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KANT AND TRANSCULTURAL CRITIQUE: TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-CULTIVATION

I. BETWEEN CRITICAL THEORY AND MODERN CONFUCIANISM

How may it be possible to relate German and French critical theory on the one side and contemporary Neo-Confucianism on the other, two philosophical movements that have had very little mutual influence on and interest for each other? In an earlier article, I mainly refer to the Confucian manifesto of 1958 and the critical reflection on Chinese modernity, which undertakes to give a preliminary answer to this question.¹ In this article, the constellation of modernity, capitalism, subjectivity, and self-cultivation serves as a point of entry. More precisely, the contrast between two paradigms of self-cultivation, that of spiritual cultivation in Pierre Hadot and that of aesthetic cultivation in Michel Foucault, is what now constitutes an analytic perspective that allows us to establish a connection between aesthetic cultivation in Foucault and spiritual (or moral) cultivation in contemporary Neo-Confucianism. But what are the main features of this difference?

The late Foucault,² as I interpret him,³ takes a decisive stance not only against Christian asceticism and religious cultivation in general, but also against spiritual cultivation as described by Pierre Hadot.⁴ Although their interpretation of Greco-Roman philosophy differs, as the concepts of “aesthetics of existence” and “spiritual exercises” already signal, the most important difference concerns not questions of interpretation but alternative views on the significance of self-cultivation under contemporary conditions. Hadot is convinced that the spiritual exercises of antiquity can be *directly* extended into the present. The only problem is to lever these philosophical exercises from the historical oblivion they have fallen into. But for Foucault, it is not possible to return to the ancients and directly use their practices of the self today; they rather serve as a point of reference that can be only *indirectly* transformed into the present age.

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First of all, there is the distance to the Christian model of ascetic cultivation and its secular aftereffects, in psychoanalysis for example. Foucault's genealogical "history of the desiring man" and his analysis of the "subject of desire"⁵ shapes the background for his interest in the "long history of these aesthetics of existence and these technologies of the self."⁶ Although he suggests, through the use of notions like aesthetics of existence and arts of existence, that there is a very strong historical correspondence between Greek antiquity and the European modernity of Baudelaire and his artistic heirs, he is aware of the fact that the ascetic practices of the self, which are necessary when we want to deal with the challenge of the modern art of government developed in the name of (neo)liberalism, cannot be found in antiquity. The need for a contemporary theory and practice of self-cultivation emerges at this point and Foucault's work, especially the part that consists of interviews, contains many experimental ideas that, up until recently, have been taken up, in a systematic and creative manner, recently by Peter Sloterdijk.⁷ The problem Foucault tried to deal with, but which he was not able to solve, concerns the relation between aesthetic and moral cultivation. Foucault writes: "There is . . . no forming of the ethical subject without 'modes of subjectivation' and an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' that support them."⁸ But what kind of ethical subject is formed through aesthetic practices of the self and the ascetics of creativity Foucault advocates? I doubt whether a Foucauldian perspective is somehow able to reconcile creativity and morality, creative ascesis and moral self-cultivation.⁹ Confronted with this problem, I have been attracted by Tu Wei-ming's understanding of "selfhood as creative transformation"¹⁰ and puzzled by Mou Zongsan's idea of "moral creativity" and began to ask the question whether contemporary Neo-Confucianism, which puts great emphasis on both creativity and moral self-cultivation, may be helpful in the process of forging a contemporary theory of cultivation.¹¹

One possibility to find some common ground for an encounter between European critical theory and contemporary Neo-Confucianism is the complex and, in both cases, critical relationship to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. For Western philosophers not familiar with the development of thought in the twentieth-century Chinese-speaking world, the enormous prestige Kant enjoys in the intellectual world of greater China and especially in the field of Confucian studies is hard to imagine. Contemporary Neo-Confucians often express such a strong feeling of intellectual affinity and cultural affection toward Kant, that the relation between the two sides can be understood as a transcultural correspondence, which goes far beyond the scholarly interest in Western philosophy.

In the history of the reception of Kant in twentieth-century China, Mou Zongsan's longtime involvement with Kant's work certainly stands out.¹² Since the 1940s when he wrote about Kant's epistemology up to the 1990s, Mou not only studied and translated Kant, but also perceived his encounter with the German philosopher as a decisive step in his attempt to come to terms with modern Western philosophy and to modernize Confucianism. Whether this endeavor has been successful is still the question of discussions in the Chinese-speaking world but also in the West. This testifies to the fact that he opened up a field of comparative and transcultural research that has philosophical potential that cannot be neglected. In the following two sections, I will roughly outline the possible direction of an encounter of European critical theory and contemporary Neo-Confucianism based on the shared linkage to the philosophy of Kant.

