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The Semantics of Wisdom in the Philosophy of Tang Junyi: Between Transformative Knowledge and Transcendental

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Abstract In this article, I offer a provisional analysis of the philosophical semantics of “wisdom” in the thought of the New Confucian thinker Tang Junyi. I begin by providing some pointers concerning the concept of wisdom in general and situating the discourse on wisdom in comparative philosophy in the context of the later Foucault’s and Pierre Hadot’s historical investigations into ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy as a mode of spiritual self-cultivation and self-transformation. In the remainder of the paper, I try to describe and think through what Foucault identifies as a “Cartesian moment,” in which self-knowledge becomes the ultimate precondition for the ethico-spiritual project of “caring for the self,” in Tang’s approach of wisdom. In the course of my argument, I outline the complex relation between his vision of a renewed Confucian mode of religious practice on the one hand and his philosophical presuppositions concerning the transcendental status of subjectivity and the reflexivity of consciousness on the other.

Keywords Tang Junyi, wisdom, New Confucianism, modern Chinese philosophy, transformative knowledge, philosophy as a way of life

1 Introduction

In a collection of notes dating from around 1958, the modern Confucian philosopher Tang Junyi 唐君毅 (1909–78) makes the following statement in which a number of concepts are strung together to the point of collapsing into each other and becoming indistinguishable: “[One should] nurture wisdom through life, replenish existence through wisdom, and open up life through knowledge, for life and existence are the matrix of learning” (以生活滋養智慧, 以智慧潤澤生命, 以知識開拓生活, 生活、生命為學問之模胎) (Tang [ca. 1958],

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49). In the following pages, I will try to gradually unfold the dense “matrix” Tang invokes here by focusing on the import of the idea of “wisdom” (*zhihui* 智慧), which he treats interchangeably with “knowledge” (*zhishi* 知識) in this note insofar as both wisdom and knowledge maintain a direct connection and mutually reinforcing relation with human life and existence as such.¹ The indeterminacy of the notion of “wisdom” prevents us from identifying it with “knowledge” without first making a few observations which are relevant to our understanding of the position of wisdom in comparative philosophy in general and Tang’s writings in particular.

One of the reasons for the overall elusiveness of “wisdom” in Tang’s thought is the fact that it is usually not defined directly or positively (if it is defined at all). It rather only gains its meaning within a series of oppositions, for example in the set of distinctions between practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), technical know-how (*technē*), and theoretical knowledge (*sophia*) reaching back to Aristotle.² In this sense, it is far from obvious whether “wisdom” qualifies as a philosophical concept to begin with, or rather denotes an existential skill which should be sought for in what Tang’s friend and fellow Confucian Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–95) famously called a “learning of life” (*shengming de xuewen* 生命的學問) (Mou 1970). Distinctions between wisdom on the one hand and whatever one chooses to distinguish it from on the other (philosophy, science, reason, perception, information, prejudice...) can draw on specific theoretical conceptions, on everyday language (think of proverbs for example), or on a combination of both.

As a starting point, one can remain content with the assumption that “all of us have an intuitive sense of what wisdom means” (Hall 2010, 8). In doing so, however, the problem becomes that which is designated by “intuition,” as opposed to (mediated) “knowledge,” and precisely what is at stake in drawing this distinction while relating wisdom to intuitive understanding in a certain discursive and socio-historical context. Additionally, by appealing to pretheoretical intuition, the idea of wisdom can come to appear as something of a *coincidentia oppositorum* that combines the characteristics of esoteric inaccessibility and everyday obviousness within itself, while leaving these two contradictory features unreconciled. If wisdom is directly opposed to “normal” (scientific, philosophical, commonsensical, ...) rationality in a general fashion, any attempt to provide an analytical, “outsider” definition of what it means to be

¹ “Knowledge is like ball of raw silk. When it is soaked in the water of life, it becomes translucent, flexible, and pleasing to the eye. But if one day the spring of life were to dry up, knowledge too will become as rigid as dried clay.” (知識猶如一團生絲，當浸潤在生活的水中時，條條清澈，宛轉如畫。但一朝生活的源泉枯竭，知識也就膠結如泥。) (Tang [1939], 23).

