

POSTMETAPHYSICAL THINKING AND SUBJECTIVITY:
ON LAO SZE-KWANG'S *HISTORY OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY*

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1 Introduction

There can be little doubt about the significance of Lao Sze-kwang's 勞思光 (1927–2012) *History of Chinese Philosophy* (*Zhongguo zhexueshi* 中國哲學史).¹ It is arguably the most cosmopolitan and modern interpretation of Chinese philosophical thought in the twentieth century.² Because of its depth and comprehensiveness, it is one of the most important references for students of Chinese philosophy. Influenced by Kant's philosophy,³ Lao considers the conception of subjectivity, which entails the notion of free will, to be a major criterion not only for reconstructing but also for evaluating different schools of Chinese philosophy. This is because it provides a plausible basis for arguing that Chinese philosophy can communicate with Western philosophy,⁴ and even contribute to the establishment of a future "universal philosophy" (*shijie zhexue* 世界哲學).⁵ Accordingly, considered from a practical perspective, justifying the importance of subjectivity in traditional Chinese thought is the leitmotiv of the *History of Chinese Philosophy*, which not only provides historical understanding but also reflects Lao's philosophical thinking.⁶ Borrowing Kant's words,⁷ one can describe the *History of Chinese Philosophy* as not a historical but a philosophical history of philosophy.⁸

1 Citations of Lao's *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1981–1984) are given without a year but with the volume and page numbers (separated by a colon) in which the reference appears.

2 Marchal 2008, 90.

3 Lao 2001c, xii.

4 Lao 2007a, 46.

5 Lao 1: 409; 3B: 888.

6 Lao 1: 2.

7 References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A and B paginations of the first and second editions. References to other works of Kant are given with the volume and page numbers of the Akademie-Ausgabe (AA) (1900ff). All English translations of Kant's works are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (1992ff). In citing Kant's works the following abbreviations are used: KrV: *Critique of Pure Reason* – FM: *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?* – RGV: *Religion within The Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

8 FM, AA 20: 340–341. Kant's distinction between the historical and philosophical history of philosophy shows two kinds of ideas about writing the history of philosophy. The former "re-

Although Lao has had a profound influence on the interpretation of Chinese philosophy, the issue of the centrality of subjectivity remains a perplexing problem. Since Lao construes metaphysics (*xing shangxue* 形上學) as a kind of hard determinism that is incompatible with the notion of a rational agent who possesses a free will, he discredits metaphysics and adopts a constructive role for subjectivity in Chinese philosophy. However, one of the leading figures of Contemporary New Confucianism (*dangdai xin ruxue* 當代新儒學), Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995),⁹ raises a strong objection against Lao's account of subjectivity in Chinese philosophy. At one point, Mou criticizes Lao's account, saying that it “tears the tendons” out of Chinese philosophy,¹⁰ meaning that Lao focuses only on theories related to subjectivity in Chinese philosophy and largely discredits other developments. For Mou, the reference to other developments lies in the metaphysics of different schools, especially to Confucian moral metaphysics (*daode de xing shangxue* 道德的形上學). Confronted with these problems, it is tempting to follow the lead of Mou's interpretation, since he provides a comprehensive framework for reviving Confucianism. Hence, many Contemporary New Confucian followers have been critical of Lao's discrediting of moral metaphysics.¹¹ Thus, the difference between Lao and Mou lies not only in the problem of the compatibility of metaphysics and subjectivity, but in their basic understanding of the essence of Chinese philosophy.¹²

counts how philosophizing has been done hitherto, and in what order” (FM, AA 20: 340); whereas the latter is “not historically or empirically, but rationally, i.e., *a priori*. For although it establishes facts of reason, it does not borrow them from historical narrative, but draws them from the nature of human reason, as philosophical archaeology” (FM, AA 20: 341).

- 9 References to Mou's work are given with the volume of the complete works and page numbers in which the reference appears (Mou 2003). In citing those works the following volumes are used: 05–07: *Xinti yu xingti* 心體與性體 – 08: *From Lu Xiangshan to Liu Jishan* 從陸象山到劉蕺山 – 20: *Zhi de zhijue yu zhongguo zhhexue* 智的直覺與中國哲學 – 21: *Xianxia yu wuzhishen* 現象與物自身 – 22: *Yuan shan lun* 圓善論 – 27: *Collected Papers of the Late Period* 晚期文集 – 28: *Zhongguo zhhexue de tezhi* 中國哲學的特質 – 29: *Zhongguo zhhexue shi-jiujiang* 中國哲學十九講 – 31: *Zhouyi yanjiang lu* 周易演講錄。
- 10 This comment comes from Ng Yu-kwan's 吳汝鈞 personal memoir, in which he discusses Mou's critique of Lao's account of Chinese Philosophy (Ng 2002, 97). A similar comment also appears in *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy* (Mou 29: 71–76).
- 11 Tsai 2009, 20–22; Wang, Cen, et al. 2005, 450–452.
- 12 While some commentators have noted the importance of Mou's moral metaphysics (e.g., Billioud 2012), the intense debate between Mou and Lao on the metaphysical interpretation of Neo-Confucianism (*Song-Ming ruxue* 宋明儒學) has been largely neglected, which explicitly reflects their fundamental difference. In an interview, Lao stated that during his exile in Taiwan (1949–1955), he and Mou had already talked about the metaphysical interpretation of Neo-Confucianism. Although they had a similar view on the conception of Confucianism,

Despite his silence on these critiques, Lao's response to essays about his own thought in the *History of Chinese Philosophy* sheds light on his defense. He clearly points out the problem of metaphysical language and affirms his explanation of his *non-metaphysical* model for interpreting Chinese philosophy, which refers to his comprehensive account of postmetaphysical thinking in his late works.¹³ Moreover, in the *History of Chinese Philosophy* we are told that in his effort to establish a "universal philosophy," Lao attempts to rule out the closed elements (*fengbi chengsu* 封閉成素) of Chinese philosophy and to reveal the open elements (*kaiyang chengsu* 開放成素),¹⁴ an approach that is further eluci-

Lao did not agree with Mou's metaphysical interpretation of Neo-Confucianism and strongly suggested that Mou should consider how traditional Confucianism could be reevaluated in the *modern world*. In spite of this serious disagreement, Mou attempted to convince Lao of the correctness of his interpretation. After publishing three volumes of *Xinti yu xingti* 心體與性體 in 1968, which represents Mou's formal establishment of Confucian moral metaphysics, Mou gave Lao that set of works and invited him to dinner to further discuss the problem of metaphysical interpretation. However, after that dinner they stopped discussing philosophical questions, since neither could convince the other of the correctness of his views (Lao 2007c). This substantial disagreement not only spoiled their friendship, but also led their students in Hong Kong to split into two opposing camps (Ng 2002, 95–97).

