

Knowledge as Realisation:

A Confucian Account of Contemplation-in-Action

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In the classical Greek worldview, the notion of ‘being’ enjoys a certain priority over ‘becoming’. Things in the world which are in a state of change or becoming ultimately have to fulfil their end or come into being. In contrast, the classical Chinese worldview tends to prioritise ‘becoming’ over ‘being’. Things in the world are seen to be in a state of transition or constant change. This understanding is expressed in terms of *yin-yang* (陰陽) which serve as co-principles of the nature of reality. On this account, the element of *yin* is constantly changing to the co-related *yang* and the element of *yang* is always becoming *yin* as well. Thus the *Yijing* (易經) *Book of Changes* presents a system of orientation that allows human beings to navigate their way through their experience of the dynamic nature of their existence in the world.

The text of the *Zhongyong* (中庸) *Focusing the Familiar* aims to show how the activity of *zhong* (中) focus can produce the state of *he* (和) harmony within the world of dynamism. Human perception and evaluation bring a sense of focus to the affairs of the world. This is because human beings aim to produce equilibrium in their dealings with others, the larger society and even the natural world. The application of *zhong* (中) is in the area of *yong* (庸) ordinary. Hence the spiritual practice of *zhongyong* (中庸) refers to the activity of focusing one’s thought and decision-making in normal human affairs. Several key virtues are highlighted in the text, including *zhi* (知) knowledge or wisdom, *ren* (仁) authoritative conduct, *yong* (勇) courage, *li* (禮) ritual propriety and *cheng* (誠) sincerity or integrity. In this paper, I intend to use the text of the *Zhongyong* as a theoretical basis for developing a Confucian account of contemplative practice that promotes moral excellence in the ordinary affairs of professional life.

The philosophical meaning of the verb ‘to contemplate’ is to think deeply about an issue or to consider something at length. On this account, ‘contemplation’ is understood to be an elevated state of mind for the human being. The object of contemplation can refer to the nature of the good or even the virtues. As a noun, *zhi* (知) can be translated as ‘knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’. As a verb, *zhi* can be translated as ‘to know’. It can also be translated as ‘to realise’. This verb involves two different but related meanings. First, ‘to realise’ means becoming aware of something or understanding something clearly. Second, ‘to realise’ means achieving something that is willed or expected. *Zhi* as ‘knowledge’ creates awareness and it refers to the theoretical epistemic dimension. *Zhi* as ‘wisdom’ enables achievement and it refers to the practical epistemic dimension. Therefore, the virtue of *zhi* includes both theoretical and practical aspects of human knowing.

Given that 'knowing' as a human activity is always understood in relation to its practice and its performance, the Confucian conception of knowing-as-realisation provides a significant basis to approach the practice of contemplation-in-action as found in the Christian tradition. This research in a Confucian account of contemplative practice is intimately related to the missionary objectives laid down by Pope Benedict XV. The Chinese are a people who have great respect for scholarship and Christianity simply cannot be presented as a foreign religion to them (*Maximum Illud*, 22, 19).