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## Self-awareness of Life in Western Philosophy

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# 1. Self-awareness of Life in Western Philosophy

*Peter Jonkers*

## Introduction

In order to introduce the theme of this paper, I will start with a short analysis of the meaning of the concept “self-awareness of life,” which is the central theme of this volume. According to Bao Wenxin, self-awareness of life is commonly used as a general characteristic of Chinese philosophy to distinguish it from Western philosophy. For Bao Western philosophy focuses on the exploration and conquering of the outer world, while Chinese philosophy emphasizes the importance of inner spiritual life and hence pays attention to questions about morality, value and meaning. He argues that “self-awareness of life” not only refers to the order and richness of one’s own inner spiritual life, but also to outer social and political life.<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, He Xirong opposes the binary character of Western philosophy, resulting in antitheses as those between subject and object, phenomenon and substance, reason and perception, etc., to Chinese thinking, which has a holistic view on human beings. This means that human beings are aware of their existence as an interactive process with their environment, both natural and social. Hence, self-awareness of life is crucial to see human life, society and eventually nature as a whole, because it helps people to enhance their living quality and to cultivate a perfect personality.<sup>2</sup>

Yu Xuanmeng extends the meaning of self-awareness of life to the very nature of philosophy, that is, to concretize philosophy’s self-definition as the love of wisdom in an exemplary way.<sup>3</sup> Self-awareness of life emphasizes the importance of inner spiritual life and rejects the separation between inner ‘self’ and outer ‘life’. Similar to the above-mentioned authors, Yu Xuanmeng argues that Chinese thinking has been more loyal to this ideal than Western philosophy. From the discussions between Plato

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<sup>1</sup> Bao Wenxin, “The Transcendent Sphere and Revolutionary Morality: A Problem of Fung Yu-lan’s Theory of Sphere,” in the last chapter of this volume.

<sup>2</sup> He Xirong, “On the Non-Theoretical Characteristics of Chinese Traditional Philosophy from the ‘Zhong Dao’ (the Mean Way),” in *Philosophy and the Life World*, eds. He Xirong, Peter Jonkers and Shi Yongze (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), 185f.

<sup>3</sup> Yu Xuanmeng, “On the Self-awareness of Life,” in *Philosophy and the Life World*, eds. He Xirong, Peter Jonkers, Shi Yongze (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), 161.

and Aristotle on the true nature of human knowledge, to the “epistemological turn” in modern philosophy and the suspension of the existence of the external world by phenomenology of the twentieth century, Western philosophy has been marked by a rather one-sided focus on conceptual, more specifically, theoretical thinking and universal knowledge. Especially in modern philosophy, this focus has led to a separation between the knower and the known: the knowing subject conceives of itself as an original objectifying and representing activity, separated by an abyss from the known object. As something passive the known object is open to objectification or representation by an objectifying and representing subject.<sup>4</sup>

According to Yu Xuanmeng, this kind of theoretical and universal knowledge is unable to cover the whole of reality, since “there are many things that we cannot know through knowledge, but should nevertheless be understood in our life. Something might be unknowable but understandable, most probably because it is not knowledge of some object, but rather the condition of one’s own self.”<sup>5</sup> This kind of non-conceptual, non-theoretical understanding becomes manifest in the awareness of oneself as the totality of life. For Yu, this is the main theme of traditional Chinese philosophy,<sup>6</sup> which results in a view of human beings who take into account different dimensions of practical life in their private and social existence. This approach is especially important when philosophy is dealing with the most important question of all, namely, the meaning of life. According to Yu, the advantage of Chinese over Western philosophy is that it is able to offer an encompassing answer to the question of the meaning of life. Chinese philosophy rests on a broader, non-theoretical understanding of reality, which does not aim at universal knowledge but rather gives a central role to a person’s acting at a particular moment of an existential situation, which is always changing. For example, Confucius “did not want to develop a general (or universal) knowledge separately from the heaven, the earth and the human being, because such a knowledge may be divided into different areas and hence cannot cover the whole of reality. Instead, he focused on the issue of ‘change’, which can integrate heaven, earth and human beings into one process.”<sup>7</sup>

I agree with the above quoted authors that the predominant answers to the question of the meaning of life in the history of Western philosophy

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<sup>4</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” in Idem, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950), 98-103.

