Theory, Culture & Society

Getting Our Ontology Right: A Critique of Language and Culture in the Work of François Jullien

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Abstract
This article presents a cognitive anthropological critique of François Jullien's approach to language and culture. Jullien approaches 'culture' as a coherent set of concepts across time and space, relying primarily on identifying Chinese (and Greek) thought with particular concepts expressed in language. This mischaracterizes human culture, which exists on the level of individual mental representations, and relies on a form of linguistic determinism which fails to stand in the face of psychological and anthropological evidence. This leads Jullien to claim an incredible degree of cultural (and ontological) divergence between the Chinese and Europeans. By accounting for the distribution and dynamism of mental representations, the degree to which thought is underdetermined by language, and above all the divergence of intuitive and reflective cognition on the individual level, we can arrive at an alternative, ontologically realistic account of cultural divergence.

Introduction

While the title of this issue is 'Against Ontology', my argument here will be in its favour, in critical dialogue with François Jullien's arguments primarily as presented in *The Propensity of Things* (Jullien, 1995), *The Silent Transformations* (Jullien, 2011), and *On the Universal* (Jullien, 2014). Jullien cites the absence of a verb equivalent to 'to be' in classical Chinese as evidence that the Chinese 'did not conceive of the existential sense of being' and 'had no concept of truth' (Jullien and Lloyd, 2002: 810) – notwithstanding

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the existence in classical Chinese of the words *you*, to exist, and *shi*, to be, and the profound influence of Buddhism in Chinese history and its central concern with 'being'. This is representative of his arguments in favour of cultural divergence between China and Europe so profound that, if proven correct, suggest two peoples so alien to one another in terms of mental life, and as a consequence social behaviour, social structure, and physical interaction with the world, that in the absence of genetic evidence to the contrary one would be justified not only in assigning them to separate species but to entirely different classes of animal. I have done my best to interpret Jullien's work as not having this implication. Whilst at times this is possible, I have concluded that in fact Jullien's abstractions from specific thinkers distributed across time and space unavoidably become statements unequivocally about 'China', presented frequently as a unitary other whose secrets can be yielded only via a form of extreme linguistic determinism. My primary aim here is not to characterize 'Chinese ontology', but to consider the ontological (and attendant epistemological) assumptions inherent in the analysis of cultural difference. To be clear, whilst this article takes a critical stance on Jullien's work, this is directed primarily at his assumptions regarding culture, thought, and language, and the larger question of cultural difference, rather than at his characterization of the thought of individual philosophers.

Whilst similar criticisms have been made of Jullien's work before, their emphasis has been somewhat different. In particular, Jean François Billeter has taken aim at what he sees as Jullien's instrumentalization of 'China' for his own philosophical purposes, and failure to pay due attention to philological concerns and the historical context of the philosophers he cites (Botz-Bornstein, 2014; Weber, 2014a, 2014b). I am sympathetic to the argument that Jullien instrumentalizes China and diminishes the voices of Chinese philosophers. My primary focus, however, is not with Jullien's work as an account of China, or its political implications, but how these features of his analysis frequently lead him to absurd claims of cultural difference based on unfounded assumptions about human thought in general. As I discuss, he is not able to escape these charges by recourse to doing philosophy rather than social science, as he makes repeated claims about social reality.

I introduce 'ontology' as relevant to cross-cultural comparison, approached from an anthropological concern with evolved cognition and cultural transmission. I then move on to discuss the idea of 'culture', central to Jullien's position and key to his own ontology of comparison, although he eschews the latter term. In assessing ontology cross-culturally, we must pay careful attention to our own ontological assumptions. This has crucial implications for the discussion of 'culture', which I approach as a phenomenon necessarily located in individual minds. A fundamental shortcoming of Jullien's focus is his insistence on a particular, and unrealistic, approach to the relationship between language and thought, discussed here in relation to his characterization of divergent Chinese and European conceptions of time. Finally, I turn to the question of the false dichotomy Jullien asserts between propensity and causation.

Ontology and Cognition: Some Essential Principles

I do not take issue with the claim, made by Jullien across his works and echoed by Stephan Feuchtwang (2014), that Chinese intellectual history did not see the

development of a philosophical discipline concerned primarily with questions of being. But this is quite different from the claim of 'China' or 'the Chinese' not having ontology. While Jullien is first and foremost concerned with the works of philosophers, he generalizes to 'China' and 'the Chinese', and in so doing makes claims about the relationship between thought, culture, and language, and how they differ regionally and historically. These claims necessarily presuppose a relationship between philosophers and the societies of which they are part, and in generalizing to China based on philosophers alone, Jullien implies that their thought is somehow representative.

Given these claims, and assuming that they apply equally to Europe, the narrow definition of ontology as a specific philosophical discipline is clearly inadequate. What is at issue is the ontological orientation of members of diverse, historical, and socially stratified societies. Therefore, an appropriate definition of ontology is necessary. The one I adopt here is by now fairly well established within anthropology, for example in the work of Philippe Descola (2013), and in related comparative projects like Geoffrey Lloyd's (2014). I define 'ontology' broadly as a set of assumptions about the most basic kinds of things that exist in the world, following Descola's (2013) focus on continuity and discontinuity between beings in terms of their physicality and interiority (external and internal being), with an added focus on the cognitive levels on which these assumptions operate. I use the term 'intuitive' to indicate the automatic character of immediately perceived ontological categories, and 'reflective' to refer to those which are the products of conscious consideration (Matthews, 2016: 175 ff.).

