

ON THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC MIND THE IRRELEVANCE OF THE TRAGIC IN KOREA'S RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

HONG-BIN LIM*

The concept of public mind bespeaks its stance to the prevailing methodological individualism. It has been well recognized that the ways of our activities and thinking could be fundamentally structured by the common mind of the culture. In order to have a meaningful intercultural dialogue, it is necessary to clarify the forms of particular worldview, which can be understood as the conditions of communication. We might put the question of particular public mind in the following way. Even if the fundamental forms of experiences of human beings are structurally similar, they are capable of conceptualizing their own problems and solutions differently. One of our interests is how each culture has to deal with their own life world. There should be so a specific way of bringing the order in this sometimes chaotic world. Not all their solutions were successful. Their formulations of normative problems could be also objectionable. It means that the accounts of how we as human beings construct particular conceptual frameworks regarding various kinds of negative conditions of the world are helpful for the elaboration of our question. And our reflection here on the intercultural philosophy can be guided by some paradigmatic exemplars of each culture.

Taking up the tragic as a model of explanation is something like tackling the following questions as these: how can we understand the different patterns of development of normative consciousness in East-Asia and Western cultures? Are consciousness of morality and legality universal? Can we have an inter-culturally acceptable meaning of life? The ongoing philosophical and also political debates on the value conflicts in the age of globalization must confront necessarily with such questions.

In some measure Hegel can be understood as one of the eminent philosopher, who has provided a systematic theory of the tragic. His insight of tragic concerns not only the aesthetic

* Korea University, Seoul, South Korea limhb@koera.ac.kr

dimensions of it.¹ Hegel speaks of the tragic as a paradigmatic case of European ethical consciousness. What is remarkable about Hegel's conception of the 'Geist' in regard to our question is his insight that even the aesthetic phenomenon should and could be seen through the optic of general normative concerns. Just as he is often accused of old fashioned metaphysics in his philosophical system, Hegel is also notoriously known for having proposed the term of 'Geist'. The very concept of public mind will be, however, a meaningful interpretation of this obscure idea of 'Geist'. According to the cultural anthropology, the mental and social activities depend upon 'symbolic structures', which also might be undergoing critical test of time and also open to the revision by the community of interpretation. But to take up the substantial sense of the symbolic structure of 'Geist' is not a return to Hegel's System itself. What we can learn from his conceptual elaboration of human culture is the methodological idea that our action and experiences as well are the expressions of common mind of the whole humanity.² Consequently, to understand the meaning and relevance of the 'public mind', one can and needs to concentrate on the concept of the tragic. There are some interesting features of the tragic that can emerge out of his treatment of it. First of all, it serves as a model for the explanation of western public mind.

Yet Hegel's account of the tragic is diverse. The tragic belongs to the dialectic of human life. The tragic is precisely the critical moment that exhibits the necessity of reconciliation. Hegel's famous citation of *Antigone* in the 'Phenomenology of Mind', for instance, is important for our task of tracing the western public mind.³

In some tragedy of ancient Greek we see a characteristic cultural transformation from the archaic version of conventional norm system to the more or less universalistic version of morality. It would be tempting to appeal the thesis that the tragic can be regarded as the relevant feature of European genealogy of public mind. But I don't follow the claim that

there can be common essential elements of the tragic which analysis reveals the fundamental characteristics of European normative consciousness. I am aware that we live no more in the world of 'heroic destiny'. The general requirements of our everyday life have another background than that of previous life-world. However, there may seem to be a interesting question about the genealogical premises of modernity. The prevailing universalisms in the western world and its tendency of abstractive arguments in terms of legal egalitarianism or of formalistic conceptualization of democracy are all ways of providing that the tragic as the unavoidable dimension of human existence should remain harmless.

