Against Aesthetic Modernity:
A Combined Action between Pragmatism and Confucianism

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Abstract: In competing with the aesthetic modernity, pragmatism usually appeals to Confucianism for supports. How is it possible? Aesthetic modernity is known for its claim for aesthetic autonomy, or art for art’s sake. In contrary, pragmatism and Confucianism oppose to the compartmentalization and elitism supposed by aesthetic modernity, instead, advocate connection and popularization. However, even there are a number of similarities between pragmatism and Confucianism, we cannot ignore the underlying differences between them. A semiotic analysis can manifest not only the difference between aesthetic modernity and pragmatism or Confucianism, but also the difference between pragmatism and Confucianism.

Today it is an unquestionable fact that aesthetic modernity become dominant in the field of aesthetics or philosophy of art in the world. This fact easily misleads us to take aesthetic modernity as the only legitimate one, and thus impedes the growth of multiculturalism in the globalization processes. As a consequence, for example, Asian arts, which had a rich tradition and high value in the history, tend to be classified as mere craft and folk art in contrast to the so-called fine arts which were imported from European tradition in the very beginning of the westernization.

However, today’s situation seems to be somewhat different. The domination of aesthetic modernity is challenged by postmodern aesthetics. In the competition between modern and postmodern aesthetics, pragmatism somehow allies itself with Confucianism. Pragmatism is clearly labeled as postmodernism, and Confucianism is certainly one kind of premodernism whether in terms of chronology or ideology. Why can pragmatism and Confucianism, which contradict each other in many aspects, join hand to fight with aesthetic modernity? In this paper I have tried to look into this question and find a reasonable answer.

I. An Outline of Aesthetic Modernity

What is aesthetic modernity? Very briefly, aesthetic modernity is in reference to the modern occidental aesthetics is typically characterized as aesthetic autonomy. This kind of aesthetic is one of the important results of modernity. Modernity, according to Weber and Shusterman, “was bound up with the project of occidental rational-
ization, secularization, and differentiation, which disenchanted the traditional religious world-view and carved up its organic domain into three separate and autonomous spheres of secular culture: science, art, and morality, each governed by its own inner logic of theoretic, aesthetic, or moral-practical judgement. This tripartite division was of course powerfully reflected and reinforced by Kant’s critical analysis of human thinking in terms of pure reason, practical reason, and aesthetic judgement.”

Looking back to the history of western aesthetics, we can find some tremendous endeavor to establish the aesthetic autonomy in Kant and the British aestheticians by the middle of 18th century. In order to isolate aesthetic from other spheres such as moral-practical and theoretic, Kant and others endowed it with a distinguished character, that is, disinterestedness. Jerome Stolnitz observes that the concept of disinterestedness can be traced back to some 18th century British and Scottish thinkers, such as the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper, 1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), and Archibald Alison (1757-1839). Stolnitz suggests that the concept of disinterestedness relevant to aesthetic appreciation was developed step by step over the 18th century. First, as Allen Carlson summarizes, “Shaftesbury introduces the idea as a way of characterizing the experience of beauty, but initially his conception of disinterestedness is, relatively speaking, theoretically lightweight and primarily negative, just like the contemporary idea of a disinterested part—that is, an individual having no particular personal or selfish interest in a situation. Similarly, Shaftesbury contrasts a disinterested stance toward an object with using it for some purpose. Second, Hutcheson elaborates Shaftesbury’s conception, extending the idea so as to exclude not simply personal and self-serving utilitarian interest, but also interest of a more general nature and in particular

cognitive interest. Third, the notion reaches its full theoretical development in the thoughts of Alison who treats disinterestedness as a particular ‘state of mind’ which he characterizes in a famous passage as one of being ‘vacant and unemployed’.”

Obviously, Kant borrowed his notion of interestedness from these British thinkers, and combined it with other modern aesthetic concepts such as beauty, sublime, pleasure, and so on in a system which bears typical character of aesthetic modernity. All of these ideas were exhaustively treated and reached their climax with Kant in *The Critique of Judgement*.

We can also find such kind of modern aesthetics in the modernization processes of Chinese aesthetics. For example, Zhu Guangqian (1897-1986), one of the important founders of modern Chinese aesthetics, borrowed his key concepts from modern western aestheticians, such as intuition from Croce, psychical distance from Bullough, empathy from Lipps, and disinterestedness from Kant, to constitute a typical modernist aesthetics that devotes itself to maintain the idea of “art for art’s sake” and aesthetic autonomy.