Following Pascal Boyer (2010: 377–8), intuitive understandings involve 'the occurrence of some information that is potentially consciously accessible and directs the agent's expectations and behaviours, although the pathways that led to holding that information are not accessible to conscious inspection'; reflective understandings on the other hand comprise 'consciously held information that has the effect of extending, making sense of, explaining, justifying, or communicating the contents of intuitive information'. The distinction can be illustrated, as Boyer does, with the example of colliding solid objects – the intuitive[1] expectation is that they do not fuse together; the reflective explanation is that this is due to certain forces. A distinction can accordingly be made between intuitive and reflective ontology. Intuitive ontology refers to very basic intuitive categories which appear to guide inferences, such as 'person', 'animal', 'artefact' (Boyer, 1998: 878), and does not seem limited to humans. Any being which proactively engages with its environment must have some means of distinguishing between things that exist, regardless of whether or not that means it is conscious. Indeed, as Maurice Bloch (2012: 126–7) points out in his discussion of the 'core self', even invertebrates must be able to distinguish at least between themselves and their environment in order to engage with the latter. In this sense, they make intuitive ontological assumptions – they perceive that different kinds of things exist and behave accordingly.

Reflective ontology, however, involves explicit understandings of the kinds of things the world consists of which may be elaborated to varying degrees (Boyer, 2010: 381; Matthews, 2016: 177 ff.); this is the domain of primary concern here, and which is readily accessible to the anthropologist or philosopher. Reflective ontology involves the meta-representation of intuitive ontology, that is, mentally representing one's own intuitive representations (see Sperber, 1997), and is therefore constrained by intuitive

ontology (Boyer, 1998: 882). Though intuitive understandings are not necessarily universals, we do find recurrent patterns cross-culturally which reflect these constraints (Boyer, 1994); that is, there are very real limits on cross-cultural variation in reflective ontological assumptions, despite the variety which we see in the anthropological and historical record. Intuitive ontology highlights the basic necessity of holding some ontological assumptions for being in the world, a capacity which extends well beyond humans – though certain nonhuman species possess some human-like reflective capacities (Emery and Clayton, 2004). It follows that intuitive ontological inference, and some degree of reflection, do not require language. So individuals necessarily make (implicit) ontological assumptions on an intuitive level and entertain (explicit) ontological assumptions on a reflective level. The next section serves to establish ontology as a phenomenon located not on the level of 'culture' or 'society', but the individual.

Locating and Explaining Culture, Ontologically Speaking

The project of examining cultural divergences in ontology cannot itself avoid being based on certain (reflective) ontological assumptions. It is therefore essential that in pursuing this project we make sure, as far as possible, to 'get our own ontological assumptions right' (Barth, 1995: 8, emphasis removed). Elaborated in the above and in the following discussion, my own assumptions here are as follows:

1) The individual human is the primary unit of analysis. Social behaviour is to be understood in terms of the interaction between individuals.
2) Individual minds operate on intuitive and reflective levels, which may be contradictory. Both intuitive and reflective processes are involved in social interaction and cognition in general.
3) Individuals mentally represent the world on both levels, making intuitive and reflective judgements about what exists. The latter may be more or less elaborated into comprehensive theories of what exists and what it is to 'be'. 'Ontology', therefore, is ontologically located in, and a product of, individual minds.
4) Ideas and practices, including ontological assumptions, can be transmitted between individuals through dynamic processes of perception and learning (what Sperber (1996) calls an 'epidemiology of representations', discussed below).
5) 'Culture' is thus a spatiotemporal aggregate of mental representations more or less shared by individuals in a given group. It does not constitute an ontologically distinct plane of existence but describes physical distributions of individuals, their mental representations, and external products of those representations (such as artefacts).

It is therefore meaningless to speak of 'nature' and 'culture' as opposed ontological categories, other than in terms of their being represented as such by certain individuals. Humans are an evolved species characterized by continuous learning, a dynamic process in which genetic propensities, developmental influences, distribution of natural resources, climate, diet, child socialization, and wider social processes all causally interact. This process acts on their physical bodies, including their brains and, as such, their minds. At

no point in the dynamic process of human life history is it possible to causally separate influences which are 'natural' from others which are 'cultural'. A description of 'cultural variation' is a description of distributions of variable mental representations and their effects between groups – not a description of various distinct 'cultures' as instantiations of a particular ontological category in relation to an underlying universal 'nature'. 'Ontology' as something which exists in the world refers to certain kinds of mental representations about what exists. These representations may be 'culturally' distributed in the sense just described, but not all culturally distributed representations are 'ontologies', and not all ontological assumptions result from cultural distribution. Many are universal – but this emphatically *does not mean* that they therefore point to the existence of a separate or prior ontological realm of 'nature'. They still develop via a dynamic process of interaction between the factors described above (see Boyer (2018) for a comprehensive discussion). The fact that they are relatively less influenced by culturally-distributed representations does not indicate any kind of ontological separation.

