

PHILOSOPHY, CULTURE, AND THE FUTURE OF TRADITION¹

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Can there be a genuine dialogue between Christian philosophy and Chinese culture? Some may be skeptical. In an earlier time, Christian philosophy--as an adjunct feature of Christian missionary work--generally had an apologetic function. It assumed that communication was possible between Christian philosophers and those in largely non-western cultures (such as China). But the nature of the exchange was rather one-sided, and it is fair to say that, often, Christian philosophy aimed primarily at challenging and rejecting local traditions and, specifically, traditional morals and moral practices.

Today, as we enter a new millennium, apologetics has relatively little importance for many Christian philosophers, but this does not mean that the prospects for dialogue have significantly improved. For philosophy--particularly in what is called 'the west'--continues to be seen as an activity that challenges and rejects tradition. And so one might think that the enquiries of philosophers are generally antithetical to the traditions characteristic of existing cultures, and that, for a culture to preserve itself and for its traditions to endure, it must resist entering into a dialogue with philosophers. Moreover, the work of many post modern philosophers, such as Richard Rorty, suggest that dialogue and even communication between different traditions and cultures is ultimately problematic, because there is no single 'final vocabulary' to which all can appeal for common standards of meaning, truth, and value.

One might conclude, then, that any proposed dialogue between philosophy (Christian or secular) and tradition (not only of Chinese but of any culture) must fail. Because philosophy has been, and is, radically opposed to or radically distinct from, tradition, there can be no real dialogue between philosophy and culture.

There is no doubt some basis for this perception and some justification for this reaction. But I will argue here that philosophical

enquiry is not inherently opposed to tradition or traditional moral practices, that it can help us to see how traditional morality is important and how it might thrive and grow, and that the dialogue between philosophy and culture should be encouraged.

I will start with a few comments on tradition itself, and look at the significance it has had in relation to morals. I then will review a few of the principal challenges to traditional morals--challenges from 'modernity,' 'post-modernity,' and from the existence of cultural diversity and pluralism. I will argue that these challenges do not show that traditional morals must be rejected, and, further, that one can maintain that there are legitimate and ethically binding moral principles that are present in, though not limited to, traditional beliefs and practices. (Here I will draw on examples from Christianity and from non-Christian views.) Finally, I will draw out some of the consequences of my view for the future of tradition in relation to moral beliefs and moral practices, and for the possibility of dialogue between philosophy and culture.

I

Cultures and communities--be they political, cultural, or religious--are defined, in part, by their normative character, that is, by their values, and morals or moral norms. By values and 'morals' here I mean not (just) the ethical theories or standards, but also the "moral practices" and "modes of conduct."

In 'natural' communities (families, villages or neighborhoods, and ethnic groupings), and in communities with a history (such as nations), the morals, norms, and values are in large part determined by the past or by 'tradition.' One common, non-controversial, definition of 'tradition' is "an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (as a religious practice or a social custom)" that has a "continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions." The information, beliefs, and customs that are part of a tradition may be handed down "by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction." In describing tradition as "a pattern of thought"--and not just a pattern of an individual's thinking--we see that it is something present in, but also 'greater than,' individuals that, arguably, both transcends and has a claim on them. It is because of these features and for these reasons that one can say that tradition is normative--that it expresses how people *ought* to act or behave, and so on.

For some, however, tradition leads to the restriction of individuality and the exercise of autonomy or freedom. And because traditional morals and morality have a reference to the past, they are often seen to be backward looking and conventional, rather than forward looking and dynamic. In general, tradition (e.g., religious or cultural tradition)--and especially traditional morals--are often seen as conservative, unimaginative (in a changing world), monolithic, inward looking, overly reluctant to and intolerant of change, ethnocentric or parochial, unworkable, and sometimes simply wrong.

II

As the preceding comments suggest, traditional morals, and tradition as a whole, have been the objects of a number of challenges. Some of these challenges are far from new, but at the present time there seems to be a rather large number of them, and they come from a wide variety of perspectives.

One source of the challenges to traditional morals is 'modernity'--by which I mean the current of thought, beginning with (or at least typical of) the Enlightenment, that proposes that we dispense with all 'tradition,' and build philosophical, cultural, scientific, and moral structures on reason alone. Reason, rather than inherited customs, or authority, or religious faith, then, becomes the basis and standard for morality and moral practice.