<sup>5</sup> Yu Xuanmeng, “On the Self-awareness of Life,” 162. In his view, the early philosophy of Heidegger is the only one that has been able to escape from the conceptual predicament of Western philosophy. See *Ibid.*, 166f.

<sup>6</sup> Yu Xuanmeng, “On the Self-awareness of Life,” 168ff.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Xuanmeng, “On the Self-awareness of Life,” 172.

have been conceptual and theoretical, so that some important aspects of this question, such as how the human person responds to change and contingency in life, have been lost. As I argued elsewhere, an important explanation of this loss is that Western philosophy has adopted, especially since the beginning of modernity, the paradigm of scientific rationality, and has extended this kind of knowledge to all domains of reality, including the human person and the world in which he lives.<sup>8</sup> Yet, although this way of thinking is still predominant, many contemporary Western philosophers have become aware of its fundamental shortcomings and, hence, have probed alternative avenues to uncover what it means that a person acts at a particular moment in an existential situation. In order to substantiate this claim, two of these alternative avenues will be explored in this paper. The first stems from a French historian of philosophy, Pierre Hadot, who interprets ancient Western philosophy as a way of life and a spiritual exercise, and retrieves these characteristics in some prominent modern and contemporary philosophies, such as those of Spinoza and Wittgenstein. The second avenue stems from Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher who has analyzed the sources of the modern idea of the “self.” His main thesis is that, after the Enlightenment with its naturalistic view of the human person, the “self” sees itself nowadays as a close connection between his inner, spiritual, and his outer, physical nature. In the final section of this paper, I will examine some implications of these insights for the self-awareness of life, thereby assuming that they will prove to be relevant to other philosophical traditions and will lead to an enriching dialogue on this very important question. The setup of this paper implies that, although I am convinced that these two Western approaches bear important similarities with the ways in which other traditions, including Chinese philosophy, conceive of self-awareness of life, an elaborate comparison between them falls outside the scope of this paper.<sup>9</sup>

### Self-awareness of Life in Ancient Western Philosophy

Although ancient Western philosophy in general and the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle in particular are often portrayed as theoretical

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<sup>8</sup> See Peter Jonkers, “A Reevaluation of Wisdom as a Way to Reconnect Philosophy with the Life-world.” in *Philosophy and the Life World*, eds. He Xirong, Peter Jonkers, Shi Yongze (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), 44-51.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Hadot highlights the correspondence between the wisdom of ancient philosophy and Eastern (religious) traditions, such as Buddhism and Chinese philosophy. See Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris, Gallimard, 1995), 351, 418ff. I am grateful to Dr. Hu Yeping of the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy for drawing my attention to the work of Pierre Hadot and his approach of (ancient) philosophy as a way of life.

and conceptual, Pierre Hadot argues that they are primarily reasoned ways of life, aimed at wisdom and hence consisting of permanent spiritual exercises to reach this goal. A life devoted to the love of wisdom does not come about as a result of a purely theoretical activity, as if this love were only a practical annex, and subordinate to theoretical knowledge. Rather, living a philosophical life constitutes the very essence of the whole philosophical endeavor, and comprises theoretical as well as practical exercises.<sup>10</sup> To put it differently, philosophy has its origin in a person's existential choice for a specific way of life, which needs to be uncovered and justified with the help of reason. This indicates that a philosophical way of life is a unity of theoretical discourse and praxis: philosophical discourse has a practical aspect insofar as it tries to convince the listener or the reader to choose for a specific way of life, and philosophical praxis has a theoretical aspect insofar as it is a matter of contemplation, including a critical examination of the chosen way of life.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, these existential choices are not made in solitude, but rather in philosophical schools, which educate their pupils in a specific way of life.<sup>12</sup> The final goal of the education in the philosophical schools of Greek and Roman antiquity is wisdom, and in order to acquire it, one has to be educated theoretically in divine, i.e. eternal and unchangeable truths (the Greek word "theory" means "beholding the divine"), and trained in practical and political knowhow. As Hadot argues, "although philosophy is the activity, through which the philosopher is trained in wisdom, this training necessarily does not only consist in a certain way of speaking and discussing, but also in a certain way of being, acting and viewing the world."<sup>13</sup> This education and training are given by a master, who is the head of a philosophical school, and whom the pupils see as the transcendent norm of this or that specific way of life. They learn to ask themselves "what would the sage do in this or that specific situation?" and the different answers to this question define the individual schools of philosophy.

