



The understanding of understanding: a philosophical reflection from a transcultural perspective

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Abstract The basic question of this article is: “What is understanding?” The objective is to initiate a process and a state of self-reflexivity which might best be defined as an understanding of understanding. In this self-referential philosophical setting, it cannot be our aim to attempt to produce any (alleged) final answers, because cognitive self-referentiality, taken as a source principle of mind, is without beginning and end. However, it is feasible to explore possibilities of a continuously increasing convergence and insight regarding the objective. In addition, the basic question of an understanding of understanding is taken into consideration from a transcultural angle here. Direct samples of ancient Greek, later German as well as pre-modern Chinese philosophies are included in one systematic context here. The topic is developed in four basic steps. At first, a semantic and philosophical analysis of the English word “understanding” is developed in perspective of philosophical-anthropological thoughts by J. G. Herder, Aristotle, and the anthropo-cosmic foundations of the ancient Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記. In a second step, the meaning of “understanding” is analysed in the extended sense of a philosophical metaphor. Selective references are made to Kongzi 孔子, Martin Heidegger, Plato, and Zhuangzi 莊子. In a third step, the discussion of the semantics of the German philosophical terms “*Verstehen*” and “*Verstand*” is explored on the basis of the preceding reflections. In the fourth segment of this contribution, further references are made to the *Daodejing* 道德經 and to a model of the structure of consciousness and understanding in the context of Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 philosophy. From various angles of different times and places, the problem of an understanding of understanding points to the most basic layers of human existence, personal experience, human cultures, and civilisations.

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If we want to change ourselves, and therefore the experience of our world, for the better—to promote the good tendencies that undoubtedly exist by constantly promoting the balancing tendencies in our own being, we must first start to engage in the process of learning to understand ourselves and therefore the experience of our world, bit by bit, more and more, and in the sense of a steady process. If we want to be able to deal with the new events and things that are breaking in from the future of infinite possibilities into our task-laden present realities of limited possibilities, we must learn to understand the foundational level of human consciousness—bit by bit, more and more, and, of course, by elevating ourselves into the realm of deep thinking.

The first step in this process consists in enabling each other to understand ourselves and our experiences (“the world”) in view of the foundational cognitive level of human consciousness. To achieve this, *we first have to strive to understand what understanding means*. Such an attempt falls under the category of the self-referential, self-refining cognitive activity called philosophy. In general, this activity is supposed to produce more and more refined meanings regarding ourselves and our individual situations and collective contexts as well as experiences of successful action and interaction. As culture, in the sense of a *general* intension of its proper concept, can at least partly be defined as a process of self-refinement, I would like to metaphorically¹ circumscribe the meaning of philosophy as follows: it is the “crown”² of every form of culture (in its general self-refining nature). Philosophy is both the reflection of cultural, respectively (self-) refining practices, and it is also supposed to provide the meta-reflection of all such kind of possible reflections of possible practices of (self-) refinement at the same time. As such, *the core of philosophy is to be reflected as a cultural, that is, constantly (self-) refining (self-) understanding*. What that means, especially what the word “understanding” is supposed to mean here, is to be explored in the following self-referential or “autological” (Luhmann 2001, 244) “pathway of thinking” (*Denkweg*).³

¹ Regarding the topic of the metaphor in philosophy, see also further below please.

² This is an allusion to a statement by Hegel (1986 [first 1807], 19). Source text: “So ist die Wissenschaft [i.e. Hegel’s term for modern philosophy in his contemporary sense], die Krone [the crown] einer Welt des Geistes, nicht in ihrem Anfange vollendet.”

³ This metaphor has been introduced by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976).

Anthropo-philosophical pre-orientation: the human crossing of yin-yang

The present development of thoughts is conducted from a transcultural philosophical angle. I would like to focus on the English word “understanding” at first. It shall be our starting point. Further on, I will then refer to corresponding contents of meaning from the Chinese cultural sector as well as from the tradition of German philosophy.

I’d like to turn to the semantics of the second component of the word “understanding” at first. It corresponds to the gerund form of the verb “(to) stand”. Analytically speaking, the English gerund “-ing” conveys the abstract meaning of a continuous activity. It refers to a process, to something ongoing. In a closely related sense, the monumental etymological standard work *Deutsches Wörterbuch (German Dictionary)*⁴ defines the first meaning (amongst many others) of the German noun “*der Stand*” as “the [processual] act of standing” (“*handlung des stehens*”) (“Stand,” n.d.). In terms of etymology, this noun is closely related to the English verb “(to) stand”, respectively, “stand-ing”.

From here, I would like to start with the very literal meaning of “-standing” in relation to the verb “(to) stand”. This literal meaning in English has to be clarified at first. It is the precondition to become able to unravel more profound meanings of our term “understanding”—namely the understanding of understanding—from a transcultural perspective in the following segments of this article. At first, we have to gain better cognitive ground—in particular to be able to explore further layers of meaning in the possible use (and therefore the possible meanings) of this word.⁵ This is to say that we have to explore the non-metaphorical meaning of “standing” at first here. At the same time, this implies an invitation to direct our attention to the anthropological pre-conditions of understanding in the sense of our most basic cognitive abilities (as human beings).

Obviously, it is the feature of *standing upright* which enables us to handle all kinds of material objects not only in a sitting manner but also in motion, and without interruption. We can carry things around that we therefore are able *to hold on to* or *to be in touch with* rather permanently. This feature is one of the basic pre-conditions that has been and is always making the cognitive development of our concepts and notions possible—individually (based on the communication with others) as well as in the sense of all trans-generational (oral and later written) conceptual histories that our two-legged species has generated since times immemorial. The German word for “concept” is “Begriff”. It literally connotes the meaning of being *manually* in touch with something. It literally means to have a grip on something! The respective German verb “(*etwas*) *begreifen*”, meaning “(to) understand” or “(to) comprehend something”, is related to the English verb “(to) grip”. By taking this into further

⁴ It has been started by the famous brothers Jacob Grimm (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859).

⁵ Wittgenstein (2009, § 43, 25^e) famously stated: “43. For a large class of cases of the employment of the word “meaning”—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”

consideration, it becomes evident that the act of standing is not just a central feature of the human life-form in general but, more specifically, also with respect to the development of our cognitive abilities. We start to comprehend things, because we can literally hold on to them as long as we want: and this is because of our special physiological characteristics. They enable us to stand and to walk—and, as will be shown, to talk as well!⁶

The special physiological origin of the special “position” of the human being (in a literal and also in a transferred sense) has first been expressed and therefore also implicitly been reflected in the Chinese character *ren* 人. It clearly represents the two legs of a human being in a standing, respectively, walking posture. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) counts as the first ancient philosopher of Western Eurasian antiquity to have pointed out the same physiological feature in relation to our special cognitive and technical abilities (in contrast to animals): “For this, there is invariably only one cause, namely that man alone walks upright among the living creatures.”⁷ (Arist., *Part an.*, 689b, ed. 1853, 233–234, trans. DB) Aristotle has not only affirmed this connection *en passant*. He actually took it into consideration in great detail regarding particular aspects of the human physiology. In relation to our feet he concluded: “In proportion, however, man has the largest feet among living creatures, and for good reason; for he alone stands upright, so that they, which are only two in number and are to bear the whole weight of the body, must be long and wide.”⁸ (Arist., *Part an.*, 690b, ed. 1853, 238–239, trans. DB)

