MICHAEL N. FORSTER AND GUIDO KREIS

INTRODUCTION: PROBLEMS OF RATIONALITY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

I. FORMS OF RATIONALITY

“Rationality” is a key concept for the description and evaluation of human practices, both theoretical and practical. This volume aims at a comparative perspective on the nature of (and the assumptions behind) our various modes of reasoning in Western and Chinese philosophy.

Being rational involves giving the right sort of reason for a belief or an action. Plato introduced the very concept of a philosopher by claiming that philosophers care about giving reasons, whereas sophists merely care about successfully engaging their audience. Aristotle distinguished five different forms of rationality: science (*episteme*), spirit (*nous*), wisdom (*sophia*), art (*techne*), and prudence (*phronesis*).¹ One major contrast here is the distinction between theoretical and practical rationality. The subject matter of science, as the paradigm of theoretical rationality, is that which is not capable of being otherwise and hence universal. By contrast, prudence or practical rationality is concerned with the particular, i.e., action. Prudence is the capacity of deliberating well with respect to what should be done on particular occasions, taking into account the more general goods of one's life. According to Plato and Aristotle, we should acquire stable habits in the rational balancing of our affections, so that we will gain a steady character to meet the challenge of our affections and desires. Acquiring virtue is dependent on role models of prudence for orientation, on the practically wise man (*phronimos*). The framework of virtue ethics opens up strong parallels between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese practical philosophy.

In his contribution to this volume, Michael Forster compares different achievements in Western and Chinese philosophy regarding fundamental fields of human rationality. The concern of the third section of

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his paper is practical reason. Regarding first order morality, Forster points out striking similarities between the traditions. However, Forster sees a sharp divergence between them, and a strong advantage of the Chinese to the Western tradition, when it comes to meta-ethical convictions. In Forster's view, Chinese philosophers have avoided what he takes to be fundamental mistakes of prominent strands in the Western tradition, e.g., the idea that moral attunement is cognitive, or the presupposition of a single moral standard and a single set of moral values. Forster recommends the Chinese tradition as an attractive alternative to dominant variants of Western moral philosophy.

Practical rationality involves practical reasoning of some kind. Philippe Brunozi raises the question of the nature of appropriate reasons for moral action with reference to two classics of Confucianism ("Normative Reasons and Moral Reasoning in the *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi*"). Whereas the *Mengzi* requires moral reasons to be built around the heart-mind and feeling reactions, the *Xunzi* holds that moral reasons are preconfigured in the Confucian social order. Brunozi sees an advantage of both texts in the fact that they attempt neither at universal reasons nor at an ultimate justification of morality, so that their conceptions remain neutral to particular substantive moral outlooks and may serve as attractive models of moral reasoning under the modern conditions of moral pluralism.

II. CHALLENGES FOR RATIONALITY

Our most fundamental convictions about rationality are at issue when we deal with paradoxes and limits of language and thought. Many traditions in the East and West have suggested that there are profound contradictions in our beliefs about language, knowledge, and cognition. Similarly, many have suggested that there are things that we cannot adequately capture in thoughts, and ideas that we cannot appropriately express in language.

Logic is often viewed as capturing the ground structure of human rationality. A basic logical principle like the Law of Non-Contradiction is commonly seen as an undeniable truth about what it means to be rational. Inconsistency in either judgment or action is considered irrational. According to Aristotle, it is impossible that the same property can both be affirmed and denied of the same thing in the same respect. Michael Forster, in the first section of his paper, contrasts this strict prohibition of contradiction with the more liberal attitude of Chinese philosophers, who seem to permit inconsistency under certain circumstances given that it has pragmatic benefits. In his paper "The Challenge of Paradox," Guido Kreis discusses the problem of inconsistency

in its strictest form, reconstructing versions of the paradoxes of the infinite from Kant, Cantor, and ancient Chinese philosophy, before asking whether the Chinese tradition might have assessed the challenge of paradox in a more relaxed manner. However, there is an early formulation of the Law of Non-Contradiction in the Moist canons, which shows that at least one strand in ancient Chinese philosophy was aware of the impermissibility of paradox. Kreis concludes that the paradoxes of the infinite remain a significant challenge for rationality.