I. THE METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSE

Confronted with the similar negative problems from the real world, the East-Asian Culture shows another face of public mind. A very simplified version of Korean normative tradition, for instance, is the syncretism, which we is also evident in our modern religious culture. Philosophical justification of universalistic theory in form of ethical system is not necessary, if we rely either on the monolithic traditional normative system or on the coexistence of various incommensurable value systems. In order to understand the multifarious aspects of public mind in regard to the conditions of intercultural dialogue, I shall briefly comment on the relationships between the tragic in the western cultural tradition and some aspects of Korean religious consciousness. When I speak of the 'Korean religious consciousness', I am mainly referring to some happiness-orientated tendencies of Buddhism and Korean Christianity as well. The syncretism that has often been identified as one of the main characteristics of Korean religious culture is the inevitable consequence of the secularization process in the Korean religious tradition. At the same time, embracing syncretism as a widespread element of the Korean religious mind clarifies the real nature of the recent expansion of Christian communities. This is the reason why individual and even national prosperity should be regarded as a clear sign of divine favor or the just result of one's own religious efforts. This description may seem to some scholars of religious studies as an oversimplification of the Korean religious tradition. In fact we can find easily many pious non-materialistic believers in many religious communities. Furthermore, I don't argue that we can understand the peculiarity of Korean religious culture only in connection with the troublesome concept syncretism. However, the

1 For instance, Schmidt says: "It becomes one of the names of the tragic of spirit. It is also the constant reminder that the significance of the tragic is not an abstraction, but only to be grasped in the full concretion of ethical life in the phenomenal world... the tragic belongs to history and must be thought in conjunction with the full force of history." Dennis J. Schmidt, *On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 92.

2 This kind of non-metaphysical reading of Hegel can be found in the following article: Charles Kahn, "From Philosophy of Being to Philosophy of Human Being," in *Metaphysik nach Kant*, eds. D. Henrich (Stuttgart: R-R. Horstmann, 1987), 528-540.

3 "Das sittliche Bewusstsein muss sein Entgegengesetztes um dieser Wirklichkeit willen, und um seines Thuns willen, als die seinige, es muss seine Schuld anerkennen; weil wir leiden, anerkennen wir, dass wir gefehlt." G. W. F. Hegel, *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*, Gesammelte Werke (Hamburg, 1980), 9: 255. Hegel cites *Antigone* of Sophokles, Vers 926.

so-called “Ki-bok” belief, which means a kind of prosperity-centered attitude prevalent in the Korean religious community, is an evident social and religious phenomenon.

What is important, then, is to see that we might get an interesting perspective on the unique ways of western thought by considering tragic consciousness in ancient Greece. One of the motives to take up the Greek tragedy as a platform of intercultural discourse should be noted. It was Jaspers who through a comparative study of cultures also pointed out that there existed no tragic literature in China before Buddhism, and similarly in India and other non-western civilizations.⁴ I will follow Jaspers to the extent that tragic literature of Sophocles and of Euripides, for instance could not be found in other cultural zone. One might also argue that practical implications of the Greek tragic would not be the contingent moments of western civilizations. From this standpoint, I will examine the inter-culturally different ways of understanding religious culture. However, I am not concerned with defending a radical claim that tragedy is the most fundamental factor in western normative culture. My view is just that the culturally differentiated modalities of real tragic experiences can allow us to pursue a particular aspect of western thought. But the basic form of Greek tragedy, according to Jaspers is found only in the western world. Hegel and Hoelderlin already suggested that tragic consciousness is one of the origins of the western world's desire and motive for universalism.