When we ask with regard to the deeper meanings of the word component “-standing” in “understanding”, we first have to make the connection between our special status as upright-standing beings as well as the possibilities which grew out of and which still constantly are springing forth from this very basic feature. One insight in this regard has been that humankind’s innumerable sophisticated forms of languages only became possible, because our special upright physiology and the related kinds of movements *also enable us to breathe more freely*. Standing and walking were a supportive factor for the structure of our articulation organs to develop further. And because we are standing or sitting upright (with the former representing a later stage of physiological development), we can also turn our “talking faces” towards each other directly. When we stand, we can turn to each other freely. All kinds of related “emotive activities”, i.e. kissing, hugging, etc., have evolved further and became the

⁶ Of course this is also associated with the ability to sit down in a kind of upright posture, but this feature seems to have developed much earlier than our ability of constant walking. It can already be observed in monkeys and apes (sitting on branches of trees and sometimes on the ground in a very human-like fashion at times).

⁷ Source text (Greek/German): “τούτων δ’ αἰτία μία τις ἐστὶν ὡς εἰπεῖν ἀπάντων, διότι μόνον ἐστὶν ὀρθὸν τῶν ζώων ἄνθρωπος.” “Hierfür giebt [sic!] es durchweg nur eine Ursache, nämlich die, daß der Mensch allein unter den lebendigen Geschöpfen aufrecht geht.”

⁸ Source text (Greek/German): “ὁ δ’ ἄνθρωπος πόδας μεγίστους ἔχει τῶν ζώων ὡς κατὰ μέγεθος, εὐλόγως· μόνον γὰρ ἔστηκεν ὀρθόν, ὥστε τοὺς μέλλοντας δούοντας ἔχειν πᾶν τὸ τοῦ σώματος βάρος δεῦ μῆκος ἔχειν καὶ πλάτος.” “Der Mensch aber hat verhältnismäßig die größten Füße unter den lebenden Wesen und zwar aus gutem Grunde; denn er allein steht aufrecht, so daß sie, die ihrer Zahl nach nur zwei sind und die ganze Last des Körpers tragen sollen, lang und breit sein müssen.”

foundation for the social human being expressing its species-character in ever larger and more complicated communities and networks.

Following Aristotle (and Plato), this anthropological theme has been resumed and discussed further by Gottfried Wilhelm Herder (1744–1803). He was the first German philosopher to have focussed in great detail on the *physiological* features of standing and walking upright. He viewed these as a central feature of human existence *as well as a basic foundation of our linguistic and cognitive abilities*. And, to direct the attention to the level of meta-reflection as well, we might say that they are therefore to be considered as contextual conditions for the activity that the reader of this text is performing right now, namely in the sense of a general and self-evident basic meaning of *understanding in relation cognitive and linguistic processes*.⁹ Herder was the first to compare our physiology and our abilities with those of other primate species in this regard: “The ape is organized in a way that he can roughly walk upright, and is therefore more similar to man than his brothers; but he is not fully organized for this, and this difference seems to rob him of everything.”¹⁰ (Herder 1853 [first 1784], 118, trans. DB) Herder concluded: “And so we find the advantage of the human being in the formation of its brain. What does it all depend on? Obviously on its *more complete organization as a whole* and ultimately *on its upright position*.”¹¹ (Herder 1853 [first 1784], 128, trans. DB) In those contexts, Herder was well ahead of his time when he explained in detail how the upright position (standing and walking) is related to the development of all of those special organic features that we regard as the basic psychophysiological characteristics of our species.

Prior to Aristotle even, our upright waking state position had already been summarized in a (characteristically) more allusive¹² manner in a central context of ancient Chinese thought. The human being (*ren*) is—as can already be seen by visualising the respective Chinese character 人—not completely “tied down” to the ground by its physical condition (as other land-living animals are). Moreover, it is reflected as the self-conscious mainstay of all living things in between

⁹ Herder counts as the founding father of the discipline of Philosophical Anthropology, which has been very influential in the discourse of 20th century European philosophy. Important German contributors to the field were Max Scheler (1874–1928), Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976), and others. This school of thought combines perspectives of classical German philosophy (since Kant) with later insights from the fields of anthropology, biology, sociology, and other interdisciplinary perspectives. In the sense of a second root, it can also be traced back to Herder, to Romantic thinkers, and also to Hegel’s philosophy and to Left Hegelian views. Amongst others, the young Karl Marx (1818–1883) has experimented with anthropological perspectives in his earlier thinking. He argued against Hegel’s Idealist political philosophy by referring to the “species-being” (*Gattungswesen*) of mankind as the most basic philosophical principle in the beginning.

¹⁰ Source text: “Der Affe ist gebildet daß [sic!] er etwa aufrecht gehen kann, und ist dadurch dem Menschen ähnlicher als seine Brüder; er ist aber nicht ganz dazu gebildet, und dieser Unterschied scheint ihm alles zu rauben.”

¹¹ Source text: “Und so kommen wir auf den Vorzug des Menschen in seiner Gehirnbildung. Wovon hängt er ab? Offenbar von seiner vollkommeneren Organisation im Ganzen und zuletzt von seiner aufrechten Stellung.”

¹² Regarding the topic of allusiveness in Chinese thought in general see, f. ex., Jullien (2000).

“heaven-and-earth” (*tian-di* 天地).¹³ According to this, humanity, being “carried” through all its individual waking states by its upright standing and walking (respectively correlating sitting) activities, is to consciously connect the life-providing principles of the cyclicity of day and night as well as the seasons (caused by the rhythmic revolutions of heaven) and the nourishment-providing fertile ground of the earth to transform and create its own *humanised* environment. An early key passage for this “anthropocosmic” (f. ex. Tu 1973, 203) self-reflection is to be found in the important Confucian classic *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*):

Ren 人 – from time immemorial this has meant: the (virtuous) nobleness of heaven-and-earth (*tian-di zhi de*), the crossing (*jiao*) of *yin-yang*, the meeting of (earthly) spirits and (heavenly) deities (*shen gui zhi hui*), (and it) also (means) the refined (spiritual) fluid (*qi*) of the five (operative and effective) phases (*wu xing*). [...] Therefore, *ren* 人 is the heart-and-mind (*xin*) of heaven-and-earth, the very base (*duan* 端) of the five (operative and effective) phases.¹⁴ (*Liji*, *Ly.*, n. 20, trans. DB)

According to this, the human being, as being allusively characterised by the character “*ren* 人”, is literally *and metaphorically* to be considered as *standing in between heaven and earth*, and it is contemplated as the living connection or relatedness and the unity of heaven and earth. From very early times on, *ren* has been reflected here as a “crossing” of (1) *yin* 陰, which, also in a very general sense, is to be taken as the principle of gestation and of giving birth (associated with the earth and the female sex in a pre-modern Chinese sense), and (2) the heavenly, “all-impregnating” principle of *yang* 陽. *Ren* was seen as the “crossing of *yin-yang*”. With his/her head, every human is “above” in heaven (*tian* 天), which has been regarded as the cosmic “masculine” meta-principle (housing the sun, the moon and the stars)—constantly “impregnating” its counterpart, the earth (*di* 地) (the “womb of life” which carries us all), with light and warmth.