- 13 From the disagreement between Lao and Mou mentioned in the previous footnote, we are told that in his early phase Lao was already demonstrating a concern for the relationship between non-metaphysical interpretation and modernity. Moreover, while Lao does not use the term "postmetaphysical thinking" to describe his interpretation in the *History of Chinese Philosophy*, his strong intention to employ a non-metaphysical interpretation is already reflected in works of his early and middle phases (Lao 2003b, 277–278). This is seen in his discussion and defense of Mencius's notion of heaven (*tian* 天) (Lao 1: 192–203, 404–406). The notion of postmetaphysical thinking is the leitmotiv in Lao's late works (Lowe 2016, 126–128; 2017, 219–224), since it provides the basis for his account of a non-absolute foundationalism. The latter attempts to reformulate a "cross-orders postulate of language" as the non-metaphysical principle for solving the predicament of skepticism in contemporary philosophy (Lao 2007a, 167–173; 2014, 92–106). For a detailed discussion of the division of Lao's thought into three phases, see Cheung 2013, 156–183.
- 14 Lao 3B: 812–814, 888. Antonio S. Cua expresses doubt about this establishment of universal philosophy: "Like many philosophers of our age, with a penchant for objectivity or 'the view from nowhere', Lao is a child of those Western philosophers beset by the fear of relativism and subjectivism. He does not seem to be worried with the problems recently presented by Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Derrida and his fellow deconstructionists" (Cua 2009, 59). However, Cua has largely neglected Lao's concern about the cultural conflict between modernity and postmodernism, instead attempting to tackling the problem of universal validity and to response to the postmodern challenge posed by Rorty, MacIntyre, and Derrida (Lao 1993; 2003a 187–218; 2014; 2018). Moreover, for Lao, whether Chinese philosophy can be

dated in Lao's late works.¹⁵ Admittedly, this distinction is closely related to the problem of metaphysical language and the universal validity of the notion of subjectivity.

Not surprisingly, in discussing Lao's interpretation of Chinese philosophy, many commentators have neglected its connection with his late works. They see the *History of Chinese Philosophy* as representing Lao's mature thought, whereas Lao himself repeatedly points out that this work is one of the products of his lifelong project to find a way out of the cultural crisis.¹⁶ According to Lao, the most important factor in that crisis is the rise of modernity, which puts all traditional cultures under pressure and which raises the problem of modernization.¹⁷ Under this consideration, we find that he repeatedly argues that "China [is] in the world, but not against the world,"¹⁸ namely, that global modernity as "the whole determines the function of its parts" (*quanti jue ding bu fen de gongneng* 全體決定部分的功能).¹⁹ Given that we are already in the modern world, in discussing Chinese philosophy we should not isolate that philosophy from this worldly background, since there are complex interactions between different philosophical and cultural traditions. Here I refer especially to the relationship between traditional and modern philosophy. If such complexities were to be ignored in discussions of Chinese philosophy, Chinese philosophy would become self-abstracted and real philosophical problems would not be addressed. That is to say, in interpreting traditional Chinese philosophy, we must consider how to *modernize* that philosophy, which is the crucial part of establishing it as a "universal philosophy."²⁰

revived in the modern world depends not on how we show its closed elements, which only function in the Chinese tradition in isolation from the world, but on how we carry out its open elements, which can be universally integrated into different philosophical traditions. For a detailed discussion on this point, see the section 3 of the present article.

15 Lao 2003a, 30–31, 224; 2007a, 54–57; 2014, 225, 234–236.

16 For a brief account of Lao's thought about the cultural crisis from his early to his late phase, see Lao 2003a, 220–222.

17 Lao 2002, xi; 2007a, viii. Apart from the conflict between premodern and modern culture, rationality remains an internal problem in modern culture, which has led to the rise of post-modernism referring to the distrust of reason (Lao 2003a, 189; 2007a, 5–6). For this reason, Kai Marchal (2008) has already noted that Lao's *History of Chinese Philosophy* also confronts the problem of modernity.

18 Lao 2003a, 221; 2007a, 57–59, 103.

19 Lao 1993, 189–190.

20 Lao 2007a, viii: 儘管「現代化」這個口號似乎已為大家所接受，但傳統文與現代文化間的關係如何定位，始終是大家未能深究的問題。因此，我自己給自己制定的工作計劃，便是先對傳統文化成果作一番清理。當然，重點或焦點落在中國傳統哲學上。這一部分的工作是以面對現代化文化及現代社會為配景而進行的，最後成

By and large, without considering his late works on postmetaphysical thinking in modern philosophy and the distinction between open and closed elements, one cannot fully understand Lao's comprehensive account of subjectivity in the *History of Chinese Philosophy*. For this reason, we need to thoroughly understand Lao's philosophical consideration regarding the *History of Chinese Philosophy* – one that avoids the metaphysical model and largely focuses on the conception of subjectivity as an essential step in interpreting traditional Chinese philosophy against the background of the *modern world*. This paper is divided into three parts. The first is a brief consideration of some basic characteristics of Mou Zongsan's moral metaphysics. Because of Lao's concern for postmetaphysical thinking in modern philosophy, the second section is devoted to his discussion of linguistic frameworks and the problem of metaphysical language. In light of Lao's distinction between open and closed elements, the third section clarifies the significance of the conception of subjectivity in Chinese philosophy.

2 Two Features of Mou Zongsan's Moral Metaphysics

Before discussing Mou's moral metaphysics, it is helpful to briefly describe some common features of Chinese metaphysics. Some commentators argue that Western metaphysics searches for the truth in the supersensible realm, while Chinese metaphysics searches for the good life.²¹ However, as Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins indicate, it is hard to believe that Chinese philosophers were not motivated by a desire to grasp reality better. "Given that Chinese philosophers generally held a less anthropocentric view of nature than did their European counterparts, they were centrally concerned with how human values and social structures relate to the patterns of nature."²² Accordingly, the two traditions do share many common concerns and the difference between them is only a matter of degree and emphasis. Because of its major focus on human values and social structure, the general characteristic of metaphysical thinking in China is that "the metaphysical and the moral are always intertwined, as the status of values, the nature of the self, and concep-

果便是我中年發表的《中國哲學史》。"Although it seems that the motto 'modernization' has been recognized, the problem of how to deal with the relationship between traditional and modern cultures is not yet solved. Thus, I set up a project for myself that the first step is to measure the achievements of traditional Chinese culture. Admittedly, the focus of that is on the traditional Chinese philosophy, the work of which has been carried out against the background of modern culture and society. The final result is the *History of Chinese Philosophy* in my middle phase."

21 Yu, Xu, et al. 2009.

22 Li and Perkins 2015, 8.

tions of order all have metaphysical implications, if not foundations.”²³ In this respect, Mou’s moral metaphysics can be deemed to be a typical example of Chinese metaphysics. In the following we shall turn to Mou’s account.

As previously noted, Mou focuses heavily on Lao’s disproving of metaphysics and attempts to establish his metaphysical framework to elucidate traditional Chinese philosophy. With respect to this, an obvious example is Mou’s strong disagreement with Lao’s one thread theory (*yixi shuo* 一系說) of Neo-Confucianism (*Song-Ming ruxue* 宋明儒學). Such a disagreement reveals basic features of Mou’s metaphysical interpretation, through which he establishes his moral metaphysics. Below, we briefly consider two features of Mou’s metaphysical interpretation.

The first feature is the affirmation of the reality of the way of heaven (*tiandao* 天道), which provides us with a guarantee that morality will not vanish. To understand this ontological guarantee, it is helpful to first briefly consider Lao’s one thread theory. In this theory Lao argues for a non-metaphysical model of Neo-Confucianism. He states that metaphysics and the theory of subjectivity are incompatible in that the former, conceived of as the origin of the world, ultimately determines all objects, including moral agents, and must deny any entity that possesses absolute spontaneity; whereas the latter by nature requires absolute spontaneity, which entirely excludes all antecedent causes.²⁴ Thus, we should regard three different threads of Neo-Confucianism not as three distinct schools exclusive of each other, but as a three-phase process for returning to pre-Qin Confucianism,²⁵ that is, for showing that moral subjectivity is independent of any metaphysical entity.

