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FIRST SECTION

<i>Tommaso Sgarro</i> EDITORIAL I – Transitions: New and Different Perspectives	9
<i>Tommaso Sgarro</i> The Human “Historicity” as a Permanent Transition in the Philosophy of Ignacio Ellacuría	13
<i>Luis Roca Jusmet</i> François Jullien: The Double Transit of Human Life	27
<i>Jordi Riba Miralles</i> The Event, beyond the Permanent Crisis	37
<i>Alessia Franco</i> For an Epistemology of Transition: Paul B. Preciado, Psychoanalysis and the Regime of Sexual Difference	51

SECOND SECTION

<i>Tommaso Sgarro</i> EDITORIAL II – Governing Transitions	67
<i>Pierpaolo Limone - Maria Grazia Simone</i> Becoming Support Teachers at the University of Foggia During the Pandemic. An Exploratory Survey	71
<i>Francesca Finestrone</i> Music: For a Sustainable Community and the Promotion of Well-being	85
<i>Gennaro Balzano - Vito Balzano</i> Educating for Transition in Work Contexts	101
<i>Giuseppina Maria Patrizia Surace</i> The Future We Want: The Transition to Adulthood of Unaccompanied Minors	111

François Jullien: The Double Transit of Human Life

Luis Roca Jusmet

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona – UAB (Spain)

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lroca13@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

François Jullien finds the “unthinkable” in our philosophical tradition in his journey to the Chinese world. One of these ideas is precisely that of understanding nature as a process, not formulated in terms of continuity but of transit. In this transit human life is inscribed, like all lives. But in Jullien there is also an ethical commitment to understand this human life as open to the possibility of another transit, that of a second life. These are interesting ideas to pick up even seeing the limitations of the Chinese approach. As François Cheng points out, the ideas of subject and right are missing. We could go further and say that the idea of freedom is missing. But Jullien overcomes these limitations by pointing out this lack and overcoming it in his proposal. But as he also underlines, it is precisely this idea of transit as a way out of our dualisms and polarities that can teach us the most, as Westerners.

Keywords: China; duration; François Cheng; François Jullien; freedom; process; real life; second life; silent transformation; time; transit; true life.

François Jullien (1951) is a French philosopher, trained in Hellenism, who makes his geographical, cultural and linguistic journey to China to access, from the most distant, the unthinkable in our Greco-Roman-European tradition. Jullien finds in the classical Chinese texts fascinating ideas that arise from a way of thinking differently from that of conceptualization and argumentation.

In Chinese logic, everything is conditional and complex, and we are part of a process that is never closed, that is always open to new combinations. François Jullien not only deals with the issue of efficiency in terms

of strategy, but also offers an approach to its morality from a reading of Mencius, compared with Kant (Jullien, 1997).

What Jullien proposes, rather than focusing on the differences between European and Chinese approaches, is that we need to build a bridge instead of noting the distance between one and the other, which would consist of taking the Chinese idea and putting it in dialogue with our own to create new conceptualizations. One of them is to understand human life as a double transit. On the one hand, we are part of life as a transit because we are part of nature. On the other hand, he proposes an ethics that has as one of its keys what he calls the second life.

1. THE FIRST TRANSIT: LIFE AS A PROCESS OF SILENT TRANSFORMATION

The theme of time is another key issue. Jullien deals specifically in a book with the theme of time as an element of a philosophy of life (Jullien, 2001). In the Chinese language there are no verbal tenses, the being is always a being in phase and the basic notion is that of duration. There are no abstract concepts of Space or Time, but at the same time in China both space and time are always present in a qualitative way in the form of locations and moments. Time understood as eras, seasons and epochs. Spaces as domains, climates and orientations. Always linked to each other: each period in solidarity with a climate. The basic notions are moment-occasion and duration. It is necessary to follow the natural course, not to force it. Everything is immanent. Time is understood as a “between moments”, that is to say as transits. Our being in the world is seasonal, which means that it is the transit between one season and another that marks our vital rhythm. There is no conception of continuity either in space or in time. The cyclical character is marked by this idea of transition, which is neither a circular nor a linear process. It is the idea of the return of transitions that determines the way in which temporality is experienced. All are transformations in which continuity and modification unfold at the same time. Everything is based on the existence of two principles, yin and yang, and the change that takes place in the dominant factor.