From this brief review of historical background, we can sum up, generally, the characters of aesthetic modernity. First, aesthetic modernity prefers compartmentalization to connection, with which modern aesthetics successfully isolates aesthetic and art from ordinary experience and experiencers. Second, aesthetic modernity bears a distinguished inclination of elitism which tries to show the aristocratic style of aesthetic as the only legitimate one. This idea is so deeply entrenched that even Pierre Bourdieu, who is known for his rigorous exposal of the hidden economy and veiled interests in the so-called disinterested aesthetic, still maintains the elitist taste as the only legitimate one and rejects to acknowledge the existence of any legitimate popular aesthetic. Although these two characters cannot

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cover all of the features of aesthetic modernity, they seem to be much enough, I think, for my purpose of contrasting it with non-modern aesthetic.

II. Against Aesthetic Modernity from Pragmatism

The domination of aesthetic modernity is challenged by postmodernism which seems to prefer connection to compartmentalization, and popularization to elitism. Since postmodernism is a very vague concept and can be defined in a number of different ways, let me choose pragmatism as its representative in order to avoid the trivial discrimination of language. Pragmatism is opposed to the aesthetic modernity, because it not only severely criticizes aesthetic modernity but also clearly labels itself as postmodernism. Here let me introduce the works of Richard Shusterman who praises himself as a follower of the famous pragmatist John Dewey.