II. KANT AND CRITICAL THEORY

Mou Zongsan initiated an interrelation of Kant revolving around the notions of "moral metaphysics" and "intellectual intuition." Whenever I tried, in recent years, to speak with Confucian scholars in Taiwan about the critique of Kantian philosophy developed in the context of European critical theory, I encountered incomprehension or even hostility, as if I had offended a delicate aspect of their very personal philosophical identity. And, moreover, any Marxist critique of Kant, as elaborated in the Chinese-speaking world by Li Zehou, for example, is rejected. As Lee Ming-huei points out in his critique of Li Zehou's interpretation, for Kant, the freedom of the moral subject is not in any respect bound to experience and therefore transcends all historical circumstances and social conditions.¹³ In Kant, there may be a strong tendency to defend this kind of ahistorical moral subject; however, the German thought that arose from Kantian philosophy and took Kant's notions of critique and enlightenment seriously has cast doubt on the metaphysical and transcendent character of the moral subject in Kant. The names of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud represent a development that culminated in a (post)modern critique of the conscious subject of rational self-control. This history of the subject in European philosophy (which is also a historization of the subject, a becoming historical of the subject) forms the general background of Foucault's theory of self-cultivation. Foucault's attempt to liberate self-cultivation and ascetic practices from the compulsive urge for (self-)discipline and (self-)control is crucial for the becoming creative of self-cultivation. Creative self-transformation is here related to the philosophical recognition of the body and of a

subjective economy of forces, which no longer grants reason, consciousness and the mind a superior position within the diversity of human faculties.

In an article on “self-cultivation after Kant,” the German philosopher Gernot Böhme has criticized Kant’s “program of self-cultivation” for being restricted to the “cultivation of becoming a rational human being” (*Kultivierung zum Vernunftmenschen*),¹⁴ which contradicts, because of Kant’s narrow and compulsive version of rationality, the contemporary need for alternative forms of knowledge, for multiculturalism and for civil courage. In this perspective, Kant may be important as a point of reference, but he has to be understood as a historical figure¹⁵ whose philosophy has historical limitations that have to be recognized if we want to evaluate his contemporary significance.¹⁶ Böhme’s critique of Kant can be situated within the constellation of modernity, capitalism, subjectivity, ethics, and self-cultivation mentioned above, insofar as it provides important clues for a better understanding of the internal relation between the Protestant work ethic and an ascetics of discipline, which is endorsed by Kantian moral philosophy. This is one of the reasons why Böhme thinks that we are in need for a “self-cultivation after Kant.”

Böhme’s interpretation of Kant, which belongs to the wider context of Frankfurt School Critical theory, has been influenced by the critique of reason and enlightenment developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and other works. They agree on the idea that modern reason is inseparable from the “control of internal and external nature.”¹⁷ The chapter on Kant in Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (“Freedom: Metacritique of Practical Reason”) gives a very dense summary of Adorno’s lifelong struggle with Kantian philosophy.¹⁸ In his lectures on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, which provide a simplified and more accessible version of his ideas, he articulates a critique of Kant that very much resonates with some of the aspects discussed in the reflections on self-cultivation above, especially concerning the relation between moral subjectivity and capitalist modernity. He refers to Kant’s notion of “good will” in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, which is important in contemporary Neo-Confucianism for establishing a link between Kant’s moral philosophy and the Confucian idea of the goodness of human nature,¹⁹ and gives a critical comment:

At the beginning of the *Groundwork*, in the celebrated first sentence, we read that “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.” If we read Kant’s overtones here correctly, this

means that the will is good as long as it is the faculty of desire guided solely by reason; and that evil is whatever has no will at all: the will-less, the diffuse, everything that drifts in the face of that centralizing, organizing authority. For this reason we can say that in Kant's ethics the bourgeois principle of domination over nature is reflected, at the very pinnacle of philosophical achievement, in the focusing of the drive-energies (*Triebenergien*) on the self that directs them. We might almost say that something like ill will is not really conceivable in Kant because the will as self-consistent rational desire is in fact the good; reason and goodness coincide.²⁰

In this article, I cannot go into the details of Adorno's interpretation of Kant. However, I think it is important to mention that his interpretation is deeply intertwined with his painstaking reflections on the catastrophe of German fascism and his attempt to trace the conditions of its possibility back to the most abstract philosophical notions. In his point of view, the internal dynamic of philosophical notions cannot be separated from the dynamic of history and, more precisely speaking, the political economy of modernity:

If we were to express what I have just said in social terms—and that, too, is a way to concretize the abstract or formal Kantian ethic—we might say that what Kant has done is to have taken the work ethic of bourgeois society, that is, the standard governing the process of production of goods that presides over bourgeois society as a whole, and to have adopted it as his own supreme philosophical standard.²¹

Only when we somehow understand that Adorno does *not* play a kind of postmodern game may we grasp the meaning of the way he, in a shocking manner, relates the categorical imperative to the death camps of Auschwitz:

Hitler has imposed a new categorical imperative upon humanity in the state of their unfreedom: to arrange their thinking and conduct, so that Auschwitz never repeats itself, so that nothing similar ever happens again. This imperative is as unmanageable vis-à-vis its foundation as the given fact formerly was to the Kantian one. To treat it discursively would be heinous: in it the moment of the supplementary in what is moral can be bodily felt. Bodily, because it is the abhorrence, become practical, of the unbearable physical pain inflicted on individuals, even after individuality, as an intellectual form of reflection, is on the point of disappearing.²²

In the chapter on Kant of his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno expresses ideas very similar to those in his *Problems of Moral Philosophy* and explains why Kant's notion of freedom is seriously deficient and one sided. In the following citation, he is focusing on the relation between reason and "drive-energy" (*Triebenergie*), already mentioned in the first citation from the lectures on moral philosophy:

