

Peng Feng | 彭峰

SIGNIFICANCE OR PRESENCE: RE-CONCEPTUALIZING  
PLURALISM FROM A CONFUCIAN PERSPECTIVE

*Abstract*

Under the influence of the linguistic turn in philosophy, contemporary Western philosophers typically limit their thinking on pluralism to the realm of language. This sort of pluralism can be named as pluralism of significance. I propose another version of pluralism in light of Confucianism, which extends the concerns from the realm of language to the realm of experience – I call it pluralism of presence. In this article, I first expound the aforementioned two versions of pluralism on the basis of Hans-Georg Moeller's semiotic trichotomy. I then argue that the conflict between multiculturalism and cultural identity in today's globalized world and the failure of pluralism of significance in resolving this conflict can be overcome by pluralism of presence. Finally, I show a possibility of reconciliation between pluralism of significance and pluralism of presence.

With today's ineluctable process of globalization, people necessarily live in a multicultural society. The inevitable consequence of the interactive nature of our contemporary cultures is cultural hybridity. Given that the life of a culture follows from its identity, does this kind of cultural hybridity threaten cultural identity? And does the need for a persistent cultural identity threaten stability within an interactive multicultural community? A clear conflict emerges between multiculturalism and cultural identity within the transactions of such a diverse society. How to resolve such conflicts is not only a political question but also a philosophical one. Some contemporary philosophers suggest that pluralism can temper this conflict. Under the influence of the linguistic turn in philosophy, contemporary philosophers normally limit their thinking on pluralism to the realm of language. I call it pluralism of significance. If we look back to traditional Chinese philosophy however, we will find another version of pluralism that tries to extend its concerns from the realm of language to the realm of experience. I call it a pluralism of presence. In this essay, I will try to articulate these two versions of pluralism and to argue that the conflict between multiculturalism

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and cultural identity that the pluralism of significance attempts and yet fails to resolve, can indeed be overcome by the pluralism of presence.

*A distinction based on semiotics*

Hans-Georg Moeller distinguishes three semiotic paradigms – presence, representation, and significance – that roughly correspond to premodern, modern, and postmodern philosophy. The core concept is “representation”. Moeller sometimes calls these same three semiotic paradigms prerepresentation, representation, and postrepresentation. Representation is conceptually based on the difference between presence and representation. Within this paradigm of representation, Moeller writes:

[T]he sign, or more precisely, the signifier, represents some more or less complex entity, the signified, which is present. The signified can, for instance, consist of a certain thing, which is its referent, or a certain idea, which is its meaning, or of both at the same time.... The status of the representing signifier is typically defined as being secondary in relation to its signified. Representation always follows behind and is dependent on presence.<sup>1</sup>

The paradigm of representation is the dominant one in traditional European philosophy. It is criticized by many postmodern philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and so on. They have all tried to undermine the authority of “classical semiology” and have in different ways contributed to the revolution of the sign that has eventuated in the so-called “crisis of representation”. As a result, the paradigm of significance or postrepresentation becomes dominant in postmodern philosophy. Moeller writes:

In contrast to the paradigm of representation, the paradigm of significance does not search for any origin of signs beyond representation itself. While the paradigm of representation introduces the relation between the signifier and signified as a relation between, so to speak, entities of “two different worlds”, the paradigm of significance introduces it as a binary relation, constitutive for the “one world of signs”.<sup>2</sup>

Since this new paradigm of significance follows the paradigm of representation, Moeller calls it postrepresentation.

In addition to the paradigm of postrepresentation, Moeller, as a philosopher and sinologist, finds another semiotic paradigm of nonrepresentation, that is,

<sup>1</sup> Moeller 2003: 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*: 72.

the paradigm of presence in traditional Chinese philosophy. Since the paradigm of presence logically precedes representation, it is designated the paradigm of prerepresentation. Moeller writes:

The ancient Chinese semiotic paradigm of presence is most apparent in the philosophical reflections on “forms and names” [...]. The Chinese theory of “forms and names” granted an equal ontological status to both the matter and the designation of the things.... Form and name constitute a thing just as shapes and color constitute a picture. None of the two entities is more “real” than the other. Signifier and signified are equally present. There is not yet a view of the sign as a “re-presenting” or as a second-order domain of reality.<sup>3</sup>

