

A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics

Fung Yu-Lan

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**A NEW TREATISE ON THE
METHODOLOGY OF METAPHYSICS
FUNG YU-LAN**

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INTRODUCTION

If we are to define philosophy very briefly, we may say that philosophy is systematic, reflective thinking about life. Every person living is instinctively aware of life, but not every person engages in systematic, reflective thinking about life. For two reasons this kind of thinking is called reflective. First, it takes life as its object and yet itself is within life; hence, the thinking about life is reflective thinking. Secondly, while thinking about life, it must include thinking about thinking which is a major activity in life; hence the thinking about thinking is reflective thinking. In the Chan Buddhist terminology, thinking is the light in life and reflective thinking is the reflective light in life.

To take life as an object of thinking is to have self-consciousness and understanding of life. In my *Xin Yuan Ren (A New Treatise on the Nature of Man)*, Chongqing, China, 1943), I have said that the major difference between human beings and animals is that human beings have self-consciousness and understanding of their life. Should animals prove also to have self-consciousness and understanding of their life, then we could say that human beings have self-consciousness and understanding of their life to a higher degree. When a person is doing something, he understands what he is doing and is conscious of the fact that he is doing it. Both this self-consciousness and this understanding are about only a part of his life. Ordinary people may have self-consciousness and understanding of fragments of their life, but not necessarily of their life as a whole. A person may have self-consciousness and understanding, but not necessarily a deeper understanding of them, and may not even be necessarily conscious of them. This is to say that he may not be conscious of his self-consciousness and may not understand his understanding. Life is an all-inclusive whole. The self-consciousness of life is

reflective thinking of life, and the understanding of understanding is the thinking of thinking. When this kind of thinking is systematized, it is philosophy.

Philosophizing may be said to be the inner-directed development of the human mind. The term "inner-directed development," however, may possibly cause some misunderstanding, for there have been people in the history of Chinese philosophy who, when speaking of the mind's inner-directed development, have implied a slight or even hostility toward the so-called external world. Whenever they make what is known as the external-inner distinction, they usually tend "to approve of the inner and disapprove of the external." But here we do not mean any approval or disapproval. To us, the mind's inner-directed development only implies that man's attention is directed to the whole of his life, which includes both of what have been called the "inner" and the "external" in the history of Chinese philosophy.

In *Xin Li Xue* (*The New School of Principles*, Changsha, China, 1940) we have said that philosophy provides, by way of pure thinking, a rational analysis, generalization, and interpretation of experience, expressed in language. This characterization of philosophy is by its method and its starting point. All studies about actuality must begin with experience, because actuality is the object of experience or possible experience. Pure thinking is the method of philosophy, while rational analysis, generalization, and interpretation are the methods of all thinking. In this context "rational" means "logical." We use our rational faculty to analyze, generalize, and interpret experience, and as a result we arrive at a logical analysis, generalization, and interpretation. We use the word "rational" to indicate the faculty we use and the word "logical" to characterize the result we thus obtain.

In *Xin Li Xue* we have spoken of the difference between rational thinking (*si*) and pictorial imaging (*Xiang*), a difference which has existed in the Chinese language since ancient times. In *Shi Shuo Xin Yu* (or Shih Shuo Hsin Yu, *A New Account of the Tales of the World*), we find:

When Wei Jie was a young lad with his hair in tufts, he asked Yue Kuang about dreams. Yue said, 'They are pictorial imaging (*Xiang*)'...

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For days Wei rationally thought (*si*) (over what was the cause of dreams) without coming to any understanding, and eventually became ill. (Adapted from Richard B. Mather's translation, p.98)

In the above passage, we may see the distinctively different usages of *si* (rational thinking) and *xiang* (pictorial imaging) in ancient Chinese. Here we have used the term "pure thinking" because we want to make clear that in philosophy there should not be any element of pictorial imaging. In modern Chinese usage, *si* and *xiang* have become a compound *sixiang* to mean thinking or thought. We have here accepted this common usage.