The cognitive foundations of human behaviour necessitate a methodological focus on the individual as the primary unit of analysis. Though Jullien does not deny differences between the thought of different individuals, in practice his exegesis remains wedded to a notion of culture, and cultural tradition, which appears divorced from the minds of the individuals involved. It is precisely this which allows him to speak of 'China' and 'the Chinese' (and 'Greece' or 'Europe') as wholes corresponding to specific cultural traditions, a position bolstered by his decisions, for example in *The Propensity of Things*, to remove the names of individual thinkers from the argument itself and confine them to the margins, presenting thinkers separated by school of thought, geography, and millennia of history as part of a continuous and largely homogeneous whole. Whilst in the introduction to *The Propensity of Things* Jullien (2000) presents his justification for this apparently rhetorical strategy, it nonetheless contributes to his making claims which are empirical in nature and which presume, ultimately, the existence of a singular 'Chinese tradition' out there in the world and through which, if we are so inclined, we can travel to arrive at new insights (a key theme of his work, particularly *Detour and Access* [2000]). The problem with this approach is that 'culture' used in this way can only serve as a convenient verbal substitute for a broad range of behaviour and mental representations among individuals, which do not necessarily belong to a 'natural category'. Dan Sperber (1996) discusses this at length in his book *Explaining Culture*, noting that by not directly addressing the ontological status of cultural phenomena in relation to the material world, anthropologists historically have tended to smuggle in ontological assumptions even whilst paying occasional lip-service to a materialist position. Following Sperber, my concern here is with establishing cultural phenomena as part of the material world, which requires paying due attention to their location.

Explanation of a given phenomenon is only possible if that phenomenon can be broken down into its constituent parts and relations and causally accounted for with reference to more basic levels of reality, an exercise which in no way necessitates denial of the reality and richness of the phenomenon overall; indeed, this is the basis of science, and there is no obvious reason why it should not also be the basis of social science and the humanities insofar as they are concerned with explanation, rather than simply interpretation amounting to translation or observer-imposed generalization (see Sperber,

1996: 32 ff.). This is not to denigrate interpretation, but to point out that it is limited in its capacity to account for why and how cultural divergences arise in the first place, and how cultural phenomena are distributed among individuals – all of these are essential questions if we are concerned, as stated in the proposal for this issue, with 'knowledge of the nature of the thing'. In speaking of 'China' and 'the West' one evokes entities which do not exist other than as aggregates of many mental representations in the minds of individuals. Following Sperber, 'culture' thus refers to an 'epidemiology of representations', their distribution through space and time; in the case of public representations, which regarding the case of China as presented by Jullien comprise texts, cultural meaning remains a phenomenon located in the mind of the individual reader, modified by the text as an input but not located in the text as such. This approach has the great advantage of facilitating the understanding of 'culture' in terms of material processes, or 'the general mechanisms at work' (Sperber, 1996: 41). Treating it otherwise risks implicitly taking 'China' or 'the West' to exist on a different ontological plane from that of the individual minds which represent these notions.

This raises obvious problems of the causal relation between individual mind and culture, and thus strongly calls into question the validity of speaking about 'China' and 'the West' as though they were discrete, bounded traditions. An interpretive focus on divergence, or difference, to the exclusion of commonality, compounds this problem significantly. This is partly due to the role of interpretation, and partly to the intuitive appeal of thinking and speaking about collectives as though they were individual, intentional agents. The latter is a point which Pascal Boyer (2018: 203–44) raises in asking whether human minds can understand societies in the first place; human intuitions about society have not evolved in order to allow us to understand society on a large scale but because they facilitate the survival and reproductive success of individuals. Thus, in attempting to understand society, our intuitions are constrained, and we conceive, for example, of groups as intentional agents, of power as a force and, crucially, of specific groups as manifesting the generalized properties of their constituent individuals. However, what is actually consequential in terms of the emergent properties of a social group is 'the way preferences are distributed within a category' (Boyer, 2018: 223).

Returning to interpretation, Sperber's discussion in relation to anthropology raises issues relevant to Jullien's analytical approach. Sperber (1996) critiques 'interpretive generalisations' (pp. 41–7), which rely on synthesizing a range of observations into an abstracted heuristic framework, necessarily reducing faithfulness to the multifarious and localized experiences of meaning by individuals within the ethnographic context. They also, crucially, raise the question of what exactly is explained through the attribution of certain meanings by the anthropologist. In the absence of evidence demonstrating a causal link between such meanings and lower levels of explanation, this amounts to an exercise in identifying patterns which 'can be selected, rejected, and modified at will' (Sperber, 1996: 43). I add that any implied causal role in such an interpretive account inevitably amounts to tautologically explaining 'culture' in terms of itself, thus raising the same issue of 'culture's' ontological status. Jullien attempts to avoid this by attributing the cause of cultural divergence primarily to language. In the next section, I argue that this is insufficient to avoid the problem.

The Language Problem

The Ontological Status of Language in Jullien's Arguments

Jullien's focus on language is crucial to his argument that 'Chinese thought' is non-ontological. He implies that the linguistic-cultural level is ontologically independent, which relates to his interpretive focus on identifying patterns of word-use across spatially and temporally disparate contexts. This allows him to maintain (broadly speaking) that 'China' is non-ontological, but at the cost that this conclusion pertains not to the historical inhabitants of China but to his interpretive abstraction of China as a coherent, unitary entity.

This problem is evident in Jullien's focus on the use of specific terms, and his explicit and implicit reduction of thought to language. Regarding the former, we can consider his focus on *shi*, rendered in the English translation as 'propensity'. Jullien (1995) does consider the evolution of this term over time and its varying use in different contexts, but he nonetheless infers continuity of meaning across times, individuals, and contexts to an extent which is underdetermined by the evidence he presents; this relates to his core assumption of 'a culture' being something which exists as a 'totality', and which has internal 'coherence' (p. 71). He is thus motivated to establish a coherence of meaning of the term *shi* across different schools of thought in the divergent domains of military strategy, calligraphy and painting, historiography, and cosmology. A representative example of his argumentation can be found on pages 76–9 of *The Propensity of Things* in a section entitled 'The Force of Form in Calligraphy' (similar examples can be found throughout). At this point, Jullien has already discussed uses of *shi* in the context of Warring States-era military strategy.