When we focus on the development of wisdom as the ultimate goal of a philosophical way of life, the introduction of the word "philosophy" in the fourth century BC implied a decisive turn in the understanding of the sage, and brought about a deep suspicion against all pretended incarnations of wisdom in the sage. Ideally, the true sage is someone "who is aware of himself as a self that, through his power over his judgments and through orienting and suspending them, can guarantee his perfect inner

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 17f.

<sup>11</sup> This is an illustration of Socrates' famous saying: "The unexamined life is not with living for a human being." See Plato, *Apology* 38a5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 334.

freedom and independence of all things.”<sup>14</sup> It is not surprising that all philosophical schools are aware of the superhuman character of wisdom, and of the immense distance that separates ordinary, human wisdom from divine wisdom.<sup>15</sup> Plato makes a sharp distinction between the perfect knowledge of the Gods, who possess true wisdom and therefore do not need to philosophize, and most humans, whose wisdom is confined to the running of their daily affairs. Thus, between the ideal of divine wisdom and the reality of ordinary wisdom as a practical knowhow, we see the emergence of philosophy, which is the essentially *human* exercise to attain *divine* wisdom.<sup>16</sup> This gap between the human efforts to attain wisdom and the divine character of true wisdom explains why philosophy can never be completed and why it is a never ending activity.

The task of the philosopher consists in the exercise, during his whole life, to describe, in a philosophical discourse, what the ideal sage is and how to live a life according to this ideal. This description constitutes the object of numerous treatises, and is the theme of practical exercises, aimed at training pupils to obtain wisdom in different philosophical schools.<sup>17</sup> Even Aristotle (who has always been portrayed as a purely theoretical philosopher) gives an excellent example of what living a truly philosophical way of life means, as distinguished from a political or practical life. For Aristotle a life of wisdom means that the human being fulfils his condition in the most superb way, while he realizes that wisdom is, because of its divine nature, beyond the human condition.<sup>18</sup> Since the most superb objects are eternal and unchangeable, it is no wonder that, for Aristotle, the highest form of wisdom is to live a contemplative life, and to be liberated from all material concerns. Yet, at the same time one is aware that human beings can only realize this ideal on rare occasions, and that, during most of the time, they have to content themselves with an inferior happiness in search of wisdom. In other words, wisdom confronts human beings with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>15</sup> Pierre Hadot, “La figure du sage dans l’Antiquité gréco-latine,” in Idem, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2014), 178f.; Idem, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 334.

<sup>16</sup> Hadot, “La figure du sage,” 179.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, 1177b 26ff.: “But such a life [of wisdom] would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. [...] We must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything.”

a paradox: “Wisdom corresponds with what is the most essential to man, namely living according to reason and spirit, and at the same time it strikes him as strange and superhuman.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, theoretical philosophy is also practical or ethical, since it is a way of life that possesses knowledge for the sake of knowledge, without any personal or egotistic interest which is foreign to knowledge. Ancient philosophers often discuss in their writings a wide range of (practical) problems in a non-systematic way. They consider their answers to all these concrete questions far more important than building a complete and coherent philosophical “system.”

