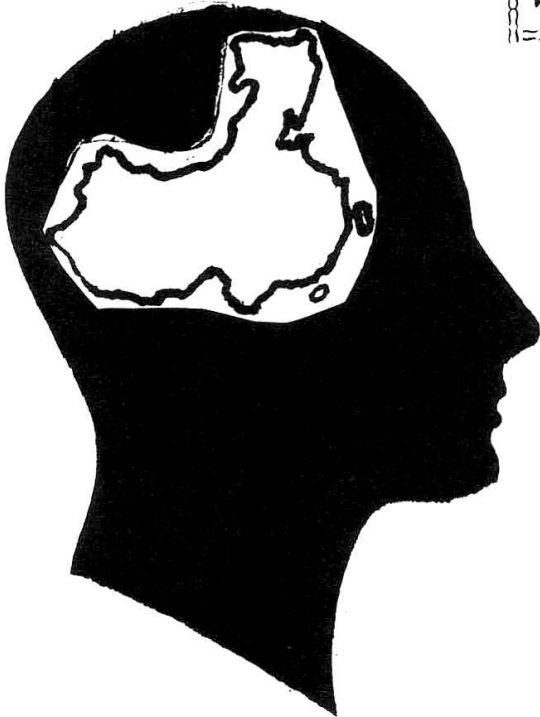


# CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

AND

# SOCIAL CONCERN



by Peter Wu  
translated by Peter Barry

Contemporary philosophy shows every sign of having lost its sense of direction. Ever since its relegation to just another course in the university curriculum it has been gradually painting itself into a corner. Having lost its true purpose, it has become a thing of mystery; an exercise in esoteric hairsplitting, where modern philosophers, under the guise of scholarship, convert what once were readily intelligible fundamental principles into an arcane science bordering on the occult. Divorced from life and society, philosophy now raises doubts not only about its practicability, but, more seriously, about whether it is of any use at all.

By way of contrast, just a glance through history with only a minimum of attention to the history of philosophy will serve to remind us that the science of philosophy was, in the past, very much concerned with and related to the practical needs of society and the lives of its members. Concern for human life and human relationships was not only

the proper object of philosophy, but its raison d'être - which hardly seems to be the case in contemporary studies of epistemology and metaphysics.

Social Turmoil and the Rise  
of Philosophy

In the early development of any human society, be it Eastern or Western, its initial level of concern is with 'the struggle for survival'. In this stage man mobilizes his energies in pursuit of life's basic material necessities: food, clothing, shelter and transport. During this phase, capable people of high intelligence came forward to dedicate themselves to resolving those problems that threatened the people's livelihood. This clearly indicates that a spirit of community service was very much a part of these ancient societies, and the wise and gifted readily placed their talents in service to the common people as the natural expression of their social consciousness.

With the gradual resolution of their more basic physical necessities, societies move on to the next stage in their development - a concern for human relationships within society, which, of course, gives rise to social-ethical systems. Interpersonal relationships fall well within the scope of 'the struggle for survival', and are, in fact, vital to social progress. The guiding ethical principle was 'benevolence' - a fundamental attitude of good-will towards others. The primary place of benevolence in social intercourse is summed up in the ancient adage: "Do not seek to pursue your livelihood to the detriment of benevolence; rather, seek to establish benevolence through personal sacrifice." The primacy of benevolence placed the ideal of human conduct above the pursuit of material necessities, establishing it as the bed-rock foundation for society's peace and prosperity.

When the wise and talented freely and willingly place their abilities in service to society, the good order of society is thus assured. This, of course, assumes a personal integrity and moral resoluteness which motivates them to rise above petty disputes and personal ambition in order to serve the common people. Lacking such moral resolve, the clever and able quickly become a source of contention, a disruptive element that can disturb the very peace and



tranquility of that society. China's Spring and Autumn Period spawned just such a society; where might made right, the big fish devoured the little fish, and the strong oppressed the weak. The result was a society marked by inner turmoil and chaotic unrest. In the West, one might point to ancient Athens where officialdom's policies of institutional slavery and unbridled colonial expansion were the primary factors that inflicted the ravages of war and the hopeless situation of dire poverty upon the ordinary masses of people.