He begins here with a quotation from Kang Youwei (late 19th century), linking *shi* in strategy and calligraphy, citing it as 'explicit' evidence of the 'transition between military art and the art of writing' (Jullien, 1995: 76). Kang Youwei's historical distance from the Warring States strategists, and the impact of his own historical context on his considerations of Chinese tradition, its place in the world, and China's evolving relationship with foreign powers, are not considered. Instead, Jullien moves on to discuss *shi* as a 'force' animating written characters, with reference to 2nd-century scholar Cai Yong, and Wang Yizhi and Wei Heng of the 3rd century. In the quotations presented, the three scholars are discussing different aspects of calligraphy, yet they are woven together to suggest complementary aspects of a common approach; this impression is facilitated throughout the book by Jullien's relegation of thinkers' names to the margins of the page, presumably the better to suggest a coherent Chinese cultural viewpoint. Further on in this section, Jullien also refers to Zhang Huaiguan of the 8th century, and Jiang Kui of the 12th century. In each case, the quotations are brief and woven together in such a way as to imply a conceptual coherence, though without sufficient discussion to establish the degree of similarity between thinkers. How language use changed not only between different individuals but across 1700 years is not considered. This fails to establish continuity of concepts through close engagement with and comparison of the thinkers concerned, let alone with thought in other domains such as military strategy and cosmology. Instead, Jullien locates separate instances of the use of the term *shi* across time and space, and

takes continuity and coherence as given, as though the meaning of *shi* is located not within the minds of the individuals using the term, but in the term itself, as (ironically, given his other arguments) a sort of Platonic ideal form somehow 'out there' in the world. The assumption underlying this is that *shi* has a common semantic range for all individuals using it, somehow encoded in the term itself or instantiated in the written character, and that the associated concepts are similarly mobilized not only within a single domain, such as calligraphy, but across others, such as strategy and cosmology, regardless of reflective or intuitive contextual prompts (thinking about those aspects of military strategy and its practicalities that differ from those of calligraphy, for example, reflective goals concerning one's own life, or proximate influences such as mood, urgency, hunger, and so on, all of which influence intuitive thinking; Kahneman, 2012).

In contrast to Jullien's approach to concepts, the approach advanced by Sperber (1996) based on seeing formal properties of representations in psychological terms (p. 63) confers the dual advantages of allowing for historical and interpersonal variation and aligning with a realistic materialist ontology. The core issue with Jullien's approach is that it does not consider ideas in any kind of real-world human context, let alone how ideas may be produced, understood, and modified by individual minds or voiced in spoken language in different contexts. This relates to the important distinction Sperber (1996) draws between individual mental representations and public representations (p. 77 ff.), the latter being, for example, public utterances. Public representations 'have meaning only through being associated with mental representations' (Sperber, 1996: 81). People in a given context will likely attribute similar meanings to public representations based on similar knowledge and experience (Sperber, 1996). In the case of *shi*, what actually exist and have existed are thousands of public representations (written characters) with no semantic content in and of themselves, and millions of mental representations, each of which depends on the knowledge and experience of the individual concerned, which in turn influences the precise semantic content attributed to a given public representation that individual encounters. Thus, what exists is a distribution of mental and public representations through time and space, which in certain contexts converge in terms of their content such that we can indeed speak of 'shared' representations.

The Relationship between Language and Thought

Mental representations vary on the level of the individual, and this of course includes representations involving language, and mental representations of public utterances. The fact that language serves as a mode of communication allowing the public representation of individual mental representations does not mean that producers and recipients share the same understandings. This by itself should lead us to question the validity of an approach generalizing coherence across thinkers through space and time. But we must also consider the degree to which language determines the content of mental representations.[2] Jullien's (2011) fundamental, and least credible, assumption about the relationship between language and cognition is that language straightforwardly determines thought, which he asserts explicitly: 'we are able to think thanks to language and through its means' (p. 100). This is demonstrably false and leads him to maintain a

position on the one hand of extreme relativism between cultural groups but on the other hand of homogeneity of individuals within those groups.

The preceding discussion of intuition and reflection, and the cognitive capabilities of various nonhuman animals (and of course human infants), are sufficient to dispense with the claim that thought is necessarily mediated via language. Contrary to Li Shiqiao's assertion (this issue) that the 'enormous quantity of laboratory experimental data [on the effect of language on thought] is stubbornly outflanked by the tremendous complexity and profundity of language and thought', evidence against such claims is overwhelming (Imai et al., 2016: 70; see also Tillas, 2015). Prelinguistic infants develop a conceptual base onto which language is later mapped (Mandler, 2004) and which influences their categorization of different phenomena (Gleitman and Papafragou, 2013: 505); moreover, individuals with global aphasia, or total impairment of linguistic abilities, demonstrate sophisticated capabilities in arithmetic, logic, theory of mind, music, and spatial reasoning (Fedorenko and Varley, 2016). Language is highly context-dependent and underdetermines the conceptual content it represents; while it can influence cognitive processing in language-on-language situations (e.g. guessing the meaning or grammatical status of an imaginary word), it does not appear to alter conceptual representations themselves (Gleitman and Papafragou, 2013: 505).

