On Small and Large Vessels: Anthropological Difference according to Matteo Ricci and Zhu Xi

Mateusz JANIK*

Abstract

The following paper offers a comparative study of Song Neo-Confucian and late Ming Jesuit arguments on the exceptionality of human beings and the role played by non-human others in the process of producing the discursive premises of the anthropological difference. It focuses on the arguments made by Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130‒1200) and Matteo Ricci (1552‒1610) in favour of a claim that there is something particular about being human. Its historical premise is that the Jesuit missionary activity in China resulted in a peculiar encounter between the scholastic tradition, based on Aristotle's philosophy, and Confucian teachings. In case of Chinese as well as Western philosophical discourse, the figure of the non-human other has played an important role in establishing the very meaning of being human.

Keywords: anthropological difference, Zhu Xi, Matteo Ricci, Neo-Confucianism, Jesuit accommodationism, non-human

O majhnih in velikih posodah: antropološka diferenca po Matteu Ricciju in Zhu Xiju

Izvleček

Članek se ukvarja s primerjalno raziskavo argumentov Songovskega neokonfucijanstva in poznejših jezuitskih misijonarjev dinastije Ming o izjemnosti človeka ter vlogi, ki jo imajo nečloveški drugi pri ustvarjanju diskurzivnih predpostavk antropološke diferenca. Osredotoča se na argumente, ki sta jih izpostavila Zhu Xi (朱熹; 1130‒1200) in Matteo Ricci (1552‒1610) v prid trditvi, da je biti človek nekaj posebnega. Njena zgodovinska predpostavka je, da je jezuitska misijonarska dejavnost na Kitajskem privedla do posebnega srečanja med sholastično tradicijo, ki temelji na Aristotelovi filozofiji, in konfucijanskim naukom. V primeru kitajskega in zahodnega filozofskega diskurza je lik nečloveškega drugega odigral pomembno vlogo pri vzpostavljanju samega pomena človešnosti.

Ključne besede: antropološka diferenca, Zhu Xi, Matteo Ricci, neokonfucijanstvo, jezuitska akomodacija, nečlovek

* Mateusz JANIK, Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences. Email address: janikm[at]protonmail.com
The following paper offers a comparative study of Song Neo-Confucian and late Ming Jesuit arguments on the exceptionality of the human condition and the role played by the non-human others in the process of producing the discursive premises of the anthropological difference. It focuses on the way Zhu Xi (朱熹; 1130–1200) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) argued in favour of a claim that there is something particular about being human. The Jesuit missionary activity in China resulted in a peculiar encounter between the scholastic tradition, based on Aristotle’s philosophy, and Confucian teachings. In both cases, the figure of the non-human other has played an important role in establishing the very meaning of being human. Below I will refer to the set of concepts and arguments devised to express and secure the gap between the human and the non-human as “anthropological difference”. This notion has gained certain recognition in recent decades, particularly within the scholarship located at the intersection of anthropology, animal studies and philosophy, opening new perspectives on the question of otherness, historically anchored in the binary of the human and non-human world (Agamben 2004; Glock 2012; Steiner 2010; Gross et al. 2012; Braidotti 2013). Studies concerning the role played by animals and other non-human beings in formation of Chinese culture, philosophy and political thought and imagery (Mølgaard 2010; Nappi 2012; Sterckx 2012; Lynn 2019; Back 2018; D’Ambrosio 2022) could be taken as part of this “non-human turn” (Grusin and Grusin 2015) in the contemporary humanities. Both Neo-Confucian learning of the Cheng-Zhu school as well as Jesuit scholastics introduced in China by Ricci, mainly through his 1603 catechism Tianzhu shiyi (天主實義, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven; Ricci 2016), addressed the question of anthropological difference in a direct manner; a fact that provides a convenient comparative ground for studying how the Neo-Confucian tradition interfered with Western thinking at the early stage of the Sino-European intellectual exchange. I am particularly interested in the way Ricci’s attempt to explain the “Western” variant of the anthropological difference through the Confucian conceptual apparatus resulted in a version of the anthropological difference that accommodated certain features of its Neo-Confucian counterpart. The paper begins with a short account of a juxtaposition of “Western” and Neo-Confucian teachings on the difference between humans and other beings offered by Huang Baijia (黄百家, 1643–1709) in the early Qing anthology of Neo-Confucian schools Songyuan xue’an (宋元學案, Records of Song and Yuan Scholars; Huang Zongxi 2007). Secondly, I will discuss Zhu Xi’s views on the way human and non-human beings differ from each other, and his answer to the question of what constitutes the specificity of human condition. In the third section I will analyse the way in which Ricci’s presentation of the Aristotelian theory of the soul is blended with the Confucian vocabulary. I will argue
that both Ricci and Zhu Xi offered a view which contrasted the fundamental openness of human nature with the nature of “beasts and animals” presented as enclosed and limited by the material conditions of their existence. In the concluding section I will look at the broader ramifications of arguments made by Zhu Xi and Ricci, showing that in both cases the anthropological difference could be taken as a discursive device used as a means of introducing otherness as a normative concept.

