologue of White supremacy as late recognition.

Yet, this seems to be too much honor for the old work which actually did not fully exhaust the topic, since even stronger arguments could have been made for its cause. In any case, why it has made me an influential member of the “globalist Right” rather than a member of the “globalist Left” is beyond the capacity of my “White mind” to understand. At the same time, I must admit that this racial core category of Duchesne is, scientifically, absolutely senseless to me, since I simply know too many stupid Whites, if I may put it polemically, and too many intelligent East Asians. But as a “race-mixing globalist”, to use Duchesne's expression, I take it seriously as a political danger. And if I engage with Duchesne in this response, it is not because I would consider arguments based on race or ethnicity or descent as discussable options, but in the hope of preventing further damage.

Not knowing much about Ricardo Duchesne, I have perhaps to grant him that he was simply weary of being confronted with all kinds of shallow and self-refuting dismissals of “the West” in the name of (misunderstood) multiculturalism. But this would be no excuse for maneuvering oneself – not unlike other (frustrated?) former Marxists – into the extreme right corner and having one's articles spread framed by Fascist literature on an eerie website which brings to mind the line by Bertolt Brecht: “Der Schoß ist fruchtbar noch aus dem das kroch” – “The womb is fertile still from which that crept”. And it is remarkable that Duchesne, as far as I know an immigrant to Canada himself, is eager to close the door behind him for other immigrants, and this, from a First Nations perspective (which should actually be to the taste of an advocate of nativism), into a stolen territory to which, historically speaking, he has no more entitlement than them.

What I have to stress is that when I started dealing with classical Chinese philosophy, my aim was not to send out a political message. It is true that the “substantiality” thesis going back to Hegel, according to which the Chinese mind has no consciousness of itself, was always intertwined with political agendas before Ricardo Duchesne, be it in order to

defend the superiority of the West or to justify political despotism in China, or both at the same time. For, as Hegel maintained and Duchesne confirms, if there is no “subjectivity” in China, the antonym to “substantiality”, there are also no subjects that would have to be acknowledged as our co-subjects on an equal footing, but only objects to be ruled by their own or by foreign despots. And the subjectivity that Duchesne defends is, indeed, the subjectivity of the possessive individualist who affirms himself – or, in this case: his ethnic group – and objectifies others. Despite these obvious political challenges of the substance paradigm that are in need of a response, my first aim has always been to *understand* the texts in question (though the process of understanding already implies a form of recognition). At the beginning, I was myself under the influence of Hegel’s assessment that had, after all, been powerfully reinforced by Schelling, Marx, Weber and too many others, and had also effectively made its way into Sinology. But it turned out that the heuristic of “substantiality” is in reality poorly equipped and much too crude to make accessible in the first place what happened in “axial age” China.

This sterile heuristic has above all, often enough against better knowledge, served to portray the modern “West” in a contrastive light. Weber, one of its proponents and one of the classics of the contrastive method, and next to Hegel the second crown witness of Duchesne, has explicitly acknowledged this: In the introduction to his *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* (*The Economic Ethics of the World Religions*), which includes his study on *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* (Engl. *The Religion of China*) as its first chapter, he admits that he omitted all commonalities between the different “religions” in favor of a “typological” account, since he intends to explain the origin of modernity in the West by a counter picture “experiment” (*KuT*). But “in the reality” (!), he says, all “qualitative contrasts” can “somehow be regarded as purely quantitative differences of the mixture of single factors”. This frank confession is seldom taken notice of in the Weberian literature. Against such deliberately one-sided and objectifying approaches, I have advocated an heuristic of *subjectivity*, not simply because it is the politically more agreeable one to me, but because it is the far more fruitful one and an eye opener when it comes to dealing with the Chinese classical philosophical texts unprejudiced by an exclusivist agenda.

As I see it, the heuristic of substantiality is also at work, though in an affirmative version, in the second “school of thought” which Duchesne has identified next to the one allegedly “led” by me (RD, CM) that weakens the West against the onslaught of the East: Roger Ames’s and David Hall’s “pragmatic” reading of Chinese philosophy (Duchesne, “The Transcendental Mind of Europeans Stands Above the Embedded Mind of Asians”, <https://www.eurocanadian.ca/2019/01/transcendental-mind-europeans-stands-above-embedded-mind-asians.html>, <https://www.counter-currents.com/2019/02/the-transcendental-mind-of-europeans-stands-above-the-embedded-mind-of-asians/>, quoted below as RD, ME). Together with American pragmatism, as they claim, Hall and Ames have in a series of influential publications described Chinese culture as a culture of radical contextualism and “embeddedness” that does not know any of the distinctions (like mind and matter, self and society, subject and object, I and me, man and nature etc.) developed in Western thought since the Greeks, and they have presented this as a message to the West to overcome its ‘dichotomous’ mindset. I have always regarded this as a disservice (*Bärendienst*) to China. And as I see it, it is also a disservice to Pragmatism (with the exception of so-called “Neo-Pragmatism”), which in fact stands, though critically, in the line of succession of Kant and does not easily lend itself to the

