

ON JULLIEN'S REPLY TO BILLETER'S CRITIQUE: MOVING BEYOND THE CARTESIAN COGITO AS A METHODOLOGICAL CONCERN

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Abstract. *François Jullien's research, which encompasses European philosophy and sinology, has been questioned by the sinologist Jean François Billeter in a specific publication that triggers the reply of the former. I delve into Jullien's reply with reference to the contingency of European thought, whose Cartesian cogito represents somehow the very point of divergence in the debate. The main goal of this paper is to clarify how the sentence I think, therefore I am turns out to be a fundamental methodological concern in Jullien's research. His reflection about the Cartesian cogito leads him to question the possibility of a pure act of thinking in order to explore how European thought and Chinese thought exploit the diverse features of their languages as intellectual resources.*

Keywords: *François Jullien, Cartesian Cogito, Chinese Philosophy, Jean François Billeter, Francophone Sinology.*

François Jullien is a present-day French scholar whose research horizon encompasses European philosophy and sinology in an original way. His work stems from the fundamental philosophical reflection that took place in Europe in the last century, which includes the Heideggerian problem of the ubiquity of the metaphysics of presence in Western thought and the Derridean tool of the deconstruction. But it also enlarges the borders of this reflection by embracing and interfering with sinology and the study of Chinese thought. In this regard, the Swiss

sinologist Jean François Billeter develops an extensive critique of Jullien's research in a specific publication (Billeter 2006). By focusing on Jullien's (2007) reply to Billeter's critique, the goal of this paper is to delve into and think over Jullien's reply as an effort to elucidate how he deals with the contingency of European thought. I think that Jullien's problematization of Descartes' (1999) philosophy is at the very bottom of his attempt to distance himself from a naïve account of European thought as a methodological commitment. In Jullien's research, the Cartesian sentence *I think, therefore I am* is examined by means of a fruitful step outside the European philosophical elaboration from which the sentence takes shape. This displacement results in an intercultural

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and interdisciplinary movement questioning the Cartesian *cogito* as the main methodological concern related to the contingency of European thought.

This paper develops an attempt to elucidate the problem of the Cartesian philosophy starting from the debate between Jullien and Billeter as their key point of divergence. Billeter's argumentation primarily questions Jullien by criticizing both his approach to and understanding of Chinese thought. On the other hand, Jullien unfolds a sharp response to Billeter's perspective that can also represent an overview of his theoretical concerns. Hence, I examine how Jullien challenges Jullien's sinology, by making the methodological choice to question the European categories that are supposed to be universal and, therefore, culturally neutral. I delve into the direction of his research as a further elaboration of the previous twentieth-century European reflection mainly rooted in the problem of what Nietzsche (2008) called *philosophy's atavism* in Europe. This atavism belongs to the beginnings of European philosophy and has been continuously reiterated by European philosophers over the centuries. It represents somehow both a resource to think and a bond from which European philosophers are not able to move away. In this sense, my reading of Jullien's research ends up elucidating how the contingency of European thought exemplified by the Cartesian *cogito* works as a kind of methodological *atavism* in the study of Chinese thought. In doing so, I frame Jullien's work as a challenging interplay between European philosophy and sinology that turns out to rethink how to approach the richness of diverse thoughts and their languages. In my

view, his reply (Jullien 2007) to Billeter's (2006) text takes shape exactly in the light of Jullien's critique of the Cartesian *cogito* enabling his theoretical elaboration about the connection between language and thought. Hence, this paper also examines his research with reference to the wider epistemological issues (especially, what does thinking actually mean, and how does a language contribute to the development of thought?) that it subsumes and tries to face too without ending up with positivism and determinism. In this paper, my exploration of Jullien's research aims at elucidating its key element related to the issue of the Cartesian *cogito* and retrieves the debate with Billeter for this purpose. However, I do not open up my examination to more general issues and theorizations relating to the Cartesian *cogito*, which would lead me to retrieve wider philosophical discussions, such as the debate between universalism and particularism. The focus of this paper is not on the contextualisation of Jullien's research within them, but rather my primary aim is to delve into and clarify his work in relation to the issue of the Cartesian *cogito*.

