Commensurability and Difference: A Hermeneutic-Deconstructive Engagement with Chinese Philosophy

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Abstract

In this explorative paper, I propose that relatively recent trends in Western continental philosophy can provide a much more commensurate access to Chinese philosophy than found in most mainstream Western philosophy. More specifically, I argue that three prominent European philosophical approaches to interpretation can offer meaningful parallels to classical Confucian views of interpretation. These are Paul Ricoeur's term "distanciation", Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophy of hermeneutics and, finally, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive notion of "*différance*". While the last two approaches have had their internal clashes, I see them in this specific case as mutually reinforcing by stimulating the continuous reinterpretation of tradition, advancing the view that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms, and stipulating that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable. In this way, they provide a future opening for—and even integration of—a Chinese-Western philosophical dialogue.
Keywords: Chinese philosophy, hermeneutics, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Derrida, *différance*

Introduction: The Angst of Incommensurability and the Quest for Truth

The question of commensurability has emerged from time to time in the context of Euro-American and Chinese philosophical interactions. Some of the most explicit statements in this vein came from a communitarian celebrity, Alasdair MacIntyre, who claimed in an "infamous" paper towards the end of last century that Aristotelian and Confucian philosophies were incommensurable (MacIntyre 1991). Briefly summarized, his argument was that while the representatives of the two traditions may be able to recognize that they are working with similar topics, their concepts depend so much on their own worldviews that the criteria on which they base their discussions make it impossible to apply the concepts of one on the worlds to the other. Therefore, a genuine conversation cannot take place, MacIntyre continued, because there is no neutral point of view outside of the traditions from which they can be evaluated objectively. As a result, each tradition is locked inside itself, and any attempt to have a conversation would be bound to fail, as they would simply be speaking past each other. Considering MacIntyre's prestige as a virtue ethicist, this verdict came as a severe blow to many of those seeking to understand Confucianism as a type of virtue ethics compatible with Neo-Aristotelian interpretations. The late Yu Jiyuan, for instance, complained that MacIntyre's stance "directly threatens our project of comparing the ethics of Aristotle and Confucius" (Yu 2007, 6). He adamantly rejected MacIntyre's claim, saying that he was "caught in confusion between the result of comparative philosophy and its mere possibility" (ibid., 8). By discussing the similarities and differences between the moral philosophy of Aristotle and Confucius, Yu continued, MacIntyre was already—and somewhat ironically—engaged in the enterprise of comparative philosophy. While he was exploring the conditions for a meaningful comparison, however, he jumped to conclusions without finishing the exploration. As Yu noted, "to say that two philosophical systems are different does not mean that they are incommensurable" (ibid., 7).

Although the very term may only rarely be brought up, the question of commensurability also appears to be central to the methodological debate between two major camps of comparative philosophy in the

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United States about how to interpret Chinese (or, more generally, non-Western) philosophy. With some simplification, the camps can be designated geographically as the "Hawaiian" camp and the "Mainland" (or, alternatively, the "analytical") camp. Members of both factions are in sound agreement that Chinese (as well as other non-Western) philosophy has much to offer and should be included in the curriculum of American philosophy departments, but they seem to differ about the "compatibility" of Chinese and mainstream Western philosophy. The former emphasizes the special nature of Chinese philosophy, which ostensibly differs significantly from mainstream Western philosophy, and claims that this special nature, often identified with an "aesthetic" vs. a "logical" or "rational" order (Hall and Ames 1998, 134), must be considered when approaching and interpreting Chinese philosophy. This difference lies at the heart of Roger Ames's insistence that we need to take Chinese philosophy on its own terms (e.g., Ames 2004). The latter camp, however, while certainly acknowledging the importance of having relevant linguistic competence when working with non-Western sources, appears to believe that Chinese philosophy can be approached in more or less the same way as Western philosophy (especially in the United States), i.e., in an analytical fashion, looking into truth-claims, arguments, propositions, inner logical consistency, etc.