6. As Richard Shusterman writes, “Perhaps the clearest and most certain thing that can be said about postmodernism is that it is a very unclear and very much contested concept. Celebrated by some as a new wave of emancipation from the stifling constraints of modern ideologies that have grown stagnantly conservative and elitist, postmodernism is conversely condemned for confining us in its own prison-house of conservatism - for encouraging an attitude of slackening by its skepticism regarding the notions of progress and originality, by its advocacy of appropriation and recycling, and by its ideology of the end of ideology. But the controversy over postmodernism goes well beyond the question of its value. Its very meaning, scope, and character are so vague, ambiguous, and deeply contested that it has been challenged as a pernicious, illegitimate non-concept. Advocates reply that the concept’s very vagueness usefully challenges the view that concepts must be clear to be meaningful, fruitful, and important.” See “Aesthetics and Postmodernism,” in Jerrold Levinson (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 771.
In his widely circulated book—Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Retinking Art—Shusterman takes a clear pragmatist perspective to criticize aesthetic modernity, where representative is chosen as analytic aesthetics, in the following manner. (1) The major thrust of analytic aesthetics, here as the representative of aesthetic modernity, is sharply opposed to naturalizing art and aesthetic value, while one of the most central features of Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics is its somatic naturalism. Since role of art is not to deny the natural and organic roots and wants of man so as to achieve some pure ethereal experience, but instead of giving a satisfyingly integrated expression to both our bodily and intellectual dimensions, analytic aesthetics separates them and prefer intellectual to natural is totally wrong. (2) Due to the influence of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, analytic aesthetics supports that the aesthetic would represent a separate realm of freedom, and art would be free from function, use, and solving problem. This freedom from use would be the defining and ennobling feature of aesthetic and art. But all this is alien to pragmatist aesthetic which simply confesses art’s great and global instrumental value. Pragmatism is correct, not only because it rejects the opposition between instrumental and intrinsic value by reinterpreting the means-end distinction, but also because it argues that art’s special function and value lie not in any specialized, particular end but in satisfying the Living creature by serving a variety of ends and especially by enhancing our immediate experience which invigorates and vitalizes us, thus aiding our achievement of whatever further ends we pursue. (3) Since analytic philosophy tries to model itself as scientific philosophy, art and aesthetic are accorded marginal status and often intentionally skirted as hopelessly beyond the scope of scientific understanding. Influenced by analytic philosophy, analytic aesthetics aims to apply the logically rigorous and precise methods of scientific philosophy to the wayward and woolly realm of art, to clarify its murky concepts and the confused methods of interpretation and evaluation through which it is understood and appreciated. But, although pragmatism intensely appreciates science and its gifts
to civilization, it clearly regards scientific experience thinner than art. For art engages more of the human organism in a more meaningful and immediately satisfying way, an engagement which includes the higher complexities of thinking. (4) Analytic aesthetics prides itself on the clarity and rigor of its distinctions and compartmentations. In contrary, pragmatist aesthetics inclines to connect different disciplines and different aspects of human life. For pragmatist holism, it is not only impossible but also unnecessary to define the aesthetic by one distinctive and exclusive character, which has preoccupied analytic aesthetics. (5) Analytic aesthetics applies itself to give a true account of our concept of art, not to change it. On contrary, pragmatist aesthetics is interested not in truth for truth’s sake but in achieving richer and more satisfying experience, in experiencing that value without which art would have no meaning or point, without which it cannot as a global phenomenon exist or be understood, let alone be defined. Because pragmatist instrumental theory of knowledge sees the ultimate aim of all inquiry, scientific or aesthetic, not as mere truth or knowledge itself but as better experience or experienced value. (6) Analytic aesthetics follows the romantic and modernist tradition of defending art’s value and autonomy by identifying the concept of art with the concept of “high” art. This inclination of compartmentalization and spiritualization of art as a separate, noble realm, divorced from the materials and aims of other human efforts, has removed art from the lives of most of us, and thus has impoverished the aesthetic quality of our lives. In contrary, pragmatist aesthetics aims to reform this concept of art and the aesthetic so that they can provide us the best experience. For pragmatist aesthetics, despite the risk of corruptive misappropriation by an unaesthetic world, art should be removed from its sacralized compartmentalization and introduced into the realm of everyday living where it may more effectively function as a guide, model, and impetus for constructive reform, rather than merely an imported adornment or a wishful imaginary alternative to the real. Based on this standpoint, pragmatist aesthetics does its best to exchange high art’s
autocratic aura of transcendental authority for a more down-to-earth and democratic glow of enhanced living and enriched community of understanding, and seriously and bravely fights for the legitimacy of popular art. (7) Since most of analytic aesthetics regard aesthetic appreciation as pure, immediate, and direct perception, they usually contrastively, ignore its socio-historical background. Pragmatist aesthetics insists that art and the aesthetic cannot be understood without full appreciation of their socio-historical dimensions. (8) Analytic aesthetics privileges art’s object over aesthetic experience, because it worries about that any concept of experience must be so completely tainted with the private subjectivity of the experience that to think of art in terms of aesthetic experience is necessarily to render it solipsistically private and thus deprive it of any real communicability or collaborative criticism. On the contrary, Pragmatist aesthetics privileges dynamic aesthetic experience over fixed material object which our conventional thinking identifies as the work of art, because the essence and value of art are not mere artifacts we typically regard as art, but in the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived. All of the eight arguments made by Shusterman are strongly against the aesthetic modernity, which represented by its recent example—analytic aesthetics, especially its two main doctrines, i.e. compartmentalization and elitism.

However, it should be noted that Shusterman does not merely condemn high art and aesthetic modernity. His neo-pragmatist stand, which in his own term is “inclusively disjunctive stance,” is much more flexible, pluralistic, and moderate. As he says in the introduction to the second edition, “In reviewing the very varied criticisms directed at Pragmatist Aesthetics’ first edition, I was surprised to see that they often derive from exactly the same logical error: a failure to understand the pluralism of what might be called its inclusively ‘disjunctive stance.’ As we learn in first-year logic, the

7. See Richard Shusterman, Pragmatist Aesthetics, pp. 6-29.
III. The Similarities between Pragmatism and Confucianism

Shusterman confesses that when he is challenged by his Western philosophical colleagues for paying so much attention to the body, popular art, and practical value of art, he usually turns to find support from Asian philosophy, especially Confucianism. The convergence of American pragmatism and Asian Confucianism is perhaps due to, as Shusterman thinks, that both were born outside of Europe.

Actually, the great pragmatist John Dewey highly appreciated

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8. Ibid., pp. x-xi.
Confucianist. The first convergence between pragmatism and Confucianism is due to Dewey’s experience of living in China between 1919-1921. As his daughter Jane confirmed, this experience “was so great as to act as a rebirth of [Dewey’s] intellectual enthusiasms,” and he henceforth held China as “the country nearest his heart after his own.”[^10] A.N. Whitehead also said in reference to his half-brother John Dewey: “If you want to understand Confucius, read John Dewey. And if you want to understand John Dewey, read Confucius.”[^11]

Beyond the particular historical instance of Dewey, we can see a great deal of promising overlap between the general orientations of pragmatism and Confucianism. Especially, we can find a lot of supports in Confucianism for pragmatism to criticize aesthetic modernity.