By providing a critical response to Billeter's sinology, which somehow represents one of the commonly accepted perspectives in the study of Chinese thought, Jullien elucidates his interdisciplinary endeavour, which in my view is without a specific place in any disciplinary framework. While approaching this debate, I firstly pay attention to the way in which Billeter questions Jullien by introducing his account of Chinese thought. Secondly, before addressing Jullien's reply, I delve into what I consider Jullien's major reflection about the contingency of European thought. Thirdly, I also investigate how Jul-

lien challenges the normative frameworks related to both the study of European thought and the study of Chinese thought. In this regard, I retrieve Georges Canguilhem's (1991, 2008) and Michel Foucault's (1991) concern for the norm in order to elucidate Jullien's movement between European philosophy and sinology that turns out to modify them both. Lastly, my reading of Jullien's reply that focuses on the Cartesian sentence *I think, therefore I am* clarifies how he rejects the possibility of a purely individual and completely de-contextualized act of thinking; he succeeds in escaping from the effects of the Cartesian *cogito* by devoting special attention to the connection between language and thought. In my account, the exploration of this connection works in a way that can shed light on the features of language in relation to thought as fundamental intellectual resources.

Billeter's Critique in Two Points

The small book *Contre François Jullien* represents Billeter's (2006) critique of Jullien's research. As a famous sinologist, Billeter unfolds the argumentation that is based on a particular understanding of the study of Chinese thought. I take into consideration his framework as both an ethical and a methodological reference of his perspective. In my view, it collides with Jullien's research in at least two key points. On the one hand, Billeter questions the way in which Jullien approaches Chinese thought from what seems an ethical point of view. On the other hand, he criticizes Jullien's account of Chinese thought at a more methodological level. Both these key points are also useful to approach Jullien's reply, by showing how

Billeter's critique could indirectly subsume the Cartesian *cogito* that seems to prevent him from facing the issue of the contingency of European thought in sinology.

As I have already specified, the first point that I explore in Billeter's critique can represent a kind of ethical examination of Jullien's approach. According to the Swiss sinologist, Jullien describes Chinese thought as a counterpart of Western thought (Billeter 2006: 63). He questions Jullien's relationship with China in the following way:

We can start from the myth of the fundamental alterity of China, like François Jullien does explicitly and like many sinologists do in a more dissimulated way, and develop a view on China that confirms the alterity placed at the beginning. (Billeter 2006: 82)¹

Hence, in Billeter's view, Jullien ends up depicting Chinese thought as a basic alterity of Western thought. According to the Swiss sinologist, the work of his French colleague stands out from other scholars who define similar alterity, since Jullien's approach is framed as the most explicit version of them. Billeter seems to glimpse in Jullien's research a kind of attempt to reflect by making up an unrealistic image of Chinese thought.

Apart from this issue that is primarily an ethical concern, the other point that I take into account is even more important in exploring the debate. Billeter's methodology reflects a traditional approach that tends to consider Chinese texts as significantly influenced and driven by contextual factors. This type of approach stresses the importance

¹ The original quote is as follows: "Nous pouvons partir du mythe de l'altérité foncière de la Chine, comme François Jullien le fait explicitement et comme beaucoup de sinologues le font de façon plus dissimulée, et développer une vision de la Chine qui confirme l'altérité posée au départ."