With regard to experience, our attention may be directed either solely to its content or solely to its process. The content of experience is the experiencer's total knowledge of the object experienced. The rational analysis, generalization, and interpretation of experience can also be divided into two provinces—one concerns the process of experiencing and the other concerns the content of experience. The former is epistemology in philosophy and the latter is metaphysics.

Metaphysics is the most important province in philosophy because it represents mankind's ultimate self-consciousness and understanding of life, which is a prerequisite for achieving the highest spiritual level of life. As a result of our logical analysis, generalization, and interpretation of the content of experience, we may arrive at a few transcendental concepts. "Transcendental" means transcendent of experience and, as a technical term from the history of Chinese philosophy, it means transcendent of "shapes and features." Our rational faculty begins with analysis of experience and arrives at concepts transcendent of experience—concepts which we call transcendental concepts. These transcendental concepts are metaphysical concepts, and they are the major concepts in metaphysics.

Since the major concepts in metaphysics are arrived at by pure thinking, metaphysics cannot increase mankind's positive knowledge—i.e., his knowledge of actuality. In this aspect, it is rather similar to logic and mathematics. Logic and mathematics, although they cannot increase mankind's positive knowledge, do contain a set of principles or formulae upon which science relies

in order to pursue positive knowledge. On this account, we may say that logic and mathematics do increase mankind's positive knowledge, albeit indirectly, for science must rely upon them and not vice versa. In contrast, metaphysics does not rely upon science and science does not rely upon metaphysics. Hence, in a very precise sense, metaphysics can never increase mankind's positive knowledge. Though it also has a set of propositions, they are primarily self-referring and tautological. If viewed for the purpose of pursuing positive knowledge, its set of propositions is not of much use and may even be called "nonsense."

The function of metaphysics, however, has never been the increase of mankind's positive knowledge about actuality. The function of metaphysics has always been the elevation of the spiritual level of life. Metaphysics cannot add to our positive knowledge; all it can do is to enable people to achieve the highest spiritual level of life, namely, the "transcendental level of life" as described in *Xin Yuan Ren*. By studying metaphysics people may not necessarily reach the transcendental level of life, but without studying it people will never reach that level.

The Book of Lao Tzu says: "To learn, one accumulates day by day. To study the Dao (Tao), one reduces day by day." Here we need not be concerned with the problem of whether the difference between "to learn" and "to study the Dao" is the same as the difference between "increase" and "decrease," but we can clearly see that there is a difference between learning and studying the Dao. In our view, to learn is to seek knowledge, but to study the Dao is to seek the spiritual level of life. In seeking the spiritual level, one seeks a level which is higher than the levels at which people ordinarily live, since the levels in which people ordinarily live are gifts from nature and require no seeking. In *Xin Yuan Ren* we have said that the highest possible spiritual level of life that people can ever achieve is the transcendental sphere. In China, people living at that spiritual level are called sages (*sheng ren*). The effort required to become a sage is called "sagehood effort" (*sheng gong*). Studying metaphysics can be said to be a part of this "sagehood effort." Wang Yang-ming (1472-1528) said that in his early years he believed in Zhu Xi's (or Chu Hsi,

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1130-1200) assertion that the sagehood effort begins with investigation of *li* (principles). One day, as Wang said, he began to investigate the principles of bamboo, but for seven days and nights he reached no conclusion and became ill. Finally, he abandoned his sagehood effort and believed sagehood to be beyond the reach of ordinary people. In this attempt, Wang made two mistakes. First, he thought that in order to become a sage one must know the content of the principles of all things; second, he thought that the content of the principles of all things can be learned merely by thinking. The content of the principles of all things cannot be learned merely by thinking, and learning to become a sage does not require knowing the content of the principles of all things. In seeking after the transcendental level of life, a higher self-consciousness and understanding of life are required. What metaphysics can give to mankind is precisely such self-consciousness and understanding.