In terms of fundamental concepts, such as those relevant to intuitive ontological assumptions, the capacity of language to determine and serve as a guide to thought appears limited; indeed, evidence regarding the conceptual representation of space and motion 'is robustly independent of language-specific labelling practices', even if specific language can influence a listener's interpretation of a speaker's meaning (Gleitman and Papafragou, 2013: 512). The likely very limited influence of language *per se* on intuitive ontology does not somehow leave room for profound linguistic determination on the level of reflective ontology. Reflective concepts allow the meta-representation of intuitive ones and are, as such, constrained by them. Examining the language of reflective ontology can reveal how ontological assumptions are expressed, and the semantic fields and associations they imply, but the semantic fields and etymologies of specific terms absolutely cannot be taken to straightforwardly index direct correspondences or divergence of thought between individuals or groups.

The Ontological Status of 'Time'

This, though, is what Jullien implies in his assertion of profound divergences in extremely fundamental concepts, such as time. Chapter 8 of *The Silent Transformations* consists of a discussion of the apparently radically different concepts of time in China and Europe. It begins with the claim that time 'is a construction of language' (Jullien, 2011: 100) and the assertion that this stems from the Greek *chronos*, generalized as an equivalent concept among the Greek philosophers and extrapolated to be likewise common to all Europeans since (even within the logic of Jullien's linguistic determinism this is a serious stretch). The crux of Jullien's argument is that the absence in (premodern) Chinese of a word with the equivalent semantic generality of 'time', despite the presence of terms indicating seasons, duration, and change, indicates a profound divergence of thought as a result of which the Chinese could not conceive of time in a general, unitary sense. The

'proof' of this is that 'time' was translated from Western languages via Japanese as, literally, 'the between moments' (Jullien, 2011: 102). It should be obvious that this in no way constitutes adequate proof, simply drawing the false conclusion that concepts in thought are tightly bound to words; this is taken to perhaps its least credible extent in Jullien's (2014) assertion that the Chinese do not conceive of 'things' but of 'East-West' (p. 47) based on the literal translation of the term *dongxi*. No consideration is given to the actual processes by which language is learned or the degree to which it underdetermines concepts. It is difficult to see what understanding of relevance to human thought or the human condition is gained from this kind of self-referential abstraction, which conflates several levels of culture and cognition whilst exaggerating cultural differences between groups and trivializing individual differences within groups.

   The question of 'time' and its relativity has risen repeatedly in anthropology, and every so often prompted similarly outlandish claims of alterity. These have been comprehensively critiqued by Maurice Bloch (2012: 79–116). Jullien's rhetorical style is reminiscent of the ambiguity in the writings of the anthropologists Bloch (2012) critiques, who 'seem to be presenting their ethnographies as straightforward supporting evidence . . . an example of the way fundamental claims about human cognition appear and disappear in ethnography as though such matters could be left in mid air' (pp. 93–4). Jullien (2011) begins his discussion of time with sweeping general claims – he moves on to make more specific and less outlandish (yet unqualified) claims regarding Greek and Chinese philosophers, noting in passing that the Chinese did produce precise calendars and clocks, but is apparently unsatisfied with the argument that they did therefore have an '"implicit" concept of "time"' (p. 102). Though his subsequent arguments deal primarily with philosophical concepts, he does not qualify his claims as pertaining only to the level of explicit philosophical exegesis (a guiding problem being that 'Greece' 'had to think about time', a topic which 'China passed aside'; Jullien, 2011: 103). Indeed, his elaboration on this indicates that his argument is not intended to be confined to philosophers. He roots the Greek philosophers' focus on time partly (and implicitly most importantly) in the fact that European languages conjugate tenses (Jullien, 2011: 104–5); this claim can be dismissed based on the evidence already presented.

   Jullien (2011) further attributes 'our' sense of time directly to the development of Greek philosophy (p. 106 *passim*), granting an instrumental role to philosophers in shaping the thought of all or most members of a historically-evolving aggregate of different societies. This raises many issues which go beyond the scope of this discussion, not least of which is the degree of interest in and exposure to such concepts on the part of non-philosophers, particularly before the era of mass literacy; a more compelling argument would be that the thought of philosophers represents an unusual degree of abstraction and exegesis applied to ideas already prevalent in the rest of society. The relationship, though, is two-way, particularly in terms of the education of specialists involving philosophical or religious texts, and in this sense individuals within an epidemiology of representations will have differing degrees of influence on how representations spread.[3] As such, philosophers may possess above-average individual influence on the spread of reflective beliefs, particularly when their works become culturally canonized among a social elite. However, this should not be taken to translate directly into philosophers' own understandings being directly imitated by other members of society through time and

space. Each instance of transmission necessarily involves individual modification of these understandings and their variation according to context. It appears, though, that Jullien's argument about particular understandings of time is not to be confined to philosophers, and also that the concept of 'time' here is not to be considered strictly in its philosophical usage, even if that is its origin in Jullien's view. In Bloch's (2012) words regarding the anthropologists, there is no specificity here concerning whether the analytical scope is 'perception, explicit theories, cultural institutions, cognition, representations and narratives since all are presumed to be coherent' (p. 105).