No model of freedom is available, except as consciousness. . . . That is why this is not thoroughly chimerical, because consciousness for its part is branched-off drive-energy, itself also impulse, is a moment, too, of what it intervenes in. If there were not that affinity, which Kant frantically denies, nor would there be the idea of freedom, for whose sake he wishes to hush up the affinity.²³

Kant's idea of freedom is one sided because he "frantically" denied the affinity between reason and drive-energy (Adorno uses the language of Freudian psychoanalysis here), thus establishing a sharp frontier between the free self guided by reason and the unfree self overpowered by drive-energies. However, this conception neglects the dialectic of freedom, which Adorno expresses as follows:

The subjects are free, according to the Kantian model, to the extent that they are conscious of themselves, identical with themselves; and in such identity also again unfree, insofar as they are subject to its compulsion and perpetuate it. They are unfree as non-identical, as diffuse nature, and yet as such free, because in the impulses, which overpower them—the non-identity of the subject with itself is nothing else—they are also rid of the compulsory character of identity.²⁴

Adorno's attempt to articulate the so-called "new categorical imperative" is tied to a new, "negative dialectical" notion of freedom, and thus a new idea of moral subjectivity, which has a double basis, in the identity of the subject with itself on the one side *and*, on the other side, in the nonidentity of the subject with itself. In what he calls the "non-identity of the subject," he recognizes the fundamental significance of drive-energy, of impulses, and of the lived body (*Leib*) for morality. His critique of the identity of the subject and the "old" categorical imperative is, furthermore, related to his critique of traditional European metaphysics: "Only in the unvarnished materialistic motive does morality survive. The course of history compels metaphysics, which was traditionally the unmediated opposite of materialism, towards this last."²⁵

Culture, spirituality, religion, everything "traditional metaphysics delineated as transcendence,"²⁶ can no longer be taken for granted. But Adorno's thought, at this extreme point of critical self-negation, does not end up with an anti-metaphysical dogma but with a meditation on the migration of "metaphysics into micrology," on a metaphysics of the "almost nothing," which is the realm where negative dialectics and Adorno's theory of aesthetics converge.²⁷

What is the meaning of all this for a contemporary theory of self-cultivation? For me, Adorno's exercise in philosophical self-negation implies a strong skepticism toward any understanding of self-cultivation that presupposes spirituality, transcendence, metaphysics, and religiousness as a given ground and a normative foundation for the process of self-transformation and self-realization. Gernot

Böhme and Michel Foucault may not share Adorno's rather idiosyncratic meditations on metaphysics, but they both also try to overcome the Kantian "ideology of the autonomous subject," that is the idea of a moral subject that is based on the one-dimensional identity of the subject with itself. Late Foucault's understanding of subjectivity as a twofold process of subjectivation and de-subjectivation corresponds to Adorno's idea of subjectivity as an open dialectical process between the poles of identity and nonidentity. Both, Böhme and Foucault, have been, on their way toward a contemporary theory of cultivation, interested in the anthropological writings of Kant.²⁸ When Böhme speaks of a "new anthropological ideal," which replaces "the narcissistic self-image of the man of reason,"²⁹ he also reveals one of the crucial features of "self-cultivation after Kant."

III. MICROLOGICAL METAPHYSICS

In the preface of his book *Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy*, Mou Zongsan bluntly states that the whole of Chinese philosophy would have been in vain if the possibility of "intellectual intuition" (*zhi de zhijue* 智的直覺) could not be proven. This assertion expresses the deep desperation behind Mou's effort to overcome Kant through the foundation of moral metaphysics. For Mou, the possibility of transcendent metaphysics, the rescue of the Confucian "way of becoming a sage" (*chengsheng zhi dao* 成聖之道), and a philosophy of cultivation are intertwined: "The very project of Mou Zongsan is to demonstrate that the Chinese tradition of thought offers solid grounds to go beyond Kantism and express the validity of practical and direct knowledge of the 'noumenal' associated with a transformation of the self," notes Sébastien Billioud in a study on Mou's philosophy.³⁰ Mou tries to affirm the contemporary significance of the Confucian philosophy of cultivation by exposing it to the challenge of critical philosophy, represented by Kant. For Mou as well as for many other modern Confucian scholars the essence of Confucian self-cultivation is the possibility of "becoming a sage (or saint)" (*cheng sheng* 成聖) and, in his point of view, Kant's negation of "intellectual intuition" for human beings equates to the negation of this possibility and thus negates Chinese philosophy as such.³¹ Therefore, Mou's encounter with Kant is dominated by the urgent need to prove the possibility of "intellectual intuition" and thereby provide the foundation for the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy as a modern philosophy. In this conception of self-cultivation, the teleological

dimension of sagehood (or sainthood) as an ideal state (*shengren de jingjie* 聖人的境界) is complemented by an ontological dimension (*benti* 本體), which is, in the case of Mou Zongsan, the fundamental goodness of human nature, and an ascetic dimension (*gongfu* 工夫), which comprises certain specific exercises that have to be practiced on the “way” to attain sagehood.

