

BOOK REVIEW

Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness

François Jullien

Translated by **Arthur Goldhammer**

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It is very easy to consider something called cultural difference or alterity intellectually. But how are these so-called differences imprinted? Are they as real as a geographic structure, like a mountain range, or a river? Are they something akin to a physical or biological difference? How do we understand this cartography of ideas, particularly today, when the globe is enervated by fiber optic cables, satellites, and instant information?

The Journal you are now reading is situated within this dilemma. It is a journal in English which is devoted to the publication of articles in philosophy and religion from many different cultural perspectives. Its writers are spread around the world, speaking from many real cultural landscapes, asserting various forms of cultural difference, yet they speak to one another. There is both a play of differences and commonalities.

The characterization of Eastern thought by the West has a long history. The philosophers Leibniz and Hegel stand out, as does the Jesuit writer Matteo Ricci, and the novelist Victor Segalen. This trend focuses upon what is different, or Other, about Eastern thought from the perspective of the Western mind.

François Jullien is a part of this tradition. François Jullien is Professor at the Université Paris VII-Denis Diderot and director at the Institut de la Pensée Contemporaine. He is the author of many books, many of which have been translated into English. These include: *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, and *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*.

This is a review of his latest book to be translated into English: *Vital Nourishment: Departing From Happiness*. In this work Jullien

looks at the Chinese understanding of life. He draws primarily from the work of the third and fourth century B.C.E. Chinese thinker Zhuanghi [Chuang Tsu]. What Jullien attempts here is a critique of Western ideas of transcendence, through the use of the Chinese approach to life. He states the goals of this investigation early on.

It also provides us with an opportunity to use the parallel between Chinese thought and the history of our rationality to recover and rethink precisely those aspects of our most fundamental experience - the experience of life that modern Western science has covered up and obscured with its characteristic procedures... (p.26)

To return to this more authentic understanding of life, he focuses on the idea of “nourishment” or “nutrition”.

... nutrition is not progress toward something; it is renewal. The transformation that it brings about has no other purpose than to reactivate something (forsaking the problematic of sense to which the West is so attached: because life in itself makes no sense, as we know)... I put myself in a position to “modify-incite” and therefore to reconnect continually with life (in myself), rather than allow it to cling and adhere - to some investment, some representation, or some affect, as caring about things inclines us to do - and subsequently to stagnate and wither. (p.27)

Life has no transcendent meaning or goal outside of itself. In place of the Western tendency to seek un-earthly redemption, Chinese thought renews itself through a kind of immanent process.

The nourishment we are tracking is not a supplement; rather, it consists in ridding ourselves of all “supplements” who only lead us “to force life.” “To feed our life celestially” is to free life from everything that weighs us down - be it knowledge acquired, agreements made, virtues adopted, or successes won - and to restore it to its sole injunction - immanence. (p.42)

Certainly, this seems to be not merely a theme drawn from ancient Chinese thought, but from contemporary Western thought. This *elevation of the concept of immanence*, is a theme promoted by Deleuze and others. We might ask if Jullien’s reading of Chinese thought is pure, or if he

is distorting it through the coordinates of the Western critique of Western thought? In other words: Chinese otherness in the service of deconstruction. Further evidence of this can be seen near the end of the book.

The task of philosophy today is, I believe, above all to reconsider its insistence on meaning, which has driven it to this point, and to ponder “existence” as a replacement for the quest for truth. To that end, it needs to draw on the cultural choices of other civilizations in order to challenge its own anthropological presuppositions more radically. It can use these other civilizations to reflect on itself. (p.160)

Now this approach which emphasizes otherness has come under criticism by another French Sinologist Jean- François Billeter, who in his various works has attempted to try to understand the commonalities of Chinese and Western art and philosophy. For instance in his work translated into English as *The Chinese Art of Writing*, he carefully draws connections between Chinese calligraphy and modern Western trends in art.

As Jullien’s fame has continued to grow, Billeter recently responded with an essay entitled “Contre François Jullien,” (which can be accessed at: <http://www.afec-en-ligne.org/IMG/pdf/9-1Billeter.pdf>.) Here Billeter takes Jullien to task for his exoticism.

Henry Zhao wrote an article about this debate in the New Left Review entitled “Contesting Confucius” (also available at: <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2664>, accessed on Oct., 2008). Here he gives an account of Billeter’s distinction between “comparatists” and “purists.” I wish to quote this at length as it gives the reader a fine summary of the divisions within the East / West philosophy debate.