The Mainland camp seems to see the Hawaii camp's argument for a significant difference between the philosophical traditions as coming dangerously close to a claim of incommensurability. In fact, it has even been explicitly argued that "MacIntyre's perception of incommensurability arises, at least in part, from his reliance on Hall and Ames's 'aesthetic' interpretation of the *Analects*" (Slingerland 2001, 99). Thus, these two debates are clearly intimately related, even revolving around the very same issues.

In these pages, I wish to advance the thought, already attributed to Yu Jiyuan, that difference does not constitute incommensurability. Furthermore, I emphasize on precisely this basis that there is no need at all to compromise or reduce our perception of difference for the sake of securing the possibility of meaningful comparative or intercultural philosophy. The penchant among many interpreters of non-Western philosophy to be wary of any claims of "radical" difference, I believe, rests upon the fear of incommensurability. Difference, even radical difference, however, does not entail incommensurability. A fundamental reason for the appearance of incommensurability is a profound Western philosophical flaw, namely the (explicit or implicit) assumption of the existence of a singular truth, which willy-nilly translates into a demand for one "correct" understanding of what philosophy is and does. My observations rest upon the very contrary assumption that philosophy is above all a *creative* enterprise, not one that aims at the discovery of a singular and eternal truth, and that the meaning it delivers to its "consumers" depends upon the context in which they are placed. As Jana Rošker has argued, what philosophy is *not* is

> a tool for finding truth, but rather a means for an endless search for constantly changing truths. The task of philosophy is not to establish an objective and eternally valid truth. Because of the situational and emotional nature of human understanding, these truths necessarily always remain merely partial. […] Instead of being a "hardcore science", which implies simple justifications and monotonous confirmations of what already exists, it is and should be a constructive, creative and unending critique of reality. (Rošker 2021, 139)

Thus, I argue, in order to make proper use of the philosophical resources available to us around the world, we need to acknowledge, in a more comprehensive manner, the multiple dimensions at play in *any* act of interpretation, not just one that involves different cultures. This calls for both a "loosening up" and "expansion" of the traditional or mainstream understanding of philosophy, which simultaneously suits the demand for an appreciation of philosophy originating outside of the Euro-

American cultural sphere.[1] Consequently, the question of the "proper methods" to be used is one that is still locked inside the parochial presumptions of traditional Euro-American philosophy, as it already assumes that such methods can be found or established once and for all. Such an approach exemplifies yet another instance of imposing upon non-Western philosophy the aims and aspirations of Western philosophy. Indeed, an open engagement with non-Western philosophy may reveal these aims and aspirations to be outdated and inappropriate in a multicultural world.

My intention here is to make use of relatively recent developments and suggestions in European discussions of the nature of a text and how to interpret it, in order to articulate *what it is that we do* when people like myself, originating and being formed in a largely Euro-American context, work with texts from a distant culture, such as the Chinese one. As I see it, the difference does not necessarily present itself as an obstacle for interpretation or understanding, but rather as a hermeneutic opportunity. As will be clear, it is not my intention to reject Western interpretations of non-Western philosophy, but I argue that such interpretations must in the very least be properly contextualized, i.e., the grounds upon which they operate made explicit and conscious, for them to be sufficiently meaningful as proposals for understanding.

I will suggest three features that I believe are helpful for formulating the process taking place when engaging in comparative or intercultural philosophy. The three features are "distanciation", a term elaborated by Paul Ricoeur, "the fusion of horizons" coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and "*différance*" which is of course a term belonging to Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction.

After discussing these three features, I will then return to the topic of comparative and intercultural philosophy in an attempt to summarize my main arguments.