When the moral laws of nature are ignored or suspended, man-made norms must then take their place. This is precisely the point where social turmoil gives rise to systems of ethical philosophy. The turbulent conditions of the Spring and Autumn Period in China produced a Kongzi (Confucius) and a Laozi (Lao-tzu). Confucius attempted to reestablish benevolence as the governing principle of human relationships, whereas Lao-tzu emphasized the cultivation of the inner-man. They shared a common purpose: to liberate society from a condition of chaos, to free the mass of people from dire poverty, and to bring peace and tranquility to the whole nation. Both philosophers were proposing practical solutions to stem the tide of social deterioration.

The policies of institutional slavery and colonial expansion of ancient Athens had as their original intent the further expansion of the people's livelihood, but it was done at the expense of social morality. Were these not sure signs of that nation's moral decline? Both systems were blatant denials of human equality. Slavery denied the equality of individuals within society, while colonialism established inequalities among tribes and nations. The 'cry of the oppressed' finally led to internal disorder and chaos. It was to be Plato and Aristotle who would propose in their philosophies radical solutions to the social ills of that time. In Plato's Republic, the ideal of justice, founded on the principle of human equality, was to be the guiding norm to overcome social evils. In Aristotle, we find the formulation of an extensive ethical system based on the human person. In clear philosophical terms, he advocated the acceptance of the basic dualism of body and soul and man's capacity for right reason as the foundation stones for an orderly society in which unjust situations would be eradicated.

It was their concern for society that committed Confucius in the East and Plato in the West to formulate their philosophies. Their philosophies were to be the practical means by which chaotic social conditions were to be re-ordered. Both gathered disciples around them, and both traveled from place to place disseminating the principles whereby men might find happiness and ensure peace and prosperity.

## The Decline of Philosophy and the Rise of Religion

The moral theories propounded by the many schools of thought in Pre-Qin China did little to prevent the subsequent decline of Chinese society. On the contrary, historical evidence dating back to the Han dynasty is rife with examples of a preoccupation with the occult and the relationships of the gods with men. During the reigns of such emperors as Qin Shihuang, Han Wudi and others, the potency of wizards' spells found a ready audience in the halls of power, which only encouraged the proclivity of the common people towards such superstitious practices as alchemy, divination, fortune telling and geomancy. At the core of this superstition was the belief that one's fate was determined by external causes, and that certain measures could be brought to bear on them in order to effect change. Some examples of this can be found in the search for the elixir of life which had the power to confer immortality on the one who drank it; building one's home with the door facing in an auspicious direction in order to bring prosperity to one's family within; effecting a harmonious relationship between one's name and birthplace to insure social distinction and success. Such practices led people to invest the external world with supranatural values; and the pursuit of the inner spiritual values in pre-Qin times, which promoted the leaving to posterity of a legacy of virtue, distinguished service and wisdom as the three incorruptible crowns of immortality, fell by the wayside.

Buddhism has had a great influence in the East, by introducing a spirit of asceticism into religious practice, and, perhaps more importantly, by introducing a cyclical approach to religious thought. After first dividing time into three periods - the present life, the former life and the future life, - it brings them together into a cohesive unity, linking them in a chain of recurring cycles. What happens in this life is a result of one's actions in the former life, and which in turn determines the status of one's future life. Virtuous acts in the past life insure blessings in the present one, while a life of vice in the former life is the cause of suffering in this one. What follows from this, of course, is that everything we do in our present life has direct bearing on what will befall us in the next. This cyclical system of



rewards and punishment served as the motivation for, and the ethical principle of, a life of virtue.

When tracing the history of Chinese thought down through the centuries, abundant evidence can be found to link the decline of philosophy with the rise of religion. Buddhism, coming when it did to China in a period of philosophical decay, was able to supplement for what was lacking in traditional Confucianism and Daoism. It was a case of religious thought bolstering a declining ethical system.