In the human case, aging is understood not so much as a journey as a transit. One does not pass through different stages in the path of life: birth, childhood, youth, maturity, old age. Growing old is the transit of life, the one that goes from birth to death. It is not about “living in the present”, which is based on a past-present-future scheme that is not contemplated in China. It is about living in the moment, adapting to the process in which

it is inscribed, being open to grasp the opportunity that each moment gives us.

The theme of time is taken up again in his book on silent transformations (Jullien, 2009), which indicates that change is not what manifests itself when there is an apparent rupture. Rather, it is the consequence of a silent transformation from a subtle, almost imperceptible twist of which it is the result, a visible emergence of a long invisible process. The cause/effect relationship itself is diluted in this approach, since it is necessary to refer to the duration of the process and the global framework in which it is framed. It is necessary to situate all the conditioning factors that allow us to understand what is happening. Aging, for example, is neither decadence nor degradation but one more element in the process of living. Death is not a rupture but just another consequence of life; there is neither Christian drama nor Greek tragedy, not even the melancholic heroism of romanticism. What matters is not the extraordinariness of the new event that may come, but the persistence of the ordinary. It is like the seasons, which transform one into the other without a strict limit that marks their separation. The Chinese sage has no ideas (Jullien, 2001) because he knows that any vision is partial and what he wants is to be open to the whole and not to distort it with prejudices. The idea of duration is complemented by that of the moment, which allows us to get out of the impasse of a present, different from the past and the future that wants to materialize in an instant that always escapes it.

Chinese thinking is fundamentally strategic (Jullien, 1999), but with a conception of effectiveness based on the idea of transformation through indirect and oblique action. We must not force, we must not control, we must follow the propensity of things, take advantage of what we call the potential of each situation. For this we must facilitate the most favorable orientation, the conditions in which what interests us appears as a consequence of the natural process. For this we must, of course, be open. This approach is not based on any of the dualities with which we move: theory/practice, ends/means, model/application, objectives/plans. There is neither decision nor dramatic choice, only adaptation to the course of things we are a part of. We must seek the potential energy of each situation and obtain much effect with little effort, adapting to the circumstances by gathering what is best for us, facilitating what is favorable to our own advantage. There is no established plan because what we have to do is to be alert to what is happening, always evaluating the forces that come into play. The art of governing consists of invisibly making others converge naturally in the position we seek from others. If it is necessary to act, it must be done as soon as possible, before the process is structured, to modify what is

soft before it becomes rigid. Chinese rationality is established on the basis of the relationship between condition and consequence, while Western rationality is established between means and ends. In the first case, we always look for the most favorable conditions and gather the most profitable, and in the second case, it is posed in terms of calculation and success or failure, victory or defeat. On the Greek side, origin of the European, the strategist is like a ship's pilot who sails on the high seas to reach his destination overcoming unforeseen threats: it is the epic and the heroic in a dramatized narrative.

At the same time, the idea of the necessary emptiness is also important: one must not fill anything completely or fill everything: one must always leave a margin, an empty space. The Chinese reference is agriculture, the growth of plants. It is not necessary to push the plants to make them grow faster, it is necessary to facilitate their growth by separating everything that hinders their development. It is necessary to try to win without confrontation, to prevent conflict before it appears. With Chinese wisdom, life is understood as a process that matures, giving a consequence, which is the good harvest.

It should also be noted the approach that the French philosopher makes, from the classical Chinese texts, to the figure of the sage (Jullien, 2021). The Chinese sage "has no ideas". This means that he is not imprisoned by an ideology, by a particular way of looking at things. It is not that he has no ideas, it is that he does not put any of them before the others so as not to fall prey to partiality. The choice of wisdom is that of variation, not progression. We do not go forward on a certain path that prevents us from seeing the other possible ways. We must not close ourselves off, we must always remain open, we must embrace everything. He does not conceptualize, does not argue, does not demonstrate. He approaches by surrounding, observing, looking for the evident. And he speaks little, only to indicate, to point out, to evoke. The rules depend on the situation, they do not pretend to apply universally to all situations. The sage knows when to be rigid and when to be flexible. The wise man keeps his mind sufficiently empty to be available, to be able to see the obvious that our prejudices hide. It is the paradox of relativizing everything without being relativistic.

