

Deshun Li *Editor*

Values of Our Times

Contemporary Axiological
Research in China

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Introduction: A New Approach to Contemporary Studies on Axiology

Deshun Li

Cultural clashes between core values and ethical prospective connected to those values have generated issues of global concern. In the current world with the increasingly diversified interests and cultures, the issue of whether such clashes can be resolved not only highlights the significance of the study of axiology, but also further motivates us to reflect upon and adjust the theories and methodologies that we are using in axiological studies.

1 Axiology and Traditional Chinese Philosophies

The term “Axiology” originated from western philosophies, especially from the research and advocacies by Neo-Kantians. Contemporary Chinese studies on value theories have accepted the terminology and have proceeded to conduct academic research centered on this concept in ways that have allowed the field to be augmented and enhanced. Thus, this kind of acceptance of the term in Chinese studies has not entailed just a simple introduction, imitation or blind following of neo-Kantian thought. Instead, contemporary Chinese scholars have provided an extended and unique understanding of the commonality and universality of axiology in our own way—a way that makes sense against the background of Chinese traditional culture and philosophy. Specifically, Chinese scholars have endeavored to explore the possibilities of providing more appropriate ways of thinking about value. The aim has been, and still is, that of providing a philosophical view that is consistent with the specific conditions present in china in modern times.

Value thinking has been the priority and central focus of traditional Chinese philosophy. This has been true since ancient times. Traditional Chinese philosophy has aimed at constructing an ethical and political system within

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Chinese society in general, and within the state specifically, by taking the relationships among “heaven, earth and man” as a starting points for contemplation. The most important concepts and categories of various schools of thoughts in China include “ethics”, “benevolence (Ren) and righteousness (Yi)”, “good and evil”, “beauty and ugliness”, “superior and inferior”, “gain and loss”, “success and failure”, “auspicious and ominous”, “weal and woe”, “endowment”, “honor and disgrace” etc. while the most common philosophical concepts or categories in Europe are those that deal with and focus on Ontology and Epistemology. These areas, in turn, deal with such concepts as “existence”, “substance”, “rationality”, “experience”, “knowledge”, “truth” etc., That are linked in crucial ways to empirical science. This suggests that when, compared with western philosophies, Chinese philosophies are revealed as actually being more concerned (proportionally speaking) than are generic western views, with traditions and concepts of value that have humanism as the main and most emphasized thread.

Take for example the treatment of the concept of faith, which is the core and highest forms of value. Faith embodies the values of people. People with differing values will have different sorts of faiths. Some western scholars tend to believe that Chinese people have no faith at all. The reason for this view is that they see western philosophy as being based on Christianity and they confuse the broad concept of faith with Christianity view of faith which is only one particular form of faith. In contrast, we philosophers working in Chinese cultural settings distinguish faith from religion and regard religion as one particular form (but not the only form) of faith. In fact, we follow the principle that “faith is above religion”. For example, the Book of Changes (Zhou Yi), an ancient Chinese book, establishes a form of faith, which advocates that being related to “Heaven (Tian)” is the highest form of faith with people being the target of heaven-ordained mandates and care. Thus, there has been an agreement in Chinese cultural settings that all persons should adhere to the principle of “following the mandate of heaven and complying with the popular wishes of the people”. “Heaven (Tian)” and the “Way (Dao) of Heaven” (taken together) are regarded as the ultimate law of nature, society and human relations. It is also agreed that this is the law of the omnipotent and omnipresent supreme master of universe. Chinese traditional philosophy has for centuries believed that “Therefore, Heaven produced the spirit-like things, and the sages took advantage of them. (The operations of) heaven and earth are marked by (so many) changes and transformations; and the sages imitated them (by means of the Yi)” (The Book of Change, Xi Ci).

The logic behind this view is that “Heaven (Tian)” does not give commands per se. Instead, its commands are shown in the words and actions of sages. Man gets to know the greatness of Tian from sages, who are respectable men and righteous men who trace the way of Tian to its source, and use it to explain the success and failure—both the auspicious and ominous aspects of life—and then, through example, guide the thoughts and actions of all of the people.

“Tian” has always been and will always be a kind of force that is combined with secular man and real society but is never interpreted as the almighty deity, or God. This logic underlies that it’s not that faith does not exist in traditional

Chinese culture, but that people in traditional Chinese culture have a people-centered faith which is different from God-centered faith. This kind of people centered faith does not take the form of a religion, but it does not reject religion either. Instead, it regards and accepts all of deity and all gods as the secondary representatives under “Tian”.

The inclusiveness of Tian has nurtured the tolerance toward religions in Chinese history and Chinese culture where “Confucius, Daoism and Buddhism coexist with each other”. One can never understand the traditional Chinese view of values, or the gist of Chinese culture, without understanding this.