This Confucian approach to self-cultivation seems to stand in sharp contrast to the move toward a critical theory of self-cultivation as outlined in the beginning of this article. However, in a previous study on the theoretical structure of Foucault’s concept of self-cultivation, as outlined in the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, I tried to show that there is an astonishing similarity between the tripartite structure of Confucian self-cultivation mentioned above and the quadripartite structure proposed by Foucault, who distinguishes four dimensions of the “moral experience of sexual pleasures” in ancient Greek culture: ontology, deontology, ascetics, and teleology, which I translated into Chinese as *bentilun* 本體論, *yiwulun* 義務論, *gongfulun* 工夫論, and *mudilun* 目的論.³² My translation of these terms into Chinese thus not only has been inspired by the Confucian terminology; I, moreover, consciously wanted to establish a terminological correspondence between Foucault and modern Confucianism by way of this translation strategy. In the present article, I presuppose the validity of this structural affinity between theories of self-cultivation in contemporary European and contemporary Chinese philosophy, and try to enter into the realm of a transcultural critique that tries (i) to make both sides enter into a philosophical relation of mutual criticism and (ii) to open up possibilities of a contemporary philosophy of cultivation that would be neither European nor Chinese but would have strong “transcultural” implications.

Following the discussion of Adorno’s critique of Kant in the previous section in which I mentioned his problematization of notions like “good will” or “categorical imperative,” I will now make a very preliminary attempt to give an example of the mutual criticism I have in mind. Therefore, I will refer to two small texts by Mou Zongsan, written in 1949, shortly after he fled the Communist mainland for Taiwan. The first one is entitled “Rational Idealism” (*Lixing de Lixiang Zhuyi* 理性的理想主義) and the second one is entitled “Moral Idealism and the Theory of Human Nature” (*Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi yu Renxinglun* 道德的理想主義與人性論). As far as I know, in these two semisolarly articles Mou expresses, for the first time, a link between Confucianism, especially Mencius, and Kant through the notion of “good will.” Both texts were first published in the journal *Democratic Tribune* (*Minzhu Pinglun* 《民主評論》) and later

included in Mou's book on *Moral Idealism Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi* 《道德的理想主義》 published in 1959.³³

In the previous section, I mentioned the historical background of Adorno's reflections on Kant. The chapter on Kant, Nietzsche, and de Sade in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during World War II in American exile, testifies, like the whole book, to a desperate quest into the possibility of thinking about the historical disaster they were observing in philosophical terms.³⁴ In the preface to *Moral Idealism*, Mou also expresses a desperate sense of calamity that runs through those articles, in which he tried to let his heart-mind calm down and reflect upon questions of "culture and life."³⁵ Both, Critical theory and contemporary Neo-Confucianism, have advanced theoretical reflections deeply shaped by the experience of historical disaster. However, the way they refer to Kant is very different. In Mou Zongsan's 1949 articles, Kant is introduced as an ally in the intellectual struggle against Chinese Communism in particular and Marxism in general. Mou parallels the critique that Marx has raised against Kant with the critique the Chinese Communists raised against Confucianism. In Mou's view, the Marxian rejection of the unconditional, pure, and absolute goodness of the "good will" is as if he would have rejected the goodness of human nature forming the core of a Confucian "metaphysics of moral idealism" (*daode de lixiang zhuyi zhi xingshangxue* 道德的理想主義之形上學)³⁶ that is the "heart of alarm and distress" (*chuti ceyin zhi xin* 怵惕惻隱之心), the heart of compassion mentioned in the famous example in the Mencius, where a man suddenly sees a child about to fall in a well and experiences this feeling of alarm and distress which moves him to rescue the child without having any considerations about recompense.³⁷ Mou understands Kant's good will and its metaphysical or transcendent character in the light of this example, where the unconditional goodness of the "good will" (the "heart of alarm and distress") is intimately related to the "categorical imperative" (*wu tiaojian de mingling* 無條件的命令) to rescue the child.³⁸ Thus, Mou states, against Marx who is said to have accepted only a "materially motivated will," that "the absoluteness of the good will is also not only an abstract concept, but indeed is revealed in real life. The 'categorical imperative' is not an illusion, but really exists."³⁹ For Mou, the materialism of Marx is a "great tragedy" because it condemns "all spiritual life" as "bourgeois" and negates all metaphysics as well as transcendent and universal truth, all good motivations, every independence of values and ideals, all freedom and sublimation in which the dignity of human nature is expressed.⁴⁰

From an ideological point of view, Mou's polemic against "Marx," his affiliation of Kant and Confucianism based on an overall

affirmation of the “good will,” stands in sharp contrast to Adorno’s interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy, which clearly shows the influence of Marxism, although it has also been shaped by Nietzsche, Freud, and others. Contemporary Neo-Confucianism and Frankfurt School Critical theory seem to be separated by an iron curtain of ideological opposition between Neo-Conservatism and Neo-Marxism. Indeed, this ideological split has impeded, more or less until today, contemporary Neo-Confucians from ever engaging in a serious effort to study European critical theory. I think that especially the critique of Kant developed in this context could be a very helpful way of deepening the Confucian encounter with Kant. However, if we look closer into the interpretation of Kant’s “categorical imperative” that both Mou and Adorno give, this clear image gets blurred as well as the clear distinction between spiritual and material life or between metaphysics and materialism. When Adorno, as mentioned above, speaks of his so-called “new categorical imperative,” he says that “in it the moment of the supplementary in what is moral can be bodily felt (*an ihm läßt das Moment des Hinzutretenden am Sittlichen sich fühlen*). Bodily, because it is the abhorrence, become practical, of the unbearable physical pain inflicted on individuals. . . .” As I see it, he adds a “new” to Kant’s categorical imperative because, for him, Kant conceived it all too rationalistically. Even the “good will” is good only “as long as it is the faculty of desire guided solely by reason.” Does Adorno discuss bodily feeling or impulse, that of a materialistic motive necessary for the survival of morality, because he wants to introduce a new understanding of the relation between good will, categorical imperative, and moral feeling? If this is the case, Adorno’s interpretation would resonate with research in the field of contemporary Neo-Confucianism, which sees in the theory of moral feeling an important resource of Confucian thought that may help to complement shortcomings and resolve problems of Kant’s moral theory.⁴¹ I think this can be a possible direction of further investigation, but it would not suffice to construct a transcultural correspondence between Mou Zongsan and Adorno, as Adorno has no special interest in a theory of moral feeling. When Adorno says, “in it the moment of the supplementary in what is moral can be bodily felt,” it seems to me that the “moment of the supplementary” is more important here than the aspect of an embodied moral feeling. But what does he mean by the “moment of the supplementary in what is moral”?