Moeller summarizes the differences between the three paradigms as follow:

While the Western postrepresentational paradigm is founded on the suspicion of the idea of presence underlying the re-presenting realm of significance, the pre-representational paradigm of ancient Chinese semiotics does not yet admit any detachment from presence. Names are present in and together with things. As soon as they are detached from things, the world may fall into disorder. The presence of names in things guarantees order. To split up the signifier and the signified would result in chaos. Representation is, so to speak, the threat of all threats. While postrepresentational semiotics is suspicious of presence, prerepresentational semiotics is afraid of representation.<sup>4</sup>

This is not the place for me to make general remarks on Moeller’s semiotic trichotomy.<sup>5</sup> What is useful for my purposes here is this background of semiotic distinction and the terms of presence, representation, and significance. The distinction between the pluralism of presence and the pluralism of significance in the following sections is based on the concepts of Moeller’s semiotic trichotomy.

### *Pluralism of significance based on Postmodernism*

The semiotic paradigm of significance can explain why postmodern philosophers presuppose pluralism. Since there is no “one” reality but “many” signs, we cannot make sure which sign is the real, true, or original one; every sign would be equally real, true, and original. With respect to human life, we can reasonably say that we do not know which kind of life is the good one; every way of life should be equally valuable for human beings. As Hilary Putnam argues, we

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*: 75.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*: 76.

<sup>5</sup> I have argued that the presence postmodern philosophy undermines is not the real presence, because it is actually something that lies behind the presence. See my paper (in Chinese), Peng 2006.

indeed have no knowledge about what human happiness is as a fixed end, and thus our choice of how to live is not predetermined by any known essence of human nature, function, or happiness. Every individual's distinctive thinking with respect to the question of how to live can supply knowledge for enriching human choices and lives. "There can be no final answer to the question of how we should live, and therefore we should always leave it open to further discussion and experimentation".<sup>6</sup> According to Putnam, we must maintain the diversity of life ways since every way of life is hopefully a good one.

Such being the case, we do not have the "reality" or "substance" to decide which way of life is the good life, Richard Rorty also argues for pluralism. A good life is attended by "self-enrichment" and "self-creation", and the search for such "self-enrichment" and "self-creation" occurs through redescribing the self in new vocabularies. "The desire to enlarge oneself," says Rorty, "is the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, of constantly learning, of giving oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future".<sup>7</sup> Arguably, Rorty's pursuit of pluralism is limited to the realm of language. For Rorty, the self is nothing but a complex web of vocabularies and narratives. Rorty explicitly says that "human beings are simply incarnated vocabularies";<sup>8</sup> it is simply "words which...made us what we are".<sup>9</sup> This vision of aesthetic-ethical life that submits itself to the narrative of language carries with it the typical bias toward signifier or significance.

Stanley Cavell offers a comparatively more ingenious argument for the reconciliation of liberty and equality. According to Cavell, the self is dynamic and not yet perfect, and is directed at self-improvement and (through this) at the improvement of society. Constantly in the making, the self should always strive towards a higher "unattained yet attainable self." Since one indeed has no knowledge about her further self, she can only choose a different way of life as her further self. Others who may be quite different from the self, can provide inspiring models for pursuing her further self, and so elicit a deep respect in her. Cavell writes:

Open to the further self, in oneself and in the other, which means holding oneself in knowledge of the need for change; which means, being one who lives in promise, as a sign, or representative human, which in turn means expecting oneself to be, making oneself, intelligible as an inhabitant now also of a further realm ..., call this the realm of the human—and to show oneself prepared to recognize others as belonging there.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Putnam 1992: 189.

<sup>7</sup> Rorty 1986: 11.

<sup>8</sup> Id. 1989: 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi*: 117.

<sup>10</sup> Cavell 1990: 125.

The main problem for Cavell's project is that the existence of the human being does not seem plastic enough to adopt such changes. As with Rorty, Cavell also limits his pursuit of the further self to the realm of language, and makes writing and reading the essence of self-perfection.<sup>11</sup> As Richard Shusterman remarks: "Cavell's emphasis on textual activity conveys (as it atones for) the admission that philosophy's true target is the ideal 'city of words' rather than the direction of actual community life".<sup>12</sup>

I do not think the pluralism of significance is really able to maintain "that there are ultimately many things, or many kinds of things" that is conceived by Edward Craig as being the core of pluralism,<sup>13</sup> and thus to resolve the conflict between multiculturalism and cultural identity. First of all, the realm of language or significance is not the realm of real life. What we are able to do in the realm of language through writing and reading does not mean that we can practice such things in real life.