This challenge is present, first, in the 'rationalist' natural law or social contract theories of Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, and then in rationalist ethical theories, such as those of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill (and to some extent G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx). These theories propose a morality independent of religious tradition--and, in some cases, fundamentally opposed to it. In these moral systems, the authority of reason replaced the authority of God or the gods or those representing God. This view is well-summarized in a remark by Henry Sidgwick who, in 1865, predicted

History will have in the future less and less influence on Politics in the most advanced countries. Principles will soon be everything, and tradition nothing, except as regards its influence on the form.²

The Enlightenment emphasis on reason (i.e., what I will call 'rationalism'), then, was the first major challenge to traditional

morals, in so far as it questioned the theory underlying traditional moral practices. But a second challenge to traditional morals comes from another feature of modernity--that is, the 'turn to the subject.' One sees it, for example, in Descartes' emphasis on epistemology over metaphysics, and on the priority of knowledge of the *self* over knowledge of other things. Anything that was not directly and indubitably knowable by the self was something that needed evidence and justification. This standard for knowledge applied not only to metaphysical and epistemological questions, but was extended to moral theory and moral practice. This emphasis on the human subject ultimately had two consequences: first, that traditional *morals* need to be justified, and, second, that this must be a justification that is rooted in what can be known by the subject. And, gradually, this second consequence has led to the view that it is the subject that sets the standard of truth and falsity; there is no standard apart from the subject.

Even today one sees the presence of the rationalist and subjectivist challenges to morality. For example, one moral practice that is a tradition in most, if not all, cultures is that children are to respect and obey their parents. And children who did not respect and obey their parents, or who behaved inappropriately, could be punished not only by their parents, but by other members of their family, and sometimes (if the parents or family neglected to do so) even by the community as a whole.

But today this practice is challenged in many countries. Parents are frequently called on by others, even their children, to justify their expectation to be respected and obeyed. Moreover, in some countries, any kind of physical punishment for disobedience (e.g., spanking) is illegal. At the very least, then, the tradition that children should obey their parents has to be justified; one has to give a reason for it.³ To say that it is a tradition--that it has gone on for centuries, and that it has stood the test of time--is considered to be no reason at all.

There is a second source for some of the challenges to traditional morals, and that is from what is called 'post modernity' (These critiques have been posed by some feminists and by 'green' ecological theorists and others as well.) The first target of post modernity and its allies is 'modernity,' i.e., 'rationality' and the modern emphasis of the priority of reason (though one might see these movements as simply developing the 'modern' critique of tradition and, thereby, turning that critique against modernity itself.) Post moderns argue that modern emphasis on rationality

'rationalism'--suffers from the same flaw as the traditions which rationalism challenged--namely, rationalism is just another ideology that should be debated as well. At its origins, rationalism presented itself--and still presents itself--as being universal and as providing a neutral position from which to criticize and evaluate all traditions. But while 'rationalism' has attempted to set itself above ideological debates, post moderns and their allies say, that it is just another tradition--and in fact there can be no universal theory and no position or language that is neutral and can serve as the arbiter of conflicting ideologies.

Post moderns, then, criticize modernity. But they also criticize tradition and traditional morals. Traditional morals are, they say, racist, or class or gender biased, or 'speciesist,' and so on, and traditional moral categories are corrupt, or flawed, and are certainly not universal. Because there are no universal, neutral, standards to which people can appeal, these critics advocate a view that they say is pluralist, or tolerant of diversity, but which is in fact a kind of ethical relativism or cultural subjectivism.

This is particularly evident in discussions of moral practices today. Although subjectivism within some cultures is not often tolerated, many people argue that there are no universal or trans-historical binding moral practices, and there certainly are not any trans-historical moral norms. There are simply different practices that reflect different understandings of morality, and (it is often said) no one understanding or set of practices can be proven to be the better than any other.

For example, consider the issue of the relations between men and women. Post moderns tell us not only that the rules concerning the treatment of women at one time need not apply in another, and that there are no universal or general principles of equality and equal dignity of men and women. Since post moderns say we cannot appeal to reason as providing a special standard by which to judge moral practices, there can be no rational critique of cultures where inequality exists. Some might think that this means that the traditional morals of these cultures are, therefore, protected. But this is not so, for there is no good *reason* for traditional practices to continue either. Reason cannot prevail over tradition, but this does not mean that tradition has any real value. Traditional morals are held in place, post moderns say, by power. And there is no *reason* why they should not be replaced by whatever those who have or who can seize power might want.