Another major challenge is skepticism. Many schools in Western philosophy center around skeptical doubts concerning knowledge and moral values. Skepticism is well-established in ancient Chinese philosophy as well, particularly in Daoism. In the second section of his contribution, Forster emphasizes striking parallels between ancient Greek philosophy, especially Pyrrhonism, and the skepticism developed in the *Zhuangzi*. So striking are the parallels, that he suggests some influence in one direction or the other, or a common influence on both, possibly in Indian Buddhism. While Skepticism is often seen as a destructive attitude, which is true of some contemporary forms of radical skepticism, most of the ancient forms were far from being merely destructive. David Wong stresses the constructive role of skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* (“Constructive Skepticism and Being a Mirror in the *Zhuangzi*”). In Wong’s reading of selected key passages, the *Zhuangzi* invites us to open our minds towards new possibilities, and towards the incorporation of alternative moral values. Taking up the idea of the embodiment of our mental capacities, Wong is interested in how unconscious reactions of our body intertwine with our more reflective activities, enabling us to be productive “mirrors” to nature. He also discusses current research from psychology and neuroscience to shed fresh light on the *Zhuangzi*. Christian Wenzel, too, offers a close reading of selected episodes from the *Zhuangzi* (“Reasoning with Zhuangzi”). The emphasis is here on the analysis of various figurative strategies by help of which the text makes an argument about the Way (*Dao*). Wenzel compares this to similar notions in Western traditions, especially from negative theology. His reading is both critical and constructive. Though he finds the *Zhuangzi* somewhat lacking in systematicity, Wenzel attempts a careful assessment of the originality of the figurative modes, thereby enriching our understanding of forms of reasoning in philosophy.

III. RATIONALITY, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

A comparative discussion of rationality is incomplete without taking into account the historicity of reason and its embeddedness in

cultural contexts. A distinctive cultural turn was introduced into Western philosophy when the relation between thinking and language became a main interest in eighteenth-century philosophy. Hamann and Herder published “metacritiques” of Kant, accusing him of having ignored the boundedness of human thinking to its expression in language. Humboldt argued that worldviews expressed in different languages must be seen as significantly differing from each other, as they belong to different cultural traditions. In his contribution to this volume, Tze-wan Kwan takes up Humboldt’s challenge. He discusses whether the Chinese language is at all able to render the concept of being, which is crucial to the Western tradition of ontology. Kwan’s paper is a case study of the question whether philosophers from cultural contexts as diverse as the Chinese and the Western are at all capable of understanding each other, or whether we have to acknowledge mutual untranslatability of vocabularies. As far as the notion of being is concerned, Kwan rejects the latter option and argues for the former. Although there is no unique character in ancient Chinese script that might serve as a counterpart for being, it does have the expressive power to render it by help of four different characters. So at least in this important case it is not true that differences in language inevitably lead to irreconcilable differences in worldview.

Taking seriously the cultural embeddedness of rationality, Kai Marchal decidedly rejects any attempt at a transcultural, universalistic account of reason, and argues for a hermeneutic conception of rationality, according to which any practice of reason is inherently mediated by cultural, historical, and linguistic factors (“Agency, Culture, Modernity”). Marchal discusses the notion of practical reasoning in early Confucianism (Confucius and Mencius) and in Neo-Confucianism (Zhu Xi and Chen Hongmou) as paradigmatic cases for culture-relative models of rationality.

A notoriously difficult topic is the “dark side” of rationality. Rationality tends to be exclusive in a potentially fatal way, in that it dismisses of anything that is not rational according to its own standard. The paradigm case in the Western context is the modern movement of enlightenment. Hegel observed that enlightenment, in its violent struggle against superstition, transforms itself from rationality into irrationality. Adorno and Horkheimer portrayed modern rationality as such a dialectic of enlightenment. Horkheimer saw in twentieth-century totalitarianism “the eclipse of reason,” effected by modern instrumental reason itself. Mario Wenning reconstructs different stages of enlightenment and its dialectics in the West and in China. Commenting on the work of contemporary Chinese philosopher Gan Yang, Wenning discusses ancient Confucianism

(Confucius and Mencius) and the “second Chinese enlightenment” that began with the adoption of modern Western culture in the nineteenth century. Wenning’s paper appeals to the necessity of continuous self-reflection of reason in the light of its inherent failures and dangers.

Tze-wan Kwan, in his contribution to this volume, refers to the title of a book by Swiss philosopher Elmar Holenstein: “China is not entirely different.”² This might well serve as a motto of comparative studies in Chinese and Western philosophy, perhaps even as the most reasonable one. Investigations into different philosophical cultures always uncover all sorts of differences in language, thinking, and reasoning. To assume, however, that China is completely incomparable to Western ways of thinking, would merely reproduce a particularly long-lasting, and eventually futile, Western cliché—the idea that it needs the experience of an *entirely* different culture to escape the Western philosophical reflection. The problem with this idea is that it confirms precisely that self-centered Western reflection which it intends to overcome, by imposing its negation upon another cultural tradition. The reality of comparative studies is more complex and more subtle, as the papers in this volume demonstrate. They have the power to challenge our familiar views on rationality in many ways. But at the same time they show, each in its own way, that China is not entirely different.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, Chapter 3, 1139b15–17.
2. Elmar Holenstein, *China ist nicht ganz anders. Vier Essays in global vergleichender Kulturgeschichte* (Zurich: Ammann, 2009).