Two aspects of meaning are (more or less allusively) suggested in this context. They should be kept in mind regarding our further transcultural path of thinking here as well, because, *mutatis mutandis*, we will rediscover them variously in our further exploration of the word “understanding” too. With regard to the ancient Chinese horizon of thinking, we should be aware that *ren* 人 is the “crossing of *yin-yang*” (1) in the literal sense of a general “*standing-in-between*” of everything else as well as (2) in the sense of a metaphorical exteriorisation (transgressing the literal meaning), namely *to hint at the general intermediateness of (“trans-positional”) human existence*.

¹³ This is evident whether the respective scope of meaning of *ren* 人 in terms of its historical stations in the history of concepts is narrow or broad, or corresponds to the “ubiquitous” extension of a modern concept of man or not. Regarding this topic see, f. ex., the remarks in Wolfgang Kubin’s article in the present issue.

¹⁴ Source text: “故人者,其天地之德,陰陽之交,鬼神之會,五行之秀氣也。[...] 故人者,天地之心也,五行之端也。” See also my German translation of the same passage in Bartosch (2015, 158–159). Unless otherwise noted, all omissions and entries in square brackets also in all following quotations are by the author of the present article.

The original metaphor of “understanding”

It became apparent that the actual physiological act of standing and our derived ways of upright sitting and walking—which enable us to manage¹⁵ things and to communicate the way we do—are to be considered as fundamental characteristics of our species-being. However, and although its isolated literal meaning is associated with these physiological human features and abilities,¹⁶ the second component of the word “understanding” (“-standing”), of course, cannot exclusively be comprehended in this sense when we reflect about its possible philosophical core-meaning. After having set the analytical foundations regarding literal meanings as well as from an anthropo-philosophical angle in the last chapter, we now need to broaden the horizon of our reflection. We also have to consider the semantics of the word “*understanding*” in the sense of an original metaphor.

The English (linguistic) term “metaphor” goes back to the Greek noun “*μεταφορά*” (*metaphora*). It is related to “*μεταφέρω*” (*metaphero*)—meaning “to bring over”, or “to transfer”. The characteristics of the metaphor as such have first been discussed by Aristotle: “Metaphor [literally: the ‘bringing-over’], however, is the bestowing [literally: the ‘bringing-upon’] of a name from another.”¹⁷ (Arist., *Poet.*, 1457b, (7), ed. ²1874, 160, trans. DB) In general, this means to use a word, like, for example, when we describe philosophy as the “crown” of culture¹⁸, not in a defined conceptual sense but *figuratively*. “Crown” is used in a *particular transferred* sense here. In relation to other practices of culture, philosophy is in the position resembling that of the “crown” in the sense of a political decision-making institution. Philosophy is “superior” and a “decisive” activity, because (at least in the sense of its possibilities) it indicates an all-pervading self-reflection and guidance with regard to making decisions, applicable to all other circumstances in general.

In the case that the verb “(to) stand” is “standing” on its own—that is, in the case that it is not used as a word compound in the verb “(to) understand”—it can be used metaphorically, like, for example, in “Where do you stand?” That means, it can be used in the sense of a question of which side of contending views or factions one is intending to join, for example, when someone is asking in such a fashion to test the loyalty of another. In a more general sense, “standing” can also relate to the meaning of taking a position (another concept going back to an original spatial metaphor) in the sense of a certain “point of view”: a “*standpoint*” in a debate, to “take a certain perspective” in order “to look at” something etc. Or it might refer to “taking a side” in a context where we “*stand up* for something” etc. All of these usages of the word “stand”, respectively, “standing” were originally metaphorical.

¹⁵ The English word “(to) manage” is etymologically related to the Latin noun “*manus*” which means “hand”. Both the English noun and adjective “manual” are related to Latin “*manus*” as well.

¹⁶ Herder (1853 [first 1784], 118 et al.) was the first to recognize that our ability to speak as well as the formation of our head shape, i.e. the prerequisites of our complex thinking, are directly related to our organic disposition designed for upright walking.

¹⁷ Source text: “*Μεταφορά δέ ἐστὶν ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου ἐπιφορά.*”

¹⁸ See the introductory segment of this article.

They are all related to spatial orientation (concerning our particular human—upright walking—physiology).¹⁹

Although the metaphorical meaning of “-standing” as a word compound in the gerund “understanding” is to be taken differently than the literal meaning, it is at the same time also “carried over” semantically from the same (literal) core meaning of “standing”. Both aspects must be discerned and are yet to be seen as being related. However, the general metaphorical meaning is reaching into a more foundational realm; it is more abstract and more general—namely *with regard to a unique (structure of human “standing” in terms of a characteristic) “positing” of self-reflective consciousness* itself. Understanding means the self-reflective actuality of a unique human ability of thinking which in a sense “stands” in analogy to our unique physiological condition.

This, finally, “lies in reach” semantically when we direct our attention to the correlation of the second word part “-standing” with the anterior word component of “understanding”. But we will also still have to bear in mind the general meaning of a specific determination of the human being which the term “standing” still also connotes in this further extended field of meaning as well. At the same time, the implicit metaphorical semantics of the term “understanding” also transcends the possible range of the aforesaid abstract *metaphorical* meanings of “standing” or “(to) stand (somewhere)”. The reason for this is that in the combination of both word components in the gerund “understanding” (respectively the infinitive form of the verb), a new and most general meaning is emerging:

In this context, we have to become aware of the original meaning of “under-” at first. It relates to a very ancient Indo-European root word and is providing the key here. It does *not* derive from the direction-indicating meaning of the word “under”! So “understanding” is *not* deriving from a meaning of standing or being located “below”. The original meaning of the word component “under-” in “understanding” stems from the Proto-Indo-European word root “*nter-” instead. This (reconstructed) word root pertains to meanings which are now expressed, for example, by using the English words “between” or “among” or “amidst” (“understand,” n.d.). The word compound “under-” in “understanding” shares the same origin with Sanskrit “antar अन्तर” (“among”; “between”) as well as Latin “inter-” (also “among”; “between”) (“understand,” n.d.; “antar अन्तर,” n.d.). Except the difference of the softer palatal sound (“d” instead of “t”), the modern English pronunciation of “under-” *still even sounds like the ancient Sanskrit “antar”!* While the adjective “international” is a quite recent creation (1780)—it is a word combination of the Latin prefix “inter-” and the English adjective “national” introduced by Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) (“International (adj.,” n.d.)—*the combination of “under-” and “-stand(ing)” goes back to a distant and very ancient past.*

This is an important finding: It means that the basic original meaning of “understanding” is that of an “inter-standing” (so-to-speak). The possible meanings of “understanding” are related to the image of “*standing in between*” or “*standing*

¹⁹ In their famous study *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnsen (2003 [first 1980]) have shown that and how metaphors also dominate our everyday orientation in terms of language and cognition.

amongst". From a philosophical perspective, this etymological background is providing us with a very important and helpful hint. It alludes to the insight that if we want to understand—to understand in growing proportions, bit by bit—we cannot take a definite "standing". This is to say that we ought never stick to one side, and we should never "chain" ourselves to one fixed set of meanings exclusively. To understand means to always proceed further by letting go of fixed positions and one-sided judgements regarding particular points of view. These always easily turn into prejudices or mere opinions. Understanding also means to see that our particular insights can always only be valued as relative *moments* of an unceasing process of true understanding. *To gain understanding*, we have to cultivate the self-reflective consciousness in the permanent state of "in-between-ness" (to which the word component "under-" is alluding to). Here, to refer to the metaphor of the "crown" once more, the royal pathway of philosophical thinking is opening up towards the meta-state, the source level of mind, or in other words, the permanent integration of absolute unity which is unceasingly running throughout all actual forms and patterns of possible distinction.

