Expert Comment

A Dialogical Perspective: Humanity, Subjectivity, and Co-Humanity

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Executive Summary

The world needs to work together to face many profound challenges, ranging from economic and political spheres and extending far beyond. At the root of many of these problems is the human race's lack of sensibility and maturity. Given our current moment in history, when human beings might either slip into the path of self-destruction or stand up to thrive, we cannot afford to not engage in a genuine dialogue of civilisations – the only path toward finding solutions to the crisis of humanity. Through examining major world civilisations, this study is an effort to explore the question: What are the true meanings of humanity's innate ethical origins and internal subjectivity in which human spirituality is situated, cultivated, and developed? What are practical ways for humans to unfold the potential in each of our original existence, that would allow us to have a harmonious and flourishing spiritual life together?

This paper examines the transformation of a person, via one's own deliberate effort, from a mere 'individual', to a 'subject'. It presents a dilemma between choosing the position of weak or passive subjectivity, or a position of strong or positive subjectivity, and proposes a third alternative – a dialogical subjectivity – as a solution. The self-motivated establishment of 'dialogical subjectivity' on the one hand opens up one's subjectivity to the external world, and on the other hand internalises the world into one's subjectivity. The former is an infinite expansion of the objective world in front of the subject, while the latter is an unending development of the subject's realm of meaning. The conclusion is that reaching the realm of co-humanity among different civilisations is the way-out of humanity's crisis. Through the practical and necessary social activity of human subjects, human existence – its meaning and value – can finally be actualised.

Practical Recommendations:
- This article aims to enable and empower us to reflect upon and go beyond the immediate self and transform ourselves from mere individuals to human subjects;

- By identifying the dilemma between weak and strong subjectivity, the article provides a philosophical analysis and justification for the need to have a dialogue of civilisations;

- This further justifies the importance of dialogue of civilisations for cultivating our co-humanity;

- Intellectual exploration should be applied to the practice of liberal arts. education.

Keywords: Dialogue of Civilizations, Spiritual Resources, Cultivation of Humanity, Dialogical Subjectivity

After the Cold War ended in the 1990s, with the great historical changes that took place in Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, it had seemed the world was steadily moving on track toward the spread of freedom and democracy. Recently however, with the increase of turmoil in the Middle East – Syria in particular – and with the inauguration of Donald Trump as the most powerful figure in the US, it has seemed the world is actually moving backwards, and has been becoming increasingly unpredictable. Profound challenges, such as the threat of war and the rapidly increasing number of refugees from the Middle East, seem to prove the theory of the famous 'clash of civilizations' by Samuel Huntington (1996). At this tumultuous time, many believe that dialogue of civilisations is the most promising path by which we may eliminate our problems and never in human history has it been so urgently needed. Far beyond the economic and political tensions that have caused the present situation, it is the human race's lack of sensibility and maturity as a whole that has led to widespread disasters. We need to go back to the origins of ancient civilisations to search for spiritual resources for cultivating human subjectivity and co-humanity. While Walter Kaufmann (1996) reminded us that "we are not so rich that we can do without tradition" (A Prologue to *I and Thou*, p.31), Roger Shattuck made it even more clear by saying, "Everything has been said, but nobody listens. Therefore, it has to be said all over again – only better. In order to say it better, we have to know how it was said before"[1].

1. Understandings of Humanity

The comprehension and interpretation of humanity varies among different civilisations. Such differences, on one hand, reflect the complexities of humanity itself. On the other

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[1] Roger Shattuck said this in a 1994 speech to the first gathering of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a group he helped to found (Martin, 2005).

hand, they indicate the limitations of human beings' capacity for knowledge. To fully understand humanity, we need to engage in the shared wisdom of all civilisations. Although any broad scale generalisation runs the risk of oversimplification, it is necessary to gain an overall picture of what we have. Without intending to be all-inclusive, we may list the world's main perspectives on humanity as follows:

The Confucian tradition considers human nature to be good, and believes that human subjectivity is found in self-reflective cultivation among social relationships.[2] As Confucius says in the *Analects*, "One who is human-hearted helps others to take their stand; wanting to realise himself, one helps others to realise themselves" (Slingerland, 2006, p.18). The Confucian cosmological foundation in the *Book of Changes* provides the view that the world is a continuum, which means that every person's existence is inseparable from their relationships with other people and the natural environment of heaven and earth.