Sentient Trees and Benevolent Cats

Jesuit missionaries operating in the late Ming China faced a difficult task of translating the scholastic conceptual apparatus into the complex network of Chinese philosophical notions. This task was difficult for a variety of reasons, conditioned by the fact that the Jesuits were only gradually gaining acquaintance with the canonical texts that provided the conceptual reservoir for the philosophical discourse used by the scholars during the late Ming dynasty. One of the first attempts to present Christian doctrine to the Chinese in a form of systematic textual exposition, *Tianzhu shilu* (天主實錄, *The True Record of the Lord of Heaven*) composed by Michel Ruggieri (1543‒1607) and published in 1584, was based mainly on Buddhist terminology. It was eventually superseded by Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi*, a text which engaged more consciously in the debate with Confucian philosophy (on a critical assessment of the difference between *Tianzhu shilu* and *Tianzhu shiyi* see Canaris 2019). It is in this text where we find Chinese translations of terminology that constituted Aristotelian tripartite doctrine of soul: vegetative soul, sentient soul and rational soul. This tripartite division served as a basis for the scholastic doctrine of the soul which sharply separated the rational soul, described as immortal and immaterial, from the vegetative and sentient soul that were assigned to plants and animals. This sharp ontological distinction produced a tension between Neo-Confucian teachings concerning the common origin of all things and Jesuit theology which focused on the unsurpassable divide between human and non-human beings. Thus, it might be somewhat surprising that precisely these three notions are found as illustrating Zhu Xi’s views in in a brief but interesting annotation in the *Songyuan xue’an*, an encyclopaedic anthology of Neo-Confucian schools composed in the early Qing period, by Huang Zongxi (1610‒1695), Huang Baijia and Quan Zuwang (全祖望, 1705‒1755). The annotation in question was added by Huang Baijia at the end of a passage quoting Zhu Xi’s reflection upon the cognitive and moral faculties of plants. After being asked why is it that animals seem to possess consciousness while plants seem to be deprived of it, Zhu Xi responded:
[...] while plants cannot be said to possess consciousness, they do have certain intention of life which they can make visible silently. When a plant is injured, it withers and is no longer joyfully vigorous. Also, plants seem to possess some sort of consciousness. Once, I saw a blooming tree, as the morning sun shined upon it, it flourished and had this intention to live that the tree bark could not contain and thus it sprung out by itself. As for the withered branches and old leaves, they show themselves to be wan and sallow, which is probably due to the fact that the vital force has already left them. (Huang Zongxi 2007, 2:1521)