This point was supported and accounted for by, Zhang Dainian, a famous Chinese expert on theories developed in China, and also an expert on the history of philosophies in China. Dainian, has suggested that the basis for Chinese philosophies is “the unity of the ways of Heaven and man, and virtue is knowledge”. He has pointed out that “philosophers in China believe that knowledge is virtue, and the pursuit of knowledge is the pursuit of virtue. Knowledge and virtue are not two different categories. True knowledge is real virtue. One that has knowledge has virtue and one that has virtue has knowledge. Thus, Chinese philosophers believe that the pursuit of knowledge cannot be separated from the nurture of virtue. The pursuit of the ultimate truth of universe and the pursuit of ultimate virtue of [or within human] life are the two sides of one coin.”¹

Influenced by such philosophical thoughts, Chinese people are more focused on the “ought to be” than on “is” and have accumulated rich wisdom and huge values systems.² By contrast, little attention is given to the “to be”. Therefore, the traditional Chinese philosophy centers on immediately applicable standards and rules instead of fleshing out or inventing systems of critical thinking and/or logical reasoning given for the sole purpose of supporting metaphysical theories. As a result, some of the genius of Chinese culture is that, while its ideas come from philosophers of ancient China those ideas have not been tested and deepened systematically through actual practice—and that in spite of the fact that sores logical reasoning and analysis are not independently developed, particularly after pre-Qin period. (Even Hegel agreed that the Chinese people had reached where they are today 2000 years ago, but they came to a standstill afterwards³). Therefore, in the general flow of philosophical studies worldwide, traditional Chinese philosophy, in comparison with western philosophies which have always focused on reason and logic, didn’t receive due respect and attention and even were not regarded as “philosophies” in many parts of the world.

¹ Zhang Dainian, *Outline of Chinese Philosophies*, China Social Sciences Press, 1982, p. 7.

² These enriched the wisdom of mankind. “Don’t do to others what you don’t want others to do to you”, “harmony in diversity”, “too much is as bad as too little”, “harmony” and other golden rules and Chinese expressions of values have been understood and accepted by more and more people in the world.

³ Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume I, Interpreted by He Lin and Wang Taiqing, Commercial Press, 1981, p. 8.

However, these facts do not entail that ancient philosophers in China had no inquiries in basic theories or that the huge values system in China lack philosophical logic. In fact, the basic Chinese philosophy of “*unity of the ways of Heaven and man, and virtue is knowledge*” has included some of the ideas on values which are regarded as “advanced” by most philosophers today. To support this claim I shall move to considering some specific views for which such a claim can be reasonably made.

One outstanding example to consider is the situation through which in both Confucianism and Daoism the “nature” and “relations” among values are shown. Ancient Chinese philosophies had reached a consensus from the very beginning on how these might be seen by asserting that (1) the existence and nature of man is a ruler for the purpose of measuring all values, and that (2) the understanding one may achieve concerning the nature of values is based totally on the understanding of the nature of man. Confucianism and Daoism take two different approaches to exploring these two assertions and many of the arguments between the two schools of thoughts mark the peak of the pre-Qin philosophy on value-directed thinking.

Confucianism tries to understand values by understanding human nature. It argues about whether the nature of men is good or evil and/or in what proportions, and this then lays the foundation for Confucian thoughts on value. No matter whether the nature of men is good or evil, or a combination of both, the premise is that “good or evil” is regarded as the nature or innate quality the existence (of men). In other words, this mode of thought connects values such as good and evil directly with the existence of men and turns its interpretation of human nature from subjective description to value judgment. For example, Confucius said that “of all (creatures with their different) natures produced by Heaven and Earth, man is the noblest” (Xiaojing—The Government of the Sages). Xun Zi said that “Fire and water possess energy but no life. Grass and trees have life but no intelligence. Birds and beasts have intelligence but no righteousness. Man possesses energy, life, intelligence, and, in addition, righteousness. Therefore, man is the noblest being on earth” (Xun Zio, Wang Zhi).

Obviously, in Confucianism, superior and inferior are regarded as the related results of the nature of man, and so the real measure of value cannot be concealed or avoided. This point is consistent with the nature of values in the west. For a “Nature of Values” approach regards values as the innate element—and the nature of human beings decides matters with values instead of through examining a phenomenon found in certain relations. The logic behind it is that given that human nature provides the measure for determining the values of all objects; Thus, human nature itself must have values. Similarly, one might say that given that rulers are used to measure the length of objects, rulers themselves must have “length”. Apparently, the two meanings of length are mixed up (one is descriptive while the other appraises) and the existence of values are mixed up with the appraisive results of values. Therefore, this approach often regards value judgments as having the same power as knowledge and truth. This approach continued for many years and resulted in an over-simplified and dogmatic interpretation of values.

Daoism takes a different approach to values. Daoism holds that “the law of nature is connected with the Dao. You will gain if you follow it and lose if you breach it” (Tai Ping Jing). Good or bad fortune and weal or woes are not the “Dao” or the “permanent nature” of all existences. Instead, they are relative phenomenon resulting from the behavior of man. Lao Zi said that “In the Way of Heaven, there is no partiality of love” (Dao De Jing). Good or bad fortune and weal or woes are results of man’s desire and behavior. He said that “With no desire, at rest and still, all things go right as of their will.” (Dao De Jing) Zhuang Zi said that “Everything has its inherent character and its proper capability. There is nothing which has not these,” (Zhuang Zi, and he added (in *The Adjustment of Controversies*): That one should “Hold all things in your love, favoring and supporting none specially. This is called being without any local or partial regard; all things are equally regarded; there is no long or short among them.” (Zhuang Zi, *The Floods of Autumn*).