of how thought turns out to take shape in the light of the historical development of its context. It brings an understanding of Chinese thought as significantly moulded by the imperial power. That is to say, Billeter's (2006: 69-70) observations seem to subsume the fact that the imperial power prevents Chinese philosophers from developing a substantial independent thinking that is largely free from the duty of preserving and covering the specific political order. Thus, in his critique, the plausibility of Jullien's endeavour seems to be not only compromised by the issue of alterity, but also by the fact that it lacks this theoretical commitment that aims at recognizing the key role of the imperial power. Billeter (2006: 69-70) exemplifies this role by mentioning the Chinese account of the ideas of regulation and harmony; in his understanding, their importance in China stems from the imperial despotism and the culture that has covered it (*la culture qu'il a secrétée*). Regulation and harmony have been developed in the shadow of the Chinese political order working as a source of constraints for Chinese thinkers. Billeter (2006: 83) claims to consider both European and Chinese people as free and responsible individuals (*individus libres et responsables*). It is interesting to note that the European reflection coming from the Cartesian philosophy has grounded freedom and responsibility in the idea of the Cartesian *cogito*. Hence, the issue of the imperial power subsumes the fact that Chinese thought could have been developed otherwise in line with the pure and isolated Cartesian act of thinking, which seems to represent somehow the theoretical underpinning of freedom and responsibility. From another perspective, as I explore

later in this paper, Jullien's aim is to frame Chinese thought and European thought in the same abstract but tangible way, which means neither reducing Chinese thought to its political context nor decontextualizing it as the production of singular and pure acts of thinking. In my reading, the key point in his approach results in the study of the ways in which both European and Chinese philosophers exploited different features of the languages they used to think. Hence, in this paper his major methodological concern turns out to be related to the contingency of European thought that I explore in the following section as a preliminary step to think over how Jullien's research approaches the issue of the Cartesian *cogito*, which I clarify extensively by considering his reply (Jullien 2007) in the debate with Billeter (2006).

The Contingency of European Thought

The contingency of European thought can be considered a challenging point in cross-cultural research, since the historical development of European thought can represent a critical source of issues about the approaches and methods that are adopted. The philosophical depth of Jullien's work is significant in his way of getting closer to Chinese thought which, in my view, is also a stimulating way of uncovering the contingency of European thought. The very general concern is probably summarized by the issue of the false universality, and therefore false neutrality, of the categories that are employed to study other thoughts. As a result, facing the problem of the superimposition of the categories of one's own culture

onto other cultures also means uncovering the contingency of European thought. In Jullien's (2012b: 44-45) words, the point is to move beyond the facile universalism (*universalisme facile*), since it subsumes an immediate universality that justifies an ethnocentric description of other cultures. This movement should be balanced by a particular attention to the opposite but complementary pole of the problem, namely the lazy relativism (*relativisme paresseux*), which encloses cultures within isolated and rigid identities. On the contrary, in his account (Jullien 2012b: 43), any culture is characterized by internal forces that mark its dynamism.

The Nietzschean idea of *philosophy's atavism* is a philosophical issue that Jullien touches in his attempt to challenge both the *facile* universalism and the *lazy* relativism. Thus, the contingency of European thought is also something that European philosophers exploited to start thinking without being able to go beyond it in a meaningful way. That is why Jullien outlines his particular work between European philosophy and sinology, which is also a movement between European thought and Chinese thought that wants to avoid thinking within *philosophy's atavism*. While in philosophy the issue concerns how to think beyond and without this atavism, in sinology the same issue regards how to drop the European culture's categories in order to get closer to Chinese thought. Jullien (2012a: 155-156) argues that European thought is characterized by the ontological and predicative tools of language. His historical look at European thought leads to ancient Greek language which allowed ancient thinkers

to develop their thought starting from these tools. Thinking with and through European thought means exploiting this contingency, but also being somehow limited by it. In this regard, Jullien's (2012b: 40) employs the expression *fonds d'entente* to talk about the resource of a culture that is adopted to think and whose limits are not perceived from within that culture. *Fonds d'entente* represents the "*basis of understanding* (of a culture)" (Jullien and Anspach 2012: 500) that works as a tacit agreement from which a disagreement can take shape (Jullien 2012a: 167). On the other hand, doing sinology by ignoring the contingency of European thought means remaining within the European categories. As a result, Jullien (2012a: 186) talks about knowledge (*connaissance*) and connivance (*connivence*) in a way that this pair points to the fact that giving up the familiarity of the categories of one's own culture should be an epistemological concern. To be more precise, moving beyond connivance means recognizing that there is no way to develop knowledge about another culture without quitting the categories of one's own culture. As I address in the last section after clarifying the interdisciplinary trait of Jullien's work, the Cartesian *cogito* in the debate can be framed in a more general way as an issue related to the contingency of European categories that affects the study of thought across cultures.