Although the insight of this existential "in-between" (in which we constantly open ourselves up—namely to receive while letting go *at the same time*) seems to deprive us of the "railing" of fixed concepts, it then nevertheless turns out to be the only way to gain a secure foothold in the unshakeable source of a constantly evolving thinking itself. While the reflective effect of thinking is bending itself back into the thinking creativity which is its own permanent cause and source, the growing circle of understanding is initiated, because this also means to move along and to experience a certain unique or personal "pathway of thinking".

Understanding—taken in the sense of this state of cognitive and existential "in-between-ness" (being absorbed and being elevated into the never-ceasing reality of "now"), bears the promise of a clear reflection devoid of any convulsive adherence to un(der)developed concepts, let alone prejudices or any other forms of self-hindering cognitive attachment. Today, it is more important than ever to develop such forms of understanding in the sense of a (self-) consciousness of "in-between-ness" as the most basic form of the mind and therefore as the fountainhead of all "true" philosophy (as the "crown" of all possible human (self-) cultivation and therefore as the "apex" of all human culture).—Because to "stand in-between" means to always start from an undecided and therefore also *absolutely inclusive position*. When we start to understand what understanding truly means (namely "interstanding"), our mind is not phased out or barred one-sidedly but will persistently rest at the balance point of all opposing judgements and differentiations (while continuously performing proper acts of analytical differentiation in the enfoldment of our thinking and our articulate speech activities).²⁰

What "makes the difference" then is to realise what *makes* the difference. This is when we realize and maintain the, metaphorically speaking, mental "mirror-surface"

²⁰ This, of course, shouldn't deny the fact that this always also represents a personal development and a process which starts from certain contextual preconditions regarding the particular contents of understanding. But the more this process of understanding is proceeding, the more universal and the less one-sided the integration of particular contents of becomes when we enter the singularity of an understanding of understanding. From that event of self-evidence the mind will start to look at those contents from a growing overview perspective, as an enfolding integration of the universal and the particular(s).

(Bartosch 2018, 2019) which presents us with all those thoughts and images. When we understand (in this sense), we rest with the creative and constantly transforming “source-surface” of mind, and we move forward with, respectively, follow its ever-changing representations at the same time. Understanding is the basic structure of the mind and of cognition itself; it is the “mind of unlimited oneness” bringing itself forth, enfolding itself permanently as an unmoved mover of all *and in all* the processes of creating distinctions and particular judgements (of which it is the inseparable causation principle at the same time).

A German philosopher of the Renaissance, Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464), has described this supreme source-level state of a self-conscious constant reception of knowledge data and, on the other hand, a forward-pushing “sacrifice” of that which had been gained cognitively as “*knowing-unknowing*” (Latin: *docta ignorantia*). This is equivalent to the most elaborate semantics of “understanding”. Living more than one and a half centuries before Aristotle, Confucius (Chinese: Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE) of the ancient Chinese kingdom of Lu, one of humankind’s initial explorers of philosophy, clearly expressed his insight into the same cognitive dimension of *knowing-unknowing*—respectively the “*foundational logic*” (German: “*Grundlogik*”²¹) (Bartosch 2015, 14–15) of true “*inter-standing*”—in the following question–answer-form: “Do I have knowledge? (I do) not know.”²² (*Lunyu, Zh.*, n. 8, trans. DB) Alternatively, Confucius’ testimony of true (philosophical) understanding might also be translated as: “Do I possess knowledge? (I do) not (have) knowledge.” Or: “(I am) not knowing.”

As the first historical witness of this kind of a most fundamental form of philosophical understanding, Confucius presents us with nothing less than a brilliant semantic demonstration of the most basic existential human situation. His self-related question of knowledge is *at the same time* the question of *non-knowledge*. *The answer is just as undecided* as the question which is expressing this most “*funda-mental*” undecidedness of self-reflective human consciousness. The most basic question, *the unresolved situation per se*, is not resolved, *because only its further ongoing unresolvedness (that of every true understanding) could ever be taken as an adequate “response”!* The foundational logic of knowing-unknowing is at the source-creativity of *all* particular processes of thinking. At bottom, consciousness is self-consciousness, and because of that it is autological and self-enfolding at the same time. In principle, Kongzi’s question and his answer are to be taken *as the same*.

I hasten to emphasize that this is *not* to be taken as a circular fallacy, because also in this case “[...] the answer to the question is not about a process of deductive reasoning but about demonstrative ground-exposure.”²³ (Heidegger 1977, § 2, 11) This is exactly what’s happening here *in Confucius’ utmost self-reflective*

²¹ The author has developed and exemplified this self-reflexive philosophical concept in a comparative study on the German philosopher Nicolaus Cusanus (1401–1464) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529).

²² Source text: “吾有知乎哉?無知也。”

²³ Source text: “[...], weil es in der Beantwortung der Frage nicht um eine ableitende Begründung, sondern um aufweisende Grund-Freilegung geht.”

knowing-unknowing question-and-answer context. Confucius' statement is a testimony of a *most profound understanding* in the sense of "ground-exposure". Confucius' remark might best be described as a semantic "pointing rod"²⁴ (Scheler 1921, 546) with regard to the most foundational level of intuitive human knowledge-creation. It is a perfect allusion to the hardly effable "in-between-ness" of the mind as a "standing-in-between"-instance, i.e. as the basic foundational structure of understanding, respectively, of absolute undecidedness (or to put it a Hegelian way: absolute freedom), namely as the aforementioned unifying balance point which goes through all processes of thinking and self-reflected experiences of cognitive differentiation. This is basically the same self-positing that a wise, that is, an *understanding* ("inter-standing") human being (a philosopher in the true sense of the word) will always adopt when "standing" *in between* heaven-and-earth (tian-di 天地) (*Liji* 禮記).²⁵

The example of Nicolaus Cusanus' term *docta ignorantia* as well as the much earlier Confucian evidence indicate that the insight of what is called "*understanding*" here is culture(s)-transcendent. It has been discovered in ancient China, but shortly after Confucius had made reference to it, we also encounter its traces in Socrates' prominent description of a conversation that he had with one of his fellow Athenians:

[And while leaving the scene] I thought to myself, "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either."²⁶ (Plat., *Apol.*, 21d, ed. 1966, n. p.)