According to Billeter, in the early decades of the twentieth century the modern Chinese intelligentsia of the May Fourth generation split into four factions over their attitude to traditional Chinese thought. Radical iconoclasts (like Chen Duxiu, founder of the Communist Party) reject it completely; critical intellectuals (like Gu Jigang, the liberal-sceptic historian) question its ‘sacred’ source; comparatists (like Feng Youlan, author of the first history of Chinese philosophy) try to compare it to Western philosophy; purists (like Qian Mu, a Confucianist educator) insist that it is simply incomparable, as well as incommunicable to the West. The four factions

can actually be divided into two camps: the critics and the apologists. Among the latter, both the comparatists and the purists, though differing in approach, arrive at the same conclusion: Chinese superiority. Jullien, according to Billeter, is a typical comparatist and, like his Chinese counterparts, unfailingly concludes that Chinese philosophy far surpasses all other varieties. Both critics and apologists have successors among younger generations of scholars in modern China, and the confrontation, instead of petering out over the years, has become even more heated, especially after China's economic take-off. Billeter cites the examples of two younger scholars. Mou Zhongjian is today's purist; writing in archaic Chinese in his 2005 essay, 'The Grand Chinese Way', he declares that Western civilization has passed its peak, culturally as well as economically, and the twenty-first century will be China's. Li Dongjun, at Nankai University, represents the new iconoclasts. In her 2004 book, *The Canonization of Confucius and the Confucianist Revolution*, she argues that Confucianism as a system of representation still has a tenacious grip on the Chinese mentality and, despite the demise of the Empire a century ago, still leads its subjects to fulfil a 'duty of abnegation in favour of totality'. (New Left Review, 44, March-April 2007)

Henry Zhao points out that Billeter also sees important political implications in this debate.

Billeter calls for the demythification of China as a 'fundamental other'. The necessity to understand its philosophy as an imperial ideology is a political one: 'not in order to reduce the role it has played in history, but to determine the approach we want to take to it'. This becomes all the more urgent because, although 'in the past the Europeans and the Chinese lived apart, this ancient separation is no more. Today we are facing the same historical moment, and should act together and understand each other.' The myth of the other now deters mutual understanding between China and the West. This is the ultimate insult to Jullien, whose purported aim has always been to bring about this understanding. Billeter puts it bluntly: 'Those who endorse a critical reflection on the past in fact subscribe to political liberty and democracy, while the comparatists accommodate more readily to the state of power'. (New Left Review, 44, March-April 2007)

Zhao echoes Billeter's concerns. Speaking about the 'fever' among the Chinese people in embracing their traditional philosophy, Zhao concludes:

Since the authorities are sitting on the fence, the ‘fever’ has been, until now, a more or less spontaneous movement among the masses and intellectuals, stoked by a newly found national pride among the populace, but only half-heartedly encouraged by the government. In Chengdu, the city where I have resettled, people gather in tea-houses on Sunday mornings to hear lectures on traditional philosophy, though I doubt they would want to hear ideological admonitions. But the ‘fever’ itself is, beyond doubt, ideological in its agenda, an attempt to fill the vacuum of values in modern-day China. Spurred by China’s increased economic strength, the ‘fever’ will develop rapidly. This is why the issues Billeter raises are of such importance. Philosophical speculation on otherness, once pushed to an extreme, risks becoming dangerously attractive. Diversity can be encouraged without rendering difference into something unrecognizable, unreachable. When otherness is made into myth, it may serve neither those inside it nor those outside. This fiery debate among French-speaking sinologists is, we may hope, only the prelude to a fuller discussion on the price of keeping the other as the other. (New Left Review, 44, March-April 2007)

If we focus on the contrast between Jullien and Billeter in its starkest form, is it perhaps possible to say that both are *absolutely* right, but that the *absoluteness* of their rightness ultimately undermines the force of their argument? Is it perhaps both too simple and too great a task to walk around the border of China and draw a boundary in the sand, and perhaps too reckless to consider ultimate accessibility?

We might add still other voices to this debate. Li Zehou, in his work *The Path to Beauty: A Study in Chinese Aesthetics*, is very careful to show that Chinese thought is not a monolithic whole, but has a complex history caught within the tensions between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Zhang Longxi, in his work *The Tao and the Logos*, appreciates the complexity of differences but also stresses the ability of hermeneutic understanding to bridge them.

Regardless of these academic discussions concerning difference and alterity, there remain certain realities that are unfolding on the ground. There are *real* divisions, which are animated by underlying mythologies, cosmologies, and tendencies that have their own blind momentum. And yet, regardless of these conflicting mythologies, there remains communication, and interaction. And what is most fascinating today is that *events*

happen across divisions and tensions, that these differences are not disappearing, that they are present even *within* individuals, and that this shows that people are able to function in multiple registers.

So it might be better to ask what this phenomenon means. How are real cultural differences, woven together into the technological, financial, economic, educational and religious tapestries, imprinted onto the landscape?

The most valuable thing we can learn from writers like Jullien, whether we are inclined to follow him or not, are the coordinates by which we can all begin entering into this important problem.

Reviewed by **J. T. Giordano**