CHAPTER ONE

THE GENESIS OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE HISTORY OF MIND: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON BETWEEN CLASSICAL GREECE AND CHINA

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For Christopher Hallpike on his 65th birthday

A. CULTURAL COMPARISON IN A HISTORIC-GENETICAL PERSPECTIVE

1. The Problem

“Is it reasonable and does it serve our understanding of history to want to find something common to the great cultures of Classical Antiquity, even if we cannot describe with any precision what that ‘something’ is?” Mark Elvin asked, in an erudite reflection on the question of whether a transcendental breakthrough can be discerned in China and he added: I do not wish to rush to an answer.¹ As far as I can see the question has been left open. And with reason. For if we search for what is held historically in what is embedded in the actual practical forms of everyday life or articulated in the semantics of systems of meaning at the abstract level of world-view, then we will find either that there is no common property, or, if it does exist that it is anemic and hardly worthwhile focusing upon. If the comparison is to make sense, then we will have to compare the social organizations as well as the systems of cognition at the level of their basic structures. For basic structures are built up under comparable conditions and develop under comparable conditions. In their historical development, the sequence of structures finally join up to a veritable developmental logic, according to which the historical development manifests itself in a universal historical process. This at least is the thesis I have tried to substantiate in a historic-genetic theory of culture.² It is not possible to unfold the theory here in detail. I must restrict myself to the basic arguments and discuss the theory only insofar as it seems unavoidable for explaining why philosophy could arise in such different societies as ancient Greece and ancient China. Without that, however, the formation of philosophy would not become transparent.

² Dux, Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur.
2. The Historic-Genetic Perspective

Within the understanding of Modernity, we have gained a knowledge that forms the requisite basis for conceptualizing an historical line of development. We have learned to understand the form of human existence as the subsequent organization that follows on from the evolution of natural history. Closely related to this understanding is the knowledge of the anthropological constitution according to which the socio-cultural life-forms of human existence are to be understood as organizational forms created by humans themselves. Nothing is more common in the modern consciousness than the consciousness of the convergence of all forms of human life on humans themselves—that is their constructiveness. We can give this understanding a keener sociological edge: According to the modern constructivist understanding of the world, the constructivistic forms of human existence emerged under the impact of the pragmatic interest in gaining both competence of action and a related organization of the world. The instrumental condition of the possibility was, that within the construction of action competence, the structures of thought and of language could be developed and integrated. While the development of the structure of syntax could be grounded on the structure of action, developed so far, the construction of language supported in turn the further development of action competence.

The constructivist approach to the intellectual socio-cultural form of human existence also impacts on our historical understanding. While the understanding of history may be conceptualized within very different frameworks, it must in any case be understood as the continuation of the constructivity in the line of the prior developed forms of socio-cultural organization. As in phylogeny, the cognitive, normative and aesthetic forms could be developed in early ontogeny of the members of the human species under the impact of a pragmatic interest in action competence, the pragmatic interest in an enhanced action-competence and an enhanced societal organization determines also the historical process. However we may choose to define the line of the advances, the pragmatic interest which set the constructive process in motion and thereafter kept it going allows us to construe the advanced structures as enhanced forms of the competence for action and societal organization as well as the related cognitive competence. Now though this might look rather abstract, it does, however, give us a strategy for gaining an understanding of history: on the one hand it refers us to a reconstruction of the development of the competence for action and societal organization and, on the other on the reconstruction of their systematic alignment with the development of cognitive, normative and aesthetic structures.

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3 See for a more intensive discussion of the genesis of language Dux, Historisch-genetische Theorie der Kultur, pp. 277, 286.
4 For a more intensive discussion see Dux, “Die ontogenetische und historische Entwicklung des Geistes,” pp. 173-224.