Jullien's Research as an Interdisciplinary Endeavour

Before delving into Jullien's reply to Billetter and the role that the critique of the Cartesian *cogito* plays in the dispute, I recon-

sider Jullien's work as a movement between European philosophy and sinology. Thanks to a wider look at his research framework, I think that it is also possible to figure out the issue of the Cartesian *cogito* in a deeper way. It seems to me that Jullien is not a typical eclectic scholar who encompasses different disciplines, but rather his research is able to challenge somehow the tacit disciplinary boundaries of the study of European thought and the study of Chinese thought. Here the main point is how to approach European thought and Chinese thought in the same way. For example, a pure political starting point to approach Chinese thought would define an asymmetry between the interpretation of European thought and the one of Chinese thought. Jullien (2007: 67-69, 137) pays attention to what can affect the understanding of Chinese thought. The main concern is to move beyond a sort of imbalance between the study of European thought and the study of Chinese thought, where the former is approached as the result of philosophers' efforts to develop their thought, while the interpretation of the latter tends to be reduced to an expression of the coercive forces of the political power.

As I clarify in the next section, Jullien's (2007) reply represents a critical way to interfere with Billeter's (2006) sinology through European philosophy. Here I retrieve Canguilhem's and Foucault's concern for norm and normativity in order to uncover how Jullien's research is able to cross and interfere with the disciplinary boundaries in the study of European thought and Chinese thought. Being a philosopher and historian of science, Canguilhem (2008: 133) remarks that medicine and biology always subsume a given "anthropology" and

its related "morality" which provides a specific account of the normal. Foucault (1991) recognizes the importance of Canguilhem's research in his work where the issue of norm and normativity is framed within the social and political processes that are responsible for the production of subjectivity. I think that in a more general sense it is possible to recognize that any academic discipline, or any field of study, brings a sort of normative effects surrounding its scholars and shaping their subjectivity. For example, the tradition of normative dimension related to scholars of philosophy tends to employ the concept of comparison in order to move beyond and across the borders of Western reflection. In this regard, Jullien's research undertakes an original intercultural movement by questioning the validity of the term comparison (Jullien 2012b: 23-29; Jullien and Anspach 2012). In his account, the pair identity and difference, which is placed at the bottom of comparison, comes from the ancient Greek ideas of metaphysics and ontology. Comparison is rooted in the philosophical elaboration characterizing European thought and, therefore, its pair of terms identity and difference cannot be universal and neutral across cultures. In conclusion, I think that comparison brings a kind of normative effect in philosophical research across cultures and, more in general, any academic discipline or a field of study tends to define what is plausible to address and state in a way that it moulds a kind of normative framework. In the next section, I explore how Jullien's work challenges the normative frameworks of European philosophy and sinology, by questioning the Cartesian *cogito*.