Influenced by the cosmological foundation of the *Book of Changes*, Daoist philosophers like Laozi and Zhuangzi argue that humanity exists together with the *Dao* of heaven, thus there is no ontological distinction between good or bad, self or other. One should overcome these artificial distinctions and follow the ever moving *Dao*. It is in the following of the natural *Dao* that human nature becomes one with others – and heaven and earth – again. For example, as Laozi said:

Sages really think and feel immediately.

They take the thoughts and feelings of the common people as their own.

To not only treat the able as able

But to treat the inept as able too (Roger Ames & David Hall, 2003, p.153).

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[2] Strictly speaking it is the Confucians of Mencius' lineage, which became the most influential within the Confucian tradition, who hold this view.

The Hindu tradition of the Vedic period has very diverse origins, but its primary view on humanity can be captured by the phrase 'atman is Brahman'--the individual self is identical to the ultimate cosmic reality. In affirming this proposition, Hinduism simultaneously affirms the existence of the individual self (atman), and denies its isolated existence.

The Buddhist tradition holds the opposite proposition of 'anatman', or 'no self'. It is believed that everything is empty in nature. One of the most famous verses from *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* states:

Enlightenment [Bodhi] originally has no tree,

And a clear mirror is not a stand.

Originally there's not a single thing-

Where can dust be attracted? (Whai-Nung , first verse in *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra)*.

Humans should not attach themselves to anything, not even to one's own empty nature, because everything is empty and hence there is nothing one can attach to. Any attachment is an attachment to one's self-created illusion, and therefore is bound to create frustration and suffering. By letting go of one's cravings one can relieve oneself from suffering and enter the state of nirvana, or the ultimate liberation. In Christianity, humans are seen as inherently evil, carrying original sin. Therefore, subjectivity manifests itself through communication with God and salvation from God. The sin of Adam and the death and resurrection of Jesus contribute to the subjectivity of being a Christian. "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12, New International Version). For a

Christian, the transgression in the Garden of Eden holds great significance for the realisation of human subjectivity.

The ancient Greeks' view on 'human nature' is represented by the Socrates-Plato-Aristotle view that humans are rational animals. Plato defines human nature through the concept of the Soul:

> The **soul** is like the eye: when resting upon that on which truth and being shine, the soul perceives and understands and is radiant with intelligence; but when turned towards the twilight of becoming and perishing, then she has opinion only, and goes blinking about, and is first of one opinion and then of another, and seems to have no intelligence (Plato. 1944. p.339).

Indeed, what Plato describes is the function of the soul. The soul "accounts for our human capacity that is located in the intellect, making us rational animals and conferring upon us the means by which to attain the contemplation of God." (Stumpf and Fieser. 2006. p.182). However, the soul is simultaneously the form of the body and imprisoned in the body. Plato's famous *Allegory of the Cave* implies that for most of us, our soul dwells in the darkness of the cave and needs to be released and brought into the light.

In Islam, humans are neither perfect nor reliable. In other words, human nature is evil. However, in Islamic teachings there is no equivalent of the Christian concept of sin. As it is said in the Qur'an:

> "Allah" is the Ever-Existent, the One Who causes existence, Who maintains existence, Who creates everything that exists. Whatever He creates shall perish; He never will: "…say: 'Allah!' then leave them sporting in their vain discourses" (Qur'an, 6:91).

> Allah has said, "All those in the heavens and the earth will come to the Beneficent God obediently" (Qur'an, 19:93).

From here we understand that the subjectivity of a Muslim is realised in following Allah obediently. In doing so, their humanity may become immortal.