Now, Jullien (2011) does maintain that the Chinese conceived of 'process' and 'duration', but that they never abstracted this into an idea of 'time' 'in a unitary and general way' (pp. 101–2); at the same time, he argues that, since ancient Greece, Europeans have been doomed to be incapable of adequately accounting for 'silent transformations', things changing in and of themselves rather than due to the action of 'time' as an agent, an argument that can be refuted on the same basis. 'Time', Jullien (2011) argues, was never the subject of a verb in Chinese before the arrival of European usage (p. 110). Leaving aside the basic epistemological principle that absence of evidence (in this case, limited to the surviving writings of a relatively very small number of intellectuals) is not evidence of absence (we know very little at all about everyday spoken language use, and so on, among the common people), this bears a striking resemblance to a claim made by the anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard about the Nuer people of the Nile Valley. He claims that because their language contains no semantically-equivalent word to 'time' in English, 'they cannot, therefore, as we can, speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth' (quoted in Bloch, 2012: 90). In fact, Jullien (2011) makes precisely the same point about time 'passing' (p. 110). The problem with Evans-Pritchard's assertion is that the ethnographic data he presents do not '[back] up, in any way, the fundamental claim . . . about the conceptualisation of time' (Bloch, 2012: 93). Indeed, Evans-Pritchard reports elsewhere a Nuer account of what is to be done with prisoners captured from the neighbouring Dinka people – an account which relies on a linear, non-reversible conception of time (in which the kinship status of captives is determined and fixed) very like that found in Europe, and which the Nuer were able to clearly explain to Evans-Pritchard who was then able to translate and explain it to his own audience (Bloch, 2012: 94). Bloch (2012) similarly critiques Nancy Munn's claim that the Gawa people continually 'construct' space-time, based on examples of speech from ceremonial occasions which appear to construct the past in the present or project the present into the future; elsewhere, it is clear that the Gawa people generally cognize linear time and cause-and-effect in the same basic way as Europeans, shown by discussion of the consequences of eating certain foods (pp. 91–6). In both cases, what the anthropologists are doing is conflating distinct levels of phenomena, using locally particular ways of evoking time in specific contexts to generalize about a given group's overall conceptualization of time. The problem is that these specific evocations occur as notable instances of culturally-specific reflective understandings within an otherwise 'taken-for-granted temporal framework' essentially the same as our own – they emphatically do not provide evidence of 'cognition of time and space as an organising principle' in all, or most, aspects of life (Bloch, 2012: 95). Moreover, they fail to take account of the cognitive psychological evidence from infants (and from other species)

for a universal evolved sense of time (Bloch, 2012: 104–16). Given that time exists as a dimension of the physical world, one whose properties are broadly uniform across the environments in which humans evolved and on the scale at which they exist, the existence of fundamentally different cognitions of time in different human groups is in any case phenomenally unlikely; its demonstration would require evidence going far beyond the purview of ethnography or intellectual history.

A fundamentally different conceptualization of time on the part of Chinese thinkers would make it very difficult for Jullien to interpret and translate their ideas, let alone compare them productively with those of Greek philosophers; such comparison relies on sufficiently similar terms of reference, suggesting that process or 'silent transformation' on the one hand and 'being and time' on the other are not in fact such radically different concepts. This is further suggested given the ease with which similar conceptions are translatable and comparable from the Nuer and Gawa contexts, two societies which differ from China and Europe in terms of scale and structure far more than China and Europe do (or have done) from each other. Specific philosophical arguments regarding process or individual transformation, as found in the *Yijing* or *Zhuangzi* (Jullien, 2011: 111–12), do not preclude a sense of 'time' as general and unitary; indeed, within the *Yijing* such a sense is directly evinced by the linear, irreversible causation presumed by the account of Bao Xi observing natural patterns and deriving the trigrams. To make certain arguments, particular conceptions of temporality are explicitly evoked, but when they are not that is precisely because there exists a taken-for-granted framework. This framework is unsurprisingly very similar to that found among Europeans, and we can likewise take the Greek philosophers' focus on 'time' as a personified agent as a specific evocation against the taken-for-granted framework. This follows directly from the human capacity to imagine social roles as distinct from their occupants, allowing the evocation of various different temporalities in different contexts (Bloch, 2012: 111–16). This is steadfastly ignored by Jullien, and leads him to make an error akin to the psychologist Piaget's mistaken interpretation that children engaging in imaginative play (for example, pretending a banana is a telephone) do so out of confusion; in fact, they are simply engaging in more than one register of thought simultaneously (Bloch, 2012: 110).

Jullien's arguments regarding time are valid only if they are stripped back to the much less far-reaching claim that an explicit abstract notion of 'time' was subject to philosophical interrogation in ancient Greece but not in premodern China, and that explicit evocations of temporality in China and Greece differed in certain contexts in culturally-inflected ways. The fundamental problem is that Jullien again extrapolates from language, often decontextualized, to ontological assumptions of entire historically-changing groups of people. His insistence on abstractions from semantics and grammar results in arguments equivalent to a future scholar interpreting my use of the present tense in relation to Evans-Pritchard, writing in the past and no longer alive, as evidence for my own lack of a concept of linear time and, by extension, a similar lack among the social group of which I am part. This is not to say, as Bloch (2012) does not say about the Nuer (p. 93), that Chinese thinkers did not *describe* time and duration in culturally-particular ways on the level of explicit philosophical discourse. It is, though, to fundamentally dispute the degree to which this can be extrapolated to their intuitive sense of time and to the understandings of others in their society. In reference to Greece and Europe, Jullien

excludes the possibility that labelling and occasional personification of the word 'time' is simply a particular linguistic manifestation of a broad human tendency to characterize phenomena in terms of agents and narratives (he does not even consider this, and the whole edifice of his arguments about time and ontology more generally hinge on him ignoring the possibility that language is not quite as powerful as he asserts). He dresses up semantic convention as profound cultural difference, and in doing this he is mistaken.

Propensity and Causality

Indeed, a similar basic concept of linear, irreversible time, shared by people of Europe and China, is what enables Jullien (1995) to compare 'propensity' and causality (pp. 219–58). The focus of this final section will be to offer an alternative approach to the apparent differences Jullien identifies.