At this point, Mou Zongsan’s interpretation of Kant and his free elaborations on some passages from the *Mencius* can be helpful to better understand Adorno and to evaluate, in a rather precise manner, the weakness of his theory concerning the further development of a

contemporary philosophy of cultivation. I especially would like to pay attention to two related passages from the *Mencius* Mou refers to at the beginning of the articles. In his attempt to explain the meaning of the “heart of alarm and distress,” he claims that it is the “transcendental ground” (*xianyan genju* 先驗根據) of moral practice, a “universal condition” which is seen as the “transcendent ground” (*chaoyue de genju* 超越的根據) of the humanity of human beings.⁴² Then he cites the saying in the *Mencius*, “that whereby man differs from the lower animals is but *very little*,”⁴³ and he comments: “This ‘very little’ difference lies in the existence or nonexistence of awareness (*jue* 覺).”⁴⁴ In the words of Adorno, this is the moment in which “the supplementary in what is moral” emerges. Earlier, Mou comments on a similar passage in the *Mencius* that goes as follows:

Mencius said, ‘When Shun was living amid the deep retired mountains, dwelling with the trees and rocks, and wandering among the deer and swine, the difference between him and the rude inhabitants of those remote hills appeared but *very little*. But when he heard a single good word, or saw a single good action, he was like a stream or a river bursting its banks, and flowing out in an irresistible flood.’⁴⁵

This passage is not about the difference between animals and humans but between the “wild” humans of remote mountain regions and future sage ruler Shun, who only slightly differs from them, but this very little difference is nothing less than the difference between awareness and non-awareness. Thus, Mou remarks that this passage in the *Mencius* most earnestly expresses “enlightenment,” the “awakening of awareness” (*juewu* 覺悟).⁴⁶ For Mou, this very little, most subtle (*wei hu qi wei* 微乎其微) difference is of utmost importance because it is the difference between the world of immanence and the world of transcendence, between the realm of the physical and the realm of the metaphysical, between natural and cultivated life which is at stake here. Thus, it is the possibility of (moral) self-cultivation as such which is entailed in this micrological leap from the world of nature into the world of living culture. This leap refers to the “metaphysical” and “universal” condition that makes human cultivation and, furthermore, so-called culture and all material civilization, possible. One might call this a “metaphysical” theory of culture and, in his very strong and emotional repudiation of Marxian materialism, Mou describes his position as “idealistic” in a twofold sense of the word: as referring to the “idea” of the moral and spiritual “heart-mind” (*xin* 心), but also referring to “ideals” and values, which are the guiding principles of material culture.

All this seems to be very far away from Adorno’s materialistic critique of traditional metaphysics, of spirituality, religion, and culture culminating in the desperate statement that “Auschwitz irrefutably

demonstrated the failure of culture. That it could happen in the midst of all the traditions of philosophy, art and the enlightening sciences, says more than merely that these, the Spirit, was not capable of seizing and changing human beings. In those branches themselves, in the emphatic claim of their autarky, dwells untruth.”⁴⁷ However, although Adorno harshly criticizes traditional (Western) metaphysics, he is not an anti-metaphysician. In one of the most enigmatic statements of *Negative Dialectics*, the last sentence of the book, he declares that negative dialectical thinking is “solidaristic with metaphysics in the moment of the latter’s fall.”⁴⁸ One page earlier, he describes what I venture to call *micrological metaphysics* in the following words:

Enlightenment leaves as good as nothing left of metaphysical truth-content, *presque rien* [French: “almost nothing”] after a modern musical term. What shrinks back becomes ever smaller . . . ; ever more inconspicuous [*unscheinbarer*]; this is the reason that, in the critique of cognition as much as in the philosophy of history, metaphysics migrates into micrology.⁴⁹

In the context of the present article, it is crucial to notice that, in Adorno, what rests in metaphysics, this “very little . . . almost nothing,” serves as justification for the “new categorical imperative.” This justification is not a discursive one—it resists rational explanation—but rather is linked to something Adorno calls “self-awareness” (*Selbstbesinnung*). It is in the ephemeral possibility of self-awareness that human beings, who essentially belong to nature and are a part of nature, are however also more than nature, at least a little bit. In *Problems of Moral Philosophy* he says, the spirit (*Geist*) stands out “a little bit above and beyond the natural world.”⁵⁰ And he further explains: “The spirit may not exist entirely in vain, it may not simply be a piece of nature itself, since what we call nature is defined through its opposition to our spiritual experience [*geistige Erfahrung*].”⁵¹ The link to “self-awareness” is established in the following manner:

Now . . . this little piece of our nature that is not nature, is in actuality identical with self-awareness [*Selbstbesinnung*]. . . . The truth is that we are no longer simply a piece of nature from the moment we recognize that we are a piece of nature. . . . Moreover, any being that stands outside nature and might be described as a human subject can be said to possess self-awareness, an awareness of the self in which the self realizes: I myself am a part of nature. By virtue of that fact the human subject is liberated from the blind pursuit of natural ends and becomes capable of alternative actions. These are ideas that underlie Kantian ethics, in an unexpressed and objective manner.⁵²

The citations above not only give a very interesting hint on how Adorno understood the ethical meaning of micrological metaphysics;

they also discuss the relation between nature and self-awareness in a way that corresponds with Mou's account of awareness in a very astonishing way. And I think it is not exaggerated to say that Mou's concept of metaphysics is much closer to Adorno's micrological version of metaphysics than to traditional Western metaphysics. From Adorno's conviction that this understanding lies, objectively, on the basis of Kantian ethics, although Kant did not express it in this way, we may even conclude that Adorno's and Mou's interpretations of Kant, beyond the ideological opposition on the surface and beyond their different cultural backgrounds, deeply coincide in the way they try to reshape Kantian ethics.

Of course, important differences remain; however, I think that, on the philosophical level, these differences cannot be reduced to something like a fundamental divide between European and Chinese philosophy, but can be, in the first place, very well explained in terms of different perspectives that have been developed within the larger tradition of Confucian philosophy. When, for example, Adorno discusses the "ontological" status (a word Adorno, the ardent critic of Heideggerian ontology, would himself not have used) of reason, his proposal resembles much more the energetic Confucianism of Wang Fuzhi, in the twentieth century an important source in the reconstruction of a tradition of materialist thought in China, who claims that "reason" (*li* 理) is branched off from *qi*-energy (*li zai qi zhong* 理在氣中), than the idealistic Confucianism of Wang Yangming, who is convinced of the identity between "heart-mind" and "reason" (*xin ji li* 心即理).⁵³ I, at least, would suppose that the following passage from the *Negative Dialectics* can be developed in this direction:

That reason would be something other than nature and yet would be a moment of this latter, is its prehistory, which has become its immanent determination. It is nature-like as psychic power, branched-off for the ends of self-preservation; once split off and contrasted to nature, however, it turns into its Other. Ephemeral standing out (ephemer entragend) from this latter, reason is identical with nature *and* non-identical, dialectical according to its own concept.⁵⁴

This passage articulates the motive of a subjectivity characterized by the dialectic of identity and non-identity discussed in the previous section in terms of "metaphysics." Here I see possibilities to engage in discussions on the different tendencies in Neo-Confucian philosophy, which are not only carried out in the Chinese-speaking world, but begin to develop within European sinology as well.⁵⁵

After this exploration into contemporary German and Chinese metaphysics, I would like to come back to Mou Zongsan's articles

because in his interpretation of the “heart of alarm and distress,” he actually distinguishes two dimensions: awareness and forcefulness (*jian* 健) or forceful practice (*jian xing* 健行). In terms of a philosophy of cultivation, awareness refers to the ontological dimension (*benti* 本體) of cultivation and forcefulness to the ascetic dimension (*gongfu* 工夫).⁵⁶ Questions arise from the above discussion, mainly about the possibility of continuing the correspondence between Mou and Adorno into the field of practice, thereby entering into the relation between spiritual and aesthetic practices of cultivation, which may have much more in common than it may seem. Especially, Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* contains material that could be included in further reflections on a contemporary theory of self-cultivation.⁵⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Neo-Confucianism reacts to the challenge of modernity and strives for a creative transformation of the Confucian heritage, but, from the perspective of major trends within European critical thought, the strong tendency to defend transcendent metaphysics and transhistorical truth seems to run counter to the heritage of the Kantian notion of “critique” that not only inspired Hegel and German idealism but a whole tradition of critical theory reaching from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud well up to Adorno, Habermas, and Foucault. The problem of a philosophy that is somehow transcendental *and* historical is related to the idea of a “history of truth”⁵⁸ as Michel Foucault has called it or, as Horkheimer and Adorno have put it, “a theory which attributes a timecore to truth.”⁵⁹ There are, in the wider field of critical theory, discussions on how to develop a philosophy which, on the one hand, recognizes the historicity of truth and, on the other, would not lapse into relativism. Especially the confrontation between Foucault, as representative of a deconstructive mode of critique in the line of Nietzsche, and Habermas, as proponent of a constructive mode of critique in the line of Kant, has highlighted very different possibilities of so-called postmetaphysical philosophy. However, in contemporary Neo-Confucian thought, I cannot see any serious attempt to interpret Confucianism in the light of nonmetaphysical and nonreligious terms, which has been, in Europe, a very influential tendency, from the eighteenth-century enlightenment (Voltaire in France, Christian Wolff in Germany) right into twentieth-century sinology. In their interpretation of Confucianism, Heiner Roetz and François Jullien, for example, are both heavily influenced by Frankfurt School critical theory and French Post-Structuralism, respectively, thus intertwining critical theory and

a sinological interpretation of Confucianism in a way that inspired the reflections in this article.⁶⁰