Distanciation and the Productivity of Distance

The term "distanciation" owes its origins to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics but is elaborated in more detail by Paul Ricoeur. Gadamer, in his discussion of the interpretation of ancient Greek texts in *Truth and Method*, suggests that temporal distance is not necessarily an obstacle for understanding a text. By having an overview of the history that has elapsed since the composition of the text, we can reveal prejudices in it that were not available to its contemporaries. Thus, the different perspectives and approaches of the interpreters enable the disclosure of new meanings of the text. In this way, far from being a "gaping ravine", Gadamer says that we ought to "recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive opportunity for understanding" (Gadamer 1990, 302). There is, in other words, a certain "productivity of temporal distance" as Georgia Warnke, a well-known commentator on Gadamer, has called it (Warnke 1987, 114–15). I would like to suggest a slight twist of this idea, namely the "productivity of cultural distance", that is to say, a "liberated" reading of texts that entails recontextualization of its content, which takes advantage of being "outside", so to speak, the culture within which the text was produced. While I shall return to this interpretive mode soon, let me briefly discuss Ricoeur's elaboration first.

According to Ricoeur's analysis, distanciation takes four interesting forms:

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[1] Heiner Roetz expressed his disapproval of this formulation when I presented an earlier version of this paper at a conference held in Berlin in December 2021. However, by "loosening up" I certainly do not mean that "anything goes", but merely that the mainstream aims and approaches of Western (especially analytical) philosophy do not need to dictate our global philosophical endeavours. Roetz is commited to the Enlightenment project of realizing a universal or unitary philosophy (cf. Roetz 2017, 74), while acknowledging that important Enlightenment notions that he both endorses and seeks to uncover in ancient Chinese philosophy, such as reason, subject, autonomy and transcendence, do take on their own specific (cultural) forms (Roetz 2016). This is a most admirable aim, to which I am not at all opposed, but I would still suggest, first, that we should carefully study the Chinese forms and variants of these notions, as it is likely that they can be used to refine our own; and secondly, that other kinds of discourses ought not to be stifled for the sake of this one.

1. First, the meaning in the text surpasses the event of the discourse, i.e., it can make it clearer through grammatical and syntactic devices.

2. Second, the text does not necessarily express the speaker's intention: "What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies" (Ricoeur 2016, 139).

3. Thirdly, a written text has no specific audience. It is potentially addressed to anyone who can read and is therefore decontextualized from its social and historical conditions of production, opening itself to a vast dimension of different readings.

4. The fourth form, which intrigues me most, concerns the "emancipation of the text from the limits of ostensive reference" (ibid., xxv). In other words, since the original conditions do not apply anymore, the text can be made meaningful in other contexts.

Distanciation is for Gadamer a move involving alienation (*Verfremdung*), but at the same time a necessary presupposition for the sciences, because it involves a certain objectification of that which is being observed. It appears to me that this conception can be traced back to Max Weber.[2] However, I do not want to emphasize an understanding of distanciation as a move toward objectification in such a scientific sense. According to Ricoeur, this aporia between alienated distanciation and belonging is at the heart of Gadamerian hermeneutics. To Gadamer it is a painful but inescapable move toward an ontology of sorts. My aim, however, is not objectification in a traditional (post-17th century) "scientific" understanding, but rather a description of what actually takes place in the act of interpretation, and, finally, how the event of such an act can entail a certain "philosophical liberation", a creation upon a text, which involves its recontextualization and even appropriation.

I believe that a part of the disagreement mentioned earlier between the two American camps of non-Western philosophy has precisely to do with very different visions of what philosophy is or how it is understood. Proponents of the analytical camp pursue philosophy as science, as a discipline that is supposed to reveal truths and aim at objectivity in a traditional understanding of the term (cf. Rošker 2021, 30). They are therefore aiming at *the* correct interpretation of the text, seeking, to speak with Rudolf Schleiermacher's 19th century approach to interpretation, "to understand an author as well as and even better than he understands himself" (Ricoeur 2016, 6).[3]