23 Li and Perkins 2015, 8. Because of the many common concerns in Western and Chinese metaphysics, I shall not sharply distinguish metaphysical notions as being from the Western or Chinese tradition when discussing the characteristics of metaphysics in general, unless it is necessary to do so. For further discussion of metaphysics in Chinese philosophy, see Hansen 2001; Perkins 2016; Wen 2011; Yang 2008.

24 Lao 3A: 76–90.

25 According to Lao, this three-phase process shows that the latter phase has the better explanatory power and refers to: (1) ontological theory (Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, Shao Yong 邵雍, and Zhang Zai 張載): as an ontological entity, the way of heaven has already determined all beings and is embodied in the empirical world; (2) metaphysical theory (Cheng Hao 程顥, Cheng Yi 程頤, and Zhu Xi 朱熹): the way of heaven determines the essence of all beings but has not yet been fully actualized and, thus, a moral agent should actualize the way of heaven in the empirical world; (3) subjectivistic theory (Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵 and Wang Yangming 王陽明): the way of heaven is nothing other than the moral principles rooted in a moral agent, with transcendental freedom referring to absolute spontaneity; actualizing those principles is entirely dependent on the free choice of the moral agent (Lao 3A: 2–4; 79–80).

By contrast, since the major thrust of Neo-Confucianism consists of constructing a moral metaphysics which remains entirely consistent with pre-Qin Confucianism, Mou offers a trichotomy, the three threads theory (*sanxi shuo* 三系說), which categorizes Neo-Confucians as belonging to three schools and evaluates their establishment of a moral metaphysics.²⁶ On this reading, the thread of Lu and Wang is the most successful one, since the central argument of this thread, which is that the “mind is principle” (*xin ji li* 心即理), not only shows “ontological being and activity at the same time” (*cunyou ji huodong* 存有即活動) in light of the approach of “retrospective verification” (*nijue tizheng* 逆覺體證), but also corresponds (*yao qi* 遙契) directly to the ideas of Confucius and Mencius.²⁷ In other words, the thread of Lu and Wang can demonstrate the compatibility between metaphysics and absolutely spontaneous subjectivity, as well as establish the reality of the way of heaven through rational agents, which reflects the underlying commitment of Neo-Confucianists to the notion that “the way of heaven, human nature, and destiny penetrate together” (*tiandao xingming xiang guantong* 天道性命相貫通).²⁸

Given that the ontological state of the way of heaven is construed as the origin of morality, Mou strongly asserts the reality of freedom. A good example is Mou's account of moral consciousness and intellectual intuition. In discussing Kant's moral philosophy Mou objects that the idea of freedom is not merely a postulate but a demonstration of a moral entity, namely, moral consciousness (*daode yishi* 道德意識). Furthermore, through some Confucian notions Mou endeavors to justify the claim that we must possess an intellectual intuition (*zhizhi zhijue* 智之直覺), otherwise moral consciousness is merely

26 These three schools are (Mou 05: 52–53; 436): (1) the thread of Hu Wufeng 胡五峰 and Liu Jishan 劉蕺山 (including Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, Zhang Zai 張載, and Cheng Hao 程顥): “they all begin to address the question of the constitutive Way (*daoti* 道體) and then evoked constitutive nature. Finally, returning to the subjective, they tackled the issue of constitutive mind (*xinti* 心體)” (Billioud 2012, 41); (2) the thread of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 and Wang Yangming 王陽明: “the *xin* (心) identified with our essence (*xing* 性) bestowed by Heaven is originally and entirely pure, or constitutive mind is constitutive essence (*xinti ji xingt* 心體即性體).” (Billioud 2012, 38–39); (3) the thread of Cheng Yi 程頤 and Zhu Xi 朱熹: “On the one hand, a mind (*xin* 心) is made up of matter-energy (*qi* 氣). On the other hand, there is a ‘transcendent’ or ‘objective’ nature (*xing* 性) that relates to *xing er shang* (形而上) principle (*li*)” (Billioud 2012, 37). As Lao comments, Mou's theory of three threads aims to establish the influential position of the way of heaven (Lao 2001a, 111).

27 Mou 08: 189; 28: 35–43; 29: 400, 419. Regarding the expression of Mou's concepts, I have considered the English translation of *Nineteen Lectures on Chinese Philosophy* (2015) and Billioud's translation (2012).

28 Mou 05: 437.

an illusion.²⁹ In what sense can we say that human beings possess such intuition? Kant defines intellectual intuition in reference to a non-spatiotemporal framework, asserting that only an infinite being, for example God, can possess an intellectual intuition. However, Mou gives that intuition a new meaning involving moral consciousness, or a benevolent mind (*renxin* 仁心) in the Confucian sense, and uses the terms “intellectual intuition” and “moral consciousness” interchangeably (Mou 06: 223; 22: 129–137). For this reason, in Mou’s moral metaphysics, the notion of intellectual intuition should be construed in a moral sense and Mou even asserts that without the affirmation of intellectual intuition rooted in moral agents, the whole of Chinese philosophy would collapse.³⁰

Following from Mou’s notion of intellectual intuition, the second feature of moral metaphysics is that moral conceptions of Confucianism propose a solution to the problem of being. According to Mou, in order to establish a comprehensive account, Confucianism should not only solve the problem of morality, but also that of being. Thus, moral metaphysics is a necessary step in the development of Confucianism.³¹ Clearly, the answer to the problem of being lies in the existence of the way of heaven. Mou’s moral metaphysics seems to deal with the problem of physical creation. However, a closer inspection suggests that Mou’s metaphysical theory focuses more on moral than on physical creation, the key point of which lies in his interpretation of the *Yi Jing*:³² “The method of Chien is to change and transform, so that everything obtains its correct nature as appointed (by the mind of heaven)”³³ (*qian dao bianhua, ge zheng xing ming* 乾道變化，各正性命). Put simply, the meaning of morality entails a guarantee of being. For example, when fulfilling one’s filial duty, especially when showing respect (*jing* 敬), we have to assume that the object of that duty, namely the being of our parents, exists. While our parents as physical objects are created by the way of heaven, heaven at the same time has also assigned to them the essence of what they should become, including the actualization of moral worth. For Mou, such actualization relies heavily on the application of intellectual intuition, or the

29 Mou’s account of Kant’s philosophy also contains many Kantian epistemic conceptions that have been transformed into ones with a practical sense. For a detailed discussion, see Lau 2013, 61–67.

30 Mou 21: 63–66.

31 Mou 29: 73–74. According to Mou, the major thrust of traditional Confucianism is not only the problem of a moral agent, but also the ontological problem. While Confucius was not interested in metaphysics, “his insight and wisdom still projects penetratingly into the issue of existence,” which refers to the idea of heaven as “responsible for the existence of all things,” namely, “the way of heaven creates and nourishes” (*tian dao shenghua* 天道生化) (Mou 29: 75; 2015, 72).

32 Mou 31: 32.

33 Legge 1971, 47.

application of benevolent mind. In order to achieve the aim of moral creation, human beings should fulfill human essence (*jin xing* 盡性), that is, perform the filial duty that makes our parents real in the sense that they are not only physical but also moral beings.³⁴ Thus, to fulfill moral duties is equivalent to applying intellectual intuition to create the moral worth of physical beings; even the ends of all beings are dictated by that intuition.³⁵ Accordingly, moral metaphysics would indeed not conflict with the absolute spontaneity of rational agents. The relationship between the absolutely spontaneous subjectivity and the way of heaven can be conceived of as two sides of the same coin, and the creation of all beings is completely subordinated to that subjectivity.