It follows that all things have their nature and character. Long or short and gains or losses are not eternal but changing. Zhuang Zi noticed that “long or short” is an appraisive judgment which is different from description. He further pointed out that the judgment of “long or short” and “gain or loss” depend on the perspective of man (observer) and the measure he adopts: “Looking at them from the services they render, allowing to everything the service which it does, there is not one which is not serviceable; and, extending the consideration to what it does not do, there is not one which is not unserviceable. We know (for instance) that East and West are opposed to each other, and yet that the one cannot be without (suggesting the idea of) the other—(thus) their share of mutual service is determined. Looking at them with respect to their tendencies, if we approve what they approve, then there is no one who may not be approved of; and, if we condemn what they condemn, there is no one who may not be condemned.” To put it simply, “Every man has his strong and weak points”. Based on these, Zhuang Zi concluded that “there is a time for noble acting, and a time for [being] mean—these characteristics are subject to no regular rule”, “When we look at them in the light of the Dao, they are neither noble nor mean. Looking at them in themselves, each thinks itself noble, and despises others. Looking at them in the light of common opinion, their being noble or mean does not depend on themselves.” (*The Floods of Autumn*) Whether things are good or bad, superior or inferior is not determined their nature. They change with time and space. In real time, every existence (thing) and spontaneously created entity thinks itself noble, and despises others. In secular life, whether a man is noble or not does not depend on himself (instead, it depends on others’ perspectives).

Zhuang Zi and Lao Zi believe that long or short, noble or mean, are not THE nature of all things including men, but are judgments; THEY INVOLVE THE identification and choice of certain relations decided upon by considering it with regard to the measure of “function (property)” and “tendency”. People usually interpret such approach as a kind of “relativism” and fail to recognize the philosophy of value behind the approach. If we realize that good or evil, noble or mean, long or short are appraisive instead of descriptive concepts, we can see that

Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi's interpretation of absolutism is based on understanding of relations and leads to a reflection upon the position and standards of the subject or "observer". In other words, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi take another approach that is totally different from the approach of Confucianism in that they believe values are DISCOVERED IN nature of all things. They enable the observer to reflect on their perspectives and include the judge (THAT IS, observer) of values into the realm of philosophy. We believe that this is a more timely and appropriate approach to the studies of values nowadays—than perhaps it was in ancient times.

However, just as the weakness of "*unity of the ways of Heaven and man, and virtue is knowledge*" is found in Confucianism in the unclear division between subject and object, existence and value, ought to be and to be etc., the weakness of Daoism is that it fails to recognize that value varies with individuals, and thus to establish the theory of relations and subjectivity IN thinking as the principle way of thinking about values. Therefore, there aren't many constructive ideas of Daoism apart from "*Wu Wei (let things take their own course)*" and "*Shou Ci (He knows his masculine power, but maintains his female weakness)*". Due to this flaw, there aren't any substantial historical breakthroughs in Chinese philosophy on the studies of values. Most of the attention of these widespread philosophical views were focused the formulation and demonstration of the consequences of applying the ethics and the studies on values, and not on theoretical efforts to move the theories forward.

Of course, time goes on and philosophy continues its development. In China, due to our attention to the issue of values and our findings in ancient China, axiology has identified a fertile soil and unique basis for analyzing values in china in 2013—more than 2000 years later. For over 30 years, in terms of axiology, we have learned from the experiences of western philosophies based on traditional Chinese culture and methodologies through practice, and further have developed sophisticated theories regarding the theory of relationships and approaches to subjectivity with regard to assessing the various merits of value studies. This development has been achieved by utilizing modern processes of critical thinking, to develop an axiology that preserves and/or is compatible with Chinese characteristics.

At the same time, we can also see that in the research on axiology in the west, that also involves deliberations concerning the "relations" approach is also drawing some fresh conclusions. Hence in the west also there are new conclusions and methodologies that western philosophies have found as recently as in the twentieth century.⁴

⁴ FRANGDIZI (Argentina), *What is Value?—An Introduction to Values Studies*, Taipei: Linking books Co., Ltd., 1986 Chinese version. The book is a critical observance to the western values history and regards "relations" approach to values studies as the latest form of axiology in the west.

2 Learn From and Build Upon the Western Thoughts on Values

The attention to and studies on values in the history of western philosophy to achieve its present status as twentieth century thought, also went through a long and tortuous journey. It is to an analysis of this journey that we shall now turn.

As early as the times of Socrates and Plato, great minds have put forward the issue of the relations between “good will” and “knowledge (truth)” through the proposition of “virtue is knowledge”. Similar to the thoughts in pre-Qin period in China, virtue and knowledge are the sources of each other and can be unified (or blended) to an initial state. Afterwards, Hume and Kant found out the divide between “good will” and “truth”, “is” and “ought”, and “faith” and “knowledge”. As a result, we have to limit the scope of knowledge and reason to make room for faith and sensation. The confirmation given to “faith” has led to a wave of thought which believes that Will is the key to all existence. Voluntarism proposed by Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche promotes humanism based on the value of man. Pragmatic philosophy present within us interprets truth through our values and experiences of the kind that produce observable results. The forgoing suggestion is not my own; It is based on the description of pragmatise given by Russell in his book *A History of Western Philosophy*.⁵

2.1 *The Essence and Importance of the Issue of Values: The Finding and Limitations of Russell*

It was by such a review and analysis of pragmatism that Russell came across the following important issue which he states in this way: “Philosophy, throughout its history, has consisted of two parts inharmoniously blended: on the one hand a theory as to the nature of the world, on the other an ethical or political doctrine as to the best way of living. The failure to separate these two with sufficient clarity has been a source of much confused thinking.”⁶

Russell goes on to suggest that this means that existence and value, ought to be and have to be, facts and standards drawn from knowledge and faith, science and humanity and other different theoretical realms can be divided into two categories: “science about knowledge and truth” and “science about values”. In other words, Russell has realized that “truth” and “value” are the two major themes throughout the history of western philosophies. This finding of Russell has promoted the importance and significance of the issue of values in philosophy. Russell’s problem is similar to the Hume’s problem of trying to find where in the physical world

⁵ Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Volume II, Commercial Press, 1976, pp. 395–396.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

value occurs; recognizing this is indeed a milestone is a matter of great significance in the history of global philosophy.