The Hawaii camp, on the other hand, conceives philosophy to be a creative enterprise rather than a traditionally scientific one. According to this view, its task is primarily to generate approaches to the world that are meaningful to those who live in it. It requires the establishment of continuity and an evolving sense of signification. This establishment is less a discovery than an ongoing construction, while certainly a construction upon the platforms on which we have no choice but to build. As I will argue later, it can be formulated as the further clearing of the way in a Confucian or Chinese hermeneutical sense. Ricoeur clearly supports this liberating view with his elaboration on distanciation, in particular in the fourth dimension, with regard to the autonomy of the text. He says that it

> encourages us to recognise a positive significance in *Verfremdung*, a significance which cannot be reduced to the nuance of decline which Gadamer tends to give to it. The autonomy

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[2] In the first few pages of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber discusses the ability to "distance" oneself from one's object, to consider it in "abstract" or "objectified" terms, which, he says, enables its rationalized systematization by applying means to a given end (Weber 1988a, 1–4). However, and as Weber also argued, another consequence of such distanciation is that it alienates human beings from each other as well as from their natural surroundings. Through capitalist practice, everyone and everything becomes, to speak with Hartmut Rosa (2020, 5), "a point of aggression" in the sense of a rationalized objective to be exploited or brought under increased control.

[3] The presumption to be able to reach an understanding of an author that is superior to his own goes back at least as far as to Kant. In his *Address to the German Nation*, Fichte also claimed that a German "can understand" a foreigner "completely, even better than he can understand himself" (cf. Bollnow 1979, 12).

of the text already contains the possibility that what Gadamer calls the "matter" of the text may escape from the finite intentional horizon of its author; in other words, thanks to writing, the "world" of the *text* may explode the world of the *author*. (ibid., 101)

Just like a work of art, Ricoeur continues, a text

transcends its own psycho-sociological conditions of production and thereby opens itself to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated in different socio-cultural conditions. In short, the text must be able, from the sociological as well as the psychological point of view, to "decontextualise" itself in such a way that it can be "recontextualised" in a new situation—as accomplished, precisely, by the act of reading. (ibid., 101)

This move from decontextualization to recontextualization is what he calls the "emancipation of the text" and a different understanding of objectification, one that evades the aporia involving *Verfremdung* precisely because of the recontextualization. This sort of objectification demands a passionate engagement on behalf of the reader. It is even tempting to conceive of it as being influenced by Nietzsche's understanding of objectivity through a plurality of passionate perspectivism.[4] Even Max Weber's methodological approaches, also influenced by Nietzsche and curiously neglected in modern scholarship, seem to be of relevance in this regard. The only attainable kind of "objectivity" to be gained when we try to figure out our empirical world of Heraclitean flux, Weber argued, is one whereby a finite part of it is singled out, one that is considered to be "worth knowing". In other words, any kind of objectivity necessarily depends on an evaluation of priority, which is ultimately always subjective (Weber 1988b, 171ff.).[5]

While Ricoeur's discussion offers other very appetizing features that we could call epistemological aspects of this hermeneutic process, I will not go elaborate on them on this occasion. Suffice it to say that he follows Heidegger in portraying *Verstehen*, understanding, as not necessarily an understanding of others but as a "structure of being-in-the-world". He says that

it is the projection of our ownmost possibilities at the very heart of the situations in which we find ourselves. […] For what must be interpreted in a text is a *proposed world* which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my ownmost possibilities. This is what I call the world of the text, the world proper to *this* unique text. (Ricoeur 2016, 104)

The text speaks to us, situated persons with certain interests, values, and preoccupations, here and now. I believe that Ricoeur's call for the "emancipation of the text" ought to appeal to us in our efforts to interpret texts such as the ancient Chinese ones. There is in any case no possibility for us to grasp the "true" meaning of such a text. Indeed, what does such truth *mean*? Where does it come from? Who

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[4] Nietzsche's best known formulation of this epistemological view is probably the following from his *Genealogy of Morality*: "There is *only* a perspectival view of things, *only* a perspectival 'knowledge', and *the more* emotions we let express themselves about a certain subject, *the more* eyes, different eyes, behold that very same subject, the more perfect becomes our 'concept', our 'objectivity' of it." (Nietzsche 1988, 365)

