

THEME : Core values in Chinese and European traditional and modern cultures
and their impact on shaping society
on "RESPONSIBILITY"

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Following a definition given by the Webster's Third New International Dictionary I associate value with «something (as a principle, quality, or entity) intrinsically valuable or desirable».

On traditional values in Europe

It is not easy to define traditional values shared by the whole population of Europe over a considerable period of time. One might suggest e.g. that the Christian content of religious belief (faith, hope and love) has strongly influenced the whole of Europe. But at any time there was at the most a dominant version of this belief shared by many, but never by all.

It is easier to identify European values which were shared -for a while- by significant sections of the European population. From the Age of the Enlightenment onwards many people were inclined to set great store on logic and reasoning to the point that what could not be explained that way was considered doubtful, including major tenets of the Christian faith. Rationalism became rather popular, and still is. Another value traditionally shared by many is the willingness to accept what is technically possible as being a priori valuable.

European traditional values are, of course, not necessarily typically European. However, there are some that for quite some time already seem somehow to be more pronounced in Europe than elsewhere. By that I mean the following. In many concrete situations people have to decide whether to give priority to one value, e.g. honesty, or to another one, e.g. politeness. They have to solve a dilemma. And in that connection one gets the impression that in Europe certain traditional values are far more often given priority in all sorts of concrete situations than in many other parts of the world. Which ones? Individual freedom to publicly express one's ideas and to act as one wishes seems to be a candidate. The appreciation of institutionalised countervailing power in politics seems to be another one. One might also think of the importance attached to rationalism in the justification of economic and managerial theories and practices (even though their application seems to lead empirically to rather inhumane consequences). And solidarity (reinforced by Socialism) with the less privileged, implying the ideas of sharing and justice, as expressed in national social security systems. Of course, elsewhere in the world other traditional values are more pronounced. The relative importance and priority attached to certain values in certain situations varies according to cultural contexts. The different histories people have gone through (and the environments in which they live) have no doubt much to do with this.

RESPONSIBILITY

My choice of focusing on the notion of responsibility is inspired by my conviction that it is one of the key-notions for facing the challenges of the unprecedented crises humanity is facing in the XXIst century : ecological, political, financial and economical.

The idea of Responsibility is associated with different traditional values at different stages in the history of Europe. Its meaning was not always the same. But, the assumption of certain tasks by certain people and accountability of certain people to certain audiences were always considered intrinsically valuable.

Original meaning : a two-fold commitment

In the European languages derived from Latin the notion of responsibility has two complementary etymological dimensions: the first one comes from the Latin verb "*spondere*" which means to *promise* to stand guarantor for something or someone or to take charge of someone or something. Parents stand guarantor for their children, a husband for his wife (the word "spouse" is derived from "spondere), and any kind of (social, political, religious) leader is supposed to stand guarantor for the well-being of the people they are in charge of. In other words the guarantors **assume** responsibility.

The second dimension comes from the Latin verb "*respondere*" which implies to **account for** the way in which one exercises the entrusted tasks. Responsibility therefore is a **twofold commitment**. It is by definition a relational concept as it always refers to ways of behaviour between human beings.

Changing interpretations of responsibility

During the Roman Empire guarantors were held to account for their actions (to "respond") before the court only. During the period in which Christianity played a dominant role and monarchs were for a long time ruling their people, a vertically upwards shift took place. Monarchs being guarantors of the welfare of the people were acting on behalf of God and therefore not accountable to society, at least not until 1848. Neither were patrons in the economic system. « The people », however, were accountable for their behaviour to the patron and the King, but above all to God and those considered to represent His will on earth. The emphasis was on *individual responsibility* for one's behaviour and *individual accountability* to someone.

Christianity continued to make man into a being transcending his social being. He was in the first place considered the creature of God before being citizen of the society he belonged to. Protestantism added to this tendency by detaching the individual from his belonging to a church and stressing the idea of man-in-direct-relation-with-God, thus re-enforcing the phenomenon of individualism.