Living is like a maturation process in which one must direct one's energy well, without dispersing or wasting it. The Greek-European notion of happiness, absent from Chinese wisdom, implies fixity and finality, whereas what the Chinese sage does is to develop one's own capacities in a natural way, without aim. It is the unintended result that counts, the natural attainment of a wise attitude towards life (Jullien, 2007a). It is to go towards harmony, which is a self-regulated dynamic balance.

2. THE TRANSITION TO THE SECOND LIFE

We are going to enter into the work that Jullien has been doing in the last few years along the lines of the construction of the ethical subject for a true life. It is about the transition to a second life.

In *Filosofia del vivir* (Jullien, 2012), the first approach is the need to be present, but without understanding it exclusively in terms of something that has already been insistently said, which is attention. It is to approach time as a moment, finding the balance between not procrastinating but counting on the delay that involves accepting the maturation process in which it is framed. Because *carpe diem* has something of haste. It is necessary to move towards what is evident, what we see clearly, but knowing how to withdraw so that the new can emerge. Jullien thus conceptualizes the importance of the “between” in life, this frontier where things are not between what they are and what they are not, this gray, transitory moment, which flees from this need of our culture to choose between black and white, to flee from the ambiguous, which is what is at the bottom of everything if we do not force it into polarizations. It is a question, for example, of not having to choose between being selfish or altruistic, but to move in this “between”, which is still the world of nuances. Here appears, for the first time, the possibility of a “true life”. Here he will also quote Pierre Hadot and his proposal of “spiritual exercises”. To keep always “on the lookout for things”, as the Japanese poet Basho says. To be alert, ready, available, to seize the opportunity, the good encounter. To avoid concatenating too much, to avoid being chained to the discourse, to be open to immediacy. It is not about looking for models, nor rules or formulas that tell us how to know, how to live. It is about living in transparency, in the sense that things show themselves to us. But this world is not given to us beforehand either, it is not a matter of wanting to return to the naivety of the lost paradise. But neither is it necessary to invent finalities or to duplicate it in another ideal world. We remain in immanence, renouncing postponement in order to be able to see, when it appears, the opportune moment. Allowing it to arrive when it has to arrive, knowing how to delay it. A life that is sustained in “a between” that we must know how to manage without the need to polarize ourselves because it does not allow us to grasp this background of ambiguity of things. We do not dream then of a “true life” but we have access to it.

In 2016 Jullien published in French edition his work *Vivre en existant. Une nouvelle Éthique* (Jullien, 2016), which we can consider his first clear essay in this line of what I pointed out with regards to how to build an ethical subject for a true life. In this essay the philosopher orients all that he

learned in his dialogue with China in a double proposal of transformation of the self. “Living by existing” is an ethical proposal that implies an inner work that consists in establishing a distance with respect to what Jullien calls our surface of adherence, which is the first thing we are attached to. It is about having the capacity to decide on that which in a primary and largely unconscious way we invest with affection, with desire. From this point of view, freedom is, in a certain way, the capacity to break these primary automatisms, to let go of those moorings that chain us. But it is also the ability to invest desire, in a light way, without dependencies, which can nourish our vitality. It also implies the need to resist, understanding in a dialectical way the value of negation that opens the way to the possible. It is therefore necessary to avoid stagnation, to avoid getting bogged down in inertia, in routine. It is a process that supposes a work on oneself in which we learn to grasp both the turn that leads to stagnation and the one that will take us out of it. This occurs, most of the time in the framework of silent transformations (Jullien, 2010). Although it sometimes appears as a rupture, whether it is meant as a beginning or as an end, in most cases it remains an illusion because it is still the consequence of a process. This happens both when something visible emerges or disappears. As Paul Eluard told us, to live means the hard desire to last. We all live, says Jullien, but we must “exist”, which means transforming this desire to live into vital power. In order to do so, one must un-coincide with oneself, not identify oneself with a self-image. Duration is maintained by its continuous process of renewal, of actualization of energy. To dis-coincide means not to identify oneself, not to fix oneself, to keep the spirit open. Certainly, it is necessary to live “here and now”, which does not mean to understand it as doing it in the instant but to live it as a process, since our present is this permanent passage from the future to the past. To live in the immanence of this world, of this whole of which we are a part. Existence is verified directly in experience, learning from it ...