Jullien's central claim regarding the distinction between ('Chinese') 'propensity' and ('Greek') 'causal explanation' varies somewhat throughout his argument. Initially, it is that 'the Chinese tradition' had 'scant interest in causal explanation' (Jullien, 1995: 219–21). By the end of the chapter, it is that 'Chinese tradition' is characterized by 'the absence of any theory of causality' (Jullien, 1995: 249–53). At times, Jullien's arguments appear focused on specific philosophical divergences rather than general characterizations, as in his comparison of Chinese philosophy with 'mechanistic' and 'finalist' schools of Greek thought (Jullien, 1995: 246–9), and his emphasis on external agency as a key component of Greek conceptions but not of their Chinese counterparts (Jullien, 1995: 219 *passim*). The constant slippage between this level of philosophical specificity, which appears justifiable if we are in fact concerned strictly with the abstract reflections of philosophers, and the level of generalization to 'China' and its having *no* theory of causality requires qualification. The specificities of accounts of causation attributed to specific Greek thinkers, and indeed the arguments regarding propensity attributed to Chinese thinkers, appear in themselves valid (though the latter are presented less explicitly, giving the impression of a continuity and similarity ranging from the 2nd-century BC *Yijing* to Wang Fuzhi in the 17th century AD, whilst Jullien explicitly differentiates between different classical Greek schools and individuals to a far greater degree).

The key issue is the illusory juxtaposition between propensity and causation. This actually amounts to a difference of reflective emphasis and the question of the ultimate cause of reality. This involves divergent ontological claims on a particularly abstract level of reflection among experts but does not imply a fundamental divergence in causal cognition overall. A concept of irreversible linear change and associated cognition of cause and effect are universal; the strong claim that the Chinese lacked any theory of causality can thus be dispensed with. What is, or should be, at issue here is the role and nature of causality as part of an explicit, reflective ontology – that is, the meta-representation of intuitive causal cognition. It is on this level that the kind of differences Jullien points to may be fruitfully examined, and on this level only. We cannot extrapolate from systematic theories of the universe and causal relations within it to the actual behaviour, in practice, of the theorists themselves, let alone to the majority population.

We are still left with the claim that 'propensity' differs fundamentally from causation, as part of certain Chinese reflective ontologies. Jullien draws mainly on the thought of Wang Fuzhi but generalizes from this. The following points concern reflective ontologies based on the idea of *qi* as the most basic energy-substance of the cosmos, governed by principles of *yin* and *yang* and the Five Phases; that is, the cosmological principles which underlie not only the thought of most historical Chinese scholars during the imperial period, but also a wide range of technical practices such as divination and traditional medicine. These principles involve an explanatory causal framework – it is not the case that 'instead of the explanation of causes, we have the implication of tendencies' (Jullien, 1995: 221). This is not to say that Greek philosophers did not tend to focus more on explicit causal explanation as a philosophical problem but that the dichotomy is misleading and what we are dealing with is a difference in emphasis which is not really about 'causation'.

Indeed, it is only through careful semantic choices that Jullien is able to maintain the distinction. He describes the role of Heaven (*tian*) and Earth (*di*) in the *Yijing* as 'initiator' and 'receiver': '[i]t is from the configuration of this primary pair that the entire process of reality stems' (Jullien, 1995: 222). That is, the process of reality depends on the interaction between Heaven and Earth, following it as a consequence. The relationship is causal. Later Jullien (1995) describes how, in the *Huainanzi*, 'propensity' 'stems from the given situation' and 'results from the particular "disposition" (situation)' produced by the coming together of the tendencies of different things (p. 223). That is, certain situations spontaneously generate certain situations which have particular effects. This is thoroughly causal, and in fact the causal character of this kind of ontological stance is essential for the technical practices based on it. Divination and *fengshui*, for example, operate via the interpretation of particular situations in terms of cosmic principles in order to manipulate them to produce desired effects (see Matthews, 2016). This necessarily entails a cause-and-effect relationship between fundamental cosmic forces and sensible phenomena. Jullien (1995) goes on to quote a passage from the *Huainanzi* (p. 224) which describes fire resulting from the rubbing together of pieces of wood, fusion resulting from contact between fire and metal, and so on. He argues that this represents 'an interpretation based on tendencies' which 'replac[es]' 'the causal explanation'. This is perhaps the clearest illustration that this is primarily a question of semantics. The *Huainanzi* description clearly relies on a notion of causation (fire resulting from rubbing wood together amounts to the same thing as rubbing wood together *causing* the *effect* of generating fire). The fact that more attention is paid in the *Huainanzi* to an 'unfolding process' rather than the 'upstream' causal chain (Jullien, 1995) does not mean that causation is excluded; this is merely a difference in emphasis.