A third challenge to traditional morals takes its force from

the simple *fact* of the existence of cultural diversity and pluralism. Given the apparent diversity in moral values and moral practices, there is no reason to believe that any particular set of values or practices are universal or are (or could be) binding. And this has led some to conclude that morality is not objective, but only a matter of personal preference. On an international level, there seems to be no established morality or set of moral principles that all respect. Moreover, appeals to traditional principles of morals--keeping agreements, showing respect for others, promoting autonomy and dignity--may have little or no real effect. Most if not all societies pay attention to such appeals only inconsistently. We see this in both domestic and foreign affairs.

Take the case of Yugoslavia or Rwanda. There, social solidarity disintegrated almost overnight, and appeals to past practices of cooperation became easily ignored. And so, some people come to torture, or kill, others with whom they had lived and worked just because they belong to a different ethnic or tribal group--despite decades or centuries of peaceful coexistence. Moreover, while many of us in other countries may deplore these events, more and more people refrain from making moral condemnations. Some people simply say, 'who's to say who is right and who is wrong?' Or consider a more local example. At one time, in some countries, it was believed that one should show (the traditional moral virtue of) loyalty to one's family, friends, trade union, or community. But more and more people are placing their individual interests above the collective interest, and even when they show an interest in the collectivity, it is only temporary and instrumental. And this reduction of morality to personal preference is apparent at the interpersonal level as well. Traditional morals and moral practices have less and less of a sway in personal behavior. The traditional moral practice of life-long marriage has disappeared. Even though most people who marry stay married, the institution of marriage on the whole is seen as a contract that is dissolvable simply on the wishes of one of the contractants. Divorce has certainly little or no social disapproval, stigma, or sanction in many countries of the west--and this attitude is taking root in many non-western countries as well.

And so, in the contemporary world, one no longer has confidence that any tradition or set of traditional moral principles is capable of providing a secure basis for a moral evaluation or assessment of whether one is acting morally or not. The result is not just subjectivism or relativism, it is nihilism. It is the denial that there can be any norms or standards at all. Morals seem to be, at

best, just a matter of subjective taste. And traditional morals are, at best, just what some people might voluntarily choose to adopt. But one might choose to adopt *other* morals, or simply abandon morality. In fact, one of the characters in literature in the west in the last half-century is not the *immoral* person, but the *amoral* person--one for whom moral categories, whether they be based on reason or tradition, simply do not apply at all.

It is ironic, then, that although the world is, in many respects, globalized, and as economies and political, social, and cultural institutions become more and more integrated, the moral world is more and more fragmented. But perhaps this should be no surprise because (as a recent critic in *The New Statesman* wrote, "economic globalisation merely completes what has been driven forward intellectually by postmodernism and politically by individualism" [or subjectivism]).⁴

In short, the challenges to tradition traditional morals are many and they are strong. And, if they succeed, then not only is there no traditional morality, there is no morality. And, as I have suggested, this will result in, at best, a radical subjectivism, if not an instability and a nihilism.

III

From what I have said, the present situation of tradition may appear to be bleak. But, I would argue that there room for some optimism.

There is good reason to reject the excesses of modernity and rationalism, and even better reasons not to adopt the critique of traditional morals and morality as a whole that one finds in post modernism and its allies. I would argue that tradition and traditional morals do not have to be abandoned, that they are necessary--and that they are necessary in the future. I would also argue that one can show or prove how they are necessary in such a way that many of the contemporary modern and post modern critiques lose much of their force. Finally, I would insist that this will also show us what the place or role of traditional morals can be in the future--i.e., what the future of tradition is.

First, let me say a few words on how tradition and traditional morals are necessary. As I stated earlier, tradition largely determines our moral practices, and is even involved in our fundamental moral knowledge. This is a fact. Tradition lies at the root of our morals; our morals and moral norms were originally determined by 'tradition' (e.g., religious or cultural tradition).

In fact, tradition is inescapable.