² “[M]odern languages generally distinguish between theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom and retain for wisdom only the practical-ethical meaning” (Cassin 2013, 1242).

wise would seem to be forced to capitulate beforehand. One thus remains outside of the boundary that the wise are able to draw between themselves and the intrusive gaze of a foolish inquisitor who would like to catch a glimpse of what the sage can see without having to go through the trouble of becoming one himself.

Obviously, the line of demarcation between “wisdom” and its opposite(s) can be drawn in many different ways. Interestingly enough, the invitation or instruction to cross or even annul the boundary between wisdom and knowledge (or wisdom and folly) is one of the most counterintuitive yet prevalent forms taken on by the philosophical discourse on wisdom in both Eastern and Western thought (see for example Payer 2004). Wisdom is not knowledge; it is non-knowledge, knowing that one does not know, knowing without knowing, knowing the unknowable, and so on.

While it is tempting to become mesmerized by the dizzying dialectical gyrations accompanying such paradoxical formulations, we can for the moment restrict ourselves to taking a cue from a few elementary observations made by the sociologist Alois Hahn which can account for at least some of the paradoxes to which accounts of wisdom often give rise. Instead of trying to isolate certain features of the kind of knowledge that different cultures and societies throughout the ages have characterized as “wise” on the level of content, Hahn opts to approach the problem of “wisdom” in a more functional and formal manner, in the hope of thereby accommodating the plethora of different conceptions of what it means to be wise or act wisely. He proposes that, whatever its specific form of appearance in various cultures, religions, philosophies, and everyday language may be, “wisdom” always designates a special or exceptional kind of knowledge (*Sonderwissen*) that is characterized by a certain degree of reflexivity and self-referentiality, as a “knowing how to know” (*Wissenswissen*), that is to say, “*a knowledge concerning how to deal with knowledge*” (Hahn 1991, 52, emphasis added). In what follows, I will limit myself to providing a brief contextualized case study of the reflexivity of “wisdom” in the work of the modern Chinese philosopher Tang Junyi.

2 Wisdom and Philosophy as a Way of Life

A motif routinely encountered in discussions on the topic of wisdom, specifically in the context of comparative philosophy, is the identification of wisdom with a form of knowledge which is not present in the knowing subject as a piece of content within a container, but rather shapes and transforms the way in which the subject perceives, judges, knows, acts, and evaluates as such (see for example Ferrerstein 2004, 89). In this sense, wisdom is seen as being concerned with human existence as a whole, with knowing and learning how to live, and not

merely with the accumulation of information or the acquisition of specialized technical knowledge. In other words: “knowing how to know” is inseparable from knowing how to live.

Unsurprisingly, as an academic discipline institutionalized in the bureaucratic apparatus of the modern university, it is not uncommon for philosophy to be suspected of having become alienated from its originary (and perennial) task of constituting a “love of wisdom” (*philo-sophia*) and of now being burdened with the task of restoring the severed bond between knowledge and existence. This is precisely the sentiment Tang Junyi expresses when he writes that “philosophical and scientific theories as such do not allow human beings to settle themselves and establish their lives” (Tang [1956], 309). Accordingly, the distinction between wisdom and its other(s) is routinely lodged onto a temporal difference, namely that between “timeless wisdom” on the one hand and, on the other, “mere (e.g. scientific or technical) knowledge,” as attached to and constrained by the specific situation in which it is employed or the problem to which it responds and beyond which it is of no use or importance. If interpreted positively, “wisdom” thus becomes a form of knowledge that is essentially continuous with the past and with tradition, serving to uphold and reactualize (ancient) knowledge outside of the specific socio-historical conditions which gave rise to it and ought not to keep it captive.³ Contrary to the evanescence of “information,” wisdom is assumed to be able to absorb and be enriched by the passing of time, instead of being eroded and eventually undone by it.⁴

If the problem of cultural difference is added to the close nexus between wisdom, existence, and historical continuity, the picture gets even more complicated. In the available literature, one encounters both universalistic conceptions of wisdom, as a type of knowledge which inherently transcends cultural, religious, and disciplinary boundaries,⁵ as well as more particularistic approaches which establish an elective affinity between the idea of wisdom and,

³ For Tang’s one-time teacher Fang Dongmei 方東美 (1899–1977) for example, wisdom constitutes the veritable “axis of the cultural life of a people” (民族文化生活之中樞) (Fang [1927], 111). Similarly, Li Zehou 李澤厚 treats “the wisdom of China” as synonymous with what he calls the “cultural-psychological formation” (*wenhua xinli jiegou* 文化心理结构) of the Chinese people, the latter counting as the product of a historical process of “sedimentation” (*jidian* 积淀) which ensures the persistence of tradition in contemporary society (see Li 1985).