At first glance, there is strong textual support for Mou's interpretation, since the notion of the way of heaven holds an important position in the history of Chinese philosophy. Moreover, Mou's trichotomy would be useful for understanding how different schools in Neo-Confucianism conceive moral metaphysics. With the help of Mou's metaphysical framework, we also see that Chinese philosophy has its own philosophical and metaphysical system considered from the practical perspective, which is entirely different from Western metaphysics considered from the theoretical perspective. It seems that Mou's metaphysical interpretation is able not only to elucidate the essence of Chinese philosophy, but also to revive that philosophy. However, Lao does not adhere to Mou's approach, objecting that Mou's metaphysical interpretation reflects an insufficient understanding of *modernity*,³⁶ an

34 See Ng 2016, 46–48. The notion of fulfilling human essence is derived from Mencius's account (2003, 7A: 1).

35 Mou's account of the "self-negation of moral consciousness" (*liangzhi ziwo kan xian* 良知自我坎陷) can further explain that dictation. Put simply, based on Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena, Mou construes the Confucian moral subject as noumena containing an intellectual intuition, and empirical objects as phenomena. The two have a causal relationship, with the former being the grounds of the latter. Influenced by Heidegger, Mou argues that the word "object" in German is *gegenstand*, which is derived from the verb *entgegenstehen* (something stands against). Mou indicates that an empirical object should be understood as something that I let something stand in front of me, in which two kinds of subject, the cognitive self and the moral self, are given a hierarchical order. Thus, when a moral subject negates itself, it will be split into a cognitive subject and empirical objects. This is why the notion of intellectual intuition plays an important role in Mou's moral metaphysics. For a detailed discussion, see Mou 20, 31–54.

36 Lao 2007a, 122–123, 128. Mou's insufficient understanding of modernity is also shown in his comments on contemporary analytic philosophy. While he was young, Mou devoted himself to the study of early analytic philosophy (e.g., the ideas of Russell and Wittgenstein), while neglecting the later development of that philosophy, such as the discussions of Carnap and Quine. In scrutinizing the history of philosophy, it is hard to deny that contemporary analytic philosophy, e.g. the philosophy of language and logic, has made an important contribution to

objection that is closely related to Lao's account of postmetaphysical thinking and the problem of metaphysical language.³⁷ In the next part we shall discuss his analysis of the problem of metaphysical thinking.

3 Modernity, Postmetaphysical Thinking, and Explanatory Power

For Lao, since the rise of modernity is one the most important of worldly backgrounds, we should understand that background of modernity when discussing any revival of traditional culture, especially traditional Chinese philosophy. In this part we shall discuss postmetaphysical thinking in modern philosophy and the problem of the explanatory power of metaphysical language.

3.1 Disenchantment and Metaphysical Thinking

To begin with, the meaning of the word "modernity" is worth noting. Lao clearly indicates that the words "modernity" or "modern" are to be used to distinguish between the present and past eras. Although the word "modernity" as such does not have any particular meaning, following the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century thinkers began to attribute some distinctive characteristics to modernity.³⁸ Based on Max Weber's analysis,

the rise of postmetaphysical thinking. However, according to Mou, analytic philosophy is merely a methodology that focuses on logical skills, which neglects cultural problems (Mou 27: 297–302); thus, he cannot acknowledge the contributions of contemporary analytic philosophy. For detailed discussion of Mou's conception of logic and analytic philosophy, see Suter 2017.

- 37 The notion of postmetaphysical thinking is argued by Habermas 1992. Habermas's notion of postmetaphysical thinking can easily be misleading, since he would deny all metaphysics. However, as Baynes points out, that notion largely does not involve a rejection of the sort of inquiry pursued in the more recent revival of analytic metaphysics. By metaphysical thinking, Habermas means "the tradition of classical metaphysics from Plato, on through the medieval period, and up to the modern 'philosophy of the subject' that arose in response to the emergence of science as a competing form of knowledge" (Baynes 2016, 205–206). Moreover, while Habermas associates Kant with the metaphysics of subjectivity, Lao thinks that Kant's philosophy has made a significant contribution to postmetaphysical thinking, since for Lao subjectivity can be construed as an *explanatory notion* rather than a metaphysical entity.
- 38 Lao 2003a, 189–191. It should be noted that Lao clearly distinguishes between Westernization and modernization. The former refers to a regional distinction; the latter to a periodical one. Although the rise of modernity can be traced back to Europe, Lao argues that a notion of historical phase represents some characteristics that cannot be reduced to a regional culture. Hence, regardless of the origin of philosophy, traditional Western and Chinese philosophies

Lao points out that one of the most significant characteristics of modernity is the process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*).³⁹ Dominated by Aristotelian metaphysics, most people living through the premodern period in Europe construed the world through a teleological model, believing that the world was realizing itself according to a purpose. However, the development of science brought significant changes to the structure of knowledge, and a scientific explanation came to occupy a dominant position over the teleological model in understanding how the world operates.⁴⁰ In other words, the modern scientific model effectively *dissolved* the premodern metaphysical worldview.⁴¹

Lao indicates that because of its expansionism, modernity places premodern cultures under increasing pressure, since the former alters the basic structure of cultural development, so that the latter gradually loses its effectiveness and is confronted with the problem of modernization. For this reason, Lao argues that the process of disenchantment in modern philosophy can be referred to as postmetaphysical thinking, which is a way of thinking that leaves behind the tradition of classical metaphysics. He further argues that we should not use metaphysical language to deal with problems of the objective world, since that language does not represent the knowledge of the empirical world.⁴² In order to better understand this postmetaphysical thinking, then, it is helpful to see how Lao construes metaphysical thinking as representing a common feature of premodern philosophy, whether Western or Chinese philosophy.

displayed the same characteristic in the premodern phase, namely, the characteristic of metaphysical thinking.

39 Lao 2007a, 66; 2016, 388–401; Weber 1994, 9.

40 While the metaphysical model is replaced by a scientific one in explaining empirical knowledge, Lao does not mean that we should remove metaphysics from intellectual activities, since it still plays a role in modern philosophy, such as in the philosophy of history and of religion. Given the background of disenchantment, Lao suggests that we should reposition metaphysics so that it can be construed as a limited concept (*jixian gainian* 極限概念) rather than as a goal concept (*mubiao gainian* 目標概念). The former carries out an orientative function towards the continuous approximation of perfect knowledge, whereas the latter regards perfect knowledge as a truly achievable target (Lao 2014, 109–113; 2018, 291).

41 With respect to Lao's lecture on the relationship between contemporary thought and Contemporary New Confucianism (Lao 2007a, 103–117), Thomas Metzger argues that Lao's account of modernity would deny the agnosticism and adopt the metaphysical view of epistemology, although Lao would accept the so-called great modern Western epistemological revolution (Metzger 2012, 623). However, Metzger largely neglects Lao's other works in his late phase, in which Lao repeatedly argues that metaphysical thinking cannot effectively respond to philosophical problems in the modern world (Lao 2012, 9; 2007a, 167–173; 2016, 391–395).