But such a view of the absence of ‘the tragic’ in other cultures, which has the function of the theoretical instrument of looking and judging the Otherness, is really a provocation. In the following argument we can hear a critical voice of a cultural theorist. “Instauration of the law and enclosure of human space, I wish to argue, have always been the fundamental term of *all* discussion of tragedy in the western tradition. I have mentioned the cliché that no other culture *has* tragedy – a fact itself requiring explanation. I am going to suggest that both the practice of and the critical terms surrounding tragedy tell us something essential about western culture”⁵ One might also argue that such a characterization and evaluation of the tragic is also controversial with regard to the western culture itself. The qualification of the literary tradition does not go far enough toward conceptualizing what was really going on in the public mind of western culture. In other words, the basic assumption of such a comparative analysis is not free from the metaphysical idea of essentialism. Consequently, the result of a comparative study might be trivial and unreasonably analogous. Nevertheless, I think that we

can have a fruitful discussion of the real nature of Korean religious culture by considering the method of dissolution of ‘negative’ experiences in the life world. On the grounds of the ways of solving normative problems, we are able to clarify the patterns of the peculiar forms of the evolution of normative rationality.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF NORMATIVE RATIONALITY FROM THE INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Why does tragedy interest us regarding the evolution of normative rationality? Tragic consciousness is related to the substantial content of the collective experience of a community. Since tragedy is based on historical events and the memory of shared myths rather than the subjective creation of a certain writer, it is closely related to the substantial content of normative consciousness. Tragedies like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have original ways of interpreting the world.

Moreover, although tragedies use intuitive emotions by being performed, they also include philosophical subjects. Therefore, they produce a special emotional effect in interpreting the world, and we see this in Aristotle's Poetics. As he says, tragedy is a philosophical making of poems. Tragedy as a part of religious events was essential to the communal life. Since tragedy was mainly performed in a theater, it reveals the formation of the reflective culture, including philosophical themes. In fact, the stipulation of tragedy, which we see in Aristotle's Poetics, emphasizes the “effect” of tragedy, and that is possible by taking up an aesthetic reflective stance. In tragedy we can easily see that the diverse questions about the uncertainty of being are raised. Greek tragedy, in particular, deals with unintelligible powers that overwhelm the subject: those powers are based on myths and history. Tragedy is different from ‘Trauerspiel’, which concerns the frustration of an individual destiny or desperate situations. Since tragedy has its historical reality, it is completely distinct from the artistic experience as a form of literary reconstruction. So tragedy builds a more direct connection to the self-formation of normative consciousness. In this sense, rightly points out that Shakespeare's tragedies (especially in the case of “Hamlet”) as well as Greek tragedy stem from a community's memory and experience about the real world, such as in myths and history.⁶ In other cultures, diverse experiences that can be called ‘tragedy’ exist as taboo and the negative memory of the community. The

⁶ Carl Schmitt. *Hamlet oder Hekuba: Der Einbruch der Zeit in das Spiel* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985), 33f.

⁴ Karl Jaspers. *Von der Wahrheit* (Muenchen, 1958), 915ff.

⁵ Timothy J. Reiss. *Against Autonomy: Global Dialectics of Cultural Exchange* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 115.

difference is that Greek tragedy is not only the subject of aesthetic enjoyment, but also a means to open a place through which the world is interpreted. This is the reason why Hoelderlin, Hegel, Nietzsche and Jaspers gave special attention to tragedy. This is also the reason why tragedy has been regarded as an important factor in the understanding of western intellectual history.