From this perspective Mou's idea of a moral metaphysics appears very problematic. Mou's defense of transcendent metaphysics even raises the question whether he ever seriously considered Kant's notion of *critique*, whether he considered the tremendous importance of the breakthrough to transcendental philosophy in the sense that it, paradoxically, not only tried to prepare the ground for a new, scientific metaphysics but, in fact, opened up the possibility of a philosophy without metaphysics.⁶¹ I often have asked myself why this possibility is so foreign to contemporary Neo-Confucianism and its reflections on self-cultivation. However, after my reflections on Mou Zongsan and Adorno in part III of this article, I am convinced that it is that it is promising to rethink the notion of "metaphysics" in light of the transcultural dynamics of contemporary philosophy especially by referring to the micrological transformations in the sphere of "almost nothing."

This article has introduced the idea of a critical theory of cultivation to outline a possible perspective. From this perspective, it cannot be taken for granted that the idea of self-cultivation as the root (*xiu shen wei ben* 修身為本) of the different aspects of human life, as exposed in the classical Confucian text, *The Great Learning*, can be integrated into a contemporary theory of self-cultivation. The perspective of becoming a sage, the relation between inner holiness and outer kingliness (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王), inner and outer cultivation (*neixiu waixiu* 內修外修) and, furthermore, the attempt to connect modern Confucianism (i) to an ontology of cosmic transformation (*bentilun* 本體論), (ii) to an ascetic (*gongfulun* 工夫論) with spiritual direction, and (iii) to a hierarchy of cultivation levels (*jingjielun* 境界論), understood as levels of spiritual and moral perfection—all this has to be critically reconsidered.

But does contemporary Neo-Confucianism provide the philosophical resources to enter into a critical and transcultural discussion on the development of a contemporary philosophy of cultivation? I suppose that this discussion will be very difficult and that we always have to beware of transcultural complexities. Nevertheless, by connecting European critical theory and contemporary Neo-Confucianism by the way of Kant, this article has already, quite surprisingly for the author and against his original intention, envisaged a kind of transcultural critique that is able to build up a new philosophical world from: very little . . . almost nothing.

ENDNOTES

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1. 何乏筆 (Fabian Heubel), “跨文化批判與中國現代性的哲學反思,” (Transcultural Critique and Philosophical Reflections on Chinese Modernity) 《文化研究》8 (2009): 89–95.
2. A good introduction by Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault's Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).
3. In recent years, I have published a series of articles (in Chinese) in which I discuss late Foucault's theory of self-cultivation from different perspectives, especially trying to establish a philosophical link between ascesis and the Chinese notion of *gongfu* 工夫. This material is accessible on my Web site: <http://www.litphil.sinica.edu.tw/heubel/>.
4. Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).
5. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 5–6.
6. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 11.
7. Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern, Über Anthropotechnik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).
8. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 28.
9. Fabian Heubel, “Transgression and Blandness,” *Newsletter of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy* 20, no.4 (2010): 43–59.
10. Cf. Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought : Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
11. See my discussion in Fabian Heubel, “Culture de soi et créativité—Reflexions sur la relation entre Mou Zongsan et le Confucianisme énergétique,” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 29 (2007): 152–77. For critical reflections on Tu Wei-ming's thought, see Heiner Roetz, “Confucianism between Tradition and Modernity, Religion, and Secularization: Questions to Tu Weiming,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (2008): 367–80. Chung-ying Cheng's attempt to connect Confucianism to the postmodern world makes me wonder in which sense his so-called “Confucian Spirit” reflects the critical spirit of postmodernity. When he speaks of the relation between self-cultivation and “the divinity of self-creation and self-transformation,” it is basically an idealized conception of creativity that merges primordial and moral creativity in a unity of heaven and man, which guides his reflections. Creativity as a modern and postmodern problem is not part of his considerations. Cf. Chung-ying Cheng, “Developing Confucian Onto-Ethics in a Postmodern World/Age,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2010): 6.
12. On the reception of Kant in modern China, see Lee Ming-huei, “Kangde Zhexue Zai Xiandai Zhongguo 《康德哲學在現代中國》,” in *Zhonghua Wenhua yu Yuwai Wenhua De Hudong Yu Ronghe 《中華文化與域外文化的互動與融合》*, ed. Huang Chun-chieh 黃俊傑 (Taipei: Xima Laya Yanjiu Fazhan Jijinhui, 2006), 89–134.
13. Lee Ming-huei, “Kangde Zhexue Zai Xiandai Zhongguo,” 126.
14. Gernot Böhme, “Disziplinierung, Zivilisierung, Moralisierung: Selbstkultivierung nach Kant,” *NCCU Philosophical Journal* 13 (2005): 39.
15. Cf. Hartmut Böhme and Gernot Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft, Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kants* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