Although the summary above shows a great variety of different and even opposing views of human nature, we can see that no matter how humanity has been defined, the main philosophical ideas of different civilisations actually share the common recognition that humans should fully develop their subjectivity either through co-creativity with other people, in co-existence with the world, or in the process of becoming one with some cosmic or transcendent being. Therefore, the sensibility of being together with others provides plentiful tools for constructing common ground when searching for the main significance of a dialogue of civilisations.

2. Subjectivity as a Double-edged Sword

Moving beyond the question of what is true humanity to the question of how we cultivate humanity so as to realise true subjectivity, we find ourselves confronting a basic dilemma in developing human subjectivity, which is that when one relies on external sources for guidance, which we shall call 'weak or passive subjectivity', one tends to submit in blind obedience to authorities and lose the very subjectivity and humanity one seeks to develop. Take terrorists for instance, who typify blind obedience in pursuit of their own self-realisation. Yet when one turns toward oneself for autonomous choices, which we shall call 'strong or positive subjectivity', one runs the risk of losing direction and ending up in either nihilism, or self-asserted righteousness, which is what happened to Hitler. Even more unfortunately, the two horns of the dilemma often feed each other. Those who have weak subjectivity usually turn out to be die hard adherents of the doctrines they have chosen to submit themselves to, and hence become blindly subjective. Those who have strong subjectivity usually become so confident in their own choice that they ironically lose their ability to be reflective and their true subjectivity is consequently lost in dogmatic adherence.

2.1 Weak subjectivity:

It is well-known that human intelligence and capacities are limited, and therefore we need external guidance, whether it is from parents, teachers, or from transcendent beings. External guidance of various kinds has in some cases even led to the belief that the path toward liberation is to surrender human subjectivity itself and throw oneself entirely at the feet of an external authority (such as God or Allah). It is fine, of course, when the external authority is good and is properly followed, but it can be very bad when the external authority is not good, or followed in the wrong way. Religious fundamentalism, for example, is typically a result of the latter, much as is the "banality of evil" described by Hannah Arendt.

Weak subjectivity also manifests in various forms of fetishism, ranging from ancient worship of man-made objects to modern materialism. Chinese Confucian scholar Tu Weiming highlights the pitfalls of a materialised subjectivity:

> When the mind encounters a thing, it faces the danger of being fixated on its intended object. If such a fixation is prolonged, the mind is gradually "materialized" by the inertia of the thing. When this occurs, the Heavenly principle becomes functionally neutralized. Consequently, the dynamism and creativity essential to self-realization will not be generated, and the original substance of the mind is "buried" (Tu, 1979. p.9).

Weak subjectivity does not mean that those who have it have consciously chosen such a path. Louis Althusser argues that ideology transforms human beings into subjects, leading them to see themselves as self-determining agents, when they are in fact shaped by ideological processes (Althusser, 1979, 86-127). Pierre Bourdieu (1991), through analysing concepts such as cultural capital and *habitué*, sought to grasp how objective structures tend to produce structured subjective dispositions. Michael Foucault (1984)

explored the discursive social practices that influence the formation of human subjects and the ways in which external forces of control are internalised. Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's (1981) 'anticipatory structure of understanding', Raymond William's (1977) 'structures of feeling,' and Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953) 'background' all sharply illustrate how and why subjects internalise the socially constructed conditions surrounding them. All these analyses disclose the weak subjectivity that human beings have been falling victim to unknowingly.

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate weak subjectivity from those who appear to be weak but are actually not. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by authorities or traditions are not necessarily weak. There is actually no inherent weakness in deliberately opening oneself up to external sources of help and inspiration.

2.2 Strong Subjectivity:

The West has developed various positive theories of human subjectivity, from Kant's theory of the human as a rational, autonomous moral law-maker, to Nietzsche's assertion of the *Übermensch* (often translated as 'superman'), to Sartre's existentialist theory which claims that man is nothing but what he makes of himself (Sartre, 1948). Although different in many ways, these theories all attempt to build subjectivity without relying on any external forces.

