1 Introduction

Western and Chinese philosophies may have started off with similar considerations, but later took quite different paths. Socrates and Plato were first and foremost concerned about the good life, both for an individual as such (ethics), and for a citizen as a part of a well-ordered whole (political philosophy). This concern led the more influential Plato into epistemological paths of thinking through which he sought to ascertain true knowledge of ethical matters, paths that were largely influenced by the pre-Socratic natural philosophers. Certainly, epistemological considerations feature prominently in Plato’s works, but they are nevertheless merely an aspect of his rich and insightful philosophy of the good society and the good life. The same can be said about Aristotle, although his works certainly offer a wide range of scientific explorations. Thus, the ancient Greeks were primarily concerned about the nature of the good life in much the same way as the Chinese.

During the modern age, however, the age of Descartes and Kant, but, significantly, also the age of the scientific revolution, epistemological foci were given prominence as the proper subject matter of philosophy. Indeed, epistemology, the theory of how we know that we know what (we at least believe) we know, was now interpreted and understood as a methodological tool for science. Not only had the epistemological accent of modern Western philosophy been sealed, but it was taken for granted, e.g. by a disgruntled Martin Heidegger, that philosophy’s theoretical, metaphysical and epistemological endeavour could be traced in a direct line back to the ancient Greek thinkers, which also significantly influenced the manner of studying their works.1 As Heidegger put it,

1 As is well known, Heidegger held that philosophy had taken a “wrong turn” already with Plato and his insistence that truth is “subject to ideas, dependent on verifiability in a positivistic-scientistic fashion” (Ferkiss 1993: 165). He therefore ventured to redirect it by immersing himself in the study of the Presocratics and their quest for ‘being’. Heidegger's
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"the essence of modern science, which has become world-wide meanwhile as European science, is grounded in the thinking of the Greeks, which since Plato has been called philosophy." (Heidegger 1977: 157)

In China, on the other hand, epistemology never became a significant philosophical factor. To the (limited) extent that epistemological considerations were present, they tended to be secondary and often characterized by skepticism. Scientific, or rather, technological innovations certainly took place in the Chinese Empire under a Confucian-led ideology, but they did so despite the lack of systematic epistemological theorizing.

A yet important aspect concerns the extent to which science enjoyed independent status in the West and in China. During the modern age in Europe, the natural sciences broke loose from both philosophy and religion, and became largely a separate sphere of human activity. While their formal justification was still Baconian in the sense that they were generally understood (and respected) as an effort to improve the human being’s living conditions on the planet, their capabilities were not significantly limited by moral and political decisions. At least such demands did not become prevalent before the latter part of the twentieth century. In many ways, they were allowed to override the immediate and long-term moral interests of humankind. Morality had become secondary; knowledge and technological mastery primary.

Philosophy in China developed in a period of almost three full centuries of incessant warfare and human misery, and it is therefore understandable that the early philosophical focus was on social order and ways to obtain social stability. When circumstances were different, however, i.e. in times of relative discord, Hans-Georg Gadamer, however, suggests that it is rather our understanding of the ancient masters that has been distorted by the scientist turn in modern philosophy. Hence, he offers a different interpretation that, at least in the field of humanities, eschews this epistemological insistence upon indisputable truths, observing, for instance, that "Aristotle contrasts 'ethos' with 'physis' as a field which, while not wholly disorderly, cannot be associated with the orderliness of nature, but the volatility and the limited regularity of human statutes and human conduct." (Gadamer 1990: 318)

2 This feature is particularly notable in Daoism. Both the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi are profoundly playful with language as a human construction, twisting and turning common references of words and expressed valuations. A good case in point is chapter 2 on language and reality in the Zhuangzi. However, Confucius's notion of zhengming, or 'using words appropriately', also implies considerable wariness of the potential deception involved in language, albeit predominantly from an ethical or prescriptive point of view.

3 Note, for instance, how Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason from 1781 is normally studied, even still today. Its second part, dealing with the meaning of his epistemological considerations for human life, tends to be largely neglected.