16. Cf. Gernot Böhme, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht, Darmstädter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).
17. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 24.
18. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 212–294; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond. This translation is accessible only on the internet at <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>. It is much better than the previously published one, but only indicates the pages of the German edition.
19. See Lee Ming-huei's book on Confucianism and Kant: *Rujia yu Kangde* 《儒家與康德》 (Taipei: Linking, 1990), 49–51.
20. Theodor W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 193–4; *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 130–1. In the context of Confucian studies, Adorno's critique of the Kantian notion of “good will” as “the faculty of desire guided solely by reason” is hard to understand and is widely accepted that the “good will” is good exactly because it exercises this function. See Chung-ying Cheng, “Incorporating Kantian Good Will: On Confucian Ren (仁) as Perfect Duty,” in *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy*, ed. Stephen R. Palmquist (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2009), 80. Cheng writes: “There is no reason why the good will could not see intrinsic good in requiring itself to cultivate itself as a sovereign by itself and also as a sovereign that rules over feelings and desires of the human persons it reigns.”
21. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 195.
22. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 358.
23. *Ibid.*, 262.
24. *Ibid.*, 294.
25. *Ibid.*, 358.
26. *Ibid.*, 355.
27. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 399. See also Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 18–24.
28. See Emmanuel Kant, *Anthropologie d'un point de vue pragmatique*, précédé de Michel Foucault, *Introduction à l'Antropologie* (Paris: Vrin, 2008); Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses, une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), chaps 9 and 10; Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984, Vol. I, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (London: Penguin, 2000).
29. Gernot Böhme, *Philosophieren mit Kant, Zur Rekonstruktion der Kantischen Erkenntnis- und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 238.
30. Sébastien Billioud, “Mou Zongsan's Problem with the Heideggerian Interpretation of Kant,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2006): 243.
31. For the notion of sagehood in Confucian philosophy, see Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Iso Kern indicates that the translation of the term *shengren* as “sage” sounds rather philosophical, while “holy man” (heiliger Mensch) sounds, in Christian ears, much too religious to be used in the Confucian context, but that, actually, it would be more correct to refer to “sainthood” and to be aware of the fact that the modern Western distinction between philosophy and religion is an impediment in our understanding of Neo-Confucianism. Cf. Iso Kern, *Das Wichtigste im Leben: Wang Yangming (1472–1529) und seine Nachfolger über die “Verwirklichung des ursprünglichen Wissens”* (Basel: Schwabe, 2010), xxi.
32. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 37. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 37. See Fabian Heubel, “From the History of Sexuality to the History of Self-Cultivation—On the Theoretical Structure of Foucault's *The Use of Pleasure*,” *Journal of European and American Studies* 32, no. 3: 437–67.
33. Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi* 《道德的理想主義》, in *Mou Zongsan Xiansheng Quanjì* 《牟宗三先生全集》 (Taipei: Linking, 2003), Vol. 9, 17–30 and 31–49.
34. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.

35. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 5.
36. *Ibid.*, 33.
37. *Mencius*, 2A: 6
38. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 34. See also 24.
39. *Ibid.*, 34.
40. *Ibid.*, 25.
41. Lee Ming-huei, *Siduan yu Qiqing—Guanyu Daode Qinggan de Bijiao Zhexue Tanta* 《四端與七情——關於道德情感的比較哲學探討》 (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2005).
42. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 31. Here, I refrain from a discussion of the problem whether Mou has really understood the distinction between “transcendental” (transzendental) and “transcendent” (transzendent) in Kant.
43. *Mencius* 4B: 19: “人之所以異於禽獸者幾希。” Translation by James Legge slightly modified; emphasis added.
44. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 31: “這‘幾希’之差就在覺不覺。”
45. *Mencius* 6A: 16. Translation by James Legge slightly modified; emphasis added.
46. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 18.
47. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 359.
48. *Ibid.*, 400.
49. *Ibid.*, 399.
50. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 152.
51. *Ibid.*, 152–153.
52. *Ibid.*, 154.
53. Cf. Fabian Heubel, “Culture de soi et créativité—Reflexions sur la relation entre Mou Zongsan et le Confucianisme énergétique,” *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 29 (2007): 152–77.
54. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 285. See the illuminating discussion of this and related passages in the following text by Habermas on Adorno: Jürgen Habermas, “‘Ich selber bin ja ein Stück Natur’—Adorno über die Naturverflochtenheit der Vernunft,” in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 195.
55. Especially in French sinology important studies on Wang Fuzhi have been published. See François Jullien, *Procès ou Création: Une introduction à la pensée des lettres chinoises* (Paris: Seuil, 1989); François Jullien, *Figures de l'immanence: Pour une lecture philosophique du Yi king* (Paris: Grasset, 1993); Jaques Gernet, *La raison des choses, Essai sur la philosophie de Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
56. Mou Zongsan, *Daode de Lixiang Zhuyi*, 19.
57. For some preliminary reflections on aesthetic cultivation in Adorno, see Fabian Heubel 何乏筆, “*Ruhe Pipan Wenhua Gongye?—Aduonuo de Yishu Zuopinlun yu Meixue Xiuyang de Keneng* 如何批判文化工業? —阿多諾的藝術作品論與美學修養的可能” *Sun Yat-sen Journal of Humanities*, no. 19 (2004): 17–35.
58. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 6.
59. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, XI.
60. Cf. Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age : A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) and the studies of François Jullien mentioned above.
61. Olf Lehmann’s monumental study on Mou Zongsan is based on this doubt: *Zur moralmetaphysischen Grundlegung einer konfuzianischen Moderne: “Philosophisierung” der Tradition und “Konfuzianisierung” der Aufklärung bei Mou Zongsan* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2003).