The experience of the West can be seen to run along parallel lines. Plato, as Confucius before him, met with little success as he went from place to place expounding his principles of ethical morality. Rome replaced Athens as the centre of political power, and philosophy gradually degenerated into a kind of popular hedonism. It was then that the Christian movement swept over the decaying Roman Empire. With its concept of man created in the 'image of God', it re-interpreted the dualism of body and soul, and proclaimed its belief in the equality of all men before God. It addressed the social inequalities of the slave system and the oppression of the colonial system with the fundamental Christian principle of self-sacrificing love. Such a love was to extend itself beyond one's own family and friends to embrace one's enemies as well. This spirit of universal love was the major force in the gradual dismantlement of the Roman Empire's policy of aggressive enslavement of peoples.

In the past, religion has often proven to be more effective in bringing about social changes in the customs and behaviour of societies than has philosophical theory. To use but one example, the initiation of the Judaic-Christian religious prescription of the day of rest, and the proliferation of places of worship in every town and village, resulted in great social changes among whole societies of people. It institutionalized leisure time within these societies by providing social centres where people from every level of society could come together not merely to worship but also to exchange ideas and experiences. This systematization of time and space within a society is but one result of the spread of Christianity throughout the world, and a basic condition for concretizing religious values within cultures.

#### Some Reflection by way of Conclusion

The determining factor in the development of civilization, its stages of advancement and regression, is found in the quality of its spiritual life. Just as with the individual person, the meaning and

value of his or her life is not determined by the span of years, but rather by the meaning and purpose that he or she invests in it. Whether one lives to a great age or dies in the full bloom of youth, the measure of one's life is in its level of meaning. It is a mark of a primitive culture to be overly concerned with mere physical survival, to relegate its concerns to the material level. It cannot be denied, however, that primitive, scientific cultures also initiate a search for life on another level. They give rise to ethical cultures, where the more spiritual values are given priority over the material. But when the ethics of humanism is no longer able to summon man to rise to the ethical ideal - to embrace goodness and repudiate evil, the only road left is the path of religious faith.



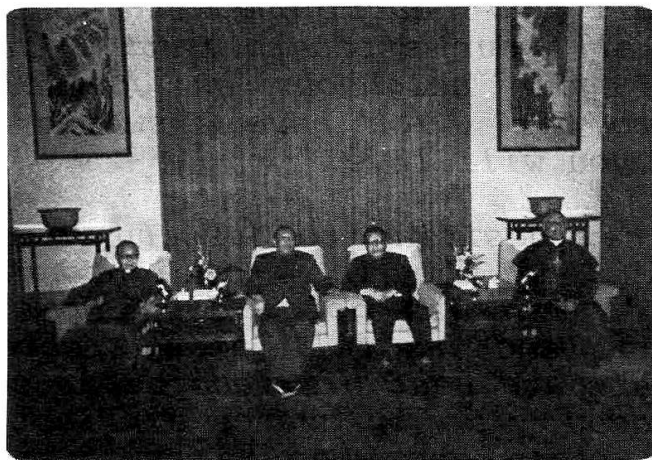
Modern man tends to measure his progress in terms of his technological development. He seldom reflects on the fact that his preoccupation with material advances is only the first phase in his cultural development - the primitive stage. The question of whether or not man experiences spiritual well-being is, after all, of much more importance than plotting the graph of his material achievements. The road to happiness does not lie in the acquisition of material things, but in the encouragement of his spiritual nature, of which ethics and religion are primary expressions. The promotion of ethics and religion in modern society is a challenge to man's wisdom, for his wisdom is especially put to the test when human nature is confronted by serious threats to his survival, and when he comes face-to-face with what seem at the time to be insurmountable obstacles to his present progress and future development.

It is precisely here that philosophy can play a major role. The purpose of philosophy is to examine, reflect and critique. It makes a comprehensive study of how technology functions in society, how social ethics and religion have influenced our past and are still influencing our present in such ways as to be vital determining elements in creating our future. It offers mankind reminders of the past and a critique of

the present that can enable us to make wise choices about the meaning of our lives and the purpose of our existence. Such must also be the ruling concern of our philosophers, who, immersed in the vicissitudes of life, must maintain a commitment to the welfare of the whole of society and a genuine solicitude for the goodness of mankind. It is the task of the philosopher to nourish our deepest yearnings for harmony and peace. What is incumbent, then, on the modern philosopher is that he himself actively seek a life of virtue, and in his social concern for his fellow human-beings, strive to contribute to the spread of virtue and goodness throughout the world.

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