⁴ “[W]isdom grows in the transmission of past knowledge and experience. Wisdom is enriched through each generation that adds its own knowledge and experience to the enterprise” (Yao 2005, 301).

⁵ “Wisdom is the ideal state of knowledge... cherished and searched for in all cultural traditions East and West... The study of wisdom brings together all these different traditions as well as different disciplines, such as religious studies, philosophy, history and social sciences” (Shen 2004, vii).

for example, “Oriental” traditions in general, or the so-called “Sapiental Books” of the Old Testament.⁶ According to Barry Allen, for instance, Chinese philosophy “does not share the problems of [Western] epistemology because it does not share the evaluation of knowledge that makes those problems perplexing. Knowledge poses different questions—not about essence or conditions of possibility, but about point and value. What makes knowledge wise and worth pursuing?” (Allen 2015, 4). Allen sees the whole tradition of Western philosophy as being preoccupied with, and ultimately blinded and crippled by, what is actually the specifically post-Kantian problem of “access” (how do we know reality, can we gain access to what is outside of the knowing subject at all, what are the conditions of human knowledge, etc.) instead of paying attention to the practical or ethical efficacy and transformative capacity of knowledge as wisdom. However, a more nuanced and somewhat different picture begins to emerge if we take some basic insights from the researches of the later Michel Foucault and the work of Pierre Hadot on ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy into account.

At the beginning of a series of lectures delivered between 1981 and 1982 at the Collège de France entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault speculates whether one could not symbolically identify what he provisionally and rather hesitantly calls a “Cartesian moment” in the history of Western thought, at which point the requirement to “take care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) which continuously and consistently appeared throughout classical Greek and Roman thought became eclipsed by a rationalist incarnation of the famous Delphic precept “know yourself” (*gnōthi seauton*) (Foucault 2006, 12–18). Throughout these lectures, Foucault attempts to demonstrate that in classical philosophy, the relation between subjectivity and truth was not primarily (let alone exclusively) understood as a narrowly cognitive or theoretical one, but rather as fundamentally practical, insofar as the subject was expected to change his attitude, behavior, and entire way of existence in order to gain “access” to, that is to say, be positively *affected and transformed by* the truth. As such, “knowing the self” was part and parcel of, but ultimately remained subordinated to, the lifelong and to some extent universal endeavor of “caring for the self.” As Foucault stresses, the requirement to “care for oneself” did not yet ring of either egotism or narcissism, but was rather closely tied up with conceptions of how to

⁶ The identification of non-Western philosophy with “wisdom” can appear in a derogatory fashion, denoting a lack a systematicity and conceptual rigor, but can also be intended positively, indicating a fundamental continuity between existence, experience, and knowledge. At times, the description of a philosophical tradition as geared towards “wisdom” serves to mete out praise and blame at the same time. For two early examples of the latter tendency in Western Sinology, see the remarks by Forke (1927, ix) and Granet (1934, 4–8).

effectively participate in communal life and properly govern the *polis* (Foucault 2006, 12–13).

Crucially, such “care of the self” took the form of what Pierre Hadot terms “spiritual exercises,” of which what we normally associate with and immediately recognize as philosophical speculation was but one example. Hadot uses the term “spiritual exercises” to designate “practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialog and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification in the subject who practiced them” (Hadot 1995, 6). According to Hadot, such exercises played a central role in ancient thought:

Each assertion [in Graeco-Roman philosophy] must be understood from the perspective of the effect it was intended to produce in the soul of the auditor or reader. Whether the goal was to convert, to console, to cure, or to exhort the audience, the point was always and above all not to communicate to them some ready-made knowledge, but to form them. In other words, the goal was to learn a type of know-how; to develop a *habitus*, or new capacity to judge and to criticize; and to *transform*—that is, to change people’s way of living and of seeing the world. (Hadot 2002, 274)⁷