What this book discusses is not philosophy, but the method in philosophy, or more precisely, the method in metaphysics. In *Xin Li Xue* we have set forth the most philosophic philosophy. In the present book we set forth the most philosophic metaphysics (i.e., a metaphysics which is the most detached from and independent of experience and actuality—*tr.*). The method discussed in this book is the most philosophic method of metaphysics and is the method of *Xin Li Xue*.

CHAPTER ONE ON THE METHOD OF METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics (*xing shang xue* in Chinese) is a term in Western philosophy and it is sometimes rendered into Chinese as *xuanxue* (or *hsuan-hsueh*, mystic learning). In 1919-1920, a debate between science and mystic learning took place in China. In the context of this debate, “mystic learning” stood for metaphysics.

Speaking from the perspective of the most philosophic metaphysics, there is no need for controversy between science and metaphysics, because they are not, and will never be, in conflict with each other. The most philosophic metaphysics is a study that logically is neither “pre-scientific” nor “post-scientific” nor “supra-scientific.” It is not built upon science, nor is it contrary or opposed to science. Hence it can never be in conflict with science and therefore there is no basis for controversy between them.

The purpose of science is to provide positive interpretation or knowledge of experience. The method of science is experimental, and the conclusions of science rely upon empirical verification. In the evolution of human knowledge, theories have developed which, while sharing with science the purpose of providing a positive interpretation of experience, have used a method that is not experimental. That is to say, there are people who hold theories that provide positive interpretation but do not or cannot verify their theories experimentally. If judged by their purpose, such theories are scientific but if judged by their method, they are not scientific. Therefore, these theories may be said to be “pre-scientific” in that, though having the same purpose as science, their method has not evolved to the precise method of science.

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For instance, medical science says that a particular contagious disease is caused by bacteria. This is a scientific claim because it can be verified by experience. But the claim that a contagious disease is caused by "unseasonable ether" is guess work which cannot be verified in laboratory or by experience, and therefore this kind of theory is pre-scientific. Though merely guess work, it represents an interpretation that is by far more reasonable and progressive than that offered by any theory that a contagious disease is caused by God's condemnation or a curse by an evil spirit.

The claim that a contagious disease is caused by God or an evil spirit is a religious claim; the claim that it is caused by "unseasonable ether" is a pre-scientific claim; the claim that it is caused by bacteria is a scientific claim. The move from religious claim to scientific claim is progress, and in this context it is the progress in man's medical knowledge.

There are people who view metaphysics as a pre-science. According to Comte, human knowledge passes through three stages of development: (1) the theological stage, (2) the metaphysical stage, and (3) the scientific stage. What he called metaphysics is exactly what we have called pre-science. If metaphysics is of such a nature, it can "occupy the seat of honor only where Buddha is absent," and only at the time when there was no modern science, could it occupy the position modern science now occupies. In other words, what is called metaphysics is the science of bygone days. At the present time of modern science, so-called metaphysics should retire. If it does not, surely there will be a clash between the two. This clash is, strictly speaking, a clash between the science of today and science of bygone days, i.e., between progressive and outdated sciences.

Another group of people view metaphysics as "post-scientific." According to them, though science uses the experimental method to interpret experience, it is at present not capable of interpreting all experiences. Whatever experiences it cannot interpret at present may be temporarily interpreted by metaphysics using a different method. When science progressed, it will be capable of interpreting experimentally such experience as metaphysics now

interprets. At that time, scientific interpretations will replace metaphysical ones. In other words, metaphysics treats exclusively those problems which science does not or cannot yet answer. Metaphysical and scientific problems are, in their view, of the same kind. Some of these problems cannot be answered by science at present so that metaphysics, employing a non-experimental method, attempts to answer them. The answers given by metaphysics are only temporary—the real ones are to be given in the future by science by way of the experimental method. At that future time the real answers will replace the temporary ones. As science progresses, the number of such problems that science leaves in its trail will shrink. In the event that at some future time no such problems are left, metaphysics will have become extinct. Then, some people may even say that philosophy has become extinct.