Consider the example of the teachings of Christianity--of Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament gospel of Matthew (5:17-18). Jesus says:

(17) "Think not that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. (18) For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

Here, Jesus's claim is that his message is dependent upon the context and tradition of Judaism. It is this tradition that Jesus says he will fulfill, not replace. But, to go further, it would be difficult to understand anything of what Jesus did and proposed to be doing, if one did not already understand the context from which he came and in which he and his followers lived and taught. To understand the teachings of Christianity, then, we have to understand what it is that the law and the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures--the tradition out of which Jesus came and in which he taught--said.

A similar claim can be made in looking at political philosophy and ideology. Take, for example, the case of Karl Marx. Marx said that he had "turned Hegel on his head"--that he had taken Hegel's dialectical idealism, and turned it into a dialectical materialism--and many Marxists have claimed that Marx's work was a 'completion' of Hegelian philosophy. (Here, in the place of the Hegelian notion of Mind or Spirit, Marx substituted 'the material world'--specifically, the economic relations of human beings. Material conditions, and not 'reason,' Marx claimed, were the basis for development and change.) And so Marx's account is a response to Hegelian philosophy and cannot be adequately understood without understanding the philosophy that was, in much measure, its source and inspiration.

Or again, in the 'common law' of Anglo-American countries, the notion of tradition is present and essential in such fundamental notions as precedent, the burden of proof, and the rule of law. Judgements of innocence or guilt are also determined by a formal procedure that is a tradition, and the judicial system is itself the result of tradition as well.

The dependence upon tradition and context, illustrated in these examples, is not just incidental. In general, from the perspective of epistemology, it is clear that tradition is necessary for knowledge to be possible. For, to understand our present

experience, we have to be able to put it into relation or harmony with our past experience--with our vocabularies, our stories, our patterns of thought or ways of thinking, our self-understanding, and our understanding of others--and, in relation to them, not just as past events, but as a perspective or form of life. And this includes a reference to a social dimension and the experience of others. Conceptual and linguistic practices, like legal, philosophical, and religious practices, are either traditions or are embedded in traditions.

IV

Linguistic, cultural, religious, and other traditions, therefore, are present throughout our conscious lives. They are valuable--by helping to put the present in a context, as a source of ideas and possible solutions to problems that we face--and necessary to our self understanding and to determining how to live and how to act in the future.

Nevertheless, it does not follow from this that human consciousness and our mental life are *entirely fixed or determined* by our respective traditions, or that these traditions are so distinct from one another that those in one tradition cannot understand, and make appropriate normative judgements about, the activities of those in other traditions. There is, in other words, a way that we can both recognize the value and integrity of tradition and traditional morals and also 'bridge' and extend traditions. By recognizing this, we not only avoid ethical relativism or nihilism or an ethical theory of 'might is right,' but we also have a means of addressing the challenges of philosophies of modernity and post modernity. But this way requires first examining what underlies or is involved in tradition.

To begin, it is obvious to one who lives in a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic society, or who travels outside of his or her own country, will encounter others who come from different traditions, and who do not necessarily share all one's values and one's cultural, religious, and moral practices. Yet, in these encounters, communication obviously occurs. Of course, there are breakdowns in communication, and sometimes discussion comes to an end without issues being settled. (There are many reasons why this may be so, and we should not forget that these may include being the result of individual fault or failings.) Still, on a large--very large--number of issues, differences in language, history, culture, and religion can be and are overcome.

One illustration of this, on a broad scale, is in the work of the United Nations and its agencies. A second illustration (that is more suggestive) is that of the twentieth century movement of religious ecumenism. (I have argued (elsewhere⁵) that religious ecumenism is a model of how one can come to agreement and unity despite differences in values, and I will not repeat these arguments here.)

How is it that international communication and the formulation of policy and political action (for example, in the UN) or religious ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue have had as much success as they have? The explanation of this is, I think, to be found in a basic presupposition of each of these activities--activities which we may call 'communicative practices.' What the United Nations does, often, is not to look for *neutral* ground, but to look for *common* ground. What it does is look to see where there might be interests, values, and concerns that all share, and build on that. And what it is that ecumenism does is, again, look for 'ground' or a set of commitments, or a 'discourse' that is *common* to all of the interlocutors. It is important to note that, in these cases, the first stage is not to dictate or force people to adopt certain values, but simply to find shared values.

