

CHUNG-YING CHENG

PREFACE:
LÉVINAS FOR CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Based on his experience of the alterity of the other, Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–95) comes to hold that ethics is the first philosophy. This should arouse strong interest in Chinese philosophers, particularly contemporary Neo-Confucians, to look deeper into what Lévinas has in mind. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Unlike in the case of Heidegger, very few contemporary scholars, in fact, practically none, in Chinese philosophy, has taken Lévinas seriously, for no other reason than lack of knowledge and understanding. In very recent years, however, there is a growing number of Chinese scholars of French philosophy, who are not necessarily specialists in Chinese philosophy, have undertaken studies of Lévinas for the intrinsic attractiveness of his philosophy as an alternative to Heidegger in interpreting human self, alterity, Being, transcendence, Good, and justice. This is a good sign, for any Chinese philosophical exploration in relation to traditional and contemporary Western philosophy has to begin with basic exploration into those traditions in the first place. It heralds a new stage of development of Chinese by engaging dialogue and interpretation of the other traditions of philosophy and allowing at the same time other traditions of philosophy to interpret Chinese philosophy. We must recognize that mutual interpretation is a crucial way of understanding “the other” while understanding oneself.

It is my view that Lévinas is richly meaningful for Chinese philosophy in three major areas. First, in ethics, the encounter with “the other” face-to-face presents a fundamental experience of humanity which necessarily leads to one’s sense of responsibility and generosity or hospitality toward others in oneself. This is a Lévinasian proposition, but it could be seen as a Confucian proposition as well. It is through deep sensibility and affection of the embodied human being that love and care develop between parents and children in a family. One could extend care and love further to others, not because of established relationships, but in a primary sense due to sense of the other in relevant contexts which leads to establishing of relationships. In other words, social roles and relationships arise after one has encountered the others in different circumstances for different

reasons and different purposes. The essence of the concern for others must naturally instill our attitude of equity and responsibility for others as we must see others in ourselves by way of reciprocity in which others see us as others. This leads to the second area of common concern, the issue on how to understand human existence.

Human self is not given as fully predetermined nature but must be engaged with the world for its embodiment, actualization, and conscious self-definition. To encounter the other is the only way to get back to oneself while the other needs not to be confined to the world of other people, but instead could cover all things in the world. Human life is a process of knowing oneself by knowing others in a profound projective sense of knowing which cannot be separated from our feelings and sensibility. In the Lévinasian perspective, this is to go beyond Being to acknowledge others in the direction of Good which binds me and others. Could we therefore come to know heaven or God in the like manner? Here we come to the most significant part of Lévinas which could have a strong impact on understanding the nature of transcendence in Confucian ontology or onto-cosmology. This is the third area of common interest between Lévinas and contemporary Neo-Confucian philosophy which faces the problem of understanding transcendence.

In Lévinas's book *Totality and Infinity* transcendence is a matter of experiencing "the other" such as through expression of a human face which arouses our sense of responsibility. It also inspires our sense of Good beyond our finite being. It is also a sense of breaking out the totality in which one might find oneself in and signifies a will toward redefining one's freedom. This is transcendence which occurs in the interiority of the human self, and which could be consequently regarded as transcendence-in-immanence, or for that matter, immanence-in-transcendence which the Confucian ontology of human nature (*xing* 性) espouses. For Lévinas, as Being is better to be described as becoming in the verb to be, human being must assume no doubt an active life-form which vibrates and reverberates. Whereas transcendence as an interior move can be immanently described, immanence as an inner power must be also seen as a going beyond oneself toward seeking relationships with others, which is transcendence. In other words, transcendence and immanence must be regarded as reciprocal moves in contrastive directions which expand the human existence of the self as the other and the other as the self.

Lest we think that as and if there is all potential consensus between Lévinas and Confucian philosophy, we may bring out concerns of family justice and state justice. It is not clear whether Lévinas resolves the tensions between the two in his writings; for the Confucians it is basically conceived that the family model must elevate to the state

level for a large community in which the state justice must be defined by a system of *li* 禮 even though it is still basically rooted in humanity of *ren* 仁. Recent discussions on difference of Chinese society versus Hebrew society in terms of presence and absence of religious laws could be relevant.

Although Lévinas speaks against Heidegger on Being and human existence in his work *Other than Being*, in one way he seems to consent to the primary experience of Being as not to be explained away by interpretation: He takes the immediacy of experience of Being as Heidegger seems to take it as having a moral signification which he would call an event, although not an uncovering of Being. Both he and Heidegger could lend to the Daoist understanding of the *dao* 道 and suggest ways of thinking other than Confucians and Neo-Confucians.

In both present issue¹ of the *Journal* and our 2008 *Supplement* we shall let both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars of Lévinas speak out on Lévinas in a preparatory gesture toward providing a comparative and hermeneutical contexts for exploring new dimensions of meaning in Chinese philosophy, both Confucian and Daoist. To take this opportunity, we present our profound gratitude to Dr. Nicholas Bunnin for organizing and editing these inspiring articles, as well as we extend our thanks to the authors.

Chung-ying Cheng
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Chinese Philosophy

ENDNOTE

1. The original versions of the articles contributed by Professors Jiang Yi, Wu Xiaoming, Giovanni Levi, and Lin Ma were presented to the Hangzhou International Conference on Emmanuel Lévinas, Zhejiang University, September 11–13, 2006.