42 Lao 2014, 99.

Taking the Western history of philosophy as an example, it is clear that in the premodern era many philosophers had a strong interest in establishing metaphysics that propose a systematic theory and subordinate all phenomena to a central principle. According to Lao, metaphysical thinking possesses three distinctive characteristics: ultimacy, substantiality, and incorrigibility.⁴³ The aim of all metaphysical theories, whether theoretical or practical, is to search for the ultimate reality that serves as the origin of all being, rather than to search for any rules of action. This means that an ultimate entity must exist independent of any sensible objects. Following from this, we must also assume that this ultimate reality is able to provide us with incorrigible knowledge by virtue of its perfection.⁴⁴ Since these three characteristics serve as the foundation for actually obtaining absolute knowledge, Lao also construes metaphysical thinking as absolute foundationalism. For these reasons, this foundationalism can be deemed to be a key feature of premodern philosophy.

However, what dissolved the validity of premodern philosophy was the rise of Kant's transcendental philosophy, which represents the beginning of modern postmetaphysical thinking. On the one hand, Kant showed that metaphysical objects cannot be represented in a spatiotemporal framework of a cognitive agent, and that metaphysics as fallacies of pure thinking cannot determine the existence of an object. On the other hand, we are told that three important spheres of experience – knowledge, morality, and aesthetics – should each be governed by its own fundamental principles, and that these fundamental principles cannot be replaced by those of the others or by any metaphysical entity. Influenced by Kant's view, many philosophers after him abandoned metaphysics and put forward different non-metaphysical models for interpreting those three spheres, although some philosophers, such as Hegel and Heidegger, attempted to reestablish metaphysics. In the twentieth century, the rise of logical positivism and some important theories put forward by other philosophers have also reinforced the trend toward postmetaphysical thinking. For example, Rawls' political liberalism and Habermas's theory of communicative actions reflect the efforts that both philosophers went to in order to avoid using metaphysical language in their theories.

In spite of the strong trend toward postmetaphysical thinking, Lao does not mean to say that we should entirely eliminate metaphysics. Instead of adhering to absolute foundationalism, Lao suggests that metaphysics should be repositioned, that is, ultimacy, substantiality, and incorrigibility have an *orientative function* that serves as the final purpose for establishing knowledge.⁴⁵ Following from the trend of postmetaphysical thinking, according to Lao, the notion of subjectivity serves a new way of thinking that lays a new founda-

43 Lao 2007, 130–133.

44 For detailed discussion of metaphysical thinking, see Lao 2007a, 130–132; 2016, 60.

45 Lao 2014, 109–113.

tion for modernity. For example, with respect to the legitimacy of government, the notion of a god's mandate is replaced by that of the social contract, in which rational agents obey their own wills. Given the assertion of individual desire, modern economic thought encourages the accumulation of personal wealth. In modern science rational agents do not blindly obey authority, but only adopt empirical observations that are convincing to their reason.⁴⁶ Obviously, together with postmetaphysical thinking, the affirmation of subjectivity is a leitmotiv of modernity. Accordingly, one may argue that because of his strong focus on the notion of subjectivity, Mou's moral metaphysics is quite modern. However, Lao's critique of Mou does not lie in Mou's use of that notion, but in his metaphysical interpretation of subjectivity. In the next part we shall further investigate the problem with that interpretation.

3.2 Metaphysical Language, Linguistic Framework, and Supervenient Structure

Having shown the trend in postmetaphysical thinking, Lao points out that that trend is not only a historical fact, but is also a reflection of the fact that a non-metaphysical interpretation has, from a linguistic perspective, a better *explanatory power* than a metaphysical one. Having an orientative characteristic, Chinese philosophy largely uses axiological language, in which the notion of the self is assumed. Inasmuch as both Mou and Lao largely apply the Kantian notion of a moral subject possessing freedom, we can still see the difference in their understanding of that notion and of metaphysical language in a linguistic framework. In turn, we shall consider Lao's introduction of Carnap's linguistic frameworks, which focuses on the functions of language.

In putting forward the theory of linguistic frameworks, Carnap indicates that using a language poses internal and external problems.⁴⁷ Internal problem refers to entities within that language framework. When choosing a language framework, we have to assume some objects as existing in that framework and rule out other objects as not existing in that framework. Here, an object should be understood as an object that could have a meaning either with or without a real reference. With respect to the external problem, we should justify our choice of language framework. Following from this, while the internal and external problems both require justification, it is clear that the meanings of the justifica-

46 Lao 2007a, 68–72, 92–98.

47 Here I largely follow the account of Carnap 1956, 205–221 and Lao 2007a, 150–151, 156–162. This linguistic framework is also closely related to Lao's interpretation of Kant's philosophy, which focuses on the conceptual relationship between a moral agent and free will. For detailed discussion, see Lowe 2019, 243–244.

tions will differ greatly, since the external problem involves explanatory power rather than a description of any entities.

With the help of Lao's introduction of linguistic frameworks, we can further indicate the problem of metaphysical language. Mou's justification of the external problem of axiological language lies in the search for a metaphysical entity, which entails the notion of one ultimate entity as an absolute foundation that *entirely determines* all others. As previously noted, given the underlying commitment of Neo-Confucians to the notion that "the way of heaven, human nature, and destiny penetrate together," Mou's account of that absolute foundation explicitly refers to moral subjects. For this reason, the notion of the moral subject is regarded as a metaphysical language to describe a metaphysical entity. However, identifying metaphysical language with explanatory language would inevitably lead to an infinite regress, since the reality of every object in an ontological relationship, including moral subjects, should be justified *ad infinitum*. Furthermore, applying metaphysical language to interpret the validity of axiological language would pose an antinomy. This is because, on the one hand, in using metaphysical language all objects including moral subjects must be conceived of as a deterministic world governed by the ultimate entity; on the other hand, by definition, the notion of the moral subject possessing freedom must preclude any preceding conditions, that is, a moral agent can *freely violate* the ultimate entity. This is why in the *History of Chinese Philosophy* Lao repeatedly expresses the explanatory problem of Mou's three threads theory.⁴⁸

Given Carnap's linguistic frameworks, Lao suggests that tackling the external problem of axiological language is not about considering the problem from an ontological perspective, but from a non-metaphysical one. Accordingly, we need not ask the traditional metaphysical question of where the freedom and the subject come from. Rather, we only need to explain the reasoning behind the adoption of those conceptions,⁴⁹ since we have already used axiological language to construe our actions, in which the notions of subjectivity and freedom are assumed to be the necessary condition to *make sense* of our actions. Otherwise, we can only use cognitive language to conceive our actions as being reduced to an empirically conditioned worldview, in which the notions of axiological language (e.g., will, responsibility, choice) cannot be established. Therefore, Lao argues that the relationship between axiological language and the notions of subjectivity and freedom should be construed as *conceptual* rather than ontological.