envisaged American-Chinese “alliance” against “European modes of thought” (Hall and Ames). There is a point in Duchesne’s critique, that what Hall and Ames cherish amounts to “leaving the world as it is without trying to understand it, passively accepting one’s ignorance” (RD, ME). However, he not only shares, in substance though not in evaluation, the reductionist view of China. He in fact also repeats the mystification of an embeddedness in a cosy context to be protected – in this case not from the threat of the European West but from the threat of the Chinese East. This *yearning for symbiosis* is truly remarkable (though perhaps not surprising to a psychologist?) for a declared “masculine mind” (RD, ME) – the Daoist classic *Laozi* called it longing “to drink from the mother”. But there is a difference: Ames and Hall, like other authors in this vein, though they may unwillingly play into the hands of Duchesne, have a legitimate concern: they react to genuine ambivalences of subjectivity and derailments of Western modernity. Possessive individualism is one, and male racism is another.

In any case, sinological misrepresentations (as I would say) of China do not justify throwing the baby out with the bathwater and coming to the conclusion that it was only the West that “produced a transcendental mind to stand outside its own cultural norms” and overcome the eternal unbroken givenness of the “substantial” (RD, CM). Neither Hall and Ames nor their critic take into consideration that the emergence of Chinese philosophy is actually a reflected reaction to the *loss* of “embeddedness” and “substance” in the civilizational crisis of the mid-first millennium BC that accompanied the total decline of the given order due to the breakdown of the Zhou dynasty and gave birth to systematic critical thinking. Though with different assessments and intentions, they think of China as a culture which has submitted to the course of events, without any tension with a world which has never become problematic. But the reverse is the case: There is plenty of evidence, and even more than I cited in the book of 1993, that in a close parallel to the “dissolution of Greece in the Peloponnesian War”, which according to Hegel initiated the “age of subjective reflection”, the *dissolution of China in the Warring States period* (5th Century – 221 BC) initiated the breakthrough towards “subjective” consciousness as an answer to the loss of “substance”. The ‘transcending’ step is made towards detached, “decentered” (Piaget) or “post-conventional” (Kohlberg) thinking, or, what Hegel denied, *Subjektivität*, which he defines as “knowledge of oneself in antithesis to substance” (“Wissen seiner gegen die Substanz”). This is also true in most cases where the old order is defended rather than called into question; even here we detect reservations, ruptures and ambiguities, and a double layer.

Karl Jaspers has tried to grasp this situation, explicitly against Hegel, by his idea of the “axial age”, which Benjamin Schwartz has aptly called the “age of transcendence” in the formal sense of “standing back and looking beyond”. I do not see any reason to change my view of this after Duchesne’s “deconstruction” of my book. I cannot go into every aspect of his criticism here and also leave aside that he conflates, with resulting misunderstandings, Confucian and Mohist, Daoist and Legalist arguments, although distinctions such as those between the different philosophies are not unimportant for the assessment of the alleged uniformity of the “Chinese mind”. I will limit myself to just some remarks.

As to the comparisons that I made between ancient Chinese and modern Western thinkers, they were of course not intended to read full-fledged later philosophies into the classical Chinese texts. To take Hobbes as an example, I pointed out affinities between his political anthropology and certain Mohist and Legalist positions that, as I

see it, do exist and obviously do not require sharing the whole architecture of Hobbes's philosophy, including Euclidean geometry. Likewise, my reference to Rawls is, hopefully, not as anachronistic as Duchesne makes it appear (RD, CM) – I wanted to point out that the basic idea of Xunzi's (3rd Century BC) understanding of justice in terms of a complementarity of equality and difference can also be found in other theories, in fact in all reflected theories of justice, among them, though with a different accent, that of Rawls. And to add one more case: I have to admit that I also found an early form of Bacon's *natura parendo vincitur*, to conquer nature by following it, in Xunzi. It is correct that pre-modern China, contrary to romanticizing accounts, already began to destruct the environment (RD, ME). But the conquest of nature by man has not just happened unconsciously, because "the Chinese don't question the world", as Duchesne maintains (ibid.), but was *reflected* – critically in Daoism and affirmatively in Confucianism, culminating in a eulogy on the transformative power of the human being in Xunzi's philosophy. In pointing out these similarities, I do not devalue Hobbes's, Bacon's, Rawls's or others' achievements. There are still a lot of differences between their and ancient Chinese thought to learn from, and, fair enough, to boast about, if one feels the need. But there is not a "world of difference" (RD, CM). There is a basic structural unity of human civilization that, for the first time in the axial age, is reflected in a similar spectrum of reactions to similar situations of crisis in the course of one and the same social evolution, different degrees of elaboration notwithstanding.