On his part, Foucault contrasts “philosophy,” understood as “the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth” (Foucault 2006, 15), with the “spirituality” found in the philosophy of Greek and Roman antiquity, the latter counting as “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” (Foucault 2006, 15). Foucault claims that, from the point of view of spirituality, “there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject” (Foucault 2006, 15).⁸ With Descartes by contrast, the self-certainty of the *ego cogito* as the indivisible

⁷ In this regard, Hadot speaks of “troubling analogies between the philosophical attitudes of antiquity and those of the Orient” that made him reconsider his initial suspicions towards comparative philosophy (Hadot 2002, 278).

⁸ In a different context, Foucault had already contrasted what he calls the “philosophico-scientific standpoint of truth,” as a universal and demonstrative form of truth assumed to be accessible at any time and to be present everywhere, with a “more archaic” conception according to which the truth constitutes an *event* bound to specific places, times, people, and forms of existence. Such a “truth-event” is not readily available to any thinking/doubting subject, but rather has its own specific “geography,” “calendar,” and “chronology,” as well as “privileged and exclusive agents.” Such a form of truth then does not require a “method,” but rather a (practical, e.g. ritual) “strategy” in order to be experienced and grasped (see Foucault 2003, 236–38).

remainder of the radical methodological doubt of a conscious subject no longer obligates the latter to engage in a praxis of “care of the self” as the inevitable price to be paid for valuable knowledge. In the distinctive self-transparent clarity of thinking, the self can bracket out everything except itself, so that its “being” comes to concern the reflexivity and self-referentiality of indubitable thought alone. Conversely, the kind of truth available to a subject who knows by thinking and doubting as such is no longer assumed to have the potential of transforming the very mode of being of the subject in its entirety.⁹

While Foucault emphasizes that he does not mean to read the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* as a singular and instantaneous rupture in the history of philosophy, it can in his view still stand as the symbol of a more complex and gradual shift in the conception of the relation between subjectivity and truth. Leaving aside the fruitful potential of these insights for comparative philosophy at large within the limited scope of this short article, I will try to indicate below that such a “Cartesian moment” can be understood not only as a (partial and never fully completed) shift in the historical development of Western philosophy,¹⁰ nor necessarily constitutes the symptom of a categorical cultural divide between Western and Chinese thought, but also recurs within the work of an individual thinker such as the New Confucian philosopher Tang Junyi.

3 Wisdom, Religious Practice, and Transcendental Subjectivity in the Work of Tang Junyi

There are but a handful of texts and passages in Tang Junyi’s voluminous oeuvre which explicitly or systematically deal with the topic of “wisdom” (*zhihui*). As is the case with many other thinkers and scholars, Tang usually does not treat “wisdom” as an idea awaiting conceptual and historical analysis, but rather as self-explanatory enough to be directly employed in discussing the relation of various forms of knowledge, such as philosophy, science, and religion, to human existence in the contemporary world. That being said, the expectation that philosophy does not stop short at remaining a purely theoretical exercise in speculative prowess runs through the whole of Tang’s work and could be said to count as a basic stance shared in common by many of the thinkers currently classified as “New Confucian.” The gradual transformation of Confucianism into

⁹ For Hadot on the other hand, Descartes’s *Mediations* were still in a sense continuous with the practice of *askēsis* in ancient Graeco-Roman philosophy (see Hadot 2002, 263–65).

¹⁰ As Foucault himself indicates, the tension between “philosophy” and “spirituality” runs through much of the history of continental philosophy from the 19th century to the present (see Foucault 2006, 28).

the academic discipline of philosophy (see Makeham 2012) did not lead traditionalist intellectuals such as Tang to abandon the normative requirement of striving for what Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) called the “unity of knowledge and action” (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一), but rather seems to have had the effect of reinforcing the demand that (philosophical) knowledge should maintain, and if necessary recover, its transformative capacity in modern society.