Zhu Xi’s response is somewhat hesitant, but it does open a possibility of thinking about plants as sentient or even moral subjects (see Back 2018). The above argument is a good example of the way in which the traditionally human-centred view of Neo-Confucian learning becomes complicated when we look into the world of non-human others. Against a claim that the difference between human and non-human beings lies in the ability of the former to behave in a virtuous manner, Zhu Xi’s texts quite often make references to human-like behaviours. This is particularly true with respect to the moral realm, considered to be restricted to humans. The fourth chapter of Zhuzi yulei (朱子語類; Classified Conversations of Master Zhu; Zhu Xi 2002a), the source of the quote given above, is particularly telling in this respect since it contains examples of virtuous behaviours among wolves and tigers (benevolence and affection towards their parents), bees (loyalty towards the ruler) or otters (ritual sacrifices) (ibid., 14:185). Animal behaviour may thus resemble human nature, as in the case of the benevolent cat biographies by Sima Guang (ibid., 185). As noted above, even plants seem to show at least some traces of virtuous behaviour (ibid., 189–90). The description of plant’s semi-conscious response to the environment triggered a more provocative question: does this mean plants are capable of benevolence? To which Zhu Xi answered somewhat vaguely: “We may see that it is wishing for righteousness from the fact that it withers when injured” (ibid., 190).

That plants can be said to strive for righteousness, one of the five Confucian virtues, might seem provocative at the first glance. However, as we shall see Zhu Xi’s argument on anthropological difference makes it perfectly plausible to admit a certain degree of virtue even to the least humanlike of beings. Here, more interesting is Huang Baijia’s decision to annotate this discussion with a reference to the Aristotelian theory of tripartite soul:

The Westerners divide humans and other beings into three classes: human beings are the first among the ten thousand things as they possess
the intellective soul; animals can eat and reproduce and they possess sentient soul; Plants and trees lack cognitive faculties but have vegetative soul. This seems rather correct. (Huang Zongxi 2007, 2:1521)

This passage could be read either as a reaffirmation of the anthropological difference that attests privileged position to human beings amid Zhu Xi’s less anthropocentric argument or as a contextualization, which situates the discussion in a broader perspective. It should be stressed that in the Zhuzi yulei Zhu Xi’s reflection on sentient trees comes after a long presentation of the reasons why humans are uniquely different from any other creatures in their ability to transform and extend their own moral condition. In either case, Huang Baijia’s comment marks a very peculiar entanglement between two independent traditions of conceptualizing the anthropological difference. On the one hand the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy epitomized by Zhu Xi’s teachings takes anthropological difference as a matter of degree rather than categorical separation, while the European scholastic tradition tends to see human beings as categorically distinguished by virtue of the fact of a rational soul that is presumably lacking in other beings. This difference might also be described by contrasting the explanatory metaphysics prevalent in Neo-Confucian learning, based on moral anthropology and foundational metaphysics, with the scholastic tradition which constructs the anthropological difference on onto-theological premises (see Huang Yong 2022). Taking into account this structural contrast in the way human exceptionality is articulated in the case of Neo-Confucian and “Western” learning, one might be surprised to find that Huang Baijia used “Western” tripartite theory of soul as a contextualization of Zhu Xi’s argument in favour of a less clear-cut division between animals and plants.

The annotation might seem even more perplexing if we take into account the lengths to which Jesuit missionaries who introduced the Aristotelian theory of the soul in China went in order to refute the Neo-Confucian response to the question of anthropological difference. According to the scholastic explanation, the non-human other was confined within the limits of the vegetative and sentient soul, which were conceived rather as a function of the organism rather than a separate substance, while human beings were endowed with an eternal soul that was substantially different from the human body. The fact that the Neo-Confucian doctrine assumed a common substance for the body and soul resulted in serious doubts among the Jesuit missionaries as to whether it was possible to express the very idea of soul as it was conceived in Christianity using Chinese vocabulary. This matter was part of a broader discussion revolving around the question as to whether or not the monist tendencies within the Neo-Confucian discourse (as interpreted by the missionaries)
within the Neo-Confucian discourse should be treated as representative of the entire Chinese tradition or as a historical distortion of the original Confucian teachings. However, a more general interpretative issue conditioned any attempt to challenge the Confucian orthodoxy of the late Ming period. Despite hostility towards the Neo-Confucian doctrine, the Jesuits were dependent on the way in which Song commentaries explained the content of the classics. In particular, in the early period of their mission the efforts to promote Christianity among late Ming scholars required a certain degree of accommodation to the Confucian discourse. Conveying the idea of the eternal soul, one of the crucial points in Christian theology, required expressing it through references to the classical Confucian sources, which—as one prominent Jesuit bluntly noticed—were incomprehensible without the aid of commentaries containing Neo-Confucian teachings (see Longobardi 2021, 107). This was also the case in Ricci’s presentation of the tripartite soul in the *Tianzhu shiyi*. In order to better comprehend the resonance between the Jesuit exposition of scholastic anthropology and the Neo-Confucian learning a more detailed analysis of Zhu Xi’s take on the anthropological difference is needed.