Secondly, the self without any restrictions cannot really result in a plurality of personalities. Since everyone may have the same potential and ambition to enlarge her "self" to include as many personalities as possible, if she succeeds in such enlargement, her personality would be, ironically, the same as everyone else. Everyone's perfect self would be the same, that is, the sum total of personalities. Such unlimited freedom makes it contradictory for the self to practice self-enlargement in the social community, and is perhaps the reason why postmodern philosophers like to relegate the practices of self-enlargement to the realm of language.

Thirdly, the respectful attitude towards others in the pluralism of significance, especially in the case of Cavell, is not a genuine respect, but rather a kind of conquest. According to Cavell, respect for others derives from the fact that others are examples for the self to pursue her further self. In other words, others would be the targets of the self's conquest in her next step of self-perfection wherein the self will transform herself into one of the other selves. A perfect self needs to experience all lifestyles manifested by others. A perfect self should constantly give up the old self and acquire a new one. The other self would be dispensed with as soon as it has been experienced by the self. In this sense, the respect for others conceived by Cavell is not a real respect, but a kind of conquest or consumption.

<sup>11</sup> Cavell 1988: 10,18; 1990: 7-8, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Shusterman 1997: 106. For a critical analysis of Rorty, Putnam and Cavell, see Shusterman 1997: 67-110.

<sup>13</sup> Craig 1998: 463.

## *Pluralism of presence based on Confucianism*

Now, let me introduce a new pluralism based on Confucianism: that is, the pluralism of presence. As we have seen above, postmodernism with the semiotic paradigm of significance strives to create as novel a signifier or significance as possible, and to embrace signifier or significance as much as possible. In contrast, Confucianism makes an effort to convert signifier into signified or to transform significance into presence.

Confucius clearly preferred the signified to signifier, or presence to significance. We find that Confucius consistently criticizes “clever words” in the *Analects*.<sup>14</sup> There is also an anecdote about Confucius recorded in the *Shiji* by Sima Qian that demonstrates perfectly the Confucian preference of presence over significance:

Confucius was once learning to play on the *qin* (a string instrument) from the music master Xiangzi, and did not seem to make much progress for ten days. The music master said to him, “You may well learn something else now”, and Confucius replied, “I have already learned the melody, but have not learned the beat and rhythm yet”. After some time, the music master said, “You have now learned the beat and rhythm, you must take the next step”. “I have not yet learned the expression”, said Confucius. After a while, the music master again said, “Now you have learned the expression, you must take the next step”. And Confucius replied, “I have not yet got an image in my mind of the personality of the composer”. After some time the music master said, “There’s a man behind this music, who is occupied in deep reflection and who sometimes happily lifts up his head and looks far away, fixing his mind upon the eternal”. “I’ve got it now”, said Confucius, “He is a tall, dark man and his mind seems to be that of an empire builder. Can it be any other person than King Wen himself (the founder of the Chou Dynasty)?” The music master rose from his seat and bowed twice to Confucius and said, “It is the composition of King Wen”.<sup>15</sup>

Confucius’s search for self-perfection is profoundly different from Rorty’s self-enlargement and Cavell’s pursuit of further self. As to the significance,

<sup>14</sup>In *Analects* 1.3, the Master said: “It is a rare thing for glib speech and an insinuating appearance to accompany authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁).” (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 71). In *Analects* 5.25, the Master said: “Glib speech, an obsequious countenance, and excessive solicitude – Zuoqiu Ming thought this kind of conduct shameless, and so do I” (*ivi*: 101). In *Analects* 15.27, the Master said: “Clever words undermine excellence (*de* 德)” (*ivi*: 190). In *Analects* 13.27, the Master said: “Being firm, resolute, honest, and deliberate in speech is close to authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁).” (Ames, Rosemont 1998: 170). In *Analects* 1.14, the Master said: “In eating, exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment. They are persons of action yet cautious in what they say. They repair to those who know the way (*dao* 道), and find improvement in their company. Such persons can indeed be said to have a love of learning (*haoxue* 好学)” (*ivi*: 74-75). In *Analects* 4.24, the Master said: “The exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act” (*ivi*: 94).