The responsibility of man for his natural environment was also strongly influenced by the interpretation given to the story of the Bible book of Genesis : God after having created the universe, the earth and the human being, delegated responsibility for the earth to man and told him to "subjugate" and to "rule over" all that lives on it (cp. The famous painting of Michel Angelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome!). In the course of time, with the advance of technology, this text was allowed to mean that nature was an object to control and to ex-

plot. As the French philosopher Descartes said: “man is master and owner of nature”. The seemingly limitless possibilities that technological discoveries opened up, induced the loss of a sense of self-limitation that went hand in hand with the loss of a sense of responsibility for the (longer term) effects of all those fascinating inventions.

While the technical impact of modernity undermined responsibility for *nature*, another aspect of modernity undermined responsibility for *human beings*, namely fragmentation. There is fragmentation in the social fabric of communities, in scientific institutions pursuing their specialised interests, in the workplace where people are given tasks of which they often do not quite know how it serves the overall objective of the company. All these and other forms of fragmentation are limiting one’s responsibility to one’s own field of action and eroding a sense of responsibility for the effect of one’s actions in that field on the wider environment.

And while in this modern era responsibility for the natural and social environment is undermined, accountability has changed as well. It has become much more secularised, i.e. less related to God. Nowadays it is more influenced by the idea that those who exercise power that affects other people are accountable to the latter (democracy, transparency). This is increasingly considered intrinsically valuable. On the other hand, there is also a tendency to weaken accountability to others through delegation of the responsibility for the negative consequences of one’s actions to insurance companies that are now among the most flourishing businesses.

Finally, to finish on a positive note: the value of *collective* responsibility seems to have come to the forefront. The obvious challenges of a globalised economic system, its consequences in terms of decision-making and acting with regard to the threats to the planet, the control of the financial system and the well-being of people, call for a renewed reflection on what the age-old idea of responsibility, at the personal as well as the collective level, implies for our world of today. This is why an appeal for a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities to counterbalance the one of Human Rights, though perhaps a far off ideal, is not without realistic grounding. Such a Declaration would :

1. address not only one specific area of concern, but all areas of human activity including in the field of governance, economics, finances, environment, education, sciences, media, corporate business, etc.
2. recognize the proportionate division of personal responsibilities (in accordance with the proportionate power, freedom, wealth, access to knowledge and information people have) as well as the shared responsibility for issues that a society has to face as a collective; in other words it would define in concrete terms the notion of co-responsibility.
3. state that responsibilities pertain to human beings as well as to all that lives on Earth.
4. recognize that responsibilities are not only related to the present and the future (the principle of precaution), but also to past actions, morally acknowledging the burden of collectively-caused damage and the need to put it right in practical terms as far as possible.

ANNEX

Principles to Guide the Exercise of Human Responsibilities

(as proposed in the Charter of Human Responsibilities ¹)

1. *We are all responsible for making sure that Human Rights are affirmed in our ways of thinking and in our actions.*
2. *Every person's dignity involves contributing to the freedom and dignity of others.*
3. *Responsibilities include ensuring the fulfilment of human potential, inclusive of material needs and non-material aspirations, as well as obligations to support the common good.*
4. *Lasting peace can only be expected from freedom, justice, and processes for reconciliation which are respectful of human dignity and human rights.*
5. *Development and consumption of natural resources to meet human needs, and the quest for prosperity must be backed by a commitment to sustainability and the principle of precaution, assuring pro-active protection of the environment, careful management of its diversity, and equitable sharing of wealth.*
6. *The full potential of knowledge and know-how is achieved through valuing different knowledge systems and ways of knowing, sharing them, and applying them in the service of unifying solidarity and a pluralistic culture of peace.*
7. *Freedom of scientific research implies being guided by ethical criteria such as enhancement of biodiversity, respect for human dignity and non-human forms of life, and regard for the limitations of human knowledge.*
8. *The exercise of power is legitimate where it serves the common good, and if it is accountable to those over whom it is exercised.*
9. *In reaching decisions about short-term priorities, evaluation of long-term consequences must concur with ethical priorities of justice and inter-generational environmental stewardship, taking into account both risks and uncertainties.*
10. *To face the challenges of today and of tomorrow, uniting in action must be balanced with respect for cultural specificities.*

¹ <http://www.charter-human-responsibilities.net>