First of all, the most distinguished ideas of aesthetic modernity, such as aesthetic autonomy, disinterestedness, and art for art’s sake, have never been articulated in the tradition of Confucianism. In contrary, Confucianism confesses the instrumental meaning of art and the aesthetic, and even emphasizes the crucially formative ethical and political power of aesthetic practices. As Confucius said, “My children, why do you not study the Book of Poetry? The poetry can make you uplifting, 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. From them you become largely acquainted with the names of birds, beasts, and plants.”[^12]


[^12]: Analects, 17:9.
to Confucius, the poetry bears a wholesale practical function from what at hand to what far away. In other place, “Cofucius said of the shao 響 music that it is both perfectly beautiful (mei 美) and perfectly good (shang 上). Of the wu 五 music he said that it is perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good.”

Confucius seems to prefer shao to any other music as recorded in Analects, which gave him so intense pleasure that “for several months he did not know the taste of meat.”

Here, it is obvious that goodness is valued aesthetically much higher than beauty by Confucius. As Kenneth Dewoskin rightly indicates, “in Confucianism, music, which included poetry and dance, was not only a force shaping individuals and society, but also a measure of their virtue.”

This Confucian doctrine of aesthetics is elaborated in Yueji 音經 or Record of Music which is perhaps the most systematical literature on aesthetics in the tradition of Confucianism. From the very beginning, Yueji gives an explanation to the origination and function of music:

All the modulations of the voice arise from the mind, and the various affections of the mind are produced by things (external to it). The affections thus produced are manifested in the sounds that are uttered. Changes are produced by the way in which those sounds respond to one another; and those changes constitute what we call the modulations of the voice. The combination of those modulated sounds, so as to give pleasure, and the (direction in harmony with them of the) shields and axes, and of the plumes and ox-tails, constitutes what we call music. Music is (thus) the production of the modulations of the voice, and its source is in the affections of the mind as it is influenced by (external) things. When the mind is moved to sorrow, the sound is sharp and fading away; when it is moved to pleasure, the sound is slow and

13. Ibid., 3:25.
gentle; when it is moved to joy, the sound is exclamatory and soon disappears; when it is moved to reverence, the sound is straightforward, with an indication of humility; when it is moved to love, the sound is harmonious and soft. These six peculiarities of sound are not natural; they indicate the impressions produced by (external) things. On this account the ancient kings were watchful in regard to the things by which the mind was affected. And so (they instituted) ceremonies to direct men’s aims aright; music to give harmony to their voices; laws to unify their conduct; and punishments to guard against their tendencies to evil. The end to which ceremonies, music, punishments, and laws conduct is one; they are the instruments by which the minds of the people are assimilated, and good order in government is made to appear.\(^{16}\)

According to Yueji, music originates from human mind, and human mind is affected by outerthings, so there is a close relation between music, mind, and out-things. A good thing would give a good affection to the mind observed it, and a mind in good mood would produce a good music. This process is reversible. The best way to manage out-things is to manage the mind, and the best way to manage human mind is to manage music. Music is not something disinterested, but a tool as serious and important as ceremony, law, and punishment to manage the society.

Second, Confucian aesthetics also bears a pragmatist spirit which prefers practical to academic. Although we cannot find that Confucius gives formal definitions to the six arts, i.e. ritual, music, archery, driving, history, and arithmetic, he teaches and practices them very well. Furthermore, Confucius seems to be suspicious of mere verbal solutions. He even hates the men who have clever words.\(^{17}\)


\(^{17}\) Confucius said: “Someone who is a clever speaker and maintains a ‘too-smiley’ face is seldom considered a person of jen” (Analects 1:3); Confucius
There is a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zigong 子贡, which can represent Confucius’ general attitude to language:

Confucius said: “I wish I could avoid talking.”
Zigong said, “Master, if you didn’t speak, what would we disciples have to pass on?”
Confucius said, “Does Heaven speak? Yet the four seasons continue to change, and all things are born. Does Heaven speak?”