Tragedy might be regarded as an important moment in the formation of a non-conventional consciousness of homogeneous community, which normative system has been depended on the authoritative traditions and some religious codes. It is not the case that the content of tragedy only consists of the inner experience of the writer or the reconstruction of the consciousness of private subjectivity. Rather, tragedy takes the conflict between the external powers and subjectivity as its content. With regard to the establishment of public rationality, this conflict merits special attention, because it involves the possibility of the formation of public opinion. I do not mean to argue that all Greek tragedies from their primitive stages already imply the moment of normative rationality. As we see in the case of Oedipus Rex, the frustration of a hero who never doubts his own morality is experienced as a power beyond comprehension. Furthermore, we expect in Antigone the striking advent of the reflective subjectivity, and the analysis of tragic consciousness is closely connected with *'Anerkennungsbewegung* (movement of recognition)', which is found in Hegel's philosophy of mind. Tragic consciousness, as Hegel said, arises when two reasonable powers or normative instances collide with each other. Tragic consciousness together with life's inevitable trouble works as an important moment, which leads to the possibility of mutual recognition. It generates a way of understanding the world, which is different from a certain simplistic view or the 'promotion of virtue and repugnance of vice' we often find in the vulgarized version of traditional religions. Thus, when the two powers converge on a dramatic end, we arrive at the experience of the ultimate limitation of the humanistic way of understanding the world. This, as we see in Antigone and Creon, corresponds with a descriptive structure to make the concept of "reconciliation" plausible. So, let alone Jaspers' remarks, Greek tragedy can be understood as an index to examine western thought. The evaluation of the tragic is necessary if we are to recognize the formation of religious culture with the corresponding normative systems. My idea is only that different mentalities in general reveal a different religious mind. Structural similarities between the Christian and Buddhist communities towards 'Ki-bok' belief could be explained by the irrelevance of the tragic as a constitutive element of the normative identity in traditional Korean religious culture. The moral problems, for instance, that arise in the

borderline between what is explicable and what is not explicable are liable to be dissolved either by comprehensive happiness-oriented rituals or by the religious authorities. In contrast, tragic consciousness works as the paradoxical moment in the differentiation of normative rationality. It seems that tragedy itself declares that we must not appeal to a way based on the traditional convention or an integrative way based on the religious doctrines to solve moral problems.

Tragedy, through the recognition of the discord between subjectivity and substantiality, awakens the necessity of the universal principle of life that transcends a community's shared but particularistic conventions. This is an interesting historical case with regard to the debate between liberalism and communitarianism, which we find also in discussion among the East Asian intellectuals. Tragedy might be thought as "Bildungsroman," which expects the advent of the reflective subject. So it is different from the unilateral description of heroes in epics. Because the reflective subjectivity accompanies a self-estrangement about the private subject by taking a distant position from a communitarian conception of self-identity, it can be said that it is not different from the recognition of the difference between substance and subject.

It is, however, not the case that tragic consciousness or experience always has the same content. Not all of the paradoxical experiences of the Self need to involve tragedy as a kind of critical moment of consciousness formation. The problem is that diverse tragic consciousness, including an indifferent universe and mutually incompatible interpretations of the world, bears a significant relation to the development of the western rationality.

It is often argued that the western rationality is defined as universalism based on reason. Rationality is also understood as the typical western way of thinking that has the form of certainty about the trans-cultural norms or philosophical arguments about the nature of human beings. Western universalism together with methodological thinking works as the ideological moment to stimulate the innovation of whole civilizations of the world. I think that this important moment of the interpretation of the world stems from the subject's attempt to sublimate the trouble and contradiction of being in tragedies. It is inevitable to appeal to more abstract rationality to solve contradiction and trouble. Abstract rationality is also required for the possibility of reflective culture. The moment of negativity that is symbolized as a chasm between community and moral subjectivity transcends the holistic worldview. Moreover, the former works as an important moment to make the reflective culture and self-consciousness possible. The concept of reflection does not need to indicate any normative morality, for the emergence of reflection is possible by confronting the external powers, the contingency of life

and indiscrimination we find in myths. "Then tragic representations have some claim to being regarded as the most illusion free representations of reality"⁷

In particular, in *Antigone* the conflict between the national law and the divine moral law as the family ethics can be understood as a conflict between public autonomy and private autonomy. This does not mean that the conflict between the right and the good. Rather, the content of tragedy is about the two plausible, opposite viewpoints about the right or the good. This special kind of normative conflict gives us some background concerning legal egalitarianism. In this context it seems interesting to quote the following argument put forward by Hegel. "Das Allgemeine in die Atome der absolut vielen Individuen zersplittert, dieser gestorbene Geist ist eine Gleichheit, worin Alle als Jede, als Person gelten."⁸