In Tang’s writings, this demand expressed itself in the notion that Confucianism has to be reconstituted not only as philosophy, but also needs to become a religious “teaching” (*jiao* 教) objectively embodied in ritual practices and modes of conduct in everyday life which concern an individual’s entire (social) being. Accordingly, in order to qualify as a socially performative form of wisdom, the Confucian teachings should not merely be an object of knowledge (*zhi* 知), but also of belief (*xin* 信) (see Tang [1954a], Tang [1953b], 385–94 and Tang [1977], 14–16).¹¹ Tang was convinced that Confucianism could begin to function as the basis for mutual tolerance and understanding between the world religions, precisely because it is not a religion in the strict or ordinary sense of the word, that is to say, had never been dogmatically oriented or fatally entangled with institutional structures of power, such as in the case of the Catholic Church (see Tang [1956], 280). Additionally, he believed that in the present age, only religious morality and philosophy *as wisdom* could ensure that the various specialized domains of knowledge are kept in check, reach across disciplinary boundaries, and overcome the epistemological as well as socio-political disintegration plaguing modern society. As such, the reassertion of a unified order of knowledge “governed by” (*zhuzai* 主宰) religious morality, which Tang sees as a continuation of the Chinese tradition, has a soteriological dimension and plays a crucial role in devising a universalistic “way to save the world” (*jiu shijie zhi dao* 救世界之道) that is no longer limited to a particular ethnicity, nationality, religious denomination, or social class (see Tang [1977], 667–68).

It is important to point out that Tang’s insistence on the necessity of reactualizing Confucianism on the objective level of society and everyday life as a practical and practicable teaching is enmeshed with his own particular philosophical presuppositions, which are not straightforwardly continuous with traditional Confucianism, but rather betray the strong influence of German Idealism as a philosophy of transcendental subjectivity.¹² In the following passage for instance, it becomes clear that there is a direct link between the capacity for transcendence and the unconditioned nature that Tang attributes to

¹¹ For a comprehensive and historically sensitive analysis of the religious dimension of Tang’s thought, see Fröhlich (2017, 108–37).

¹² For more historical background and details, see Van den Stock (2016, 65–81, 247–66).

the mind on the one hand and the project of positively transforming human existence through religious practice on the other:

It is only within the unlimitedness and transcendence with which the mind is endowed and within the human existence where the mind is located itself that human beings can find a place of repose and a ground to settle themselves and establish their lives. In order to do so, human beings must be able to possess a religious spiritual demand and religious belief as well as a form of religious morality and practice in which the unlimited and transcendent nature of the mind becomes manifest. (人只能在其涵具無限性、超越性之心靈，與此心所在之人生存在自己，得其安頓之所時，人乃能得安身立命之地。此則待於人之能有一表現其心靈之無限性、超越性之宗教的精神要求與宗教信仰，及宗教性之道德與實踐。) (Tang [1956], 310)

Interestingly enough then, Tang grounds the possibility of religion as an existential and transformative practice in what he calls the “requirement to transcend the world of actuality” (超越現實世界之要求). This movement of transcendence, of the mind recognizing its own autonomy and unconditioned (“unlimited”) nature vis-à-vis the objective world, is not conceived of as being directed towards an external, transcendent God as in Christianity, but as a movement in which “the self settles itself and establishes its own life” (自安此身，自立此命) in the immanence and immediacy of self-awareness (Tang [1956], 316; Tang [1961], 152–53). In this sense, the kind of religious belief Tang is describing here necessarily contains a reflexive moment, namely what he calls “a great turning-around of mental activity” (心靈活動之大回頭), in which the mind gains self-confidence (*zixin* 自信) by coming to recognize its own existence as a “transcendental self and subject” (超越的自我主體) (Tang [1956], 312). “Turning around” towards the self coincides with an insight into the fact that the mind is irreducible to any of the cognitive activities or objects for which it constitutes the condition of the possibility. Additionally, this reflexive movement can serve to overcome conflicts between different types of knowledge such as religion and science by leading to a recognition that the latter are equally dependent on the self as a transcendental subject (Tang [1956], 288).