Such strong or positive subjectivity overcomes the self-abasement and blind acceptance of authority that haunts the weak or passive form of subjectivity, but it has its own risks as well. Since we are all limited and liable to errors, our choices may not be right. This will then lead to either subjectivism, relativism, and eventually nihilism (the belief that basically denies any objective rights and wrongs), which leads to total moral paralysis, or to the self-asserted righteousness that was seen in Hitler, Stalin, and many of those

responsible for atrocious cruelties committed under the guise of a sense of universal purpose.

To be fair, those who hold positive subjectivity are not necessarily self-centred individualists. Kantian rationality is claimed to be universal. One has to "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, 1989, Vol 2. p.317). Sartre's amoral subjectivism does not prevent him from claiming that,

> When I choose in the process of making myself, I choose not only for myself but for all people. I am therefore responsible not only for my own individuality but I am responsible for all people. When we chose this or that way of acting, we affirm the values of what we have chosen and nothing can be better for any one of us unless it is better for all. We are in the world of subjectivity. I am always obliged to act in a situation that is in relation to other people (Sartre, 1989).

Reflecting the diversity of civilisational backgrounds mentioned above, strong subjectivists also believe that humans can develop their subjectivity either by being co-creative with other people, by being co-existent with the world, or by becoming one with some cosmic or transcendent being. What differentiates strong subjectivity from the dialogical subjectivity that we will turn to in the next section is the fact that strong subjectivists usually consider themselves self-sufficient, and hence do not see the necessity of appealing to others, whether it be the community, traditions, or transcendental beings. In asserting one's own strong subjectivity, one increases the likelihood of making others' subjectivity weak and passive. Even worse, one increases the likelihood of creating conflicting subjectivities!

3. Co-humanity towards Dialogical Subjectivity

The only solution to the dilemma stated in the previous section is to develop the human being as a dialogical subject, which means that humans must develop their subjectivity by being constantly in touch with, and communicating with, other people and their environments. The process of unfolding human potential is the process of constructing co-

humanity. By 'co-humanity', I mean the co-becoming process in which humans share their lives with other people, understand others, and even love and appreciate others as part of themselves. Actually, each civilisation – even those whose extreme representatives are entangled in serious regional conflicts – at its foundation teaches its citizens to love their neighbours and promote humane love among people. For example, Islamic teachings advocate that we should love our neighbours like ourselves and that being sympathetic is our own responsibility (Quran 6:12). The Bible tells us to love others without complaints. These teachings align with the Confucian saying that "everyone within the Four Seas is one's brother" (Slingerland, 2006, p.34). Mencius claims that,

> All the ten thousand things are there in me. There is no greater joy for me than to find that I am true to myself. Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence (*Re*n, 仁） (Van Norden, 2008, p.172).

Likewise, Ming dynasty philosopher Wang Yangming (1963) claims that great people are those who feel that they are together with the whole world, and share the sensibility that all myriad things are just one body.

It is clear that classic ideas of loving humanity are deeply rooted in the origins of each civilisation, but why do disasters persist? Why do people choose to neglect and forget their ancestors' teachings? This may be explained by Martin Buber's (1996) analysis of the *Ich-Es* relationship. According to him, the expansion of a purely analytic, material view of existence is at the heart of the propogation of the *Ich-Es* relationship – even between human beings. We may love others, or respect others as ends in themselves, but as long as we do not treat their existence as inseparable from ours, respect them as an extension of our own existence, and respect them as an essential condition for the existence of our own subjectivity, we are still treating them as 'it'. In Kaufmann's words,

there are many ways of living in a world without you: I-I; I-It; It-It; We-We; Us-Them. In

these relationships,

> People are not merely interested in some thing or subject, but the object of their
> interest dominates their lives, which would smack of subjectivity. His or her 'subject'
> is no subject in its own right. It has no subjectivity. No individuality has yet emerged.
> In the Us-We relationship, righteousness, intelligence, integrity, humanity, and
> victory are the prerogatives of us, while wickedness, stupidity, hypocrisy, brutality,
> and ultimate defeat belong to them. (Kaufmann, 1996, *A Prologue to I and Thou.*
> p.18*)*.