**Mind the Gap—How Small is the Anthropological Difference according to Zhu Xi?**

For most of the Neo-Confucian scholars the human condition was constituted by a double entanglement with a wider cosmo-ontological edifice in which human beings played the role of creative agent, endowed with the greatest excellence among the myriad things. On the one hand human beings shared a common origin with all things in existence, on the other they operated in a particularly resonant manner “that brings about the completion of the Great Ultimate” (Tu Wei-ming 1971, 80). Neo-Confucian inquiries concerning the specificity of human existence followed Mencius’ observation: “That wherein human beings differ from the birds and beasts is but slight” (*Mencius* 2011, 89; 4B19). Assessing this statement from the perspective of a discursive apparatus allows to see that the non-human other played an important role in thinking of some of the themes located at the centre of the Confucian doctrine, such as self-cultivation or emulating the sages. In his study of the early Confucian humanism Eske Møllgaard notes that in Mencius in particular the state of being human is taken as a precarious condition that requires constant cultivation. Without it human life would deteriorate to the level of the “beasts and birds”. Taking this observation as a representative of Confucianism in general, Møllgaard calls the set of practices and ideas rendering this preservation of the human condition possible the “anthropological machine” (Møllgaard 2010). The term, borrowed from the Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben, is built around
a claim that that being human is both object and condition of a complex discursive machinery, which produced first and foremost the very difference based on (non-human) otherness that secures the exceptional status of human beings. According to Agamben, a particular feature of the anthropological difference is that while the human being is conceived as fundamentally open-ended and undefined, the animals (non-human others) are limited by their environment, and clearly defined by these limitations (Agamben 2004). In other words, the human condition is located in the very gap that separates human and non-human beings. For Mencius upholding this gap distinguishes nobleman (junzi 君子) from common people—an indication of the fact that anthropological difference is a prescriptive rather than descriptive notion. To see how thin the line between human beings and animals is, we may consult Mencius’ argument against Yang Zhu’s egoism and Mozi’s idea of universal care:

If the ways of Yang and Mo are not stopped, and the way of Confucius is not made known, the people will be deceived by these deviant views, and the path of humaneness and rightness will be blocked. When the path of humaneness and rightness is blocked, animals are led to devour people, and people will be led to devour one another. (Mencius 2011, 70; 3B9)

Here, the anthropological difference located in the proper cultivation of the Way is not only an individual task but also a foundation of a properly human life. It is thus a matter of proper social, political and moral conduct rather than a certain set of innate qualities. Zhu Xi’s comment on the above passage further elucidates this view by pointing towards the realm of human relations. According to Zhu Xi, Yang Zhu’s egoism leaves no space for any form of political order that is organized along relations between rulers and their subjects. In other words, to follow Yang Zhu would mean “to do away with the ruler”. Similarly, Mozi’s idea of indiscriminate care for others (jian’ai 兼愛) makes it impossible to differentiate between one’s kin and strangers, and effectively dissolves the relation one has with one’s parents, which is based on filial piety (xiao 孝). As his commentary explains: “Not having a father and not having a ruler leads to losing the human Way and thus equates with beasts and birds” (Zhu Xi 2002b, 6:331). The relation between subject and ruler and the relation between father and son is one of the staple elements of Confucian moral discourse. As such it constitutes the key factor distinguishing human beings from animals. Zhu Xi therefore explains the passage from Mencius in terms of deterioration of human condition.