Wisdom then is not merely a practical type of knowledge concerned with the specific situations and concrete circumstances encountered by particular human beings in everyday life, but also and above all requires the capacity to synthesize (*zonghe* 綜合) the particular, that is to say, to conceptually subordinate the particular to the universal (see Tang ([1962], 4–6, 21–23, 33–34). Wisdom, religious belief, transcendental subjectivity, and the turn towards and transformation of human existence are thus joined together in a complex and dialectical manner that should keep us from simplistically conceiving of

“wisdom” as the privileged property of the Chinese philosophical tradition. Rather, in Tang Junyi’s work, the turn towards existence and religious-moral practice (“care of the self”) is closely linked with reflexive self-knowledge, in the specific sense of an insight into the transcendental position of the mind.

4 Wisdom as Transformative Experience and Transcendental Reflexivity in Tang’s Philosophy

Crucially, these seemingly speculative considerations have a determinate historical background and significance. For Tang, the challenge faced by Confucianism in the modern world can be summarized as the task of restoring the gap between “inner” and “outer,” that is to say, of revealing the continuity between the Confucian “spirit of returning to seek it in oneself” (反求諸己的精神) (*Mencius* 4A4) and the merely apparent externality of the institutional (“democracy”) and epistemological (“science”) requirements of modernity, the latter being internal to and not detached from the religious process of moral self-cultivation and self-transformation in Confucianism (see Tang [1957], 246–54). This conception is meant as a corrective to the putative neglect of the external and objective dimensions of social life in Song-Ming thought (Tang [1957], 256–57). “The most important kind of wisdom we need,” Tang writes,

consists in recognizing the significance of the fact that all of the seemingly outwardly directed instead of internally oriented forms of cultural life in modern society can help us unravel the kind of entanglements and shackles described in the above and in recognizing that they appear to run counter to, but actually serve to complete, the spirit of returning to seek it in oneself. (吾人所需之最重要的智慧，則是在認識一切表面看來是向外而非反求之各種現代社會文化生活，可幫助我們解開前述之糾結系縛的意義，其與反求諸己的精神，似相反而相成的意義。) (Tang [1957], 247)

The “internality” to which we are called upon to return here designates both the self as an individual as well as the mind as such, insofar as the latter is endowed with a faculty of transcendence which allows human beings to “absorb the external into the internal” (*yi nei she wai* 以內攝外) (Tang [1957], 256) and thereby reclaim what at first appear to be objective barriers to leading an authentic moral life in modern society. In turn, this obliges the subject to cultivate an ability to “withdraw from the external world into the interiority of my own self” (從外面的世界，撤退於我自己之內). By temporarily and

strategically maintaining a certain “coldness” towards the world, the subject can acquire and maintain the “spiritual coalescence” (精神的凝聚) necessary to recognize itself in the external social world, which ultimately constitutes a modality of its own essence as a moral and spiritual subject. Tang invokes the traditional saying that “the greatest hermits retreat into the city” (*da yin yin yu shi* 大隱隱於市) in order to make clear that such a “withdrawal” has to be accomplished within the hustle and bustle of daily modern life itself.

The dialectical nature of this whole process becomes even more obvious when Tang goes on to argue that “the most important kind of wisdom” required in the contemporary age also involves consciously embracing the cold and objectifying gaze of modern science and philosophy, as forms of knowledge that he at other instances, following Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968), directly opposed to wisdom (Van Den Stock 2016, 221–34). By recognizing the value of science and philosophy as “instruments to stabilize external stimuli” (貞定外面的刺激的工具), the subject can accomplish a “turning around” (回頭) towards itself and come to realize that the distance introduced between the subject and the object by scientific and philosophical reasoning, and conceptual analysis as such, is instrumental in accomplishing the transformative process of “seeking it in oneself” on a social level in the long run (Tang [1957], 247–50).¹³ Here we find something very similar to Mou Zongsan’s dialectic of the “self-negation of intuitive moral knowledge” (*liangzhi de ziwo kanxian* 良知的自我坎陷). The constantly recurring motif of “turning around” refers both to the transcendental status of consciousness, as well as to the dialectical movement of the self (“inner”) recognizing itself in society (“outer”) as a precondition for moral *self*-cultivation under the conditions of modernity. Moreover, Tang’s “Cartesian” move from the immediacy of human experience to the reflexivity of consciousness is closely related to his attempt to come to terms with what he sees as the epistemological and socio-political peculiarities of modern society.