François Jullien continues this conceptualization in a very important essay, which is where he conceptualizes what he calls “a second life” (Jullien, 2017b). There is a step from life to existence, he told us, and he calls this step “a second life”. The starting point is immanentist: we have only one life, from which there is no replacement, from which we cannot leave and re-enter. The second life is therefore a transformation. But a transformation that does not arise from a rebirth or a conversion, nor from the voluntaristic act of reinvention. It is the result of a maturation, of the silent transformation to which our own experience leads us. It is the result of the lucidity that we acquire through the elaboration of what we have lived, which separates us from illusions. It is the consequence of

continuous work on oneself. But it is not the spontaneous result of old age either, but rather the turn we acquire from this will to “live while existing”. The second life becomes the good “winter” of our life if we have prepared ourselves for it. All this concludes in what he calls the “true life”.

In his latest book, entitled *De la vraie vie* (Jullien, 2020) François Jullien comes to summarize in a very lucid way the proposal. It is not to aspire to another idealized life, it is not to lose oneself in illusions nor to look for extraordinary moments. It is to be able to try to live a life worthy of being lived, accepting what there is of tension and ambivalence, in a permanent and daily combat against inertia, routine and stagnation. To live in dis-coincidence, in an opposition that we are able to sustain without provoking conflict. It is a life lived in the moment, not alienated in the banal or in absence. It is not a conversion but a transformation without idealization or intensification. It is an open process that is moved by desire. It is a power that is being lost but that must be recovered through emotion. It is an attempt to live that is to experience the difficulty of living and to survive the non-life that withers life. It is both a yes and a no, a yes to life and a no to non-life. This tension cannot disappear, there is no conversion that eliminates the no in order to install us in the yes. True life is, then, a combat that does not rest on a determined conception.

3. TRANSIT AND FREEDOM

The approach of life as a double transit is interesting. But Jullien himself already points out in his book on silent transformations that a historical-strategic-political concept is missing (Jullien, 2009). This concept is that of the free subject, with all the ethical and political implications it entails. China has traditionally accepted its political system and has had a communitarian idea in which the communitarian has prevailed. Or, in the Taoist proposals, an individual autonomy based on a certain withdrawal from society. The idea of a subject that can be built ethically and cooperating with others in a democratic system is missing.

François Cheng (1929) spent his childhood and adolescence in China and as a young man settled in Paris. He is one of the clearest examples of the power that interculturality can have in the same subject (Cheng, 2002). Precisely what he tells us is that China must learn from the West the idea of Subject (autonomous, beyond the community) and Law (just, beyond positive laws). Both ideas refer to the idea of freedom. But what the West has to learn from China is this idea of transit, what he calls “half-empty”, which is precisely what allows this transformation and allows to get out of

the conflict of polarities. In this way, transit and freedom complement each other in an ethical and political proposal that can open a very suggestive horizon.

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RIASSUNTO

François Jullien incontra l'“impensato” della nostra tradizione filosofica nel suo viaggio attraverso la cultura cinese. Una delle idee che ricava dal quest'ultima è intendere la natura come un processo, non formulato in termini di continuità ma di transito. In questo transito, come tutte le vite, è inscritta la vita umana. Ma in Jullien c'è anche un impegno etico a comprendere questa vita umana come aperta alla possibilità di un altro transito, quello di una seconda vita. Si tratta di idee interessanti da riprendere, ma all'interno dei limiti dell'approccio cinese. Come sottolinea François Cheng, infatti, mancano in questo approccio le idee di soggetto e di diritto. Andando oltre potremmo dire che manca l'idea stessa di libertà. Jullien tuttavia supera questi limiti, evidenziando egli stesso queste mancanze e provando a risolverle all'interno della sua proposta. Come evidenzia sempre Cheng, è proprio l'idea del transito come via d'uscita dai nostri dualismi e polarità che può insegnare qualcosa di più e di nuovo agli occidentali.

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