Here, we see that the element of co-humanity is missing. The key point lies in whether we

truly treat others as inseparable from ourselves or as parts of ourselves. Just as

understanding, appreciation, and enlightenment are needed for co-humanity and dialogical

subjectivity to fully grow, it is actually through both intellectual knowledge and

communicative feelings – what Chinese philosophers would call 'body-knowing' – that

humans can mature. Again, as Martin Buber highlights, we humans should cultivate

ourselves so that we can be transformed from 'individuals' to communal 'persons' (Buber,

1996, p.63-64).

Let us once again echo Plato's idea of co-humanity reflected in his *Cave* metaphor,

in which he emphasises the importance of achieving a common good for all. He states,

> We must choose out therefore the natures who are most likely to ascend to the light
> and knowledge of the good; but we must not allow them to remain in the region of
> the good; they must be forced down again among the captives in the den to partake
> of their labours and honours. You should remember that our purpose in framing the
> State was not that our citizens should do what they like, but that they should serve
> the State for the common good of all (Plato, 1944. p.346)*.*

Likewise, Aquinas also stresses that the common good must be the good of concrete

people and "since every person is a part of the state, it is impossible that a person be good

unless he will be proportionate to the common good" (Aquinas 1989, Vol. 1. p.259-278).

Whether we admit it or not, human beings are creators of common good, but at the same

time, we are potential destroyers of what we have created. As a result, we have all

witnessed the continual destruction of the world and its slippage into the traps of war and

conflict, as I described in the opening passage of this paper. The idea of sacrificing

another group for the purpose of elevating one's own group is the source of conflicts and

wars, which eventually destroy the perpetrator along with the victim. Yet on the other

hand, if we open up ourselves to embrace others, and to care for others, we are growing

ourselves and infusing our life with meaning.

We must acknowledge that the apparent infinite expansion of the objective world will

not necessarily lead to the growth of the subjective world. When such an expansion does

not aim to create a true community of common destiny, it can lead to nothing but

destruction. It is urgent for humans to cultivate a better sense of inter-subjectivity to stop

conflicts and clashes among civilisations. The self-motivated establishment of 'subjectivity'

must on the one hand open up one's subjectivity to the external world, and on the other

hand internalise the phenomenal world into one's subjectivity. The former is the visible

infinite expansion of the objective world, while the latter is the unending development of

the subject's realm of meaning. It is in the process of self-reflecting, self-cultivating, and

practicing humanity in correspondence with other human beings that humans start to

become more mature and more capable of constructing co-humanity. Thus, subjectivity is

actualised in the self-reflective and self-cultivating process. The process helps people

absorb lessons from their past and wisdoms from other humans, allows them to project

their influences onto others through the creative process whereby people manifest the

meaning of their own existence and receive responses from others. This is a process

which will not only increase our awareness that others are inseparable from ourselves, but also a process of making more and more others parts of us.

In light of rapid developments in information technology, we occupy a unique period in human history when people have the unprecedented power to share ideas and intentions widely and quickly. Yet with such power comes responsibility. It has never been so urgent to engage in peaceful dialogues among civilisations. This is the only option if we wish to see a bright future for the human race. The ability to cultivate not only humanity but also co-humanity is the exact power that humans need to project into the world so that we might save the world from falling apart. Luckily, we never lack rich sources of wisdom to guide us! What we lack is a critical understanding of ourselves, others, and the world, through these shared sources of wisdom, embodied in world civilisations. Once we have filled these gaps, we can foster a true community of common destiny that in turn will allow us to transform our humanity and our subjectivity, to co-humanity, where our minds and hearts finally meet!

Jiahong Chen
Research Director, Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute

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