<sup>15</sup>Lin 1938: 74-75.

the Confucius can be called a minimalism, while the later, on the contrary, a maximalism. Confucius did not deploy as many vocabularies as possible so as to reach a rich self by redescribing it in a rich language. On the contrary, he deployed as few vocabularies as possible so as to create a novel self by translating significance into presence. Confucius did not rush to learn many melodies, but kept to the practice of one, even when the master urged him to progress and move on. His purpose is not to deploy as many melodies as possible, but to recover from the melody the personality who created it.

This episode only shows that Confucianism embraces the semiotic paradigm of presence. It does not persuade us that Confucianism is a kind of pluralism. Normally monism or foundationalism, rather than pluralism, is derived from presence. However, Confucianism is an exception. Confucius was famous for encouraging different students to pursue different lifestyles. In contrast with Cavell, Confucianism not only respects but also appreciates others.

Confucianism surely admits that the self has many future possibilities. For example, Confucius frankly said of himself several times in the *Analects* that he is not a “Sage”. He is saying that his present state is not perfect and he should strive to realize his further self. He admits he is tireless in learning and in teaching other people,<sup>16</sup> that is to say that he constantly perfected not only his own but also others’ personalities. The self-realization practiced by Confucius is almost replicates the example of Cavell’s claim of self-realization. For Confucius, the process of self-realization did not reach its end in his lifetime. He said in *Analects* 2.4:

From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I stood my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* (*tianming* 天命); from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

Given that Confucius lived to be seventy-two years old, the stage of following “one’s heart’s desire without transgressing the norm” was the last one in his lifelong process of self-realization. One can reasonably assume that Confucius might have ascended again to another higher stage if he had lived to be eighty.

However, even if the self might have many possibilities in the future, the self also recognizes she can realize only one of these possibilities in any particular moment. What about the other possibilities? For Confucianism, if the self chooses one of his possibilities, at the same time the other possibilities will lose

<sup>16</sup> For example, in *Analects* 7.34, the Master said: “How would I dare to consider myself a sage (*sheng* 聖) or an authoritative person (*ren* 仁)? What can be said about me is simply that I continue my studies without respite and instruct others without growing weary.” (Ames, Rosemont 1998: 119).

<sup>17</sup> Ames, Rosemont 1998: 76-77.

their chance to be realized by the self. The other possibilities would then be the desired but unattainable further self. This desired but unattainable further self has lost its chance to be realized by the self in this moment, but are there other chances for them to be realized? Of course, they can be realized in the self's imagination, its narrative, or to borrow Cavell's example, in the self's life of reading and writing. However, the only way for them to be realized in the social community is by others. That is to say others may be regarded as the very realization of the self's desired but unattainable further selves. It is here that we can find a deep affinity between the self and others. Based on the recognition of their deep connection, others would not be potential materials or resources for one's own further self, but rather for the realization of the self's expectations or dreams. Thus it is that others become worthy of being appreciated as a necessary complement to the self and inspire in the self a deep feeling of oneness with others. This is the Confucian vision of respect for others. As the *Analects* 4.15 records:

The Master said, "Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao* 道) is bound together with one continuous strand". Master Zeng replied, "Indeed". When the Master had left, the disciples asked, "What was he referring to?" Master Zeng said, "The way of the Master is doing one's utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other's place (*shu* 恕), nothing more."<sup>18</sup>

Feng Youlan takes two maxims of Confucius to interpret the meaning of *zhong* and *shu*:

In the maxim, "Desiring to maintain oneself, one sustains others; desiring to develop oneself, one develops others", there is the Confucian virtue of "conscientiousness to others" or *zhong* (忠). And in the maxim, "Do not do to others what you do not like yourself", there is the Confucian virtue of *shu* (恕) or altruism. Genuinely to practice these virtues of *zhong* and *shu* is genuinely to practice *ren*.<sup>19</sup>

The virtues of *zhong* and *shu* form the basic attitude towards others for Confucius. The core of practicing "authoritative conduct" (*ren* 仁) or of practicing self-perfection is knowing how to treat others properly. The Confucian strategy for realizing these central virtues is to limit the self and to keep space for others to perfect their own selves. Others can be appreciated as the real realization of the self's desirable and unattainable further possibilities.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*: 92.