Just like Wittgenstein, who does not want to be imitated by the “philosophical journalists” but to effect “a change in the way people live which would make all these questions superfluous,” Confucius does not like his disciples to record and circulate his words but to follow his life style so as to become the superior man by themselves.

Third, though Confucianism appears to be one kind of elitism because of declassing the inferior man and panegyrizing the superior man, it is still open-minded to accept popular music. For example, Mengzi 孟子 advocates that popular music has the same aesthetic value with class music, and suggests that the more pleasant is not to enjoy music by oneself alone but to enjoy it with many others.

Fourth, Confucianism seems to share the same “inclusively disjunctive stance” with pragmatism, which in Confucian term is the mean (zhong 仁). The concepts of the mean, is first expressed by Confucius in Analects, and then developed to be a crucial concept by Mengzi and Zisi 子思 who is supposed to be the author of Zhongyong 中庸

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20. Mengzi, 1B:1.
which, like the Daxue 道家, is included in the Liji 礼记, and forms one of the Four Books 四书. The mean sometimes is combined with normality (yong 永) as mean-normality (zhongyong 中庸), or with time (shì 时) as timely mean (shizhong 时中), and all of them means an in-between and flexible stand which is very close to the so-called “inclusively disjunctive stance” advocated by neo-pragmatism.

According to Fung Yu-Lan’s 服鷹鴯’s interpretation, the mean, mean-normality, or timely mean is very close to what Aristotle would call relative and not absolute. Fung Yu-Lan’s says:

This mean of Aristotle is one that is taken as a guide for human emotions and actions, and that differs according to the time, place and person which are encountered, thus making it impossible to have any fixed rules that will serve as a mean under every circumstance. The timely mean spoken of by the Zhongyong is precisely like this.21

The idea of relative of Aristotle is surely close to the mean of Confucianism, but we can find a perfect explanation of the mean in Mengzi nevertheless. Mengzi said:

The principle of the philosopher Yang 章 was—“Each one for himself.” Though he might have benefited the whole kingdom by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it. The philosopher Mo 莫 loves all equally. If by rubbing smooth his whole body from the crown to the heel, he could have benefited the kingdom, he would have done it. Zimo 湛 holds a medium between these. By holding that medium, he is nearer the right. But by holding it without leaving room for the exigency of circumstances, it becomes like their holding their one point. The reason why I hate that holding to one point is the injury it does to the way of right principle. It takes up one point and disregards a hundred others.22

Here, we can find at least four different stands, i.e. Yang, Mo, Zimo, and the mean supported by Mengzi himself. Yang and Mo are representatives of the two fixed extremes, which are contradicts each other. Zimo is the representative of the middle between Yang and Mo, which appears to close to the mean, i.e. “the way of right principle.” But the middle is not the mean, because the middle is also a point as fixed as the two extremes. So the middle is the third fixed extreme which “takes up one point and disregards a hundred others,” and it is the very reason why Mengzi also hates it. The forth standpoint is the mean supported by Mengzi himself, which is taken to be totally different from Yang, Mo, and Zimo, i.e. the three fixedly extreme standpoints. The mean is surely between Yang and Mo—the two extremes, and thus is almost close to Zimo—the fixed middle-extreme. But the mean is not the very fixed point between the two extremes, which thus makes it also different from the fixed middle-extreme. So the mean denotes not only middle but also flexible. This standpoint is very pragmatic, and it is, I think, the real common spirit between Confucianism and pragmatism.

IV. The Difference between Pragmatism and Confucianism

We can find a lot of similarities between pragmatism and Confucianism, which are the very reasons why they come together against aesthetic modernity. But pragmatism and Confucianism are quite different in many aspects. In a word, the very difference between pragmatism and Confucianism is what between premodernism and postmodernism, which, again, is their common different from aesthetic modernity as modernism.