What's surprising is that Russell himself did not attach much importance to the study of values. He never associates "ethics and politics" with the study of values. Instead, he tried his best to exclude value studies from scientific research. Maybe this is because Russell regarded pragmatism, a view which provides a good basis for studies on value, as his major opponent and made efforts to expose the theoretical fallacies of it. Thus, he adopted a skeptical and negative attitude toward the study on values. When some pragmatists interpret or even replace scientific truth with values and claimed that "truth is a form of value and logic is an appraisive judgment,"⁷ Russell refuted them by saying that "Science is not about 'values'"⁸ and that "the issue of 'values' is beyond the scope of knowledge."⁹ Thus quite amazingly, Russell, while being himself a master of logical positivism, once had a fierce argument with John Dewey, a master of pragmatism.¹⁰ We can see from examining Russell's argument with Dewey, that the argument that Russell presented had within it the spirit of adhering to the reason of science and truth. However, when criticizing the philosophy of Dewey, Russell made a small mistake in the replacement of concepts.¹¹ The mistake occurred because Russell never really understands or realizes the significance of studies on values. He, in effect, "threw away the baby with the bath water" when criticizing pragmatism. He thus shut the door to the study "values" by denying that it could be done through scientific methodologies.

2.2 Inspiration Drawn from Western Value Studies and Utilized in China

The argument between positivism and pragmatism happened during the beginning of values studies in contemporary China. I think both of these two schools of

⁷ Schiller, *Studies in Humanism*, English version, p. 198.

⁸ Russell, *Religion and Science*, Commercial Press, 1982, p. 119.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 336.

¹⁰ Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, Chap. 30, Commercial Press, 1976, Chinese version, pp. 379–388.

¹¹ Russell mocked that "whether the perception on things which have happened should be "good" or "bad" is not based on what really happened but because of beliefs in the future. The result would be interesting. Assume some people say to me: 'Did you have coffee this morning?' If I'm a common person, I would recollect what happened this morning. However, if I'm a follower of Dewey, I would say: 'Wait, I have to do two experiments before I can tell you.'..." (*A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 385). Russell didn't realize that he has replaced the concepts. Based on the perception of "good or bad", the question here should be designed as a question on values: "whether the coffee you had this morning was delicious?" But Russell turned into a question regarding existence and facts because he had misunderstandings about the concept of value.

thoughts have very clear grounding in logic and offer logically well-developed or complete systems; they are thus worth being a focus of our study and research. The disputes between positivism and pragmatism and The arguments offered in the course of these disputes, fully demonstrated the nature of value and truth, and the relation between value and truth as a common philosophical issue (not ethical issue or analytic philosophy), and thus elevated the studies of value to a higher level. As a result, the study and analysis of Russell, Dewey and other great minds and their theoretical explorations have become the basis for us to further study on the issue of values. Of course, we do not blindly agree with any one side of the argument or simply accept the conclusions of either side. Instead, we are greatly inspired by the argument itself to explore new ways in which the essential aspects of the argument might be clarified or developed.

One direction in which the inspiration leads us is to examination of the positioning of axiology. What should be the scope of axiology or study of value? When we are talking about “value”, do we also know about “non-value”? Can we answer the question of “what is value?” by defining “what is not value?” To clarify this matter we must ask these questions: “are truth and falsehood and good and evil naturally integrated or are they totally separate entities?” “What is the basis upon which we can separate and/or connect “truth and falsehood” with “good and evil”?”

The traditional Chinese philosophy featuring “unity of the ways of *Heaven and man, and virtue is knowledge*” never paid much attention to these questions. However, the argument between positivism and pragmatism lands us in a dilemma concerning whether we have to choose between “truth” and “value”, or whether perhaps we can accept and/or follow either. We also feel compelled to ask why “truth” and “value” often coexist and interact with each other in human history and social practice? What should we do to maintain the consistency and/or compatibility between aspects of truth and aspects of value?

When thinking about these questions, contemporary Chinese studies on values are naturally based on the realities of life and adopt new methodologies to answer the questions. We explain the positioning of value and the relationship between value and truth through practice.¹² The new philosophical methodology has advanced from a mode focused on hypostasis in the past to a mode focused on relations (practice).¹³ We try to explain the positioning of value and its relationship with truth through practice.

From the perspective of ontology, it’s pointed out that practice is not a substance, but a special aspect of human existence. Practice is an interactive relationship between subject and object, and it is this process itself which creates the basis of both truth and value. “Value” is one of the directions of the interactive

¹² This new philosophical methodology came from the practical materialism founded by Karl Marx. See Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*. The practical materialism can still be fully understood, applied and tested nowadays and it is still a brand new methodology—by author.