In these cases, and despite the different religious, political, and cultural differences among the interlocutors, all recognize (at least implicitly) that there are ideas, interests, values, and concerns that they all share. And it seems plausible to say that this common ground is not just coincidental, but is in virtue of being the kinds of beings they are. (And in discerning and acting on these ideas, they may come to recognize that they share or have an interest in other common ideas, values, and so on, as well.)

What are some of the interests, values, and ideas that these people may share?

At the most elementary level, there is the recognition of the nature and value of life itself. To have human life, there must be certain objective and material conditions--e.g., the presence of food, water, and related resources, shelter and security, as well as the possibility of satisfying not only fundamental physical, but also intellectual, moral and spiritual, needs.

At an equally elementary level, for a people or any group of persons to live and thrive, they have to *recognize* that these needs are *common* needs, and have to share or be capable of sharing a discourse or language and 'practices' or activities with others that enable these interests to be pursued.

But there is another group of material or quasi-material conditions that must exist. First, there must be a *recognition of one another* as beings with whom they *can* live and act and, second (which is not actually independent of the first), a recognition that they do *or can* share a number of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, about what basic human needs are and how we might or must satisfy these needs, but also about communicating and cooperating with others, about how nature works, and much more. We might call these 'dominant ideas.'⁶ Since dominant ideas in a culture are shared ideas, an idea becomes more dominant as it becomes more widely shared.

These basic 'dominant ideas,' then, are discovered, not invented. There is, then, a fundamental non-arbitrary relation between these ideas and interests and human beings and the world they live in--reality. In fact, one can say that these ideas and interests are *objective*, because they reflect something basic about what it is to be a human person (e.g., the kind of being--physical, mental, moral and spiritual--that humans are, and the kinds of needs such beings have). They must be discovered (or thought to be discovered) for any dialogue or cooperation--and for almost any relation--to be possible. If we did not share them at some basic level, then we could scarcely deal with one another.

Before going further, however, we should note some other principles or features that are involved here.

First, it is clear from the above that the existence of basic dominant ideas is necessary not only for dialogue and cooperation with others, but for any self-consciousness or developed mental life in any individual. For these ideas are not just about what makes life with other human beings possible, but are necessary for us to think about and understand ourselves. In broad terms, these are ideas like 'person,' 'need,' 'life,' and 'future,' and, arguably, 'like me' and 'not like me' (which reflect one's gender and ethnicity). In short, they are the (kind of) ideas that, if we gave them up, we would (as one might in conversation say) no longer be who we were before. Moreover, we can say that these dominant ideas have a claim on us because they constitute the way through which we understand both ourselves and the world around us.

Second, it is the dominant ideas that exist in a culture that constitute or make possible its traditions. Many of these ideas are about the nature of reality and, specifically, about human needs and basic desires, and so they are not things that people can simply choose to have or not have. These basic 'dominant ideas,' and the

kinds of beliefs that human persons must share in order to interact with other persons, cannot be purely contingent or arbitrary or *casual*. There will be, of course, other 'dominant ideas' present in a society or culture that are not 'basic' in the preceding sense, but which also reflect features of the physical and social environment--and which therefore will affect how those in these societies and cultures think and understand. *Altogether, the set of the dominant ideas in a culture defines, or at least provides ideas essential to the expression of, that culture's tradition and its morals.*

But there is a third important point: dominant ideas are not static; for example, which ideas are dominant at a particular time depends in part on the kinds of activities and practices we are engaged in. Moreover, through new experience and contact with others, and as our ideas become more consistent or coherent with the other ideas that one has, our dominant ideas may change. Those which are basic may become richer and more coherent; others may cease to have an influence. Nevertheless, these ideas provide a stability and continuity in understanding oneself and in dealing with others.

This account of 'dominant ideas,' then, asserts that there are basic ideas and values that are objective and cross- or inter-cultural, but it also allows that these values need not be fully articulated, and are, in some sense, incomplete and that they grow and evolve (and must grow and evolve) because the world in which we live and our understanding of it, are incomplete and grow and evolve. This account also recognizes the legitimate diversity of many 'non-basic' dominant ideas that arise in response to features of the physical and social environment, and which are therefore not arbitrary, and which are also incomplete and will grow and evolve. Consequently, this account is pluralistic. It allows that there can be--and usually is--at least some 'truth' in ideas dominant in a particular community.⁷ There can be inter-creedal or inter-cultural discourse and debate about these ideas and values, without calling into question the objectivity of values; and one can come to a deeper and more enriched understanding of one's own values, and can acquire a greater knowledge and appreciation of what is of value, through this interaction with others.