This, again, is to say that somebody who is just following "pre-fixed" and rigid notions as well as preclusive one-sided positions will *never* truly understand in the proper sense. In addition, those who try to avoid understanding (in the sense which has been elaborated above) are confronted with the problem that their fixed or "frozen" positions merely seem to promise security (of belief). In reality, these can never be developed further. That means, these positions can never be considered as endurable. Therefore, also to acquire a growing understanding in a multicultural and multipolar world, we should always be ready to let go and to transform and to adapt in reasonable ways, namely to accelerate the process of self-formation that is rooted in the realisation of understanding per se. To use a mental picture: We have to *raise* our thinking to melt the ice of a barrier of frozen concepts that we ourselves and/or

²⁴ The original German expression is "Zeigestab".

²⁵ The author has coined the term "foundational logic" (German: *Grundlogik*) to discuss the respective approach of thinking in elaborate traditional forms of philosophical reasoning in China and Europe (Bartsch 2015).

²⁶ Source text: "πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν δ' οὖν ἀπιὼν ἐλογιζόμεν ὅτι τούτου μὲν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐγὼ σοφώτερός εἰμι: κινδυνεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἡμῶν οὐδέτερος οὐδὲν καλὸν κάγαθὸν εἶδέναι, ἀλλ' οὗτος μὲν οἶεται τι εἶδέναι οὐκ εἰδώς, ἐγὼ δέ, ὥσπερ οὖν οὐκ οἶδα, οὐδὲ οἶομαι: ἔοικα γοῶν τούτου γε σμικρῶ τιμὴ αὐτῶ τούτῳ σοφώτερος εἶναι, ὅτι ἂ μὴ οἶδα οὐδὲ οἶομαι εἶδέναι." (Plat., *A' πολ.*, 21δ, ed. 1903, n. p.).

others have put in our way at some point in time. The Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi has reflected the same basic insight openness by using the following example:

(If one) uses “fish traps” (*quan*), fish will remain (in them). If one has obtained the fish, one forgets about the fish traps. (If one) uses “hare traps” (*ti*), hares will remain in them. (If one has) obtained the hares, one forgets about the hare traps. When “words”/“speeches” (*yan*) are used, “meanings” (*yi*) will remain. Once the meanings are attained, one forgets about the words. Where and how do I find someone who forgets about the “words”/“talk” (*yan*) in order to be able to “talk”/“(have) words” (*yan*) with him?²⁷ (*Zhuangzi*, *Zp.*, *Ww.*, § 13, trans. DB)

In addition to the aforesaid, this is describing the phenomenon of understanding not only in relation to our individual understanding but with regard to the basic intersubjective settings of communication.

The German words “*verstehen*” and “*Verstand*” as bridges “in between”

To build a “bridge of understanding” from China and the East to the Western side of the Eurasian continent on this occasion, it is beneficial to also discuss the German word for “understanding”: “*das Verstehen*”.²⁸ And we also have to take into consideration the related noun “*der Verstand*” (the mind). As in the case of the English expression “understanding”, the latter and the former are concepts which have been derived from original metaphors relating to the characteristics of upright standing; they are metaphorical in origin. In addition, the verb correlating with the second word component, “*stehen*” ((to) stand), can also refer to a building, like, for example, when we say that an old tower is still *standing*. The German expression for the definition of the notion of a fact (“*eine Tatsache*”) literally translates as “something that stands firm” (“*etwas, das feststeht*”).

Both words “*Verstehen*” and “*Verstand*” include the prefix “*ver-*”, and both contain a main word component derived from “*stehen*”, which, again, is to be translated as “(to) stand” or “standing”. The word “*das Verstehen*” is thus a substantiated verb that can be used in the sense of a (self-) reflective (cognitive) process as it has been discussed earlier with regard to its English counterpart.

Starting from there, we can expand our perspective by consulting the German language background more in depth: First of all, in German not only cognitive activity or the mind in the sense of its original setting of a constantly learning and evolving “in-between-ness” or openness are reflected as “*Verstehen*” (understanding). The possible scope of meaning in the philosophical use of the word “*Verstand*” includes the entire immanent (living) *structure* of understanding (without regard to content matter) itself. The latter term thereby corresponds to possible English meanings of

²⁷ Source text: “荃者所以在魚,得魚而忘荃;蹄者所以在兔,得兔而忘蹄;言者所以在意,得意而忘言。吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉?”

²⁸ The word “*das*” is used as a definite article here.

“mind”, but the core-meaning of the German word itself also points more directly to the self-structuring of understanding as an autopoietic process. In a more abstract sense, the term once again characterizes the “standing” structure of understanding itself *in the sense of a constant becoming*.

Let’s start the analysis with “-stand”, i.e. the second component of the word “Verstand” (mind). It implicitly refers to the German noun “*der Stand*”. We have seen earlier that one of the possible literal meanings of “*der Stand*” is “the [processual] act of standing” (“*Handlung des Stehens*”). With regard to “Verstand” we have to further reflect upon a few additional aspects now. “Stand” can also be used as in German “*der Stand der Dinge*” (meaning “the state of affairs”) or as in the case of the noun “*der Wasserstand*” (“the water level”). In such cases, “Stand” refers to something that is defined and thus emerging for us from the indefinite multiplicity of the constant flow of that which is thereby given and at the same time presenting itself as a given fact and therefore as a fixed datum.

These further extensions of possible meanings correlate with the German verb “*feststehen*” which is a combination of the meanings “firm”/“fixed” (*fest*) and “standing” (*stehen*). It indicates that something is in a fixed state or position currently. This also includes the connotation of measures or gauges and of measuring, which is a connotation that can also be traced in the Latin expression “*ratio*”. This word is the Latin counterpart of the German word “Verstand”. As a basic form of cognition, the *Verstand* “solidifies”, that is, its activity elevates the flow of experience(s) into forms of recognisable and recollectable “things” – even in the sense of immaterial forms of numerical concepts prior to sensual experience. Something can only be recognized when it is fixed by the “eye(s)” of the *Verstand*,²⁹ i.e. when it is reflected, as if it were, for the moment, resected from the organic flow of the multiplicity of the world.

It has to be added that, on the one hand, the prefix “*ver-*” itself can also add the implication of something (or a process) which enters a fixed state, or is “freezing”, or coming to a *standstill*, respectively, and which is therefore resulting in a certain self-contained and determinable characteristic situation of experience. However, *and on the other hand*, the use of the prefix “*ver-*” in a word can also mean that something changes! This is the case in the German word for change itself: “*Veränderung*”. The prefix can therefore also mean that something negates itself or is passing from one state into another state of awareness and reflexivity.³⁰ This is one of the examples of a sort of “natural” dialectics which is deeply embedded and hidden even in German colloquial language contexts. Something that *changes* will always maintain at least some aspect of its former “state of affairs”. It is never turning into a “wholly other”.

