

FORUM CHINA - EUROPE

THEMATIC WORKSHOP WT 12

THE EVOLUTION OF MORAL AND ETHICAL REFERENCE POINTS
IN CHINA AND IN EUROPE
both regions in the face of the dual need for continuity and openness

Note on the issue at stake from the European facilitator

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In the Presentation of this thematic workshop it is stated that :

“The workshop will have a dual descriptive and normative aim. *Descriptive* by *comparing the evolution* of ethical and moral reference points in the two societies and the *consequences* that this evolution entails; *normative* by seeking to affirm *common principles* on which they can agree in order to contribute to a pacified and cautious management of the planet.”

The same text says:

“Ethics is a major component of culture. For this reason, in each society it is endowed with a certain lasting quality. But ethics are also evolving, even if it is because the concrete situations that require ethical choices are themselves constantly evolving on their scale or in their nature.”

Moral and ethical points of reference

Prior to a description of the « evolution » of moral and ethical points of reference, it seems necessary that we would describe, from the European side, not only what we understand by “moral and ethical points of reference”, but also that we specify where they come from and on what they are based.

If ethics can be defined as a whole of moral conceptions meant to guide right and good behaviour : where and when did these emerge and how were these moral conceptions

formalised ? Did they develop and change in the course of their histories, and which ones are still recognized as relevant ? Is it indeed possible to discern « a certain permanence » in the whole of moral conceptions in Europe ?

Dilemmas

Throughout human history, traditions of wisdom - religious and otherwise - have taught values, to guide human behaviour towards a responsible attitude. Their basic premise, still relevant today, has been that individual and social values influence practices. In fact, practices and values mutually influence each other. Such values include the right to a life of dignity and respect for non-human forms of life, a preference for dialogue rather than violence, compassion and consideration for others, solidarity and hospitality, truthfulness and sincerity, peace and harmony, justice and equity, and a preference for the common good rather than self-interest.

And yet, there may be times when these values have to be weighed against each other, when an individual or a society faces dilemmas, such as the need to encourage economic development while protecting the environment and respecting human rights. These issues are all interconnected and cannot be addressed separately.¹

Which values are considered to be determining in Europe when confronted with such and other dilemmas ?

Evolution

A preliminary clarification of the notion of « moral and ethical points of reference » itself seems necessary for the presentation of European points of view. Subsequently a presentation of their development and change in the course of time could identify the cultural factors and the circumstances that had a determining impact on this process.

In Europe, for instance, philosophical and religious currents, often opposing each other, not only exercised a strong influence on the evolution of ethical points of reference, but also -as they were co-existing- created confusion. Where then are European values anchored ? In juridical systems (as in the Roman period) ? In God's Word as revealed in the Bible ? In the 'natural' consciousness of the human being nourished by his Enlightened 'reason' ? In the autonomy and freedom of his will ? In an unbridled individualism ? Did the 'modern' European man, by rejecting the "last judgment" (in the biblical sense of, at the end of his

¹ Passage from the Charter of Human Responsibilities

days, having to account for his acts to God) become his own legislator, defendant and judge at the same time ?

Consequences

The question of the consequences of the evolution of points of references leads us to the need of making explicit where nowadays we are, in Europe, with relevant and valuable ethical points of reference to face the challenges of the XXI century. Do we have any left ?

Likewise, one may ask : even if there are plenty, what about their *application* in everyday life of individuals, in the various fields of professional activity (scientific research, the medical sphere, technology, politics...) ? In other words : how, in Europe, is the idea of responsibility conceived, and practised...? Who is considered responsible ? And of what ? And more in particular : who is supposed to account for his acts ? How ? And before whom?

In Europe (and North America as well) there is an incontestable tendency to delegate the application of moral points of reference to Ethical Committees, personal responsibility to insurance companies (« the litigation society »), and collective responsibility to the State or even to a collection of States like the European Union. In this context the question of how these days the idea of ‘accountability’ of the individual and of the collective is conceived, becomes more and more pressing.

Towards a common kernel of basic principles ?

The way in which the Chinese delegation is going to deal with these questions (an approach that may be quite different from ours), will shed an important light on the issue at stake in this workshop.

If we may presume that the Chinese society, like ours, is affected by individualism, consumerism, egoism, and is concerned about a possible « clash of civilisations », would that give hope for finding a real common kernel of basic principles shared by Chinese and European societies so that “both of them participate in the management of our unique planet, which is populated and fragile, and limited in natural resources” ?

The European participants are kindly invited to communicate their thoughts on these questions, if possible by writing before the venue of this workshop.

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