The above means that the most important philosophical question is “How should I live?” and the answer to this question is to have a theoretical examination of possible answers to the question as well as putting their implications into practice. Philosophy is basically about transforming one’s life; to achieve this, all kinds of spiritual exercises are needed. These exercises should not be conceived as a praxis complementing an abstract theory or discourse, but they rather belong to the very essence of a philosophical life. They can be defined as “a voluntary, personal praxis, meant to realize a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, the final aim of these exercises is not so much to *inform* the disciples about philosophical theories and insights, but to *(trans)form* their lives, that is to educate them, and to assist them in reaching self-awareness of oneself. Obviously, the various philosophical schools differ substantially in their answers to the question how to live and the result of the process of transformation. Hence, they can be considered as experimental laboratories in ways of life.<sup>21</sup>

### Self-awareness of Life in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy

Another philosopher who has made a major contribution to the historical and systematic rethinking of the self-awareness of life in Western philosophy is Charles Taylor, author of *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989). Based on his critique of the dominance of theoretical and purely conceptual thinking in Western philosophy, especially that of the Enlightenment, Taylor thinks that we need “subtler languages” to uncover the self-awareness of life as well as the order in which life is set. These subtler languages are a matter of allowing “personal resonance” into one’s way of philosophizing in order to shed a light on questions like

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<sup>19</sup> Hadot, “La figure du sage,” 186. See also: Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 128-130.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 144. See also: Idem, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 276ff.

<sup>21</sup> Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, p. 417.

“why it matters and what it means to have a more deeply resonant human environment and, even more, to have affiliations with some depth in time and commitment.”<sup>22</sup> This methodological shift is an aspect of the many faceted movement of “subjectivation” and bears similarities with epiphanic works of art, in which personal resonance also plays an important role. “Things that were once settled by some external reality – traditional law, say, or nature – are now referred to our choice. Issues where we were meant to accept the dictates of authority we now have to think out for ourselves. Modern freedom and autonomy centers us on ourselves, and the ideal of authenticity requires that we discover and articulate our own identity.”<sup>23</sup>

A second methodological point is that Taylor considers self-awareness and, hence, meaning of life, as essentially historical notions. Their meanings are not the result of a universal knowledge of the immutable essence of a human being but vary through time, because they are derived from articulations of what it means to be human, which are closely related to specific socio-cultural settings.

A final methodological consideration is that self-awareness of life is always the result of an interplay between discovering and inventing: “Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions which are adequate.”<sup>24</sup> This means that the content of the notions “meaningful” and “adequate” not only depends on the self, but on strong evaluations, whose ends or goods stand independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices. In other words, they are part of a larger framework, within which the self can shape its self-awareness and determine where it stands on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. That is why these frameworks are inescapable for our identity, for our self-awareness of life.<sup>25</sup> Again, these frameworks are not immutable, transcendent ideas in the Platonic sense, but define the way in which human beings in a particular era experience themselves and the world. Some examples of these frameworks in the history of Western civilization are: the honor ethic of early civilizations, in which the life of the warrior or citizen, marked by fame and glory, is deemed higher than the merely private existence; Plato’s ethic, in which reason’s vision of the transcendent good, marked by purity, order, limit and the unchanging, governs the desires, bending to excess, instability, fickleness and conflict; Christian

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 513.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 81.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 27.



ethics, which understands the higher life as the work of God's grace, transforms of the will and aims at an ideal of altruism (agapè).

According to Taylor, a framework that dominates self-awareness of life in our times is the idea that inner and outer nature are not neutral and radically distinct entities, but form a profound source of what it means to be human. This framework originated in the late eighteenth century in Europe (the age of Romanticism) as a countermovement against the consequences of Enlightenment naturalism and Kant's sharp distinction between the natural and the moral world. These two ideas had led to a radical objectification fragmentation and instrumentalization of nature, as well as to a conception of the human self as an instance of radical moral autonomy separated from inner (emotional) and outer (physical) nature. Consequently, inner and outer nature were seen as without intrinsic significance for the life of the self, thus annihilating its richness, depth or meaning. To catch the quasi-coercive force of this perception of reality, Taylor uses the image of an iron cage, thereby following Max Weber.<sup>26</sup> The Romantic ideal of inner and outer nature as a source of meaning is a reaction against the view of nature as something neutral and, consequently, people's disengagement from it. Phrased positively, this ideal reflects an aspiration towards a reunification of oppositions and dualisms that mark the Enlightenment, and a striving for a harmonious vision of the whole of reality, "bringing us back in contact with nature, healing the divisions within between reason and sensibility, overcoming the divisions between people, and creating community."<sup>27</sup>