However, as is arguably the case in the history of modern Western thought as well, this Cartesian moment does not constitute a singular and definitive rupture, but rather would seem to describe an unresolved tension running through the whole of Tang Junyi’s philosophy. In Tang’s earlier and hitherto largely unstudied writings,¹⁴ there is already a similar logic at work which foreshadows

¹³ At another instance, Tang explicitly relates “wisdom,” not to ageless knowledge, rootedness in history, and continuity with the past as one might expect, but rather with the ability to break free from established (conventions of) knowledge, with novelty, creativity, and youthfulness. See Tang ([1962], 43, 50–55). Also see Tang ([1953a], 215–83), where Tang is led by “Wisdom” as a ten-year old child in his encounters with various philosophers and religious figures.

¹⁴ For a detailed study of Tang’s *The Establishment of a Moral Self* (*Daode ziwo zhi jianli* 道德自我之建立) from 1944, see Fan (2000).

the complex relation between “knowing the self” and “taking care of the self” in his mature oeuvre. In *The Experience of Human Existence* (*Rensheng zhi tiyan* 人生之體驗) from 1944, it soon becomes apparent that the early Tang does not approach truth in a propositional sense as an adequation of the subject to the object, but rather as an existential experience with a strong affective and transformative quality:

There is no need to constantly go about analyzing truth through your speculative faculties; what the truth needs most is a profound form of experience and enjoyment. This means that the knowledge of the truth you obtain has to permeate your existence [...] You can suck in the truth of the universe, like an infant suckling at the breast. (你不必處處用思辨力去分析真理, 真理最需要的是深心的體玩。這是說你所得之真理的知識, 必須滲融於你之生活中 [...] 你可以吮吸宇宙之真理, 如嬰兒之吮乳。) (Tang [1944a], 45)¹⁵

“True wisdom,” Tang writes later on in these pages, “does not require a brain, but only eyes” (真正的智慧, 是不要腦髓的, 只要眼) (Tang [1944a], 268). He makes it clear that in writing this book, he is not trying to formulate a systematic theory of human existence in dialog with other philosophers. Rather, it was “written for the self” (爲己寫的) and primarily deals his own private vexations, doubts, anxieties, and shortcomings, as well as with the problems besetting the path of spiritual progression and moral growth in a more literary and poetic fashion (Tang [1944a], 3, 9–10).¹⁶ What he is after in this context is *wisdom*, as a “radiance of the mind” (心靈的光輝) that is not to be sought for outside the self (Tang [1944a], 42). As such, *The Experience of Human Existence* is meant to have a “guiding function” (引導的作用) (Tang [1944a], 118) for both the reader and the writer, and is filled with self-interrogations and admonitions calling upon the subject to change his life and way of thinking by “turning around and seeing yourself” (反身看你自己) (Tang [1944a], 111–14). Writing (and reading) *The Experience of Human Life* thus qualifies as a kind of “spiritual exercise” in its own right, albeit one of a relatively cerebral type.

Although this work, which is mainly devoted to philosophically uncovering the latent moral value of seemingly amoral or even immoral forms of thought and behavior in personal everyday life, is still largely devoid of a socio-political dimension, the idea of “returning to the self” is already tied up with the ability of the mind to transcend the apparent limitations of the outside world in general and of being able to see that “the material world of external entities is a symbol of your own existential experiences” (外界事物之形色的世界, 即是你自己生命經驗

¹⁵ Cf. Tang [1957], 202.

¹⁶ Cf. Tang ([ca. 1958], 50), Tang ([1944b], 1–3), and Tang ([1977], 676).

之象徵) (Tang [1944a], 130). Even though Tang claims that the beginning of philosophical wisdom consists in the realization that the self and the world are inseparably linked as respectively the subject (*neng* 能) and object (*suo* 所)¹⁷ of a unified form of direct experience and “pure apprehension” (*chuncui de ganjue* 純粹的感覺),¹⁸ it is ultimately the reflexivity of the conscious mind which allows the latter to come out on top in the unity of the subjective and the objective.