[5] "The concept of culture is a value concept. The empirical reality is 'culture' because and insofar as we associate it with value ideas, comprising those and only those parts of reality that become *meaningful* to us through this association. Only a minuscule part of reality that is being observed at any given time is highlighted by our interests through these value ideas, only it has meaning to us; […] However, *what* is meaningful to us is of course not derived by any 'unconditioned' research of the empirical given, but its determination is a prerequisite for something being taken as an *object* of research." (Weber 1988b, 175–76)

can claim such truth and on what grounds? What is its *value*? Instead of striving for the aim of deciphering the text's true meaning, I would rather suggest rendering the text *truly meaningful* to those who seek to elucidate it, to us, and speak with Ricoeur that we must aim at the "appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the text, its application (*Anwendung*) to the present situation of the reader" (ibid., 105). Appropriation in Ricoeur's sense has nothing to do with an attempt to put oneself in the author's shoes, but rests precisely upon the acknowledgement of its impossibility due to distanciation:

> Thanks to distanciation by writing, appropriation no longer has any trace of affective affinity with the intention of the author. Appropriation is quite the contrary of contemporaneousness and congeniality: it is understanding at and through distance. (ibid., 105)

While "appropriation" has the meaning of "making one's own" it must further be distinguished from what I am tempted to call "arrogation". In the case of intercultural philosophy, this involves the attempt to impose upon the philosophy of another culture characteristics that are considered indispensable for philosophy in general, often because they happen to be seminal features of Western philosophy. While the intentions may be good and noble, i.e., to identify strands in the other philosophy that are believed to be of value, the danger is that more is being invented than discovered. Distanciation enables a certain liberalization with regard to approaching classical works originating in a different culture from fresh points of view. These works can be burdened with such heavy history that it prevents their local readers from seeing potential signification that is contained in them. As I have argued elsewhere, as distanciated interpreters

> we are sometimes able to tease out hidden possibilities inherent in the ideas that have been inhibited by the discourse and phenomenal structures of reality in which they have been placed in their own culture. We may reach "objectivity" in the Chinese meaning of the word: the "guest's eye view", *keguan* 客觀. (Sigurðsson 2015, 9)

This is far from being an original idea. The Belgian-Australian sinologist Simon Leys had something very similar to say about how classics are approached. In the introduction to his translation of the *Confucian Analects*, he says that

> the way in which every statement in a classic can gather the comments of posterity may be compared to a hook, or a peg on the wall of a cloakroom. Successive users of the cloakroom come one after the other and hang on the peg hats, coats, umbrellas, bags and whatnot; the load swells up, heavy, colourful, diversified, and eventually the hook disappears entirely under it. For the native reader the classic is intricate and crowded, it is a place filled with people, and voices, and things and memories—vibrating with echoes. For the foreign reader, on the contrary, the classic often presents the forlorn aspect of the cloakroom after hours—an empty room with mere rows of bare hooks on a blank wall, and this extreme austerity, this stark and disconcerting simplicity, accounts in part for the paradoxical impression of *modernity* which he is more likely to experience. (Leys 2011, 317)

Think, in this regard, of the dominant Chinese understandings of Confucian philosophy that tend to identify it with the isolationist and reactionary nature of the Qing dynasty, and thus overlook its more creative and critical aspects. Incidentally, Leys also makes a note of this tendency:

Imperial Confucianism only extolled those statements from the Master that prescribed submission to the established authorities, whereas more essential notions were conveniently ignored. […] As a result of these ideological manipulations, in modern times many enlightened and progressive-minded Chinese came spontaneously to associate the very name of Confucius with feudal tyranny; his doctrines became synonymous with obscurantism and oppression. (ibid., 314–15)

Certainly, the converse of approaching Chinese philosophy with fresh eyes is also possible—and certainly desirable. A Chinese reading of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant, for instance, may uncover novel and undiscovered aspects contained in their thought. A good case in point is Mou Zongsan's intricate and original interpretations of Kant's philosophy.