The reaction against the disenchanting and disjunctive effects of instrumental rationality has also led to a new vision on the self, "expressive individualism." According to this view, every single individual has an intimate awareness of his inner nature or self, and expresses it through his words, works and deeds, to resonate with the outer nature. This expression is not the actualization of what is already potentially present in the self, but should rather be conceived in the sense of an original and artistic creation. "Each one of us has an original path which we ought to tread; they lay the obligation on each of us to live up to our originality. [...] Here we have the notion that the good life for you is not the same as the good life for me; each of us has our own calling, and we should not exchange them. Following you may be betraying my own calling, even though you are being faithful to yours."<sup>28</sup> This explains why in our times, in which "expressive individualism" is predominant, questions about the self and the meaning of life cannot be answered in simply universal terms: the inner voice within myself is unique and listening to this voice and ex-

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 500; Idem, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 93-108.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 384.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 375f.

pressing it is something that is hidden in the intimacy of my personality. This does not invalidate the fact that I give my individual answer to these questions against the horizon of substantial meanings or inescapable frameworks, but the originality of these answers has become much more important than in previous times. “Expressive individualism” has its most conspicuous manifestation in the culture of authenticity. It is the idea “that each one of us has her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”<sup>29</sup>

What makes the role of these frameworks of the meaning of life different from pre- and early-modern conceptions is that they do not anymore reflect an objective eternal order, in the sense of the Platonic ideas, or Aristotle’s idea of the good life, or a divine order or God’s will. Instead, they have become fragile, as they have been linked to a person’s original identity and depend on social recognition in a specific way. “The thing about inwardly derived, personal, original identity is that it does not enjoy this recognition a priori. It has to win it through exchange, and it can fail. What has come about with the modern age is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which this can fail. And that is why the need is now *acknowledged* for the first time. In premodern times, people did not speak of ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’, not because people did not have (what we call) identities or because these did not depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, whereas recognition was initially something universalist and egalitarian (e.g. the idea of inherent human dignity, underlying the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights), the focus is nowadays on the recognition of differences and their expressions (e.g. the specific rights of LGBTs, the claims to cultural, religious ethnic rights etc.), which enhances expressive individualist character of our times.<sup>31</sup> A second difference between the Romantic period and today is that a life according to the ideal of expressive individualism was in those days restricted to a very small (culturally and financially privileged) elite. Yet, since the sixties of the twentieth century, this ideal became accessible for the majority of the population in Western societies, mainly due to the growing spread of wealth.<sup>32</sup>

The overall result of this development in modern history for today’s Western societies is a sharp tension between the Enlightenment ideal of a completely neutral and instrumental stance to nature and the Romantic

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 475.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 510.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475ff.

idea that sees inner and outer nature as a source of profound intrinsic meaning and harmony. Taylor's reaction to the two conflicting trends of our times and their consequences for the self-awareness of life is a nuanced one. First, although instrumental rationality bears the risk of a naturalization and fragmentation of the 'self', and eventually can lead to an annihilation of the self-awareness of life, one should recognize the enormous benefits of this kind of rationality in the fields of life-expectancy, economic, social and cultural opportunities, spread of wealth, comfort, etc. Second, another risk of such rationality is that the frameworks of substantial meaning and the striving for encompassing harmony, which characterized the Romantic shape of "expressive individualism," have all but evaporated in our times. People now tend to express their inner voice and their self-awareness of life without any reference to these frameworks, and even consider them as obstacles to their fulfilment of life. Although the turn to "expressive individualism" bears the risk of sliding into a shallow subjectivism and self-centeredness, one should not forget that authenticity is a truly moral ideal that deserves to be valued. "It accords crucial moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost, partly through the pressures towards outward conformity, but also because in taking an instrumental stance to myself, I may have lost the capacity to listen to this inner voice."<sup>33</sup> To avoid this slide, true self-realization and inescapable frameworks of meaning should be conceived as not excluding but rather including each other. "Our normal understanding of self-realization pre-supposes that things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs."<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