The ability of the mind to take itself for an object leads to the problem that the subject can never completely recover its self-identity and that an irreducible distance remains present within itself, as simultaneously the subject and object of reflexive thought. However, Tang sees this as a positive attribute and quality of the subject as a spiritual as opposed to material form of existence: “Matter can only be identical to itself and cannot become aware of itself, it cannot turn itself into two different selves [...] The self-nature of matter does not hold the unlimited within itself” (物質只能是它自己，不能自覺它自己，不能化它自己為兩自己 [...] 物質之自性，不具藏著無限) (Tang [1944a], 141). The holistically sounding “mutual interpenetration” (*huxiang shentou* 互相滲透) of world and self that Tang envisages is thus accomplished within spirit as the privileged constituent and evolutionary apex of this unity (Tang [1944a], 155–61). When we take the subsequent development of Tang’s philosophy into account, it becomes apparent that the call to return to the self and the immediacy of human existence and experience was consistently coupled to a Cartesian insistence on the reflexivity of consciousness as the transcendental guarantee for autonomy in modernity. In this sense, “knowing the self” (the transcendental reflexivity of the subject) has become the condition of the possibility for “caring for the self” and realizing moral self-cultivation in the contemporary world.¹⁹

¹⁷ Tang ([1944a], 120). Tang probably adopted these Buddhist terms from Xiong Shili’s *New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness* (*Xin Weishi Lun* 新唯識論).

¹⁸ See Tang ([1944a], 125): “In pure apprehension, the white cloud you perceive is nothing but a pure lump of whiteness. You do not know that it is a white cloud, just as you do not know that it is white, because pure apprehension is an immediate and unified apprehension, which at first has nothing to do with what something is” (在純粹的感覺中，你所見的白雲，只是一單純的白色之團。你不知它是白雲，亦不知它是白，因為純粹的感覺是突然的一感，最初並無所謂是什麼)。The influence of William James’s (1842–1910) concept of “pure experience” is obvious here. Also see Tang ([1954b], 563–64).

¹⁹ As Pierre Hadot notes, such a transcendental recovery of self-knowledge in classical philosophy occurs in the closing lines of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* as well: “The Delphic oracle’s *gnothi seauton* [know thyself] has acquired a new meaning. Positive science is a science lost in the world. One must first lose the world by the *epochē* [bracketing out] in order to regain it in a universal self-consciousness. *Noli foras vie*, says St. Augustine, *in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas* [Do not lose your way from without, return to yourself, it is in the inner man that truth dwells]” (qtd. in Hadot 2002, 65).

5 Concluding Remarks

In the above, I have tried to argue that the relation between life/existence and knowledge/wisdom described as completely co-dependent and reciprocal in the quote I invoked at the begin of this article is constantly on the verge of collapsing into the self-sufficient reflexivity of consciousness in Tang Junyi's writings. For Tang, wisdom is not simply a matter of practical experience, spiritual know-how, or existentially oriented knowledge, but also always involves a specific conception of subjectivity as the ultimate condition of the possibility for any ideal unification of knowledge and action within the specific conditions of modern society. As such, Tang's Confucian project of spiritual self-transformation cannot be separated from his philosophical vision of the subject as irreducible to its empirical objects and external conditions, that is to say, from the transcendental position of subjectivity in a Kantian sense. In other words, the assertion of the transcendental status of the subject in relation to the immanent and factual world of experience runs parallel with his undertaking of arriving at a reintegration of the epistemological and broader institutional differentiation characteristic of modernity by restoring a universal form of religious morality to a dominant position. The transcendental status of the subject over and against the objective world it gives shape to is thus not simply a post-Kantian epistemological presupposition describing the overarching condition for gaining access to the truth, but also at the same time has a spiritual dimension in functioning as a guarantee for the universal applicability of "Confucian" religious practice. In this sense, the recurrent motif of the wise subject "turning back" and "seeking it in oneself" designates the turn from the insufficiency of the speculative endeavor of philosophy as an academic discipline to wisdom as a form of transformative spiritual practice in everyday life. At the same time however, it also refers to the seemingly opposite yet dialectically related movement in which the subject turns from the facticity of experience back towards itself as a transcendental locus free from the increasing contingency of traditional knowledge in modern society.

Acknowledgments Research on this article was supported by a grant from the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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