<sup>19</sup> Fung 1952: 71.



## *A Reconciliation between Confucianism and Postmodernism*

In the preceding sections I have articulated two kinds of pluralism, i.e., pluralism of significance and pluralism of presence, that can be found in postmodernism and Confucianism respectively. Indeed, they contradict each other in many ways. However, there are also some similarities between them and so offer possibilities for reconciliation.

Theoretically, the paradigm of presence and the paradigm of significance share a similar semiotic structure. That is, the signified and the signifier are not separated into two different realms. Both gainsay the paradigm of representation in which the signified and the signifier are separated into two different realms, i.e., the signified is in the realm of presence and the signifier is in the realm of representation. In the paradigm of presence, the signifier descends from representation into presence, while in the paradigm of significance, the signified ascends from presence into representation, and thus both overcome the split between the signified and the significance. In the paradigm of presence however, the signified and signifier are linked and descended into the realm of presence, while in the paradigm of significance both are linked and ascended into representation.

Actually, similarities between postmodern philosophy and Confucianism have been found. In the case of Richard Rorty, scholars “have found some surprising similarities between his philosophy and Confucianism, particularly in their conceptions of morality”.<sup>20</sup> Most of the similarities derive from the fact that both Rorty’s postmodern philosophy and Confucianism resist the dichotomy between the signifier and the signified. In the case of Rorty, the signified is ascended from presence into representation and linked with the signifier, while in the case of Confucianism the signifier is descended from representation into presence and linked with the signified.

The linking of signifier and signified can result in harmony. But two different harmonies. The pluralism of presence can result in the greater harmony while the pluralism of significance only the smaller one. Let me borrow the Confucian concepts name (*ming* 名) and reality (*shi* 实) to explain this claim. According to Confucianism, there are many names in a society, and “correction of names” (*zhengming* 正名) is the most important thing for those in authority. What Confucius called “correction of names” is to make the name accord with its actuality. “For if it is brought about that ruler, minister, father and son all act in real life in accordance with the definitions or concepts of these words, so that all carry out to the full their allotted duties,” as Feng Youlan interprets, “there will be no more disorder in the world”.<sup>21</sup> A world without disorder is

<sup>20</sup> Huang 2009: 2.

<sup>21</sup> Fung 1952: 60. For another interpretation of the correction of names in detail, see Makeham 1994: 35-50.

what I call great harmony. The world with great harmony consists of diverse individuals who have made their actualities accord with their names respectively. There are many different names for individuals to choose from to transform into actualities. Everybody can find her proper name and have the chance to make her actuality accord with her name. The great harmony does not consist of homogeneous individuals who finally occupy or consume all names. This is the consequence of the pluralism of significance, especially Cavell's mode. According to Cavell, people should acquire as many names as possible. As a result, everybody would similarly acquire all names and, ironically, reach the homogeneity of personalities – that is the sum total of personalities. A person acquiring all diverse names, if indeed possible, results in small harmony. The great harmony is a society with diverse people, while the small harmony is an individual with diverse names. Thus, the conflict between liberty and equality can be resolved in a big harmonious society rather than in a small harmonious person.

Unfortunately, in Moeller's semiotic trichotomy the meaning of the link between signifier and signified, that is shared by Confucianism and post-modernism, is neglected by himself. As a result, Confucianism is likely to be misunderstood as a kind of essentialism or foundationalism that is prevailing in premodern society.

Although Confucius preferred presence to significance, he especially emphasized the role of poetry, music and other arts, that belong to the realm of significance, in practicing self-perfection. As Confucius said in *Analects* 17.9:

My young friends, why don't any of you study the Songs? Reciting the Songs can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you.<sup>22</sup>

Since the signifier and signified is not split, they can penetrate and influence each other. Confucius recognized the importance of this mutual influence, and if postmodern philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell also realized this mutual influence, a reconciliation between them would be possible.

*Peking University*

<sup>22</sup> Ames, Rosemont 1998: 206.

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