However, when we take a closer look at the way this Mencian “anthropological machine” is handled by Zhu Xi, we may notice—that while the conceptual focus is
put on the notions that allow us to differentiate between the human and non-human condition, the issue of resemblances amid these differences seems to be constantly present in his argument. In other words, while being human requires constant cultivation which prevents a person from sliding down towards the level of beasts and birds, the beasts and birds possess certain features that are traditionally considered to be reserved for humans alone.

On the one hand Zhu Xi puts a strong emphasis on certain metaphysical preconditions that make human beings unique. The commentary on the Mencius’ statement that the difference between human beings and animals is but small brings up a much stronger version of the anthropological difference:

When people and other beings are born, they commonly obtain the *li* of Heaven and Earth as their nature, and they commonly obtain the *qi* of Heaven and Earth as their shape. Only human beings obtain within this shape *qi* that is upright, and that by means of which they are able to complete their [proper] nature is but small. When it is said that difference is small, in fact all that separates people from other beings is located in this. The multitude of people do not know this and cast it away. Thus, while they are called people, in reality they do not differ from beasts and birds. (Zhu Xi 2002b, 6:358).

While to maintain the condition of being human one needs to cultivate the Confucian virtues, particularly humanness, there is also a specific ontological precondition that makes this cultivation possible: the uprightness of human physical nature. According to Zhu Xi, being human is conditioned by the arrangement of *qi* in a particular, upright manner. This however is possible because *qi*, being the creative and active force, is always qualified by *Li* (the Cosmic Pattern or principle). However, to assume from this that there is something intrinsically human in the content of this cultivation would miss Zhu Xi’s point. The chapter 57 of *Zhuzi yulei* contains an explanation of the Mencian “gap” that is more nuanced than the commentary mentioned above:

Jing Zhi asked [about the passage from Mencius]: “That whereby man differs from the lower animals is but small”. The answer was: “It is *Li* that is common in people and ten thousand things. Thus, the heart-mind is that by which they differ. The human-mind being an empty numinosity embrace numerous *li* [miles] and there is nothing it does not penetrate. Even if the endowed *qi* is murky, there it can overcome it and make it bright. The heart-mind of ten thousand things, covers a lot of *li* it does not go through, even though there is some uprightness in the *qi* they are
endowed with, it stops at having one or two paths towards the brightness. If there is care between fathers and sons among the beasts and birds or differentiation into males and females, there is only such one or two paths towards brightness, and other principles of the way are not penetrated or extended further. The human heart-mind, through its lucid transparency extends further. Thus, speaking of its great root, the *Li* is one, and the difference lies in what is endowed with *qi* there.” (Zhu Xi 2002c, 15:1838)

According to Zhu Xi, the human heart-mind is open by its very nature. While animals can be said to act morally to a certain degree, they do so in a fixed and limited manner. Human beings on the other hand can respond morally towards a multitude of situations. Furthermore, while people are endowed with *qi* of different clarity, it is the very openness of their heart-mind or their nature that allows them to refine it in a way that animals are presumably unable to. Nevertheless, what is revealed in the moral behaviour of both human and non-human animals is the very same pattern, common to all beings—it is the scope of this practice and its self-referential transformative effect in the case of humans (who, according to Zhu Xi, can overcome their material preconditions) that constitutes the anthropological difference. To put it bluntly, it is much harder for an animal to practice self-cultivation than for a human.

**Small Vessels and Sparrows Tied to Trees: Ricci’s Depiction of Aristotelian Soul**

In the passages presented above we saw how Zhu Xi’s views concerning the anthropological difference operate at two levels: moral and ontological. However, this difference is not located in any moral qualifier: beast and birds also engage in virtuous behaviours that are generally considered to be distinctively human—some of them are filial, other adhere to the rulers, some even practice ritual sacrifices. What actually distinguishes human and non-human beings is the penetrative ability of human beings to overcome the limitations of their material conditions and retrieve original pattern, common to all beings. In other words, while human beings remain fundamentally open-ended and undefined, “beast and birds” are considered limited by their environment and confined by their bodily constitution.