Instead of going into more detail, I will rather focus here on Duchesne's central thesis: that in what I described as an "enlightened" ethics of the Chinese "axial age", "substance" was not in fact called into question by human subjectivity; rather, one "substance" was just replaced by another (RD, CM). It would be structurally the same, then, to blindly submit to power or to criticize power in the name of the "dao". For, as Duchesne sees it, the "dao", like anything else that China has to offer here, would just be a one more "substance lacking in precision" (RD, CM). This not only disregards that the "dao" is itself a matter of dispute, but also completely overlooks what in fact constitutes the various philosophies of ancient China: different attempts to replace or reformulate the no longer working old normative orientations, operating with new ideas and criteria, among them some with a cosmological dimension, and others, like the useful, the good or the practically possible, that are conceived as typically human. At the end of the Warring States period, a totally novel political system comes into existence, invented and thought through by radical thinkers very conscious of themselves as standing "beyond the norm" (*Shangjunshu*), knowing that what they are doing goes against everything that has hitherto been accepted. As they say, "He who talks about highest virtue does not conform with the customs." (*Shangjunshu*) He "will not take as a norm what was practical for a long time" (*Hanfeizi*). And "a wise man monitors the time rather than being monitored by it." He will "leave customs behind" and "create new ones". (*Zhanguoce*) And there is a categorical shift from a law-maintaining to a law-making perspective, from that *what is* to *how* something is achieved (vom *Was* zum *Wie*). The traditionalist is compared to a stupid man who throws a baby into the river simply because "the father is a good swimmer" (*Lüshi chunqiu*). But Ricardo Duchesne knows better: "The Chinese ... were simply unconsciously immersed in the customs and ways of thinking of their time." (RD, CM) And members of a people with such mental retardation do not have the right to cross the Canadian border. However, other than Duchesne, already the Chinese "axial age" has recognized that normative arguments by mere descent are null and void.

It is another matter that the remarkable and even extreme forms of subjectivity that developed in ancient China, surely anticipations of modern consciousness, did not lead to a republican form of rule and to overcoming the monarchic model. There are quite a number of historical reasons for this, but certainly not a “yellow” mind unable to transcend the given state of things. And it also not the case that after the axial age, China simply fell back into “substantial” conditions again – this is actually not what the book suggests, despite its highlighting of the classical philosophies.

The only kind of subjectivity that deserves this name for Duchesne seems to be self-reflection of the “white” Kantian ego. But this not only dismisses China, but also all Western philosophy prior to Kant (or perhaps to Descartes) which has by and large operated in an ontological paradigm and yet has brought forward independent thought. Christian Wolff, for example, a China enthusiast and forerunner of Kant who believed in the unity of micro- and macrocosm, formulated a ‘naturalistic’ principle of autonomy, interestingly enough in conjunction with his reading of the newly translated classical Confucian texts (“Because we see by reason what the law of nature wants to have, therefore a reasonable man does not need any further law, but by his reason he is to himself a law.” – “Weil wir durch die Vernunft erkennen, was das Gesetze der Natur haben will; so braucht ein vernünftiger Mensch kein weiteres Gesetze sondern vermittelst seiner Vernunft ist er ihm selbst ein Gesetze.“). Obviously, we have the idea of moral autonomy here and yet, certainly a contradiction in the eyes of Kant, a holistic ontology that operates with a “substance lacking in precision”. Subjectivity had a long and twisted way to travel before it culminated in Kant’s philosophy as the late peak of European Enlightenment. But its journey started long ago, and not only in ancient Greece, but also in ancient China. And unlike Hegel, who was constrained by his historical scheme, many Enlightenment thinkers before Kant had a glimpse of this, since Confucius was one of their heroes, on a level with Socrates and the Stoic philosophers. Without their openness for the foreign, the Enlightenment would not have come into existence in the first place. But this has been almost totally deleted from the historical consciousness of the West.

However, Ricardo Duchesne is not a Kantian. He simply uses Kant as the ultimate representative of the “White mind” in order to set the bar for overcoming “substance” as high as possible, so that, as he thinks, no non-white of whatever color will jump over it. But that done, he amputates Kant with Hegel, obviously relying on Hegel’s *Rechtsphilosophie*, together with an extreme ‘Right-Hegelian’ reading of it.

Thus we end up with an ethnic naturalization, a bringing back home of subjectivity, which now means nothing more than to do with reflection what was previously done instinctively: to “affirm” the ethnic “collective identity” of Europeans (RD, CM) against others. White symbiotics of all countries, unite! A remarkable turn for a Marxist. We have the same tribalism as before, but now we are aware and proud of it. This, of course, not only betrays the cosmopolitanism of most Enlightenment thinkers. It is also a simplification of Hegel, though I would not like come to his defense here. His *Rechtsphilosophie*, after all, as Theodor W. Adorno has put it, was “not his best piece of writing” (“nicht sein stärkstes Stückle”).

It is becoming fashionable among the Western Right to embrace the Enlightenment, rather than dismissing it as an insane cosmopolitan bauble, as part of the peculiar identity of the West in order to discredit other traditions. Duchesne, too, eulogizes the

context-transcending “transcendental mind” of “Whites” only in order to defend the closedness of the “White” context. But a xenophobe who celebrates ‘transcending’ philosophies just to declare them the exclusive private property of the culture that, as he thinks, solely produced them, must ask himself whether he has understood them in the first place. Reducing philosophy to an inventor’s contest for winning entrance tickets to Canada does not necessarily prove the White mind’s unique intellectual caliber. It rather betrays the mentality of a patent attorney.