The key difference between the Chinese and Greek ideas Jullien describes is really about where ultimate cause is located. The Greek philosophers he describes invoke external agency, whereas the Chinese philosophers ascribe causal capacities to inherent tendencies. However, even here this difference in form of explanation, rather than the more obvious and, for the question of depth of cultural difference, less important, difference in content (emphasis on energy versus matter, four elements versus five phases), is less profound than Jullien suggests. He contends that in Chinese thought 'in reality everything always comes about immanently as a result of an internal development, with no

need to invoke any external causality', but also that 'this spontaneous process is itself a supremely regulatory force' (Jullien, 1995: 231). The problem is that the 'regulatory force' of spontaneous transformation, as elaborated in theories of *qi*, *yinyang*, and the five phases, only lacks the need for external causality on the level of the cosmos as a whole. At that level, no external agency or 'unmoved mover' is invoked, it is true, and *this* does have significant effects in terms of reflective ontology, notably that it compels a position of ontological monism, in this case reducing all reality to *qi* as a fundamental energy-substance,[4] and in terms of this monism combined with transformation, bearing a structural similarity with the ontology of the natural sciences (Matthews, 2017); it should also be noted that *qi*-based monism marks a distinct shift in ontological assumptions among specialists between the late Warring States and early Han periods (Matthews, 2016: 201–29). Within the cosmos, however, as Jullien shows and as already discussed, spontaneous process itself depends on the tendencies of other entities and their effects. That is, spontaneous process is a result of factors external to the entity concerned interacting with the tendencies of that entity. Moreover, this follows from the cosmogonic sequences outlined for example in the *Yijing*, from the 'limitless' (*wuji*) to the principles of the eight trigrams (*bagua*), which cause change dependent on circumstance (Matthews, 2017).

Conclusions

The view of causality in terms of the interaction of tendencies producing effects should not strike us as particularly 'other'. It is in fact, in form if not in content, very similar to the viewpoint of evolutionary biology (and by extension other natural sciences). Cause and effect here depend on the interactions of specific configurations and processes – and this lies at the heart of the ontological position I have argued for in this article, with the help of Boyer, Sperber, and Bloch. This amounts to an account of cultural differences based on an understanding of specific human tendencies manifest on the level of individuals, which through interaction with other tendencies (via interaction with other individuals, social institutions, and the wider environment), produce spatiotemporal variation between individuals and thus tendencies to certain reflective ideas in different groups.

Ontologies as I have discussed them must be understood as individual phenomena resulting from unique life histories and the epidemiological distribution of ideas and behaviour across a group. This approach to culture allows us to consider spatial and temporal distributions of ontologies, which viewed at this scale will give an appearance of convergence of worldviews. Thus we can make some very general claims about tendencies in reflective ontologies in a given place, with direct implications for Jullien's approach. He implicitly takes the thought of philosophers as causally prior to that to cultures as distinct wholes. This is unrealistic – when viewed epidemiologically, and taking account of the existence of cognitive levels and degrees of reflective systematization, the view of primary philosophical influence becomes very hard to sustain. Philosophers historically make up a tiny minority of an already small literate minority, existing only as a function of a degree of social complexity which allows for such specialization. These individuals inevitably grew up within this broader context, their cognitive ontogeny informed not only, or even primarily, by reflective consideration of existing ideas but by

their social interactions and observations. This results in a paradox of scale on the part of philosophical experts; on the one hand, as specialists they are frequently contemplating the world on the highest level of reflective abstraction, cognitively speaking. However, from the perspective of society in aggregate, the specificities of their thought only becomes visible when we zoom in to the level of the individual – assuming that, as students of human behaviour, we grant all individuals equal analytical weight rather than disproportionately concentrating on the most visible (and often unrepresentative) of those examples. If, comparing two groups, one selects outliers within those groups as one's primary points of comparison, and moreover selects their most abstract reflective ideas, one inevitably exaggerates aggregate divergence between those groups.

Jullien's project necessarily makes empirical claims, which in the broader view of human behaviour are profoundly unrealistic and which, as I have discussed, imply a level of qualitative cognitive divergence between human groups which would exceed that between humans and other species. A focus on the language of philosophical expression alone is insufficient and misleading in generating productive understanding of cultural difference. This is not to deny the importance of understanding culturally-specific philosophical ideas, or their value for understanding the various ways in which humans contemplate reality. It is, though, to caution against drawing conclusions which exceed what can reasonably be claimed on the basis of the data, and to encourage steps toward an approach based on the productive exchange of knowledge and theoretical insight across disciplines.

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Notes

1. Throughout this article I use the terms 'intuitive' and 'reflective' in this strict sense unless otherwise stated.
2. This question is similarly raised by Li Shiqiao's contribution to this issue, though if anything he adopts a version of linguistic determinism more extreme even than Jullien's in attempting to 'establish a link between the absence of grammatical markers in the Chinese language and the characteristics of Chinese garden-landscapes'. Li acknowledges in passing that not all thought is linguistic, but quickly brushes this aside to insist on a conceptual approach divorced from empirical data (in fact, he cites a paper suggesting that language *does not* alter conceptual representation; Gleitman and Papafragou, 2013). As in Jullien's case, this may be sufficient for a formal analysis of concepts but allows no conclusions to be made about how people, other than Li and Jullien, actually think. In Li's case this is exacerbated further by his collapsing of Chinese language into written classical Chinese – his argument rests on the supposition that thought follows not language as a whole, but writing, combined with a critique of 'phonocentrism' based on the orality of Indo-European languages and their alphabets

(leaving aside the facts that historically, the vast majority of people have been illiterate, that linguistic thinking tends to follow oral language patterns, that oral and spoken language differ significantly and that, as such, surviving writings cannot be taken as generalizable guides to the syntax and semantics of individual thought).

3. My thanks to Stephan Feuchtwang for raising this point.

4. The common dichotomy drawn between Greek 'essence' and Chinese 'process' is similarly a matter of emphasis rather than a fundamental gulf in understanding. The notion of process makes sense only in terms of matter of some sort undergoing transformation; the idea of *qi* typically reflects this, and contemporary diviners argue that particular beings or entities are determined by specific configurations of *qi* – that is, the configuration functions as something like an essence (Matthews, 2016).

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