Thus, from the minimal set of basic dominant ideas noted above, there is a gradual tendency towards other ideas. The recognition of others as those with whom we can live and work is, then, simply the recognition that we share some basic dominant ideas and seeing that we are capable of sharing more. And it is in

the recognition of others as other persons like ourselves that has given rise to ideas such as human value, dignity, the importance of human flourishing--and (one might argue) human rights.

In short, dominant ideas are those ideas which make dialogue, communication, and recognition--and, thereby, activity together--possible. These activities, in turn, make it possible for other ideas to become dominant. This is an ongoing process; we come to see what we share, and we develop what we share, by working and communicating with one another. Altogether, these ideas form the basis for a cultural tradition and for the existence of the moral practices and norms of that tradition. While the present analysis accepts the fundamental role of human nature and needs, it nevertheless does not entail a static model of culture or tradition.

V

The preceding analysis of what underlies the possibility of working together with others is, I would say, descriptive--and it shapes (though it does not determine) institutions, practices, and cultures. What, then, are some of the consequences of this analysis for tradition and traditional morals?

First, it enables us to *respond to some of modernity's challenges* to traditional morals.

What this analysis shows is that morality cannot be rooted in the Enlightenment model of reason and rationality alone. Not only is the 'modern' view inconsistent with the 'natural' origin of morals (i.e., as a product of the dominant ideas of each tradition), but even the principles characteristic of 'rationalism' are themselves the product of a history and a tradition.

Nevertheless, this analysis is not compatible with, and arguably requires, a model of tradition and, specifically, of morality that emphasizes the role of reason. 'Reason' or what counts as 'rationality' is dependent upon facts about the world (e.g., the nature of conscious thought) and on dominant ideas--and therefore it is or can be cross cultural. One can also say that reason here is normative so far as it represents a demand for coherence among beliefs and of beliefs with the world. But such a view of reason is not a 'rationalist' one, and does not establish or demand a *neutral* space or arena in which discussion or debate is to take place. All it requires is that there is a cognitive space or discourse that people share or are capable of sharing, in which such discussion and debate can occur and in which progress in understanding can be made. (And

hence this ‘non-Enlightenment’ model of ‘reason’ would demand an openness to dialogue.)

Now, if we understand ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ as an open-ended process that tends to coherence in ideas, that draws on basic dominant ideas, and as the result of which other ideas become recognized as dominant and basic:

i. there is clearly a place for traditional morals.

This account of reason does not demand a radical critique of or a ‘putting into question’ of tradition (as rationalism does). Because traditional morals are the product of a rational process that has been established and sustained over time, all things being equal, they have the benefit of the doubt.

ii. tradition has a fundamental value.

When confronted with a challenge to or a problem with existing moral values and practices, we have to express or articulate that challenge within the traditions in which we live. And the central place of tradition requires that we have to return--though in a creative and thoughtful, and *not* a defensive, question-begging, way--to that tradition, and draw on its resources in order to attempt to respond to such a challenge. I would add that, unless a tradition is inconsistent or genuinely unable to address certain ‘tensions’ in a coherent way, one has no grounds for refusing to defer to it.

iii. tradition is *dynamic*.

Given the ‘open-endedness’ of experience and of human life, individuals, cultures, and societies will inevitably be ‘called out’ from their past practices and from their established institutions. The account of tradition presented above not only acknowledges this open endedness of experience, but enables one to maintain that tradition itself is open ended. New experience may, for example, allow us to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the tradition of which we are members, and may even force us to go back and ‘reinterpret’ that tradition. The occurrence of novelty and change does not mean that traditions have to be abandoned.

A second consequence of the preceding analysis is that, while it does acknowledge the authority of tradition, it does not make this authority absolute and it does not entail (as some post moderns have suggested⁸) that traditions are incommensurable with one another.