Before I elaborate the difference between pragmatism and Confucianism, it seems necessary to make a differentiation among premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. Let me borrow Hans-

Goreg Moller’s semiotic analysis of premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. Moller divides three types of semiotic structures, i.e. presence, representation, and significance, which are similar to premodern, modern, and postmodern, respectively. The semiotics of representation means taking sign as the representation of meaning. In other words, there is “some medium, such as language or signs, mediates ‘presence’.” The semiotics of significance “extracts the signified from the realm of presence, includes it into the realm of representation which consequently itself—now without something to be re-presented—becomes a realm of pure significance.” “There is no gap of representation between sign and meaning: sign and meaning are the same kind, and sign just signifies meaning—it does not ‘mirror’ or represent it as if there were two different realms of ‘present’ meanings and ‘representing’ signs.” On the contrary, semiotics of presence is imagined as such “position which denies a realm of representation and conceives of both the signified and the signifier as likewise present. Such a semiotic position would be based only on ‘presence’, not on ‘representation’ or even ‘significance’, and it would conceive of the signifier as presenting the signified.” Moller uses a table to illustrate the relation between the three semiotic ideal-types:

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Moller asserts that the postmodern semiotic paradigm can be described as “post-representationalism,” modern as “representation-alism,” and premodern as “pre-representationalism.”

According to this semiotic analysis, pragmatism clearly satisfies the semiotics of significance and thus belongs to post-representationalism or postmodernism. Confucianism, as Moller argues, “is based on the idea that the signifier presents the signified, both join each other for the presentation of things or events. There is no realm of representation established, which is based on the absence of the signified while it is represented, and much less there is a realm of ‘pure’ representation or significance established beyond any presence at all.”

The difference between pragmatism and Confucianism is indeed the difference between post-representationism and pre-representationism, or postmodernism and premodernism. Let me give some further arguments to support this claim.

The pragmatists, perhaps it is more exact to call them neo-pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty, frankly call themselves postmodernists. We can find the typical postmodern appearance in Rorty’s claim of aestheticizing ethics. In Rorty’s vision of the aesthetic-ethical life, the search for “self-enlargement,” “self-enrichment,” and “self-creation” is by the way of redescribing self in new vocabularies. “The desire to enlarge oneself,” says Rorty, “is the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and of the future.” But this pursuance is limited in the realm of language. For Rorty, the self is nothing but a complex web of vocabularies and narratives. Rorty explicitly says:

Lixue and the location of New Confucianism,” Research of Philosophy, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 54-55. As Shusterman rightly criticizes, this semiotic model is too simplistic to explain the complex differences between premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. So I just limit it to explain the differences between Confucianism and some neo-pragmatism which extremely prefer language to actuality.

24. Ibid., p.55.
“human being are simply incarnated vocabularies”; it is simply “words which ... made us what we are.” This vision of aesthetic-ethical life which submits itself to the narrative of language is the typical postmodern style.

This vision of postmodernism would scare Confucianism which clearly satisfies the semiotics of presence. We have seen that Confucius criticizes the clever words. Here I want to indicate another feature of Confucianism, which is also very different from both modernism and postmodernism. There is a story about Confucius recorded in *Shijing* by Sima Qian, which seems to be a good example to manifest this difference:

Confucius was once learning to play on ch’in (a string instrument) from the music master Hsiangtse, 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.”

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Confucius’s search for self-transformation is thoroughly different from Rorty’s pragmatist self-transformation as “self-enlargement,” “self-enrichment,” and “self-creation.” The former can be called minimization, and the later, in contrary, maximization. Confucius does not occupy vocabularies or signs as many as possible so as to create a novel self by redescribing it in the new language, in contrary, he does occupy vocabularies or signs as few as possible so as to create a novel self by translating the significance into presence, or signifier to signified.

Actually, Rorty’s version of pragmatism is not only different from Confucianism but also different from Dewey’s version of pragmatism. Richard Shusterman already articulates the differences between Rorty’s pragmatism and Dewey’s, and criticizes the limitlessness (and consequent shallowness) of Rorty’s quest for constantly new vocabularies. So we have another neo-pragmatism (or perhaps neo-neopragmatism) conceived by Shusterman, which is different from Rorty’s neo-pragmatism and much closer to Dewey’s pragmatism and Confucianism.

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28. See Richard Shusterman, Pragmatist Aesthetics, ch. 9; Practicing Philosophy, ch. 2.
30. For the detail, see Peng Feng, “Perfectionism between Pragmatism and Confucianism,” paper for the international conference at Yong-In University, Korea, May 28, 2003.
V. Conclusion

Now we have a clear vision about the difference among Confucianism, aesthetic modernity, and pragmatism, which is actually the difference among premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. From this clear differentiation, we can understand not only the reason why pragmatism and Confucianism come together to against aesthetic modernity, but also the great difference between pragmatism and Confucianism.