¹³ About the “relation” approach, see Li Deshun, *Theories on Values* (2nd edition), China Renmin University Press, 2007, pp. 33–35.

relation, or the nature and effect of the relation measured by man's subjectivity. Based on this, the principle of value and the principle of truth are identified as the two basic principles of human progress. Philosophers have been trying to interpret the definition and significance of truth and value based on the division and connection of the two. Truth and value are not absolutely divided as positivism maintains, nor does truth replace value as pragmatism suggests.

Another inspiration drawn from western thought is that we should interpret value through scientific and reasonable logic. Positivism emphasizes that "value" is a special phenomenon which cannot be described by science and reason. This may seem to protect science from having to talk about value, but the position actually undermines science, because it fails to interpret the existence of human beings as a whole by "seeking truth from facts"—that is, from facts alone—(for this limited "facts only" approach is what constitutes "science" for Russell¹⁴).

Therefore, starting from studies on practice—which takes into account the special values in the existence of humans, we regard practice and subjectivity as the basis of value analysis in order to make it a logical starting point. "Subjectivity" is a concept that describes the position and function of human in his practice. Its core is the rights and obligations of man. We believe that value and value relations can only be interpreted on the basis of rights and obligation of subjectivity. At the same time, based on the understanding of human existence and awareness, we do not simply regard subject as equals to abstract "human" or subjective intention, but the relational existence of human. Value relations and values, values and appraisals, value standards and appraisive standards should be differentiated from each other to show that practice is the source of values, and to connect the change of values with the change of society. In general, all these follows the direction of "treating the issue of values in a scientific and reasonable manner" to find out the in-depth nature and features of values and provide basis and solution for value decisions in our daily life.

The third inspiration is that we should properly deal with the relation between science and values. The study on values is a scientific research which should be "value neutral". Researchers' description and analysis of the subject matter should not be subject to the favor of the researchers. The same situation applies to value studies. Of course, the ultimate goal of all the scientific research endeavor is focused on the destiny of human, pursuit of human value as well as the value of science. Therefore, our studies on values should aim at establishing reasonable and healthy values.

Science is the premise of reason. Only when we understand value relations and the nature of values in a scientific manner can we establish reasonable value system. Much of the research projects on values in past lacked A scientific basis. They simply started from a predetermined target and attempted to demonstrate which values, from their own perspectives, were the "best" values and/or standards to adopt. Thus, their studies lack scientific basis and are similar to the

¹⁴ Russell, *A History of Western Philosophies*, p. 397.

recommendations found in traditional non-scientifically based religious and ethical views.¹⁵ Learning from their mistakes, our studies on values focus on exposing the nature of value to demonstrate the position and function of human understand and follow the nature of values, and understand, respect and fulfill the rights and obligations of every subject in practice. On the other hand, we should have clear value stances which are consistent with the civilization of mankind, and protect the rationality and justice of value and science. I believe that such approach will help us to avoid the mistakes of “value studies either becoming derailed from reality or reduced a tool to promote value stances” and maximize the unity and positive interaction between science and values.

3 Change in Axiology Studies

Although Chinese values studies and western axiology adopt different concepts and approaches, both are focused on the same issues and faced with similar difficulties. I believe that the major difficulty with values study today is that it does not offer a reliable basis for reasonable consensus in the age of intensified value and cultural conflicts in the world. The lack of a scientific and reasonable basis is not that the motive and passion for analyzing issues concerning values are not strong enough, but, rather, because the approach to value studies is backward.

The approach to value studies is backward in the sense that the traditional theoretical framework of value studies lacks critical retrospection and advancement with times. It is limited by ontology in the twentieth century which is centered round subject and epistemology which, in turn, is centered around knowledge theory (truth), and fails to adopt any new ontology featuring relations (practice). Our studies on values prove that a change in approaches is what we need and that values studies must go through and are going through a profound revolution.

I would like to illustrate the needed change through an example dealing with how to identify and apply the “subject, object” category? Should we stay with the “subject-object dichotomy” mode left behind by Descartes, or should we render a new dialectical nature to the “subject, object” category based on the inspiration from contemporary science and practice?

Some critics think that values studies in China adopt the concept of “subject and object” and believe that we have followed the subject-object dichotomy found in the philosophy in the west. However, in fact, the subject-object dichotomy

¹⁵ Some scholars believe that we can only use “positive value” such as “good”, “beauty”, “satisfy reasonable demand” to identify the concept of value, and there will be negative consequences if we identify value through the common features of positive and negative values and render the same value concept to man and things. Such idea lacks proof and reflection on the predetermined value concepts including “good”, “beauty” and “reasonable”, and thus are similar TO THE TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS OF religion and ethics.

approach (which has even been criticized in the west) is exactly what all of us should get rid of. We have reflected upon the approach and found out that it was generated from the traditional “substance” approach.

Subject-object dichotomy proposes that “man is the subject and nature is the object”, and thus divides the universe into two categories (apart from human and nature (thing), there are no other relations and subject-object categories). To some extent, it renders superiority to subject over object. The major fallacy of subject-object dichotomy is that it confuses the relation between subject and object with the substance of existence (human and thing). As a result, the subject/object concept loses its scientific property. For example, Martin Heidegger has pointed out that when appraising value, we often neglect that “The thing to be appraised is an object for the subject. The being of the thing is not contained in the above fact.”¹⁶ This is what we emphasize: Values only demonstrate one dimension of the subject/object relation—the significance of subject to object. To “understand the thing in its being” is the other dimension of the subject/object relation—the requirement for humans is that they obtain both knowledge and truth. (Under this circumstance, the object is only a cognitive object instead of a value object).