In the view of the proponents of the above approach, metaphysics, though post-scientific, is still a science insofar as its problems and the problems of the other sciences are of the same kind and share the same purpose of providing positive interpretations of experience. On the ground that it tries by a different method to answer problems unanswerable at present experimentally by other sciences, as they say, metaphysics is a post-science. But because it will definitely be replaced by other sciences in the future, this post-science is still of the nature of pre-science. That is, in relation to present day science metaphysics is a post-science, but in relation to future science it is anterior.

Some people may claim that, though metaphysical problems and scientific problems are of the same kind, metaphysics answers exclusively problems which science can never answer, not problems which science cannot answer only at present. This is to say, metaphysics employs its own method to find solutions exclusively to problems which science will never be able to solve. In this view metaphysics is only a post-, not pre-, science. Fundamental problems in Western philosophy, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the freedom of the will are problems science can never answer. Problems of this kind are metaphysical problems. Metaphysics exclusively discusses these problems and

hence it will forever remain a post-science.

Some individuals hold the view that there is no end to scientific progress. When one problem is answered, another immediately arises—in the manner of wave following wave. In this view, though its domain will change overtime, metaphysics as post-scientific can never become extinct because it develops together with other sciences.

Yet there are others who claim that metaphysics should be viewed as a supra science. The purpose of metaphysics, they say, is to seek the “First Principle,” from which all of mankind’s knowledge can be deduced. Some people in ancient China, for instance, believed that the *Book of Changes* contained such a First Principle. Though people nowadays rarely hold this view, there are nevertheless quite a few who believe that the first principle in metaphysics should be the fundamental principle in science. For instance, in Hegel’s metaphysics, the Dialectic is a principle of this kind. The Dialectic in Marx’s dialectic materialism is also a first principle of this kind. According to these individuals, metaphysics is the mother of science, i.e., the supra-science.

Although the aforementioned views are different, they have one element in common—all state that the purposes of both metaphysics and science are to positively interpret experience even though the methods used by them are different. If metaphysics does not use the experimental method to verify its conclusions empirically, it will inevitably come into conflict with science—since science does not recognize positive interpretation of experience that is not acquired by way of the experimental method and empirical verification.

If metaphysics does not use the experimental method and does not verify its conclusions empirically, how can it find solutions to problems in positively interpreting experience? This question is not easy to answer. It is from this viewpoint that the Vienna circle in modern Western philosophy has criticized metaphysics. If metaphysics were pre- or post- or supra-science, then the Vienna circle’s criticism would be quite justifiable. The Vienna circle says that metaphysical propositions are meaningless and

metaphysics should therefore be rejected. Indeed, if metaphysics were indeed as it is viewed by the afore-mentioned groups, it would seem to have no way to answer the criticism of the Vienna circle.

However, the most philosophic metaphysics or the genuine metaphysics is neither pre-scientific nor post-scientific nor supra-scientific. In the history of philosophy, some philosophers' metaphysics did indeed exhibit the qualities of such sciences, but we cannot say that metaphysics must contain such qualities. Accordingly, the Vienna circle's criticism of metaphysics is applicable to traditional metaphysics in the West, but it is irrelevant to the genuine metaphysics.

In the following pages we shall discuss the nature of genuine metaphysics. The main purpose of this book is to discuss method in metaphysics. Since the nature of any branch of learning is closely related to its method, we hope that in the following pages we may clarify the nature of metaphysics by discussing the methods in metaphysics.

There are two kinds of method in genuine metaphysics: One is positive and the other negative. The positive method consists in logical analysis but the negative method consists in discussion of the inexpressibility of metaphysics. The negative method is like regarding someone as unteachable and refusing to teach that person, yet in so doing, exercising a method of teaching. Mencius says: "I refuse, as inconsistent with my character, to teach a man, but I only thereby teach him." ("Kao Tzu B," *Mencius*, Legge's translation). In *Shi Shuo Xin Yu* we find: "Regarding their son's education, Madam Xie asks Lord Xie, 'Why have I never seen you teaching our son?' Lord Xie answers, 'I have already taught our son very often.'" These words of Mencius and Lord Xie are cited to illustrate the essential characteristic of the negative method. To say that metaphysics is inexpressible is to characterize metaphysics and in that characterization, metaphysics is thereby being expressed. This method can be said to be, using a technical description from Chinese painting, "delineating the moon by coloring the clouds." Using this method, a Chinese painter in depicting the moon paints only the clouds and leaves a blank spot

for the moon. He paints the moon by not painting the spot where it is to be represented. Doing metaphysics via the negative method is like characterizing something by omission. Characterizing something by omission is also a way of characterizing that something just as "delineating the moon by coloring the clouds" is also a way of painting the moon.

