

STYLE AND THE PROBLEM OF UNITY AND PLURALITY*

Archie J. BAHM**

Abstract. The study approaches the concept of style, from the perspective of the problem the One and the Many, shaping up as the problem of Unity and Plurality, to emphasize the topic of the universal truths, embedded in every particular culture.

Keywords: Unity, Plurality, style.

Turning to the topic of your Meeting on Cultural Styles, I find the language and way of stating a most fundamental problem, very interesting, partly because of its difference. I emphasize the word “style,” which has not been a word that I have used, even when dealing with the same problem for so long and so intricately.

This is the ancient and perennial problem of the One and the Many. It shapes up as the problem of Unity and Plurality. It occurs most obviously, and to most thinkers most annoyingly, as the problem of the whole and its parts. (It is ravaging university campuses in the U.S. today as the problem of cultural diversity provoked partly by legislation favoring minorities that has been carried too far.) The problem has shaped up in Western history as the spiritual (wholeness, holiness) and material (parts, particulars), and a dualism resulting from the conviction that a whole (spirit) is not its parts (body, matter), and to identify the two in any way constitutes a contradiction. It is kind of seeming contradiction that prevents us from solving the problem and putting it to some kind of rest.

For me, in addition to a whole which is not its parts and the parts which are not the whole, both exist together in a larger whole, which I call an “organic whole.” My studies in Chinese philosophy have led me to interpret this larger whole (TAO) as a whole and parts embodying mutual immanence.

Turning from the problem of the one and the many as a metaphysical and logical problem to Cultural Styles, this problem occurs most violently in the clash of claims in religious and political belief especially those firmly established in traditional customs.

You state the problem in terms of “categorical and exclusive assertion of identity and autonomy” versus “fertile interaction between cultures” or “absolute universality of cultural traits” versus “emphasis on style diversity”. Your dichotomies are not clear to me, and you may have something in mind that is much more subtle

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** Honoured Professor of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, USA.

and specialised than my more simple distinction between views held fanatically versus those held tentatively.

For me, the issue is not one of “style” (something which I do not understand) but one of “truth” (something which I do partly understand; recent studies in Comparative Philosophy have enlightened me further: more about this if you ask for it). People adhere to traditional beliefs because they believe them to be true. When so, I believe that they have a commitment to truth. When they encounter the beliefs of other cultures, then the problem of truth versus tradition(al truth) arises. “Believers” ignore the problem. Philosophers are bothered by it, and should be.

Personally, I am now engaged in a project, “The World Philosophy Project”, stated initially in the enclosed “Methodology for World Philosophy” I am this week in the process of writing to the Director of the UNESCO Division of Philosophy and Ethics in Paris to request its statement of its acceptance of responsibility for concern for World Philosophy and its inability to conduct research requires it to authorize its United Nations University in Tokyo to accept responsibility for establishing an agency to be concerned with the Methodology for Considering World Philosophy. It is too early to say what will become of this endeavor. But you can see from the attempt that I do believe that it is possible (even if not probable) for humankind to come to some agreement about some principles about the nature of self, society and the universe.

For example, when asked for examples of Essentials, I reply with examples from three philosophical traditions. Jesus: “Love casteth out fear”. Confucius: “Treat each other person as you would be treated if you were that person”. Gotama, The Buddha: “if you don't get what you want, you are frustrated. So to avoid frustration, avoid wanting what you do not get.” Each is a psychological principle that every mature person can test for oneself.

Every culture has some universal truths embedded within it, but each also has some falsities. The human problem, the philosophers' problem, is to discover which views are true and which are false, both within and between cultures. Playing with alternative cultures as if each were true as traditional, a task for anthropologists and perhaps comparative religionists, is something immoral for philosophers, who, in my opinion, have some obligation to see the truth wherever it may be found, *and* to seek to expose and eliminate, if possible, any falsity.

My interest in world philosophy is buttressed by my interest in, and life-long work in, comparative philosophy. I have been to India seven times and now China five times. I am indebted to both Indian and Chinese influences, and Chinese philosophers have become impressed with my philosophy (as influences by Chinese philosophy) and have established, on October 19, 1944, in the Ciangsh Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Philosophy a Center for Archie J. Bahm Comparative Studies Philosophy. They are translating my books into Chinese (needing subsidy), I am expecting the Director to help finish developing my Diagram of Types in a way most suited to Chinese ways of thinking (in pictograph language).