With regard to our topic of “*verstehen*” und “*Verstand*”, we therefore have to consider two basic signifying meanings of the prefix: “*ver-*”₍₁₎ in the sense of a finalising or, so-to-speak, “solidifying” meaning (that we hold on to as an unchanging

²⁹ Regarding this metaphor, which has been used in many ways, reference can be made to Kant (2008, 45).

³⁰ This has been the basic starting point for the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

datum of mind) and “*ver-*”⁽²⁾ in the sense of the self-negation or elevation of a meaning (which is semantically presented by the word used in combination with the prefix) in the sense of an open and self-evolving assignation, i.e. in the sense of a process or, more specifically, *an unceasing becoming*. The “*Verstand*” (mind) and its constituting activity of “*verstehen*” (understanding) both include *both possible and opposing meanings of “ver-” at the same time*: In the sense of “*ver-*”⁽¹⁾, this basic form of our consciousness appears to itself in the form of a stream of judgements, conclusions and decisions; and yet in the sense of “*ver-*”⁽²⁾, these are always self-negating—especially in the sense that they always have to be developed further—unless we are talking about an “apex” of understanding (of understanding), that is, a true self-reflective insight of the principle of “*inter-standing*” (in the aforesaid sense) (being reflected back into itself). So, the form of the “*Verstand*” lies in its constant self-transformation and is finally posed with the task to *understand* “itself” autologically as a “*standing-in-between*” of a *respective cognitive determination of meaning and its self-dissolution and therefore permanent transformation at the same time*.³¹ Starting from this, we enter the self-reflective process of the understanding of understanding.

Having reached this systematic level, we can now explore the further question of how this insight can be further related to Chinese thought culture in particular and whether the common basis of understanding (which had already been detected in the thinking of Confucius and Zhuangzi here) can be further extended “in between” English-, German- and Chinese language-related perspectives. Our remaining task is to further broaden the understanding of understanding in a transcultural sense. This next step can be taken on the basis of what has already been said with regard to the ancient classic *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*), namely that “man” (*ren* 人) is (literally and metaphorically) “standing” in between heaven-and-earth (*tian-di* 天地). *Ren* 人 is the possibly self-conscious centre of the two unconditional basic principles of *yin-yang* in their inseparable unity. Man is *yin-yang*’s irrevocable inherent connection and unity, and *ren* represents both their intersection—humanity, both individually, socially and collectively (as a whole), is both the “in-between” and the “bridge” of the *yin-yang*-principle, connecting and differentiating (male–female) both at the same time, constantly generating and propelling itself forward in alternating steps.

The *foundational logic* (German: “*Grundlogik*”) (Bartosch 2015, 14–15) of this principle is—to borrow an expression from the tradition of German Idealism—that of an all-encompassing *unity of unity and difference*. The principle of *yin-yang* is one, and yet it represents the *two* most basic sides of all respects of existence at the same time. The human being, more specifically human consciousness, *is both their connection and distinction at the same time*. In general, this foundational logic of understanding (in our sense of an “*inter-standing*”) can be clearly identified both in Central European and Chinese philosophies as the fundamental determining layer of

³¹ In his article in the present issue, Wolfgang Kubin refers to the same “meta-meaning” that arises from the etymology of “*verstehen*” (to understand) as “to get through (withstandingly)”. To pass through something in this sense means to undergo a process (change) unaltered. So the unity of change and constancy is reflected in a likewise manner as well in that case.

the respective thought cultures (Bartosch 2015). In China, it can also be traced in the Daoist *philosophical* use of the word “*dao* 道”. In the present explanations the foundational logic (unity of unity and difference, respectively, unity *through* difference, i.e. the “*inter-*” which connects and distinguishes at the same time) clearly stands out in the “dialectic” meaning of the prefix “*ver-*” in the German word “*verstehen*” (or, as a substantiated verb, “*das Verstehen*”). Understanding is both “coagulation” and “liquefaction”, permanently setting limits and yet at the same time transgressing them without beginning and without end. This is the meaning of understanding as an *endless way* of self-reflective becoming.

Developing a Chinese perspective on understanding as “standing-in-between”

“Way” or “path” would also be a literal translation for the Chinese word “*dao* 道”. In the sense of the Daoist classic *Daodejing* 道德經, no specific meaning can be intended in the word use of the Chinese character “道” in this context. It is rather the symbolic indication of the suspension of all possible finite meanings, i.e. the elevation of semantics into its own inherent indefiniteness (its realm of possibilities and probabilities), also to be identified with the aforementioned “knowing-unknowing” which, as the “*in-between-ness*” of understanding in the sense of the present paper, is at the same time implicitly ever-present (although indirectly alluded to by the greatest thinkers of all places and all times) as the ineffable source³² of all possible concrete (effable) meanings, respectively, “names”:

Passable “pathway(s)” (dào): pathway(s) without permanence;
Nameable “name(s)” (míng): name(s) without perpetuity.³³ (*Daodejing*, ch. 1)

The Chinese character “道” symbolizes the meaning of “head”, or “chief”, and “leading”—as well as “first” (*shou* 首)—in combination with a meaning-indicating component *chuo* 辵. The latter classifies a general meaning of “walking”. In this metaphor of thinking, the two-legged upright being is not standing (as in “*understanding*”) but moving (“*in-between*”)! This bears an affinity of meaning to the case of “*ver-*”₍₂₎ in “*verstehen*” and therefore with regard to the interminability of the *process* of understanding (in the sense of its form, regardless of its respective contingent contents). “It” runs and is striving constantly in all of us in respective non-repeatable ways, and it is in everyone the non-completable and inexhaustible “First”. In the Western tradition, the correlation of an original metaphor of “walking” is related to the word origin of “theory” in a comparable fashion (Nicolai de Cusa, *De quaer.* (h IV), ed. 1959, cap. I, n. 19, 15).³⁴ As the evolving “*in-between-ness*” of

³² Regarding the topic of ineffability, the author has already presented a detailed analysis from the perspective of transcultural comparative philosophy in Bartosch (2015), 233–300.

³³ Source text: “道可道,非常道。名可名,非常名。”

³⁴ Source text: “Theos dicitur a theoro, quod est video et curro. Currere igitur debet quaerens per visum, ut ad omnia videntem theon pertingere possit. Gerit igitur visio similitudinem viae, per quam quaerens

human consciousness, it is the ever-present origin in all actualisations of meanings, and it is “running” through all concrete meanings in all of “our” thought processes (as (self-) conscious observers). This also relates to those cognitive representations which are evoked by the use of the words “past”, “present” and “future”. No finite meaning whatsoever would be able to exhaust “It”.

The understanding of understanding includes the insight that the “trans-structure” of understanding cannot be defined like a finite object of understanding itself, respectively, like a “track section”, i.e. like a particular process of understanding in the sense of the development of a concrete aspect of thought content. Laozi 老子, the semi-legendary author of the *Daodejing* 道德經, has been portrayed as the first to realise that this understanding of understanding or self-awareness of *dao* 道, namely as the “nateness” of understanding (in between, distinguishing and yet all-relating) *yin-yang* in the Chinese sense, can only arise in an unconditional state when one is absolutely free of any particular interest (*wu yu*).