Différance and the Fusion of Horizons

There are two other well-known notions in recent theories of interpretation that I want to touch upon briefly in the hope that others find them worth developing further. One of them, I believe, complements distanciation, and deepens some of its strands, while the other may constrain, but not obstruct, the liberalization of the reading of a text that distanciation suggests, as discussed in the section above. The first of these is Derrida's *différance*, but I believe that a slightly modified version of it can function as a promising hermeneutic tool for a Western approach to Chinese (and other non-Western) philosophy. It may even serve as a limited parallel to what I take to be the traditional Chinese philosophical approach to interpretation. The second notion, namely Gadamer's "fusion of horizons", is much more commonly invoked in the context of intercultural philosophy, but I feel compelled to make a few comments on its applicability here.

Différance is a hybrid concept pointing to the dual meaning of "difference" and "deference", indicating, respectively, both spatial and temporal dimensions. The spatial refers to the inescapable difference between things in the world, and the temporal to the inevitable postponement of meaning that ensues from the sign as "deferred presence", i.e., as being "conceivable only on the *basis* of the presence that it defers and *moving toward* the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate" (Derrida 1982, 9). This formulation appears to be in line with Ricoeur's suggestion of recontextualization and appropriation, but *différance* goes even a little further. In the act of interpretation (or what we may call understanding), *différance* highlights in particular two important elements. Firstly, that there is necessarily an ultimately unbridgeable distance between the interpreter and interpreted; and secondly, that the meaning derived from what is being interpreted is necessarily a temporary meaning, applying to the particularity of present circumstances, of the discourse in which it finds itself, and thus, importantly, that something like an objective, final meaning *must be deferred to indefinitely*.

This usage of the term *différance* is, I believe, sufficiently in line with Derrida's own original application, while certainly reformulated specifically for its role in communicating between distant traditions. As it happens, I believe that the very act of such adaptation is also in line with *différance* as a hermeneutic tool or concept that acknowledges that there can be no meaning without difference—no same without the other—and that there can be no absoluteness or completeness in any act of interpretation (cf. Thorsteinsson 2014, 159). The adoption of *différance* is therefore simultaneously an acknowledgment of the limiting role of the notion of truth, which is then for the most part discarded, deconstructed, or *at least* deferred. While truth is deferred, the emphasis is placed on the most appropriate or fitting interpretation of the philosophical teachings in light of the present circumstances. The question guiding us in our philosophical undertaking then becomes: how can we gain a useful and viable understanding of this philosophy?

One significant revelation of a *différance*-approach to the issue is that Western and Chinese philosophies cannot be reduced to the other in conceptual terms. This does not imply that they are incommensurable, because conceptual difference does not entail incommensurability but rather calls for intensified discussion and the ensuing fusion of horizons, to which I will turn shortly. The approach ought to act upon the attitude we take with us in our efforts to interpret between traditions, because what it points out to us is that a finalized meaning or interpretation of each is *a priori* unattainable. It is precisely the acceptance of such unattainability that is the required opening for a meaningful and complementary Chinese-Western philosophical dialogue.

Let us now move to the hermeneutic notion of "fusion of horizons" that I believe both complements and constrains the liberalization arising from distanciation. Gadamer made it very clear, in his *Truth and Method*, that we cannot operate or approach anything at all except from some point of view. This refers to the concept of *Vorurteil*, "prejudgement", as it is often called in English to distinguish it from the more pejorative "prejudice". Gadamer himself does not make such a distinction, presumably because he wants to underline that the prejudgements that enable access to new things are as such not distinct from prejudice, except in their function. However, in order not to be fixed as rigid prejudice, they must be susceptible to modification as they engage dialectically with the unfamiliar text or object. This is what both Heidegger and Gadamer have called "the hermeneutic circle". While our expectations of the other are inescapably always coloured by certain prejudices, the process of learning from the other also involves some degree of transformation or reinterpretation of those very expectations. The hermeneutic circle generates a "fusion of horizons", which means that the new understandings gained from the other become part of the interpreter's prejudices. At the same time, the interpreter's horizon is expanded, giving rise to a new and more comprehensive hermeneutic circle. This is a continuous, and, needless to say, a never-ending process as long as we are engaged in an active, dialectical relationship with the "other".