In order to further elucidate that conceptual relationship, it is helpful to look into Lao's account of supervenient structures. According to Lao, although different objects can be classified in different spheres, they should be put in a hierarchical order, with the differ-

48 Lao 3A: 53–57.

49 Lao 2007a, 158.

ences being determined by supervenient characteristics. From the bottom to the top, these levels are: (1) physical objects; (2) organic objects; (3) activities of subjectivity; and (4) activities of intersubjectivity. To introduce a supervenient structure is to show that an upper level displays some unique characteristics that a lower level does not possess.⁵⁰ In the first two levels, it is clear that physical language is sufficient to deal with those objects, since all of the objects are empirically conditioned. However, given the moral consciousness of rational agents, physical language is insufficient to tackle the problem of good and evil. Therefore, the notions of subjectivity and freedom have made significant contributions to the third level of the supervenient sphere since, as mentioned above, our actions should not be simply deemed as empirically conditioned. That is to say, those notions build a *necessary* supervenient structure in the empirical world for understanding the actions of rational agents. By contrast, because of the problem of explanatory power, introducing metaphysical language to justify the validity of axiological language would impose an *unnecessary* supervenient structure, in which the problem of infinite regress and the antinomy mentioned above would exist.⁵¹

After discussing Lao's accounts of postmetaphysical thinking and linguistic frameworks, we are now in a better position to understand his critique of Mou's interpretation of Chinese philosophy. Given that metaphysical thinking displays a distinctive characteristic of premodern philosophy, any attempt to put a metaphysical interpretation on Chinese philosophy would not only break the relationship between that philosophy and modernity, but also generate considerable tension between premodern and modern cultures.⁵² In other words, Mou's metaphysical interpretation would greatly undermine an

50 Lao 2007a, 159.

51 Lao 2007a, 159; 2007b.

52 Inasmuch as his account of culture was largely influenced by Hegel's philosophy, in his early phase Lao focuses on the notion of the spontaneity of subjectivity, which determines the establishment of institutions and the behavior of agents. Thus, Lao makes a distinction between culture as cultural phenomena (*wenhua xianxiang* 文化現象) and cultural spirit (*wenhua jingshen* 文化精神). As Brigit Knüsel Adamec points out, Lao sees Confucian teachings and values as forming the mainstream of Chinese culture and further argues that those teachings and values "are one basis of social reality, providing a framework that shapes the discourse on how the social world operates and, moreover, providing the basis for a reflection on how it should operate" (2013, 93–94). However, after reflecting on the limitations of Hegel's account of culture and adopting Talcott Parsons's discussion of social reality and action, in his late phase Lao develops the following more mature three-part notion of culture:

1. Lao understands culture as being a product of the activities of rational agents, which impose a supervenient structure on the natural world. That is to say, being based on axiological language and spontaneous rational agents, culture is independent of the natural world and

effort to revive traditional Chinese philosophy in the modern world.⁵³ However, in adopting Lao's accounts of postmetaphysical thinking and linguistic frameworks, the validity of the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy in the modern world still requires further justification. In the next part we shall consider how Lao construes the notion of subjectivity as a universal element of Chinese philosophy.

4 Subjectivity in the Practical Sphere: An Open Element of Chinese Philosophy

4.1 Distinction Between Open and Closed Elements, and the Problem of Cultural Sovereignty

As previously noted, in investigating Chinese philosophy Lao repeatedly puts forward the argument that "China [is] in the world, but not against the world." This argument focuses on the cosmopolitan contribution of Chinese philosophy in a worldly background, referring to the cultural crisis mentioned in the introductory section of this paper. We are told

cannot be reduced to a physical language that denies any spontaneous entity (Lao 2007a 158–161; 2016, 179–199).

2. Given this supervenient structure, Lao further suggests that all cultures can be construed as a system made up of three levels, creating a hierarchical order. From the bottom to the top, these levels are: the way of living, institutions, and axiological conceptions (Lao 2007a, 90).
3. However, Lao does not mean to imply that this philosophy of culture can solve all cultural conflicts, since it merely focuses on the spontaneous thinking of a rational agent rather than on that agent's social behavior. In order to provide a comprehensive account of cultural systems, Lao discusses two cultural models, the Hegelian and Parsonsian models. Put simply, the Hegelian model explains culture as a process of initiation, whereby all cultural phenomena are regarded as the externalization of the axiological conceptions of a rational agent: this explains the development of culturally homogeneous parts within a single system. By contrast, the Parsonsian model characterizes culture as a process of imitation, with given cultural phenomena being considered aspects of social reality; thus, a rational agent learns and internalizes social norms in axiological conceptions (Lao 2002, 103–142). This shows that there is an interrelationship between culturally heterogeneous systems. This is especially the case with the modernization of a premodern culture. Despite their substantial differences in their views of cultural development, both models focus on the development of axiological conceptions and provide a panoramic picture of a cultural system. For Lao, philosophy plays an important role, since as a form of reflective thinking it deals directly with the problem of axiological conceptions. That is why Lao's philosophy of culture focuses heavily on axiological conceptions.

53 Lao 2007a, 122–123.

that, in that crisis, Chinese philosophy is pertinent to the conflict between the premodern and modern eras in the sense that the rise of modernity dissolves the validity of traditional Chinese philosophy. So construed, that dissolution includes some invalid components of that philosophy. Given that one of these invalid components is metaphysical language, Chinese philosophy would become a museum collection if one insists on keeping that invalid component of Chinese philosophy in the modern world.⁵⁴ Thus, in order to revive that philosophy, Lao suggests that we should carefully distinguish a universally valid component from an invalid one, so that Chinese philosophy can carry out its important function.⁵⁵

With respect to the problem of valid and invalid parts, Lao's other significant distinction between open and closed elements comes into play. The former refers to universally valid components for every rational agent, while the latter refers to particular components in a philosophical tradition, the validity of which can only be upheld in certain historical and social contexts.⁵⁶ From the preceding discussion we are told that the open element of Chinese philosophy consists in subjectivity considered from the practical perspective, and the closed element in metaphysical thinking. Lao believes that not only can that distinction help us to determine the real contribution of Chinese philosophy to the world, but that it can also solve the problem of cultural sovereignty (*wenhua zhuquan* 文化主權).⁵⁷ In order to better understand the distinction that Lao makes between open and closed elements, it is helpful to first consider the problem of cultural sovereignty, before discussing the universal validity of the practical subjectivity of Chinese philosophy.

The notion of cultural sovereignty arises from Lao's view that every cultural achievement merely belongs to a different tradition, which strongly insists on its own cultural autonomy in a worldly intercultural background. Thus, to adhere to cultural sovereignty is equivalent to resisting this worldly intercultural background. That notion leads to a closed thought for philosophical development, since every cultural achievement focuses on its own characteristics and neglects *common criteria* for evaluating the contributions of different cultural traditions. So construed, the notion of cultural sovereignty is concerned with the particular rather than the universal, and we would consider each philosophical tradition to be a closed system denying communication with other heterogeneous traditions.⁵⁸ However, armed with Lao's distinction between open and closed elements, we do not need to see a philosophical tradition as either an entirely open or closed

54 Lao 2007a, 127.

55 Lao 2003, 24, 26–30, 221.

56 Lao 3B: 812–813.

57 Lao 2014, 223–225. On other occasions, Lao calls this the problem of “cultural subjectivity” (*wenhua zhuti xing* 文化主體性) (e.g., Lao 2007, 61).

58 Lao 2014, 225.

system that should be totally adopted or ruled out, since it must comprise both open and closed elements. Of course, Lao recognizes that every philosophical tradition inevitably arises from certain historical and social contexts, through which open elements still need to be embodied. But we can still separate open elements from closed ones.