If we abandon the overall background and meaning of the subject/object relation and require value judgment to play the role of obtaining knowledge and truth, then we will not have a means of criticizing, in any instance, cases where the “dignity” of the object is being “deprived.”¹⁷ Otherwise, there would be no difference here from raising the criticism that “the left hand does not have any relation to the right hand and that depriving the dignity of the right hand does not entail that the left is being deprived of anything”. This would be misalignment and misunderstanding of concepts and a bias in values. If we try to understand values through this approach, there would be even more serious chaos.

One typical example of this chaos is found in some ecological or environmental value theory which denies “subject-object dichotomy” while upholding a similar logic: for while denying “anthropocentrism”, it tries its best to maintain the “subject” position of nature and wildlife and argues for an equal “subject/subject” relationship between nature and man. However, it does not consider, or is not able to answer, the following questions: in practice, how are we to explain the rights and obligations of human persons who are concerned with protecting environments? Should the rights and obligations of man involve “subject/subject” negotiations with wildlife? It also does not consider or is not willing to answer these questions: when nature is considered “subject”, how can nature uphold its rights and obligations to protect environment? Should there be mysterious representatives for the “subject of nature” and “subject of wildlife” to interact with humans, just as there should be mysterious representatives for “deity”? Should these mysterious representatives must enjoy both the rights and fulfill both the obligations of “human and animal”?

¹⁶ *Collected Works of Martin Heidegger*, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore Press, 1996, pp. 391–392.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

From this perspective, environmental value theory does not explain the meaning of “subject” and ignores the fact that only the human person can be the subject that has the responsibility to protect environment. The aim of the theory can thus be distorted to render certain people the opportunity either to gain privilege in the name of “environmental protection” or to shirk the responsibility and deprive people the rights of environmental protection. Without a dialectical understanding of the concept itself and the appropriate practice that displays the significance of the subject/object concept, studies on values, such as the kind sketch out above, will be arbitrary and will offer strategies that are distorted and thus false.

The dispute on subject/object concept in the studies of values shows that we need to reach a consensus on the definition of basic concepts which are consistent with science and practice. I believe that to get rid of the rigid mode of “subject-object dichotomy”, we should abandon the ideas which separate the world into unchanging substances or classes and establish a dialectical subject/object concept which is based on practice. For example, we should position “subject/object” as a relational category which describes the structure of practice. Then, through observation and research on human practice and history, we should understand the unity of rights and obligations of humans as a specific subject. In the process, we can reach the conclusion based on practice: in the realm of values, different subjects should be treated as equals and “return the rights and obligations of human to human”. This should be a principle and starting point for solving the issues that pertain to the values that humans face in real life. This is the “subject” principle proposed by the value studies in China. I believe this approach will help us to establish clear and self-disciplined values.

4 Conclusions

4.1 In the World of Human Kind, Truth is Monistic While Value is Pluralistic

The “monistic theory of truth” represents the overall cognitive ability and the process of existing that actually occurs in human life. In other words, truth is monistic because it represents the monistically reliable cognition of the subject matter, but it can only be tested through continuous practice of man. Monistic truth does not change with people. It comes from scientific cognition where the human being as a whole is the only subject.

The “pluralistic theory of value” represents the life and development of man. Value (values) is pluralistic because value refers only the significance of the object to the subject and it varies with subjects. Only when there is a sole subject will values be monistic. In real life, there isn’t a sole subject, each man, group, society or even the whole of humankind are only specific subjects in standing in certain

relations to one another and they each are irreplaceable. In short, values are always pluralistic when subjects are, as a matter of fact, pluralistic too.

“Division” is always accompanied by “unity”. The reasons behind division are the reasons for unity. The divide between truth and value is due to the division in human practice. Monistic truth and pluralistic values are due to the divide between subjects and objects. Therefore, truth and value must unify through practice. And the unity of pluralistic values will result from the overlap of subjects.

“The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide.” Under the backdrop of pluralistic values and cultural diversity, how to pursue unity and harmony among the pluralistic values has come into the spot light. Whether we can deal with the pluralistic values reasonably is the key to theories and practices and depends on whether we fully understand the nature of value and whether we can solve the issues in the realm of values through reasonable approaches. We lack the basis for reasonable consensus because studies on values lack a scientific basis. As a result, there are a great many conflicting views that tend to lead us toward chaos in values studies today.

Many tragedies in history happened because some people are too eager to work out certain monistic value structures to benefit themselves by violating or depriving other people of appropriate opportunities to exercise their rights and obligations. Therefore, I believe that the priority for the values studies needs to be that of following scientific methodologies to offer a basis for consensus. Only by having a basis for consensus can we seek harmony among pluralistic values by fully understanding and respecting each other’s rights and obligations.

These are the conclusions this paper defends as the conclusion to its thesis (July 2012 in Beijing).