The term "horizon" originally comes from phenomenology, where it has been applied by both Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to refer to the conditions of perception, or more specifically the set of expectations that accompany the perception of an object. Perceptions are complemented with expectations. Upon hearing a sound, we immediately associate it with something we know and have experienced, and when seeing a familiar object, we do not need to see all of it to be able to recognize it. Our expectation, so to speak, "fills in" whatever may be missing from the perception as such, and when we change our perspective, the horizon also changes. Horizons are therefore "the conditions that provide the meaning for the object, conditions which need to be made conscious for a proper understanding of the object" (Vessey 2009, 536). This is important, because it sheds light on horizons not only as limits of our possible vision—which they of course are—but even more so as continuously expanding channels of understanding. A horizon is everything that can be seen, and this horizon can be expanded so that we see even more. As Gadamer puts it, "A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (Gadamer 1990, 250). Such advancement, however, regards the proper contextualization of the object to be understood, i.e., that it be associated with the historical and cultural background in which it is produced. Without such an association or contextualization, the danger is that one mistakes the object for something already known or experienced, or as Gadamer puts it: "A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him" (ibid., 307). This could apply to the penchant to perceive aspects of Chinese philosophy to be identical to Western ones, while they may in fact have arisen for very different reasons.

The fusion of horizons takes place when we have the capacity to use the context of the subject matter to gain a different perspective on it. It involves surpassing the initial understanding or interpretation and realizing the contingency of that interpretation. Thus, it can be considered as a limiting factor for the "liberalization" of the interpretation of a culturally distant text. Nevertheless, I do not consider it

antithetical to it. These are two different strands operating simultaneously in an act of interpretation that is simultaneously creative *and* responsible.

Concluding Remarks: The Problem of Truth and a Note on Chinese Hermeneutics

As has been alluded to in this paper, I consider it to be a major problem with the traditional Western interpretive approach that it is geared at truth. This would not be a problem if truth were understood, say, relationally or depending on the context each time. But this is unfortunately most often not the case. Truth is generally understood to refer to the *one and correct* way to understand the object under investigation. The inescapable consequence is that such an interpretive approach ends up being so narrow and rigid that it is in fact an obstacle to an openness to other traditions. Consider, for instance, Rudolf Schleiermacher once again. According to his explicit theory of interpretation presented in the 19th century, he claims that "hermeneutics is the art to avoid misunderstanding" (cf. ibid., 188). "To avoid misunderstanding" means to bring to light the true understanding concealed in the text. Schleiermacher's objective was to grasp the origin of the thought that underlies the text, access the author's intention, and thereby get to the "true" meaning of the text. This reveals not only the conspicuous tendency in Western thought to focus on singular truth, but also another questionable one—to equate "origins" with truth.

What I would like to call classical Confucian or perhaps simply Chinese hermeneutics seems generally to proceed very differently. Its proponents could surely accept the description of the first step of Schleiermacher's objective: "grasping the origin of thought that underlies the text". But this merely constitutes the first step, then it goes to developing, adapting, and, most importantly, realizing and implementing.

This sheds a light on why the classical Chinese tradition does not rely on definitions, at least not in the sense of Western logic. Jana Rošker (2021, 81) correctly points out that Chinese logic is first and foremost relational instead of being substance-oriented. But the Chinese mode of relationality is also implicitly dynamic because of the sense of the incessant flow of time and change. While definitions in a Western context are timeless, universal, and ultimately absolute, nothing can be timeless, universal, or absolute in a Chinese context. A vital aspect of the Chinese philosophical sensibility concerns timeliness and appropriate responses to the situation at hand. All serious students of classical Chinese philosophy are aware of this vital background cosmology, or "daology" as I prefer to call it (cf. Sigurðsson 2020, 23ff.).