When we shift our attention to Ricci, we may notice that he uses references to the classical Confucian themes in order to stress the very same openness constitutive of the human condition. Despite the fact that Ricci’s stance towards
Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in his *Tianzhu shiyi* is ambiguous at best (and openly hostile in his writings addressed to European audience) he offered an idea of anthropological difference that resonated with Zhu Xi’s argument, at least at the rhetorical level.

The human soul and its faculties are discussed in the third chapter of *Tianzhu shiyi*. Here for the first time three types of soul mentioned by Aristotle are given their proper Chinese names (*shenghun* 生魂, *jiuehun* 觉魂, *linghun* 靈魂), used by Huang Baijia in the comment referred to in the opening section of this paper. Ricci’s exposition of the tripartite theory of the soul is presented in the following manner:

In this world, there are three kinds of souls. The lowest is called the life principle—the vegetative soul. This kind of soul supports vegetation in its growth, and when the vegetation withers the soul is also destroyed. The second class of soul is called the sentient soul. This soul is possessed by birds and beasts. It allows the birds and beasts to be born, to develop and to grow up, and causes their ears and eyes to be able to hear and see, their mouths and noses to be able to taste and smell, and their limbs and bodies to be aware of things, though not to be able to infer truth. When creatures die, their souls are destroyed along with them. The most superior of the souls is called the intellective soul. This is the soul of man, which includes [the powers of] the vegetative soul and the sentient soul. It enables people to grow to maturity; it causes people to be aware of things outside themselves, and it allows people to make inferences as to the nature of things and to distinguish between one principle and another. (Ricci 2016, 119)

Ricci’s account is a paraphrase of a fairly straightforward presentation of Aristotle’s theory in the earlier text *Tianzhu shilu* by Michel Ruggieri (see Tan Jie 2014, 109). Here it is important to notice that the division does not stress a radical ontological difference between human and non-human life: the intellective soul is not so much something different but rather something more than the sentient and vegetative soul, as it includes and exceeds both.

However, it should be noticed that this weak version of anthropological difference is stated after a much stronger theological claim that humans are unique as they come “out of this world”. Ricci’s argument is built on the theological premise according to which the human soul is of transcendent, spiritual origin that surpasses the material realm (to which vegetative and sentient souls belong). This material realm or the natural world, inhabited by beasts and birds, is foreign to humans who dwell in it as guests or temporal residents rather than hosts:
Our home is not in this world, but in the life to come, not among men, but in heaven. We ought to establish our inheritance in that place. This world is the world of birds and beasts, and therefore the bodies of each incline earthwards. Man is born to be a citizen of heaven and therefore his head is lifted heavenwards. It is the birds and beasts that treat this world as their own dwelling place; it should not surprise us, then, that the Lord of Heaven should treat people with greater severity. (Ricci 2016, 117)

The reason why Ricci puts such a strong emphasis on the transcendent origin of the human soul is that he intends to show that the soul is immortal, immaterial and does not perish when the human body dies. Through this the human soul gains a substantial dimension: it is not merely that human beings are more capable than animals, as what makes them special is the spiritual substance that constitutes the soul.

Such an argument put Ricci in a difficult position when discussing religious matters with his Chinese interlocutors. While for Chinese scholars there was no serious problem with the statement that there is a difference between human and non-human beings, it was somewhat perplexing for them that there was some other kind of substance involved in making this difference. This was not a matter of incomprehension but rather discrepancies between the basic cosmo-ontological premises of Western and Chinese philosophical discourses. Where the Chinese saw a single vital force which constituted a multitude of beings that shared a single origin, the Europeans looked for division allowing them to separate the Creator and His Creation, and a substantial difference between the spiritual and material worlds neatly served this purpose (see Janik 2022).