Which conclusions can be drawn from the above insights in the self-awareness of life, and to what extent is there a correspondence between Western and Chinese philosophy in this respect? It is clear that mainstream Western philosophy has fallen short of expectations when it comes to answering the question of the self-awareness of life, even though this is a traditional subject of philosophical reflection. This is not because Western philosophy would have failed to examine inner spiritual life, since this question has been a primordial point of attention throughout its whole history. Rather, this inability is due to the mismatch between the theoretical, conceptual and universal kind of knowledge that has predomi-

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 507.

nated in Western philosophy, and the very nature of self-awareness of life. As the expression itself already indicates, self-awareness of life is closely linked to questions about the meaning of life, and thus is part of the still broader question of (the love of) wisdom. Generally speaking, wisdom is a kind of theoretical and practical knowledge that is essentially based on a profound insight in what is true and good, not only for oneself, but for all people. Although a profound insight in the true nature of things and human beings is essential for wisdom, it is certainly not identical with ordinary factual knowledge. Rather, sages are those who can see the bigger picture, whose horizons are broadest, and whose vision is clearest. Moreover, they not only need to have a broad and profound vision, but also have to be able to relate this vision in a meaningful way to the particular moral or existential situations of concrete individuals or societies.<sup>35</sup> This explains that self-awareness of life is indeed an instantiation of wisdom, and that self-awareness of life according to Chinese philosophy bears a lot of affinity with other wisdom-traditions, including in the West.

However, as Hadot illustrates, mainstream Western philosophy has lost its contact with most traditions and schools of wisdom and thus with the self-awareness of life. One of the main reasons of this development is that people defined and its history as a succession of systems of theoretical and conceptual thinking rather than as a variety of reasoned ways of life, taught by a master in a school of wisdom. To restore this connection between philosophy as a theoretical discourse and philosophy as a reasoned way of life, Hadot pleads for a restoration of philosophy as a spiritual exercise, which orients people towards wisdom. He defines the true sage, who serves as the exemplar of wisdom, as follows: “Only the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to his mind. He never forgets the world, but thinks and acts with a view to the cosmos. [...] The sage is part of the world; he is cosmic. He does not let himself be distracted from the world, or detached from the cosmic totality. [...] The figure of the sage forms as it were, an indissoluble unity with man’s representation of the world.”<sup>36</sup> This approach is another example of the affinity between Western and Chinese philosophy.

Similarly, Taylor has pointed out that the separation between inner spiritual life and outer physical nature, as manifested in the philosophies of Descartes and Kant, results in a reductionist kind of thinking that fails

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<sup>35</sup> I developed this in more detail in Peter Jonkers, “Serving the World through Wisdom. Revitalizing Wisdom Traditions in Christian Faith,” in *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*, eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), 73-105.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 251 (Hadot quotes here a book of Groethuysen).

to grasp the self-awareness of life. Thus Taylor pleads for subtler languages, which are able to think the close link between one's inner and outer nature appropriately. Moreover, Taylor's analysis of the sources of the self also enables him to define self-awareness of life in a different way than the solipsistic and dualistic approach of the self in modern Western philosophy. The self is not a self-sufficient substance or a radically autonomous subject, but only obtains meaning against inescapable horizons. This approach of the self is close to that of Chinese thinking, namely that the self is always embedded in a societal environment.

In sum, I hope that the above analysis has provided some clarification that the idea of self-awareness of life in Chinese philosophy indeed offers a major contribution to some perennial philosophical problems, but also that this approach is not completely absent in Western philosophy. This affinity can make the dialogue between these two philosophical traditions not only promising but also feasible.

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