However, the production of those particular concatenations of evolving meaning (as respective finite “milestones” on the way that we “walk”) which derive from specific interest or intentional directionality (Laozi’s state of “having name(s)” (*you ming*) in contrast to “without name(s)” (*qi jiao*) in the following quote) is the major function of the “*Verstand*” in the aforesaid sense. So as soon as this “way” (*dao* 道) has a particular name, or names, “it” becomes the understanding “mother of ten thousand things”:

Without name(s): origin of heaven and earth;

Having name(s): mother of ten thousand things.³⁵ (*Daodejing*, ch. 1)

To truly “under-stand”, that is, to enter the permanent “*in-between state*” of *understanding* (“*inter-standing*”), we must allow the nature of each meaning then. We must, so-to-speak, “dive” into names and meanings *as such*, i.e. without being restricted by their particular and finite meaning in a concrete situation. In the figurative sense, one might put it as follows: *The line or boundary which draws all individual forms is in itself without any limit; it is itself undivided.*³⁶ But in order to allow conscious experience, the understanding, more specifically the mind in the dialectical sense of “*Verstand*”, must “draw itself out of itself”, thereby constantly producing finite experiences and finite knowledge—which is, as the word “finite” is telling us here, bound by certain limits which we have to adhere to.

From the perspective of self-knowledge, that is, the self-reference of human consciousness, the constant experience of finiteness is essential in order to learn to acknowledge the non-conceptualisable infinite—we could also say: the trans-conceptual—which, as I have tried to suggest here, is always closest to us *in a rather inef-fable way*. Therefore, in this regard, we might also follow Hegel who was the one to

Footnote 34 (continued)

incedere debet. Oportet igitur, ut naturam sensibilis visionis ante oculum visionis intellectualis dilatemus et scalam ascensus ex ea fabricemus.”

³⁵ Source text: “無名天地之始;有名萬物之母。”

³⁶ For an interesting discussion in this direction see also Luhmann (2001).

realize that every finite meaning has it within itself to suspend itself, respectively, to elevate itself into a foregoing and nevertheless increasing understanding—therefore always representing the true “*inter-standing*” nature of *Verstehen* itself. In this sense, understanding, which (as *knowing-unknowing* and in terms of its inherent structure) is permanently driven out of itself and back to itself by itself and through itself, does not mean that we know nothing. But we can only know to the extent and in the sense that every current state of our respective present knowledge has to be overcome constantly towards the more and more complete states of what we do not yet know or have not yet achieved at a given instance!

As we are able to also *understand* the most existential unity of life and death in this way of an *evolving* knowing-unknowing, and as we are therefore able to *understand* our finiteness as a representation of infinite possibilities, reflecting an infinite structure of consciousness ourselves, this most basic situation of understanding cannot be resolved. However, and as we realise higher and more evolved states of an understanding “in-between-ness” throughout all the reflections of the moments of our onward-moving existence, we become increasingly clear about our related questions. Therefore, of course, we have to let our innate capacity of understanding translate itself into the self-explicating form that we give our personal existence in the context of our respective circumstances. It is the only way to deal with the most existential philosophical questions in the end.

It is exactly in this sense that the Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) has hinted at a model of the structure of understanding in which he developed a *systematic reflection of an awareness of a direct, pre-theoretical immersion in that most fundamental structure of human understanding in action*. The respective passage, which contains the foundations for such a model in relation to traditional terms, is to be found in the middle volume of Wang Yangming’s major opus *Chuanxilu*:

One (limitless/boundless) *li* 理 (“(self-) organising principle”) – that’s all. To articulate the “becoming apparent” (*ningju* 凝聚) of its *li* 理 (“(self-) organising principle”), we call it *xing* 性 (“character(ising)”). To articulate the “(self-) mastering” (*zhuzai* 主宰) of its “consolidating” (*ningju* 凝聚), we call it *xin* 心 (“heart(-and-mind)”). To articulate the “emitting-moving” (*fadong* 發動) of its (self-) mastering, we call it *yi* 意 (“will(ing)”). To articulate the “clear awareness” (*mingjue* 明覺) of its emitting-moving, we call it “knowing” (*zhi* 知). To articulate the “perceiving and responding” (*gan-ying* 感應) of its clear awareness, we speak of the “thing(s)” (*wu* 物).³⁷ (Wang Yangming, *Chuanxilu*, ed. 1933, zhong, 70–71, trans. DB)

The functions and aspects of consciousness that Wang Yangming addresses here in the extended sense of an understanding of understanding are not isolated. They

³⁷ Source text: “理一而已·以其理之凝聚而言·則謂之性·以其凝聚之主宰而言·則謂之心·以其主宰之發動而言·則謂之意·以其發動之明覺而言·則謂之知·以其明覺之感應而言·則謂之物。” (The original edition contains no modern punctuation marks, only dots to suggest individual sections of contexts of meaning. In the vertical rendering of the original text, these dots are superscripted here.)

represent basic descriptive perspectives on a process—inseparably coherent perspectives, or to put it another way, functional aspects of a process that cannot be conceptualized at once and/or without reflecting on it from different functional angles. Similar to the *Daodejing* 道德經, where, as we have seen above, the character 道 is used in the sense of a semantic “pointing rod” to indicate the ineffability of the unlimited precondition of every (finite) meaning itself, Wang Yangming has used the word “*li* 理” (“(self-) organizing principle”) to refer to the unlimited precondition of the associated process that we refer to as understanding and that has been ascribed to the use of this English word as well as to the implicit foundations of meaning in the use of the respective German terms that we have discussed.

Li 理 (“(self-) organizing principle”) is without inside (and) outside. *Xing* 性 (“character(ising)”) ³⁸ is without inside (and) outside. ³⁹ (Wang Yangming, *Chuanxilu*, ed. 1933, zhong, 70, trans. DB)

In the penultimate quote above, Yangming is very much centering his systematic vision around his concept of the “heart(-and-mind)” (*xin* 心). The heart(-and-mind)’s “will(ing)” (*yi* 意), a word which might also be translated as “intentionality” in this context, at the same time relates to the “character(ising)” (*xing* 性) of the emergence of the permanently changing “things” (*wu* 物) of our experiences. The phenomenality of the process described by means of these concepts (which is supposed to represent the autonomous generation of experience and consciousness in general) is exemplified in the following famous passage:

While the teacher [Wang Yangming] was strolling in Nanzhen, a friend pointed at a blossoming tree, asking: “Under heaven there are no outside-things without *xin* 心 (heart(-and-mind)). But how does the flowering tree, opening up its blossoms deeply in the midst of the mountains on its own [alternative translation: “self-so-ingly”] relate to my heart(-and-mind)?” The teacher said: “When you haven’t yet seen these flowers, these flowers in relation to your heart(-and-mind) in the same way of a (non-qualified) stillness belong to the heart(-and-mind). When you come along and see these blossoms, this is when the colours of the blossoms (suddenly) appear clearly. Therefore know that these flowers are not outside of your heart(-and-mind).” ⁴⁰ (Wang Yangming, *Chuanxilu*, ed. 1933, xia, 18, trans. DB)

For Wang Yangming, “things” (*wu* 物) can mean objects in the context of our direct experience, like a flower that we perceive in a particular instant. But the word can likewise also refer to situations or tasks that we are fulfilling. “Thing(s)” (*wu*) possibly refers to everything which is present in our consciousness while we are

³⁸ The latter is to be viewed as a constant transformative creative flow of experience and change, posited in an intended directionality of the “emitting-moving” (*fadong* 發動) as the effect of an inherent autopoietic will(ing).