These two layers of argument—one pointing towards substantial difference the other towards specifically human faculties of the rational soul—prepare the ground for Ricci’s argument in which he presents a more detailed analysis of the anthropological difference. As the dialogue continues, we find Ricci presenting six arguments to his Chinese interlocutors that illustrate uniqueness of the human soul. The general logic of these examples is that while animals are bound by their corporeality, human existence is radically open:

[T]he mind of the flesh is like a small utensil/vessel: what it can know is small and limited. It is like a sparrow tied to a tree by a thread. Because of the limitations imposed on it by the thread, it cannot spread its wings and fly high in the sky. Thus, although birds and beasts have awareness, they cannot understand things beyond the world of form and are incapable
of reflecting on themselves in order to know the condition of their own natures. The [spiritual and] formless mind, however, is most great and comprehensive. There is nowhere it does not penetrate, and it cannot be limited by a small vessel. (Ricci 2016, 131)

It is interesting to observe how Ricci employs his accommodationist strategy of blending together Western learning and Chinese sources. His use of the term “vessel”, which is also often translated as “utensil” is a skilful reference to the Confucian tradition. The famous passage in *The Analects* states that “the gentleman is not a vessel” (*The Analects* 2.12) indicating—as many commentators suggest—that he is not bound by a single function or skill and can practice virtue regardless of the conditions he finds himself in. The phrase “small vessel” also appears in *The Analects*, when minister of the state of Qi, Guan Zhong (~ -645 BC) is described by Confucius as a vessel of small capacity (*The Analects* 3.22). According to Zhu Xi this refers to his inability to comprehend and practice the Way as it is described in the Great Learning (namely by cultivating oneself, correcting one’s mind, etc.). One might also point towards *Exemplary Figures* (*fayan* 法言) by the renowned Han author Yang Xiong (揚雄, 53 BCE–18 CE) where the passage from *The Analects* is explained by contrasting the small vessel or utensil with a great one, namely one which, like a compass or carpenter’s square, allows one to set order within variety of situations. According to Yang Xiong a great utensil refers to a figure who is capable of mastering themselves before mastering others (Yang Xiong 2013, 145). Ricci might have had something similar in mind when opposing the human mind to the small vessel or utensil: at the very end of the related paragraph he notes that the human mind “can also reflect on itself, coming to know the condition of its own nature”. Finally, the term *qi* 器, vessel or utensil (and in a more general manner: something particular), can be found in the famous passage from the *Xici* 系辭 commentary on the *Book of Changes*: “that what is above shapes is called, the Way; that what is below shapes is called *qi*, a vessel [or utensil]”. There are many possibilities to approach this set of references, but it seems that the term *qi* 器 is located at a particularly fortunate position, which allows Ricci to bind together references to transcendence and anthropocentric psychology with a variety of ideas located at the centre of Chinese textual tradition. The result is a Christian anthropology attuned to the Confucian vocabulary: animals, which are small vessels or utensils, are bound by the particularities of their corporeal existence, while human beings are supposedly capable of transcending these particularities (and thus practicing the Way) by the virtue of their soul that is linked to the transcendent, to the spiritual world (i.e. the world located above the shapes which constitute the bodily form of particular objects).
Conclusion: Anthropological Difference and the World Order

It is commonly acknowledged that the concept of the immortal and immaterial soul introduced by the Jesuits in late Ming China posed a challenge to the Neo-Confucian worldview, oriented around a single-substance universe. However, when the question is articulated in terms of the anthropological difference one may notice a genuine resemblance between the way European and Chinese scholars understood non-human others. Taking Ricci and Zhu Xi as examples, we may see that for both of them the difference between human and non-human beings was located in the radical openness of the human cognitive and moral faculties. They both saw animals as bound by their environment and corporeal nature that narrows the scope of their actions. In both cases this difference was linked with certain metaphysical preconditions, making human beings something profoundly different to animals. Still, these resemblances should not obscure the complexities of the conditions in which the encounter between scholastic and Neo-Confucian discourses took place. Zhu Xi’s understanding of the anthropological difference was built upon a moral anthropology that took certain assumptions concerning actual human behaviour as a starting point, while Ricci based his argumentation on theological premises that assumed substantial differences separating the human and non-human realms.