The positive method in the study of metaphysics, i.e., logical analysis, is to give logical interpretation to experience. It is to analyze, generalize, and interpret experience by the use of reason or, in brief, to rationally interpret experience. But there is a fundamental difference between metaphysics and science: metaphysics professes to give a logical interpretation of experience, while science professes to give a positive interpretation.

What we call "logical" means "formal." What we call "positive" means "substantial." In this book "positive" is in opposition to "logical" or "formal," not to "pessimistic" or "negative." "Formal" means "without content" or "blank." "Substantial" means "with content." We will illustrate this distinction with the following examples.

In *Shi Shuo Xin Yu* we find:

Chung Hui was thoroughly equipped with ability and reasoning power, but he had not previously been acquainted with Hsi K'ang. Chung in company with other worthy and outstanding gentlemen of the time went to visit K'ang. K'ang was at that moment engaged in forging metal beneath a tree with Hsiang Hsiu assisting him at the bellows. K'ang continued to pound with the hammer without interruption, as if no one else were present. Some time passed without his saying a single word, until Chung finally rose to go. K'ang said, "What had you heard that made you come, and what have you seen that now makes you leave?" Chung replied, "I came after hearing what I heard, and I am leaving after seeing what I have seen." (Chapter 24, adapted from Mather's translation, p. 393—*tr.*)

As another example, there is a legendary story about Shao Yung (1011-1077) and Ch'eng I (1033-1107):

When both heard a clap of thunder, Shao asked Ch'eng, "Do you know where the thunder originated?" Ch'eng answered, "I do, but you don't." Surprised, Shao pursued further: "What do you mean?"

Ch'eng answered, "For the known facts mathematical deduction is unnecessary. Only for the unknown is mathematical deduction required." Shao replied, "Since you said you know, then where do you think the thunder originated?" Ch'eng answered, "It originated where it originated." Shao grinned. (Cited in *Song Yuan Xue An*)

In the above two stories, the answers given by Chung Hui and Ch'eng I are both formal answers, i.e., both are blank or without content. From Ch'eng I's answer alone, we cannot know where the thunder originated; and from Chung Hui's answer alone, we cannot know what he heard that made him come or what he saw that made him leave. Should Ch'eng have answered that the thunder originated at Mount Peimang, and should Chung Hui have answered that he had heard Hsi K'ang was an eccentric and had seen Hsi K'ang forging, then their answers would have content and thus would not be formal. Answers with content are positive answers.

People in the past have felt Chung Hui's and Ch'eng I's answers very absorbing, that is, philosophically interesting. Why? Three reasons can be given: (1) the answers are almost tautological propositions; (2) they say nothing, or at least very little, about actuality; (3) they have extremely broad ranges of implication. Metaphysical propositions have all these characteristics.

For the sake of convenience of discussion, we will recast Chung Hui's and Ch'eng I's answers as follows: (1) I saw what I saw, (2) I heard what I heard, and (3) the thunder we just heard originated where it originated. These three propositions are almost tautological—"almost" tautological, because each still affirms the existence of its subject. Chung Hui affirmed that he did hear and see something; Ch'eng I affirmed that what he heard was thunder and that the thunder did originate somewhere. In talking about these things they asserted about the existence of these things, and in so doing asserted about the existence of the subjects of the propositions. Propositions that affirm the existence of their subjects are not tautological. Because the predicate of each of the three propositions is just the repetition of the subject, we classify them as "almost" tautological, meaning that they are saying very little about actuality but not entirely nothing.