Part I
The Gist of Values and Contemporary
Philosophy

Value and Time

Wei-ping Sun

Value is a historical category, and there does not exist any “super-historical” value. The value, as the distinctive character of historical category, needs to be studied from the historical dimension by applying historical methods. This is just like what Hans-Georg Gadamer says: the value-concept has to historically describe the philosophical dilemma by means of self-contemplation. The social history, however, is only the one-directional and one-dimensional extension of time. In accordance with the irreversibility of time, the past, present and future altogether constitutes a long and entire historical picture, which is the “background” and “spatiality” of all human value activities. To research the value theory, it is necessary to comprehend and grasp its historical dimensions and methods from the perspective of time concretely.

1 Time Dimension of Value

Since time is a philosophical category pertaining to “actual humans”, time dimension becomes indispensable to understand the value. Human beings are the temporal existence and the living organism generating and existing with the historical development, namely, time is the existent living form, the existent positive state, and the necessary requisite of human life practice. The extension of “abstract” and “objective” time, prior to human beings or outside human beings, has no special meaning and no relevant to human value possessed with the practical trait. In consideration of the value theory, only when time is related to actual humans and practical human activities, does it have constructive and constitutive significance. It is just the purposeful, independent and initiative human beings by the creative social practice that bestow time on the distinctive meaning.

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Conforming to the time fleeting, both the object and the world do have certain change-“humanization”. To be specific, the objection and the world, in the process of unceasing “humanization”, emerge into the meaningful existence and the significant social space for human living and development. At the same time, by making full use of time in life practice, humans do realize, cultivate and improve themselves, and contribute the social and historical meaning to the extension of life as well. From this point of view, time is the “space” in which humans take the value activities to “change the world” and make self-cultivation, self-creation and self-improvement. As Karl Marx points out, “time is IN FACT the active existence of the human being. It is not only the measure of human life. It is the space for its development”.¹ Without time, the social space for human activities and the measure of subjective life, we can neither truly comprehend and elaborate the concrete and historical value, nor grasp how the value comes into being and exists in time, especially in the limited life of each person.

What is one crucial feature of western philosophy since the contemporary time is to pay attention to the historical and time dimension. Basing on the achievements of natural science like the theory of evolution and of relativity, the time dimension is essential, even the main factor and hermeneutics dimension for the philosophy of Marxism and the conspicuous schools, like the creative evolution (Henri Bergson), existentialism, phenomenology, historicism, process philosophy and modern hermeneutics. Heidegger claims that “time must be brought to light and genuinely conceived-as the horizon for all understanding of Being for any way of interpreting it”.² Time, of course, should also be the horizon for all understandings of value for any way of interpreting it.

The historical dialectic, by emphasizing history and time dimension, is distinguishable from the mechanical historical view in spatiotemporal view. Ignoring time means that, in the social and historical field, people neglect the influences from the historical and cultural tradition, from the duration of human life and from the active role in human life practice. Hence, it is believed that what people can only do is to submit to fate and accept the arrangement of fate negatively, so they reckon social history and life outlook as wasting the time. On the contrary, stressing the importance of time means to emphasize human positive existence, the inheritance of social history, the human active role as the subject, and to grasp humans own destiny as well. The human life, by the activities and creation in every second, bestows the significance to the passing time, even “change the world” by the physical or mental creation in order to make their lives (especially their mental life) to “be immortal” after death.

Since the ancient time, the close relationship between time and value, in fact, had already been thought from the rational and sensory aspect for many times.

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works (Volume 33)*, Moscow: Progress Publishes, 1991, p. 493.

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Macquarrie & Basil Blackwell, New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1962, p. 39.

What we think at once is plenty of apothegms, such as “time is life”, “time is money”, “wasting our own time equals to suicide, and wasting others to murder them for money”. Social psychological professor Robert Levine, in his book called *A Geography of Time*, summarizes some “power” of time: time is money; the law of supply and demand regulates the line; we value what we wait for; status dictates who waits; the longer people will wait for you, the greater your status; the more powerful control who waits; The Siddhartha move³; time can be given as a gift, etc.⁴

Time, indeed, is extremely indispensable to humans and human value, because the one-dimensional and limited time is the one-off resource which cannot be stored, reused, lent and exchanged. Since each of us just has one life which is the limited duration of time, all value is created in this limited time. There is a saying—God creates the world and bestows the value to creatures before human coming-into-being—which is just the religious and theological hypothesis only understood by believing unconditionally. If we ground human value on the ration, we will find that all human value is, in fact, created in the social and historical activities. Therefore, apprehending the historical value without time is in vain. Even though it were true that God did create the world and bestow value to creature, this “almighty” power would only be possessed by God instead of the historical and realistic ordinary people. Time, hence, is a sine qua non for human practice and all value creation. How to create and achieve maximum value in the limited time is a vital life issue confronted by people. The human realistic value ends up with consuming their entire time, and as time goes by, the value of human life will be judged and verdict impartially.

Karl Marx once uncovered that the value of commodity, in economic sense, refers to the labor time spending on per unit of product. So the contradictions and struggles based on material interest, in the antagonistic social formations, even in some non-fundamental confrontations, often manifest in fighting for the survival time and labor time.

