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The writings of Tu Weiming 杜維明 (*1940) are anthologized in disciplines as different as Religious Studies, Philosophy, Sociology, Business Administration, and Political Theory.¹ Yet, what is the relation of a text to its author in disciplinary terms? May we think of Tu as one of those rare cases of a scholar succeeding in attractively addressing in his texts the concerns of many different disciplines? Would that qualify him as a scholar of all these disciplines? Is it at all possible to master so many different disciplines? Would one not end up being not quite a sociologist, not quite a political theorist, and not quite a philosopher in the eyes of each disciplinary specialist? In the case of Tu, however, some specialist must have thought of him as enough of a sociologist, etc., to include a text of his in the disciplinary anthology in the first place. Obviously, it could also be the case that Tu is just one of those generalists who employ a language congenial to many disciplinary languages. It could be that his texts discuss their topics in a general, or vague, fashion, and hence lend themselves to disciplinary tailoring by the specialist. A text could hence, if one stresses the relation between text and reader, be read into completely different disciplines depending on which specialist reads it. Perhaps the issue is even more complicated and the multidisciplinary reception of Tu’s work has to do with different taxonomies of disciplines. Or perhaps it is more pragmatic and has to do with the fact that Tu is often included in discussions primarily as a representative of China, of the Chinese worldview, of Chinese philosophy or of Confucianism, and not so much as a representative of any one discipline.

In this paper, I set out to examine the reasons why Tu’s texts, or at least the one to be analysed presently, might be claimed to be ‘philosophy’. The claim is controversial, as will become apparent. Yet, judgments along similar lines have hitherto largely focussed on his person rather than on his texts. On the one hand, at Harvard University (where he served on the faculty for three decades), Tu was Harvard-Yenching Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies. At Beijing University (where he is currently working), he is

Lifetime Professor of Philosophy and founding Dean of the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Studies. He is also frequently referred to as a ‘philosopher’ by third parties. On the other hand, he is also, and no less frequently, referred to as something other than a ‘philosopher’, although these ascriptions need not be necessarily mutually exclusive. Thus it has been said that he is a ‘missionary’ (Liu Shuxian), even a ‘fundamentalist’ in this regard (Arif Dirlik), and an ‘evangelizer’ (Umberto Bresciani) of Confucianism, or ‘both an intellectual activist and an active thinker’ (Ezra F. Vogel) – respectively drawing on the tensions between philosophy and religion as well as between philosophy and politics. In any case, if an author’s religious or political purposes are sufficiently important as to qualify a text as something other than philosophy, then it seems that these purposes should readily show in the text. If they do not show or if what shows is judged insufficient for such a qualification, then we seem to be free to read the text as philosophy.

The focus in this paper is (almost) exclusively on Tu’s texts. I commence with the question ‘What is philosophy?’, which is necessary for the simple reason that one or other answer to it must inform the claim that a text is or is not philosophical. I argue that the more the answer is considered to be a substantive answer to the question ‘What is philosophy?’, the more complex it should be, while a mere instrumental approach might rely on a simple answer. I take it that any answer, whether substantive or instrumental, must orient itself along uses of the word ‘philosophy’. I therefore offer an analysis of Tu’s concept of philosophy based on how he uses the word ‘philosophy’ (a word which he uses frequently). This reveals a particularly interesting finding as to what he thinks is not philosophy or philosophy only in a very special sense. I then embark on a close reading of one of Tu’s more seminal texts, entitled ‘The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature’ (1984). I shall analyse the text by focussing on four key passages and by relating these passages to a number of issues in the context of our question ‘What is philosophy?’. Towards the end, I shall demonstrate a way by which that text might indeed be understood as ‘philosophy’. A critical note on an ideological dimension in Tu’s text, which it would seem irresponsible to ignore, concludes the paper.

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