³⁹ Source text: “夫理無內外·性無內外·”

⁴⁰ Source text: “先生遊南鎮·一友指巖中花樹問曰·天下無心外之物·如此花樹·在深山中自開自落·於我心亦何相關·先生曰·你未看此花時·此花與汝心同歸於寂·你來看此花時·則此花顏色一時明白起來·便知此花不在你的心外·”

actively participating in our environment. In this sense, the flowers perceived are not “things” in the sense of some kind of substance-based entities, but each blossom is eminently to be understood as a “thing” in the sense of the *situation of experiencing* the perception of this particular blossom.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasise that this functional determination which is constantly “emitted” from the conscious centre of the heart(-and-mind), thereby resulting in situational “things”, is not aligned in a single direction. At the same time, the side of the “thing” which is experienced, and which can only be “real” as its particular experience as such, has a permanent influence on our situational knowledge, which in turn, as it were, also influences the heart(-and-mind)’s intentions and our decision-making processes, at least in a very basic way.⁴¹

This is also the very basic meaning to be derived from the third last Wang Yangming-quote further above. The basic aspects with their functions listed by Wang Yangming in that first passage actually have to be envisioned in the form of a chain of aspects being interlinked in a circular scheme. In this functional system of aspects, every one of the five basic aspects (altogether with their respective functions) can be taken as the beginning and the end of this self-referential system.

To provide an example for how in this classical Chinese perspective, consciousness, so-to-speak, “bites its own tail”, we can start with the aspect mentioned by Wang Yangming in the sense of the “knowing” (*zhi*) of *li*: The knowing is characterised by its “clear awareness” (*ming jue*). Now this clear awareness is reached or aroused by “perceiving and being in resonance” (*gan-ying*) with regard to “things” (*wu* 物) in the sense just mentioned above. Against the background of clear awareness resulting from knowing, the “heart(-and-mind)” (*xin*), which is only another perspective of the whole, is able to “master” (*zhuzai*) and to determine a respective way of taking action by letting the “emitting-moving” (*fadong*) function of the “will(ing)” (*yi*) do its part. The directed emission of this immanent intentionality is stirring up the particular functional aspect which Yangming calls “character(ising)” (*xing*) and which is related to the “consolidation” or “becoming apparent” (*ningju*) of a tendency of that which is to appear in the uppermost layer of our experience: the respective “thing(s)” (*wu*) of our experience. Their immanent function in the whole (unmoved and yet moving) structure of understanding (respectively the “*Verstand*”) is to arouse the constant “clear awareness” (*ming jue*) of situational “knowing” (*zhi*).

Et voilà: *there it appears again!* immanent What we got here from Wang Yangming is an immanent system of most basic functions which, implicitly being intertwined in the permanently “standing” form of a “circle”, represent the persisting intentional and perceptive structure throughout all of our permanently shifting experiences. At bottom, this presents us with the same *foundational logic* (German: *Grundlogik*) of a *unity through difference* which is also to be viewed as the foundation of the reality at the very core of the most elaborated outcome of the German philosophy tradition. In this sense of our transcultural perspective here, it might not be too far-fetched to say that Wang Yangming is eager to semantically point

⁴¹ For a very detailed analysis in this regard please refer to Bartosch (2015, 390–424).

towards the inherent nature of change in the context of understanding (respectively *Verstehen*).

In the (self-) conscious process of understanding, we permanently experience ourselves in the “in-between-ness” of the (self-) evocation of “our” present things *and a perceptive “response”* (*gan-ying* 感應) which the things of our experience permanently evoke in the sense of their respective cognitive reflections. When we become aware of this basic structure of our self, including especially our “*Ver-stand*” (in the dialectic sense outlined earlier), *we begin to understand in the most original sense*—because we are reaching a state of full resonance in which we “stand through” our lives in a permanent state of openness and *understanding*, meaning a self-perfecting, awareness-growing “*in-between-ness*”.

Conclusion

The present philosophical exploration might best be considered as a transcultural philosophical experiment in which the author has ventured forward towards one of the most basic philosophical topics itself: we were dealing with the creative limits of the possibilities of conceptualisation on this occasion. In order to explore the respective notion of understanding (and, later, the meta-position of an understanding of understanding) cross-culturally, a starting point had been chosen which is suggesting general anthropological constants in this regard. Our unique human feature of living our waking state based on walking and upright standing body postures characterises our ways of life in general, and it enables our cognitive abilities in the sense of a very central and culture-transcendent, more specifically psychophysiological foundation. After that, the term “understanding” has been explored etymologically and with regard to inherent layers of word-semantics, namely also in the sense of metaphorical layers which transcend and transform the layer of mere literal meanings of an exceptional psychophysiological human condition. Accordingly, understanding has been reflected then in the figurative sense of a special “self-positing” of human consciousness itself. The etymological perspective in the context of the Germanic languages English and German has shown that the word “understanding” derives from a meaning of “standing-in-between” or “standing amongst”. This has provided a vantage point to relate the evolving reflection of understanding to the ancient Chinese concept of *ren* 人 in the Confucian classic *Liji* where we got to know the human being as an upright walking intersection of *yin-yang*, namely of heaven-and-earth in the particular ancient sense, and implicitly also in correlation with the respective contemporary world views, forms of social organisation etc. Furthermore, and through an in-depth analysis of the semantics of the German word “*Verstehen*” (understanding), it became feasible to show that the “in-between-situatedness” of human consciousness stands its ground as a unity *through* difference (as a unifying self-conscious process of fixation and change, self-seclusion and openness, past and future etc.). According to Wang Yangming, human consciousness, which, at least in its waking state, is in a reciprocal state of subjective (self-) emergence and

objective (self-) perception, is immanently in “resonance”⁴² within itself *as* everything that is experienced or encountered alongside the paths of our lives. Human consciousness is “itself” reflected as being identical with the basic form of its permanent “*under-standing*”, namely in the sense of an “in-betweenness” or “amongstness” in the most original and most general possible sense also in this contemporary Chinese horizon of Wang Yangming thought. Our life is permanently enfolding and elevating itself in between its own self-positing and its own self-revocation in relation to its particular ends. To reflect this not only in words but practically and permanently in every situation of our waking state then becomes the non-finalisable (autological) exercise of the all-permeating self-referential principle which has been called the *understanding of understanding* here. The related form of a growing and self-enriching consciousness, becoming aware of itself and thus less and less hindered in its correspondences, has to be considered as the ultimate reference point for all forms of mutual and reciprocal integration amongst different civilisations and cultures.

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⁴² For a very insightful discussion of the topic of resonance from a transcultural philosophical perspective see also Elberfeld (2017, 274–327).

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