Specifically:

i. Although the recognition of the value of tradition reminds us that, in the discussion of tradition and traditional morals, one must be historically or contextually sensitive, the account of dominant

ideas and of their role in moral practices and culture reminds us that traditions are not arbitrary constructions. The basic dominant ideas reflect objective aspects of the world and basic human needs--and this reminds us that the morals, interests, and values of a tradition are not entirely contextually determined. Moreover, because of this contact with 'the world,' and because all traditions--no matter how different--exist in the same world, features of these traditions may have an inter- or cross-cultural character. And because the response of traditions to the world is not arbitrary, we have a basis for rejecting the view that we must accept the moral norms and practices found in different cultures as *on a par* or equally valid or legitimate.

ii. Because the question of which ideas become dominant, and which are most coherent, is not settled simply by the individual subject or even the community, traditions can be 'corrected'--and corrected from 'the outside.' And so, it is also reasonable to expect that, as those in a culture or tradition encounter new values and ideas, they may be forced to ask questions that they don't know exactly how to answer, and they may be challenged to answer *why* the questions they have always asked are in fact appropriate or useful questions. As one comes to put one's thought into coherence with this 'larger' experience, one's ideas will inevitably change and develop. But, even if this is unsettling, such change is not something that we must fear. Acknowledging the existence of the ideas and values of others, and taking other persons seriously, are really nothing more than demands of the character of conscious life--which reflects, after all, the influence of the culture, ideas, and material environment around it--and it is a demand that one cannot escape.

In short, then, since traditions must themselves respond to the world in which they exist, traditional moral practices and moral norms are not immune from criticism or change, and need not be retained at all costs.

VI

Despite the widespread infatuation with the idea of 'starting afresh,' characteristic of the new millennium--and despite the challenges of modernity and post modernity which have so much of an effect on contemporary opinion--it is not necessary to abandon tradition or traditional morals. In fact, tradition may provide us with a fruitful means of addressing current problems and of avoiding the relativism and the nihilism to which many modern and post modern moral views appear to lead. The view of tradition presented here is not one that

is static and fixed in the past. Rather, it allows for, and requires, an ongoing reinterpretation of the past in order to address present and future problems.

What philosophers--and, I would add (though I do not argue it here), Christian philosophers--can contribute is a reminder of the value and importance of tradition and also a recognition that cultures can and must respond out of their traditions to other cultures, traditions, and experiences. If we acknowledge this, we can begin to see how tradition is not rooted in the past or restricted to the culture in which it arises, how local culture can 'inform' philosophy, and how the dialogue between philosophy and culture in general--and Christian philosophy and Chinese culture in particular--can be fruitfully engaged in at the beginning of the third millennium.⁹

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NOTES

¹Invited paper for the conference on "Philosophical Perspectives for the New Millennium: The Dialogue between Christian Philosophy and Chinese Culture," Fu-Jen Catholic University, Taipei, Taiwan, November 23-25, 2000.

²Cited in Andrew Pyle, ed., *Key Philosophers in Conversation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 79

³The place of the larger family or the community concerning the relation between parents and children is also being redefined. It is now generally considered unacceptable for a member of the family, or a member of the community, to tell a parent that he should *punish* his child at all.

⁴Ulrich Beck, "Beyond the nation state," *The New Statesman*, Monday 6th December 1999.

⁵See my "Globalization, Philosophy and the Model of Ecumenism," in *Philosophical Challenges and Opportunities of Globalization*, Oliva Blanchette, Tomonobu Imamichi, George F. McLean, eds. (Washington, DC: Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 2001); see also my "Value Inquiry, Cultural Diversity, and Ecumenism," *The Future of Value Inquiry*, Matti Häyry and Tuija Takala, eds. (Amsterdam: Rodopi Publishers, 2001).

⁶I have borrowed this term from the idealist philosopher, Bernard Bosanquet. See his *The Philosophical Theory of the State and Related Essays*, Gerald Gaus and William Sweet, eds. (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2001). To speak of ideas as 'dominant' is not, however, to suggest

that they are ‘dominating,’ in the sense of oppressive or of being the instrument of an elite designed to marginalize or suppress other ‘voices.’

⁷As Aristotle writes, ‘no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but every one says something true about the nature of things’ (*Metaphysics* II, 993a27-993b2).

⁸See Hendrik Hart, in *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), who claims to be following the view of Richard Rorty.

⁹An earlier version of this paper was published in *Science et esprit*, Vol. 54. I am grateful to the editors of that journal for their permission to use this earlier paper here.