Jullien and the Issue of the Cartesian Cogito

Since I consider the Cartesian sentence *I think, therefore I am* as a fundamental methodological concern in Jullien's research, the previous two sections addressed as preliminary steps the more general issue of the contingency of European thought and Jullien's interdisciplinary horizon. In this section I begin with a further clarification of the sentence, being in my view the very point of divergence between Billeter and Jullien. I previously mentioned that Billeter's (2006) critique seems to be in line with the traditional research framework affirming the key role of the political power in Chinese thought. This framework implies a theoretical underpinning related to a specific idea of individual freedom and responsibility (Billeter 2006: 83) in a way that the interpretation of Chinese thought turns out to be significantly marked by the attention to the effects of the imperial power. On the contrary, Jullien's view moves beyond the stressing of the role of the imperial power, as European thought and Chinese thought can be studied in a similar way (Jullien 2007: 67-69). Hence, it seems to me that Billeter's (2006: 83) remark of individual freedom and responsibility probably remains in line with, or at least seems to subsume, the Cartesian *cogito* defining the possibility of a pure individual act of thinking from which to develop thought. As a result, here the Cartesian *cogito* is not only a theoretical underpinning in the study of thought but also the measure of the individual freedom compromised by the contextual factor of the imperial power. The possibility of a pure act of thinking is

problematized by Jullien in a sophisticated way. Here the Cartesian sentence *I think, therefore I am* is a naïve idea which cannot represent a theoretical underpinning in the study of thought across cultures. As he remarks:

Where is this "we" (of the language, of the categories of thought, of the ideology...) buried in this "I" that I say so nobly, heroically (naively?): "I" think? (Jullien 2007: 37)²

Hence, *I* subsumes *we* in the sense that any act of thinking always seizes on something, such as a shared language and its categories. In Jullien's view, *I think* implies *we think*, because we never think in an isolated way. As a result, thinking does not mean approaching a sort of universal and neutral space in which it is possible to discover categories.

By moving beyond the Cartesian possibility of the pure act of thinking, any account of whatever thought as a mere result of contextual facts, such as political power, turns out to be simplistic, being dissolved by the pair of decontextualized mind and contextual factors. Then the clarification of how people actually think is a preliminary methodological concern, especially when Jullien (2007: 67) comes to the issue of the study of thought as abstract thought. In this regard, the Cartesian *cogito* seems to obscure the fact that any attempt to develop one's thought is related to the language that one uses. A starting point of any account of thinking should be to acknowledge that, even though the relationship between language and thought is not deterministic, the language

² The original quote is as follows: "Ou quel est ce « nous » (de la langue, des catégories de pensée, de l'idéologie...) enfoui dans ce « Je » qui dit si noblement, héroïquement (naïvement?): « je » pense?"

that we use predisposes somehow our thinking (Jullien 2007: 52). Jullien points out:

If I “place” something, then it will not be some “alterity” in principle, but rather this one: thinking, it will be first of all exploiting the resources of the language in which one thinks. (Jullien 2007: 52)³

Therefore, the problematization of the Cartesian *cogito* makes room for a diverse account of the act of thinking. This account moves beyond the Cartesian idea of a pure act of thinking without subsuming any a priori alterity. It seems to me that Jullien’s exploration of the connection between language and thought is heuristically useful to escape from the normative effects of the naïve *I think*. We never think and doubt in an isolated way, since we are always within a shared language and the concepts that have been developed by means of that language (Jullien 2012a: 11). The features of a given language represent its tools of thought in the sense that they facilitate the development of thought in some directions rather than in others. In Jullien’s (2012a: 154-156, 2014: 49-51) account, European language-thought is characterized by the ontological and predicative tools (such as, the ancient Greek thinkers developed metaphysics and a discourse about being, namely ontology, starting from the verb to be in their language), while Chinese language-thought gives shape to polarities and fosters correlations of factors.⁴ Thus, the understanding of thought as

related to its language and tools represents a methodological turn that goes beyond the Cartesian decontextualized mind insofar as it escapes from the typical consequences of the sentence *I think, therefore I am*. On the one hand, it does not affirm a facile isolation as a precondition of any valuable act of thinking. On the other hand, it does not run the risk of reducing the account of the development of one’s own thought to the problem of thinking without external influences.