For example, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) claims that “Benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity, and the great exercise of it is in loving relatives” (*renzhe, ren ye, qin wei da* 仁者，人也，親親為大).⁵⁹ In Lao’s analysis, because of its major characteristics of moral agency, the notion of benevolence (*ren* 仁) has a strong universal validity. However, the so-called key point to explaining benevolence is that it is a closed element, since the assumption of extended families had only been in existence in ancient Chinese society and has lost its *objective reference* in the modern world. Another example of this is the five cardinal relationships (*wulun* 五倫) of Confucianism. Inasmuch as in that society people normally had five relationships – namely, ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, older and younger brothers, and friends – they had five corresponding duties for cultivating benevolence. However, whether one must have those relationships is questionable; for example, an orphan or a bachelor lacks at least one or two cardinal relationships.⁶⁰ Thus, the five cardinal relationships are likewise a closed element of Confucianism. With these two examples, it is evident that the distinction between open and closed elements does not mean that one is right and the other wrong; rather, the focus is only on the universal validity of philosophical notions in different traditions, so that these can be integrated with other open elements from different traditions under contemporary historical and social conditions.⁶¹ Accordingly, whether a philosophical tradition can perform its proper function is dependent on how many open elements it contains.

Following from this, we can also see why Lao understands Mou’s metaphysical interpretation as a perplexing problem of how to revive Chinese philosophy. As previously noted, given that metaphysical thinking possesses three characteristics (ultimacy, substantiality, incorrigibility), such thinking entails an absolute foundationalism establishing an *all-inclusive closed system*.⁶² Mou’s moral metaphysics is no exception in that it inevitably

59 See Legge 2012, 405.

60 Lao 2003a, 9–10, 22.

61 Lao 3B, 888. The possible conditions of this new integration of different cultures involves Lao’s account of the Parsonsian model, or the process of internalization, which involves the imitating of heterogeneous cultures. It should be noted that Lao’s concern for finding open elements in different cultures can be regarded as preliminarily work for that integration. For a detailed discussion, see Lao 2002, 127–142.

62 For example, following Zhou Dunyi’s 周敦頤 cosmology of *yin* and *yang* and five elements (*yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行), Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 metaphysical theory also corresponds to that

involves certain historical and social contexts in premodern China.⁶³ Consequently, to identify that closed system as the fundamental feature of Chinese philosophy is equivalent to increasing the power of closed elements and the extent of cultural sovereignty, which is easily associated with patriotic sentiment.⁶⁴ Needless to say, that system denies any communication with other philosophical traditions and does not integrate open elements of other philosophical traditions.

4.2 Universal Validity of Subjectivity: An Orientative Characteristic of Chinese Philosophy

Having shown the reasons for a metaphysical interpretation as the closed element of Chinese philosophy, in the remaining part I shall discuss Lao's account of the subjectivity of that philosophy. According to Lao, the open element of Chinese philosophy consists largely of the notion of subjectivity considered from a non-metaphysical, or *conceptual*, perspective. For this reason, Lao attempts to argue that the concept of subjectivity itself is sufficient to serve as a universal component of different philosophical traditions, including Chinese philosophy. Lao's account of that concept can be divided into two parts. The first is a justification of the universal validity of the notion of subjectivity, which largely involves a discussion of Kant's transcendental idealism,⁶⁵ which deeply influenced Lao.⁶⁶ Thus, we shall consider Kant's account of subjectivity.

cosmology, such as the mention of five sounds, five colors, five tastes, and five cardinal relationships. Clearly, that theory establishes a closed system, since that relationship between the number of elements is perfect and cannot be changed (Lao 1993, 187).

- 63 In searching for an ultimate entity, Western metaphysics focuses either on the notion of the classical elements of earth, water, air, and fire, as was the case in ancient Greece, or on the notion of a personal god, as was the case in the Middle Ages. By contrast, Mou's moral metaphysics reflects certain Chinese historical and social contexts. For example, the notion of the way of heaven as the metaphysical entity is attributed to moral characteristics, which can be traced back to the tradition of the Western Zhou; the notion that "the way of heaven, human nature, and destiny penetrate together" can be traced back to an ancient religious belief in the Shang and Zhou dynasties of "the unity of heaven and men" (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一). For a detailed discussion of this point, see Yu 2014, 171–218.
- 64 As Lao indicates, because of this patriotic sentiment, Tang Junyi's and Mou's inquiries into Chinese philosophy focus on the difference between the Chinese and Western philosophies. They even see a confrontational relationship between China and the world, which differs totally from Lao's cosmopolitan concern for Chinese philosophy (Lao 2001a, 110; 2003a, 104–106; 2007a, 58–59).
- 65 There are two kinds of interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism, namely, the "two-

As mentioned above, Kant's philosophy is the benchmark for the rise of modern philosophy, which brought about the transition from metaphysical to postmetaphysical thinking. According to Kant, the notion of subjectivity plays a central role in this transition, since it serves as a source of all of the normative principles of three kinds of important experience, namely, the theoretical, practical, and aesthetic spheres of experience. As Kant elucidates in his transcendental deduction in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, all judgments should comply with the concept of "I think,"⁶⁷ which "is an act of *spontaneity*, i.e., it cannot be regarded as belonging to sensibility."⁶⁸ Accordingly, it is not that our cognition must conform to the objects, but that the objects must conform to our cognition,⁶⁹ namely, a cognitive agent must judge a thing as his object. Following from this, there are two *all-inclusive and mutually exclusive* philosophical standpoints, that is, transcendental idealism and transcendental realism,⁷⁰ both of which concern the relationship between a cognitive agent and empirical objects. Putting details aside, transcendental idealism attributes spatiotemporal conditions to that agent, whereas transcendental realism attributes them to objects. For Kant, inasmuch as transcendental realism utterly confuses the distinction between phenomena and noumena, which is the main fallacy of metaphysics, only transcendental idealism is correct. In a nutshell, the notion of subjectivity is the necessary condition for *making sense* of our cognitive experiences.

aspects" and the "two-worlds" interpretations. The former focuses on the conceptual relationship and the latter on the ontological one between rational agents and objects. Some may take the "two-worlds interpretation" and declare that Kant's philosophy builds up another metaphysics by virtue of his extensive description of the world of noumena. However, according to the "two-aspects interpretation," the same object can be considered in two ways, from the aspects of phenomena and noumena, in relation to the conditions of human sensibility. These ways are only an expedient methodological distinction and the notion of a rational agent serves merely as a necessary condition for justifying the validity of empirical knowledge. For a debate on these interpretations, see Allison 2004, 3–73. In the present article, the "two-aspects interpretation" is assumed for Kant's transcendental idealism, since it has better explanatory power. Moreover, because of Lao's account of Carnap's linguistic frameworks, which focuses on the conceptual relationship between different uses of language, Lao's understanding of Kant's philosophy is closely related to the "two-aspects interpretation."

66 For Lao's early discussion of Kant's epistemology, see Lao 2001c. For Lao's comprehensive account of Kant's transcendental philosophy, see his lectures (Lao 2003c).

67 KrV, B 131–136.

68 KrV, B 132.

69 KrV, B xvi.

70 Allison 2004, 20–49.

In the practical sphere we are told that the notion of subjectivity also serves as the major thrust in making sense of *obligation*, for which the notion of an absolutely spontaneous self is required. First, we shall consider the concept of absolute spontaneity. Considered from the phenomenal perspective, all of the objects in a spatiotemporal world, including oneself, are strictly governed by natural laws, namely, “all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect.”⁷¹ However, considered from the noumenal perspective, that is, apart from spatiotemporal conditions that are “only sensible forms of our intuition, but not determinations given for themselves or objects as things in themselves,”⁷² Kant’s transcendental idealism provides a plausible basis for an object, including rational agents, to which absolute spontaneity can be attributed, to be considered in itself.