All the abstract laws after tragedy presuppose the equality of membership in society. The principle of equality itself, which is regarded as being holy and is the fundamental premise of all social and political institutions, is an abstract concept. It requires us to think beyond skin color, race, and gender. Because the principle of equality does not often accord with the recognition of concrete individuals developed by socialization or everyday experience, it might be considered a kind of regulative idea. The domain of acts and norms where the principle of equality has special meaning is related to the domain of law, but not always within the dimension of morality or cultural identity. Human being in its abstract meaning should be regarded from now on as an autonomous member of a juristic community. Hegel thinks that the rule of abstract law is made possible by tragic consciousness in the western world. He argues that the legal egalitarianism is the spread of the universal moment. When we consider Hegel's genealogical analysis of the connection between law culture and tragedy, we see that the conflict between the private and the public already worked as a unique mechanism of the western normative culture before the modern age, where for the first time people had full-blown liberalism. The individualism and metaphysics of subjectivity of the western world were shaped by tragic consciousness.

Tragic consciousness, which is different from the mere experience of the negativity or from the mere pessimistic worldview of the subject, may lead us to transcendence. Transcendence through tragedy would certainly be different from religious experience. For example, it is doubtful whether a Christian experience of 'tragedy' is necessary and relevant. The idea of redemption of mankind by Christ is not compatible with the tragic experience. Christianity

is not compatible with tragic consciousness, because the former purports to provide us with a definite answer based on a holy text. The reconciliation oriented Confucianism does not have as its essential content the troubled aspects of life that face the tragic interpretation of the world. If we regard tragic consciousness as a kind of a cultural 'ideal type', we can see that the opposite of it is the harmony-oriented interpretation of the world that we can easily find in East Asian countries. For example, Confucianism prefers a harmony-oriented normative system to the antagonistic model of the western value system. That is to say, Confucianism provides us with the principle of social unification that combines the elements of a universal ethics realized by the coherence of those values with a hierarchical normative system.

The religious culture of Korea displays, as I previously mentioned, a typical syncretism. There was defiance against foreign religions and culture during the initial stage of their introduction. We can observe this phenomenon in nearly every society. However, they eventually came to coexist. For example, the conflicting doctrines of Buddhism, Confucianism and Shamanism have coexisted in Korea. Syncretism is a cultural disposition that makes different understandings of the world coexist; it does not try to sublimate the conflict between normative systems at an abstract and universal level. If we take a closer look at the unique religious culture of Korea, however, we can find a more significant cultural difference with regard to the method of solving normative conflicts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Under what conditions does syncretism proceed to the culture of tolerance and openness that guarantees trans-cultural pluralism? The reason I raise the question is that the fact that there are many incommensurable interpretative ways of the world does not guarantee the possibility of a trans-cultural normative culture. Of course we do not need to accept the strong claim that philosophical, cultural pluralism is impossible without tragic consciousness. Since the evolution of normative consciousness is also possible through the painful experience of collective crimes, such as war and genocide, the claim that a particular cultural symbolic system and philosophical reflection is the prerequisite to universal culture of norms might be too strong. Nevertheless, if we note that normative culture including religion by tragic consciousness is a historically significant moment in the evolution of legal egalitarianism, then we can argue that tragedy is conceived of as a paradigmatic recognition of the relativity

7 Richard Eldridge. *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164.

8 Georg W. Hegel. *Paenomenologie der Geistes* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1952), 342-343.

and limits of the understanding of the world in the trans-cultural age. Tragedy may work as a significant remedy for fundamental egocentrism or cultural narcissism.

The recognition that there always exists unintelligible aspects of life most likely does not tell us about the presence of tragic consciousness. Many societies that have accomplished social integration by a relatively homogeneous legacy of culture, due to the overlapping globalization, might confront the “tragic” conflict between equally reasonable value systems. So a discussion of tragic consciousness and the context of western intellectual culture can be a good indicator of the ongoing change in Korean religious culture, too.