Conclusion

This paper explored how Jullien’s research deals with the contingency of European thought in sinology through his attempt to give up the European categories in order to get closer to Chinese thought. In this regard, as I showed, the problematization of the Cartesian *cogito* turns out to be a key issue that can also be fruitfully elucidated by addressing his reply (Jullien, 2007) to Billeter’s (2006) critique. A historical approach that stresses the importance of the political power as a contextual factor shaping Chinese thought seems to rely on the possibility of a pure and isolated act of thinking, which is minimised by the contextual factor itself. As a result, an approach like that emphasises the contextualisation of thought within the political power as a historical reality that tends to nullify the Cartesian decontextualized mind in which pure acts of thinking can take shape. On the contrary, as I examined, Jullien’s account is rooted in problematization of the contingency of European thought whose Cartesian *cogito* is a case in point. Here the problem is that the Cartesian *cogito*

³ The original quote is as follows: “Si je « pose » quelque chose, ce ne sera donc pas quelque « altérité » de principe, mais plutôt ceci : penser, ce serait d’abord exploiter les ressources de la langue dans laquelle on pense.”

⁴ In Chinese language the term for thing is east-west (dōng-xī 东西), which outlines a correlation between east and west; other examples are mountain-water

(shān-shuǐ 山水), which is a term for landscape, and yin and yang (Jullien 2014: 49-51).

is a misleading theorisation, since the act of thinking is never pure and isolated. Thus, a historical approach that gives too much emphasis to the political factors in the shaping of thought runs the risk of subsuming the reality of the Cartesian *cogito* as the starting point of thought. And, at the same time, it also runs the risk of affirming an imbalance of interpretation between European thought and non-European thought, since the former has been widely studied as abstract thought beyond the pair of Cartesian *cogito* and political factors. In my reading, Jullien's work represents an original attempt to challenge this pair in the study of Chinese thought and, more generally, of non-European thought. His attempt is grounded in the contextualisation of the act of thinking by means of an emphasis on the connection between language and thought. Here the key "contextual" factors in the study of both European thought and Chinese thought are the concepts, the tools of thought, and

therefore the language features from which thinkers have started thinking.

By interfering with both European philosophy and sinology, the study of European thought and the study of Chinese thought, Jullien faces the issue of the Cartesian *cogito* in a complementary way. In sinology, the Cartesian *cogito* becomes a methodological concern about the contingency of European thought in the study of Chinese thought. In philosophy, Jullien's research challenges the Cartesian *cogito* that questions what we think, since his intercultural and interdisciplinary horizon, and therefore his interaction with sinology, can be considered as an attempt to question what we use as tools to think (Jullien 2012a: 159). *I think* no longer refers to an isolated mind, but rather the act of thinking is a collective endeavour. The act of thinking is related to a shared language insofar as it exploits the tools of thought that have been developed through the features of that language.

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APIE JULLIENO ATSAKYMĄ Į BILLETERIO KRITIKĄ: IŠĖJIMAS ANAPUS KARTEZIŠKOJO *COGITO* KAIP METODOLOGINIS INTERESAS

Francesco Carpanini

Santrauka. François Jullieno tyrinėjimus, apimančius Europos filosofiją ir sinologiją, vienoje publikacijoje kvestionavo Jean François Billeter, išprovokuodamas pirmojo atsakymą. Šiame straipsnyje gilinamasi į Jullieno atsakymą ir kontingentiškumu pasižymintį europietišką mąstymą, kurio karteziškasis *cogito* reprezentuoja diskutuojančių nuomonių išsiskyrimo tašką. Pagrindinis šio straipsnio tikslas yra paaiškinti, kaip sakinyss „Mąstau, vadinasi, egzistuoju“ pavirsta fundamentaliu metodologiniu interesu Jullieno tyrinėjimuose. Jo samprotavimai apie karteziškąjį *cogito* verčia jį kvestionuoti grynojo mąstymo akto galimybę siekiant iširti, kaip europietiškas mąstymas ir kiniškas mąstymas naudojasi skirtingomis savųjų kalbų, kaip intelektinių išteklių, savybėmis.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: François Jullien, karteziškasis *cogito*, kinų filosofija, Jean François Billeter, prancūziškoji sinologija

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