The exploitation made by slave-owners to slaves, by land owners to farmers, by capitalists to employees, by power grabbers to the ruled, appears to occupy on other’s labor and product, but, in essence, often on “the *theft of alien labour time*”.⁵ For example, the capitalist accumulates and improves their wealth precisely by stealing worker time as the premise, just as “The *theft of alien labour*

³ Young Siddhartha believes “Everyone can perform magic, everyone can reach his goal, if he can think, wait and fast”. With the right attitude, waiting is a potent tool against the obstacles of life; waiting can in itself be a powerful act. This is consistent with what we are often sayings: Time cures the hurts, time eliminates pain...choosing nothing is a kind of choice, doing nothing in itself is also a kind of action.

⁴ See Robert Levine, *A Geography of Time: the Temporal Misadventures of a Social Psychologist, or How Every Culture Keeps Time Just a Little Bit Differently*, New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 101–126.

⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works (Volume 29)*, Moscow: Progress Publishes, 1987, p. 91.

time, which is the basis of present wealth.”⁶ The theft and exploitation of time results in the alien employees who have to unceasingly sell their time cheaply in order to obtain the limited subsistence necessary for their survival, and often falls into this vicious cycle. Karl Marx, in *The Capital*, ruthlessly exposes and criticizes the capitalists, after the wonderful analysis on which the capitalists exploit the surplus value from the workers. In contemporary world, the capitalist owners run around the world, even move their factories to the developing countries constantly, just because there are cheap employees (relatively low wages per unit time) and the huge time of surplus value which can be deprived. Karl Marx asserts that the history will evolve into the communist society in which the “alien” phenomenon of time will vanish with eliminating the antagonistic social classes gradually. Until then, “the growth of the productive forces can no longer be tied to the appropriation of alien SURPLUS LABOUR, and that the working masses must, rather, themselves appropriate their own surplus labour...then, on the one hand, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual; and, on the other, society’s productive power will develop so rapidly that, although production will now be calculated to provide wealth for all the DISPOSABLE TIME of all will increase.”⁷ With the more free time, human beings will have more “free space” for free and comprehensive development on which the society will be undergoing a profound and historical progress.

Time, in actual and social life, plays a much more conspicuous role than it did before, according to the evolution of times, the deepening of industrialization and the acceleration of life pace. The utmost loss of value, as often as not, lies in the time-wasting and needless time-spending. Besides the following common-sense phrases about time, such as “time cannot flow backwards”, “history does not repeat itself”, “fleeting youth never returns back”, “happy times fleets quickly”, “things flow away day and night”, we still have some new ones: “an inch of time is an inch of gold, but you cannot buy that inch of time with an inch of gold”, “when an opportunity is neglected, it never comes back to you”, “the waste of time amounts to the waste of life”, “wasting other people’s time is tantamount to robbery or murder”. These are all needless time-spending and time-wasting, which cause to sigh deeply for some damage of value, even for vanishing value forever. In contrast, the real gains and utmost savings are almost the saving of time. All these notions, like “time is life”, “time is money” and “efficiency is life”, reveal that value is progressively generated and added within time flying and consuming. Due to this, the conspicuous and valuable creation is more likely to design for saving time and improving efficiency. For example, transportation means like carriages, automobiles, ships, trains, airports and spacecrafts, aim at shortening human time in travelling and transmission; the communicational tools including

⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works (Volume 29)*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, p. 91.

⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works (Volume 29)*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987, p. 94.

the telegraph, phone, internet, and mail delivery, intend to reduce the communicational time; kinds of machines such as manual, semi-automatic and automatic machines, are conducted to shorten the processing time. Moreover, with the improvement of labor efficiency and social progress, free time is increasing as labor time is becoming less, thus humans have the more liberal conditions and possibilities for comprehensive and free development.

Certainly, some people also uncover that human beings do make some technological creations so as to save time, such as the massive new inventions and considerable new technology, which do not save time indeed, but rather beget more time-wasting. The invention of telephone makes the remote communication become convenient and swift by saving considerable transmission time. However, as the widespread of telephone, the telephone seems to be “the time killer” because much precious time, without calculating by people, is spent on the unnecessary calls, even with long time, especially owing to its cheaper price. Newspapers, magazines, televisions, movies and internet, and so on do save the information transit time, but also “murder” a great amount of time by reading or watching insignificant materials. For instance, plenty of people unconsciously spend their countless leisure time on lots of “soap opera series” which flood in TVs. What a time we waste! Obviously, it is lack of logic to connect the invention of new technology with time-wasting. After all, the new technology is in people’s hands and actually decided by the subject itself about whether to use it or not and how to use it.

In any case, with the development of times and of society, people are gradually aware of the significance in time value and life practice. The creation of human value enduring in the revolution of time has already been or is enormously changing the world. Meanwhile, in the duration of time, the world with more efficient and greater ability to innovate becomes more “humanization” and turns into a value world keeping pace with times and changes. When the social progress provides human beings with more free time, human beings gain more free and comprehensive development, and become more “being a man” and unceasingly improving.

2 Past, Present and Future

The arrow of time eternally targets one direction, and appears the basic pattern of “past–present–future”. In the flows of this singular and one-dimensional time, human value not only possesses the character of Da-sein and irreversibility, but also faces future ideality and transcendence. In other words, in this time stretches of “past–present–future”, human beings are different from any other animals. They are never satisfied with the present situation, and always develop for surviving, explore and turn into the desired direction at all times.

In the time dimension of value, human value practice has inseparable relations with history in accordance with the one-dimensional and singular time flowing.