It seems therefore natural that the objective of the Chinese scholarly tradition of writing commentaries to canonical texts is not necessarily to explain the ultimate meaning of the text by getting to its "original" and "only true" meaning, as is usually the case with Western commentaries. Instead, they continue the dialogue in the hermeneutical sense that the ideas expressed in the texts invoke the commentators' own ideas and inspire them to elaborate them further. There is much scholarship on the historicity of Chinese philosophy that seems to corroborate that interpretation is primarily understood as the continuous adaptation and readjustment of the philosophical ideas to concrete reality. For example, Huang Chun-Chieh says, speaking of the Song-Ming-Confucians' reading of the *Mengzi*:

> During the prolonged dialogues back and forth among [Zhu Xi] and his disciples we never find them regarding the *Mengzi* as an objective text unrelated to their personal lives. They all blended their life experiences into their various readings of the *Mengzi*. (Huang 2001, 258)

Certainly, there are many exceptions from such efforts and aims in Chinese intellectual history, and an ongoing creative interpretation and reinterpretation did not always take place. However, the more extreme exceptions can be attributed to rigid state control and difficult political periods during which

intellectuals had limited freedom to exert their interpretive capabilities. For instance, limitations to creativity already emerge in Confucianism after it became the state ideology during the Han dynasty. François Jullien (2000, 212) points out, for instance, that under the Han, Confucianism's "success was its downfall. […] The Confucian openness is […] transformed into its opposite: the codification of moralism." Huang Chun-Chieh (2007, 42) has also expressed this most aptly: "After the establishment of the Han Empire, when Confucianism was designated the orthodox state ideology, the Confucianization of politics in the ideal of Confucians was soon turned into the politicization of Confucianism." The situation for intellectuals during the late Ming and Qing dynasties was even more constrained, as Zhu Weizheng (1990, 123) has pointed out in his discussion of the rather rigorous ideological control exerted by the imperial authorities during this time. In contrast, he says, Han classical scholars "researched the classics not in the search for truth, or to recover the true historical character of the Confucian texts, but to use them" (ibid., 127).

Codification of philosophical thinking is always a temptation, be it in the West, in China or anywhere else, because it appears to mitigate the requirement to think, at least creatively. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Sigurðsson 2021), Confucian philosophy may quite possibly be too demanding for most of us, and therefore it is not surprising that many of those who have engaged with it have resorted to imitation, literality, and historical orthodoxy. Some periods in Chinese history, and quite possibly the history of other cultures that adopted Confucianism, encouraged such tendencies more than others. Though we may be experiencing such a tendency again today, recall chapter 23 in the *Daodejing*: "A gusty wind cannot last all morning, and a sudden downpour cannot last all day […] If even Heaven and Earth cannot go on forever, much less can man" (Lau 1963). Contrary to what seems to be happening in China now, the overall philosophical tendency in Chinese hermeneutics (which I think will prevail, but this is also up to us) has been to understand canonical texts creatively and contextually depending on circumstances, which implicitly temporalizes the truth of the interpretation—we could also say *defers* truth. At the same time there is clear awareness of the distinction between the interpreters and the object of interpretation.

What we need in Western philosophy is something comparable—and I suggest that distanciation, *différance* and fusion of horizon may be good starting points for generating more liberalized and productive interpretations, ones that reflect the urgency and willingness to learn from other world-cultures. If Alasdair MacIntyre had adopted approaches of this kind, he would have seen that while there are certainly clear differences between the approaches of Confucian and Western communitarian philosophers, the differences can be used for the benefit of each. Therefore, in his paper on Confucian and Aristotelian virtue ethics he would not have talked about incommensurability, but about *complementarity*. It is my claim that such complementary reading—one that still acknowledges and respects the differences—is precisely what a meaningful and productive intercultural dialogue between Chinese and Western philosophy needs to be based on.

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