Given this notion of absolutely spontaneous rational agents, we can further briefly consider Kant’s account of freedom. As we all know, in the sphere of practical philosophy Kant has also argued for an all-inclusive and mutually exclusive dichotomy, namely, categorical and hypothetical imperatives.⁷³ At first glance, in discussing the governance of an imperative for rational agents, the former means autonomy, referring to motivational independence from sensual needs, whereas the latter means heteronomy, referring to dependence upon inclination, which shows that rational agents are externally determined. However, in scrutinizing Kant’s account of freedom, it is clear that rational agents are not directly determined by inclination, even in the case of desire-based actions, which entails the notion of an absolutely spontaneous self, i.e., of causal independence from natural laws, in that “I take” *freely* is an inclination to an imperative. In other words, to be capable of thinking, rational agents have to assume a model of deliberation using some imperatives. As Kant indicates,

freedom of the *Willkür* has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself); only in this way can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the *Willkür* (of freedom).⁷⁴

This model of deliberation can be called the “Incorporation Thesis.”⁷⁵ Thus, “if I take myself to be a rational agent, that is, if I take myself to be acting on the basis of reasons and

71 KrV, A189/ B232.

72 KrV, A369.

73 For a detailed discussion on the establishment of this dichotomy, see Allison 2011, 320–322.

74 RGV, AA 06: 23–24.

75 Allison 1990, 40.

a reflective evaluation of my situation rather than merely responding to stimuli, I must necessarily regard myself as free.”⁷⁶ Accordingly, in an analogy with the function of the notion of “I think” in cognition, the Incorporation Thesis suggests that without the notion of “I take,” our obligation does not *make sense*, since all actions are merely determined by inclination.

After showing that the universal validity of the notion of subjectivity is regarded as the necessary condition for making sense, the second step in understanding the open element of Chinese philosophy is to specify the significance of the practical sphere in philosophy, which is closely related to Lao’s understanding of philosophy. For a long time, the philosophy has been defined in such a way that it has been considered equivalent to Western philosophy, which mostly focuses on epistemological theories. Consequently, the conception of philosophy remains closed, since that conception is incompatible with other philosophical traditions, which rules out Chinese philosophy. In order to build up an open conception of philosophy, Lao suggests that we do not need to directly answer the question of what philosophy is;⁷⁷ rather, we need to rethink features of philosophical thinking, which is “reflective thinking upon (a, b, c,...).”⁷⁸ That (a, b, c,...) refers to the functions of philosophy that allow philosophers to tackle different topics in different phases of history.⁷⁹ In other words, Lao conceives of reflective thinking and different philosophical topics as being in a functional relationship, which would demonstrate the openness of the conception of philosophy and allow a particular conception to gain the acceptance of those from other philosophical traditions.

Given this reflective thinking upon different topics, we can further explain the significance of subjectivity in the practical sphere. As previously noted, for Lao the notion of subjectivity plays a central role in modern philosophy, and there are two different but equally important approaches to it. In the history of Western philosophy, especially after Descartes, the notion of subjectivity is often reflected in different *theoretical* frameworks. By contrast, the basic interest of Chinese philosophy lies in the practical sphere, namely,

76 Allison 1996, 133

77 In Lao’s early work, *Introduction to Philosophy* (*Zhexue gailun* 哲學概論), he indicated that because there are no constant topics in philosophy, the essential definition cannot define philosophy. In order to provide a conventional definition, Lao uses the ostensive definition in different important topics in the history of philosophy to include philosophy (Lao 1998, 1–14; 2016, 1–26). Of course, Lao knows that the ostensive definition cannot provide a criterion for judging whether or not any new topic can be subordinated to philosophy. Therefore, he attempts to rethink features of philosophical thinking to tackle the problem of the definition of philosophy.

78 Lao 1989, 271.

79 Lao 1989, 271–272.

Chinese philosophy has an *orientative* character that involves self- and social transformation.⁸⁰ Regardless of the different conceptions of good in Confucianism, Daoism, or Chinese Buddhism, their “doctrines of mind and essence” (*xinxing lun* 心性論) also entail the notion of an absolutely spontaneous self, since they attempt to provide a plausible basis for orientating oneself.⁸¹ This is strongly reflected in a particular area of Chinese philosophy, namely, in the theory of cultivation (*gong fu lun* 工夫論), which contains different practical maxims for exercising an agent’s will.⁸²

By and large, for Lao, in modern philosophy the Western and Chinese philosophical traditions find common ground in the notion of subjectivity, although the two traditions have adopted different approaches to affirm that notion. That is why in the *History of*

80 Lao 1989, 277.

81 Lao 2001b, 30–43. For Lao, Confucianism can carry out the therapeutic function of easing the problem of reification, which is derived from the instrumental reason of modernity (Lao 2007a, 81, 100, 114; 2004), since the distinction that it makes between human beings and beasts (*ren qin zhi bian* 人禽之辨) affirms the significance of humanity. With respect to the problem of modernity, one cannot help but ask whether the notion of the subjectivity of Chinese philosophy can cure another problem of the iron cage of modern governance, presented by Max Weber. According to Weber’s analysis, given that democracy is aimed at promoting individual freedom, a democratic government implements the notion of *laissez-faire* to develop a free market, where instrumental reason spurs the rise of capitalism. However, capitalism widens the gap between rich and poor, requiring the government to intervene to impose taxes and promote the welfare of its citizens. Such intervention in fact violates individual freedom, and the government is transformed into a welfare state. Moreover, since effective governance requires a large bureaucracy, it is difficult to change such a bureaucracy through regular elections. Thus, Weber thinks that this kind of bureaucracy and capitalism are like an iron cage from which people cannot escape. Obviously, this iron cage places rational agents in a predicament, since on the one hand modernity affirms the autonomy of rational agents, while on the other hand the development of modernity denies that autonomy. According to Lao, such a predicament arises because the principles of a cultural sphere transgress into other spheres (Lao 2007a, 78–79). Since the operative principles of capitalism expand excessively into other spheres such as politics and education, and even into the whole of society, almost everything is transformed into exchange value, which causes the problem of reification and the iron cage. Given the Confucian distinction between human beings and beasts, we are told that human beings possess two irreplaceable identities, and that we are not governed solely by instrumental reason, which satisfies sensible desires. In other words, compared with Weber’s pessimistic view of capitalism, Lao adopts Habermas’s view that modernity is an incomplete project that can be revised and would suggest that the problem of transgression can be fixed by again recognizing our autonomy as considered from the practical sphere.

82 For detailed discussion of the orientative characteristic of Confucianism and Daoism, see Lao 1989, 276–290, and also the first book of his *History of Chinese Philosophy*.

Chinese Philosophy Lao makes that notion the main criterion for appraising different schools of Chinese philosophy and endeavors to indicate that in Chinese philosophy the notion of subjectivity functions as an open element that can not only communicate with the Western philosophical tradition, but also be integrated into universal philosophy.

While Mou and Lao agree that the notion of the subjectivity of the practical sphere plays an important role in Chinese philosophy, the fundamental difference between them is the characteristic of that notion. The former argues for a metaphysical notion, the latter for a conceptual one. Although Lao does not deny that metaphysics once played a large role in the history of Chinese philosophy, this does not mean that we now have to use metaphysical language to interpret Chinese philosophy, especially when a history of Chinese philosophy in a modern sense is required. For this reason, in his *History of Chinese Philosophy* Lao endeavors to show that there is an alternative way of understanding Chinese philosophy, that there is a non-metaphysical model to demonstrate subjectivity from a practical perspective that enables the Chinese philosophical tradition to contribute to the establishment of a universal philosophy.

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