It is important to notice how the encounter with the Neo-Confucian discourse affected Ricci’s exposition of the idea of an immortal and immaterial soul. The conceptual transformations involved in rewriting scholastic anthropology into a Confucian idiom opened it to new ways of contextualization, as exemplified by Huang Baijia’s annotation discussed in the first section of this paper. One important implication was the inscription of a fixed ontological difference separating human and non-human souls appropriate to scholastic traditions into the Chinese conceptual framework, which focused instead on the dynamic process of constructing this difference. From the Confucian perspective human beings could become animal-like by means of their actions, while some animals on the other hand were clearly endowed with the capacity to act in a way that is humane, even if to a very limited degree. Furthermore, while Ricci’s use of the Confucian terminology, such as a small vessel, was restricted to the natural (i.e. non-human) world, the Confucian applications of this term were much broader and included the practical aspects of human existence. While in both cases the aim of arguing in favour of anthropological difference seems to be somewhat different—the recovery and cultivation of human condition in the case of Zhu Xi and separating the soul from the natural realm in case of Ricci—they seem to share a similar vision of an ordered universe attainable by the penetrating inquiry of human mind.
What seems crucial in order to understand the driving-force behind these two apparently similar lines of thought is the counterfactual logic that takes lead each time the possibility of a world without intrinsic order and clear normative divisions is taken into consideration. In a brief, but a significant, discussion on heart-mind of Heaven and Earth Zhu Xi makes a following point:

If we were to accept what has been said here [i.e., that Heaven and Earth have no heart-mind] it simply meant that there is no place for heart-mind. And if there is no heart-mind, then by necessity oxen would give birth to horses, and peach trees would bloom with plum blossoms. But they have their own fixed [ways]. Master Cheng said: that by which [things are] decided is called emperor, that by which nature and affection [emerge] is called the haven [or heavenly creation]. He formulated this by himself, the heart-mind is the place in which things decide and thus we call heart-mind that by which Heaven and earth gives birth to things. (Zhu Xi 2002a, 14:117)

This image of a chaotic world without any clear distinctions points towards a deeper problem that underlies the anthropological difference in Zhu Xi’s writings. Since the human condition is exercised by sincere responsiveness towards the world according to its patterns that the human mind can penetrate, the lack of these patterns (i.e., a situation in which anything can follow from anything else) makes it effectively impossible to practice humanness in any comprehensible form. It is worth comparing this Neo-Confucian image with a similar one found in Ricci’s dialogue:

Objects that lack souls and perception cannot move from their natural habitats by themselves in a regular and orderly manner. If they are to move in a regular and orderly manner, it is necessary that an intelligence external to themselves should come to their aid. Should you suspend a stone in space or place it on water, it is bound to fall until it reaches the ground, unable to move a second time. (...) Now, when we observe the supreme Heaven, we see that it moves from the east, while the heavens of the sun, moon, and stars travel from the west. Without the slightest error, each thing follows the laws proper to it, and each is secure in its own place. If there were no Supreme Lord to control and to exercise authority [over these things], would it be possible to avoid confusion? (Ricci 2016, 49)

What seems to be key argument in both examples is that there is certain instance in the world, which translates the factual into the normative. It is significant that
in both cases the matrix for this instance is political: the heart-mind of the world is called the emperor, the figure securing the universal order of things is called Supreme Lord. In fact, when we look at Mencian argument against Yang Zhu and Mozi we may notice that what is at stake in maintaining the human animal distinction is a proper model of society, where human relations are practiced in a manner that accords with the Way.

These examples point towards a more general question concerning the philosophical notion of otherness, which reveals itself primarily as a normative concept. In the passages quoted above we saw few of such counterfactual illustrations, which resort to help of imagination in order to illustrate the world beyond human comprehension: “people devouring one another”, “oxen giving birth to horses”, “confusion without anyone to exercise authority”—all these examples point towards certain external world which by the virtue of being detached from human condition becomes fundamentally foreign, a world in-itself so to speak, with no intelligent soul to penetrate it nor sincere heart-mind to resonate with it. Thus, the reason we should think about a discursive device or a machine (to use Agamben’s expression) when discussing the anthropological difference is that it allows to see how this set of notions and ideas translates the relation between the human mode of existence and the external world into the language of normativity. As a result of this translation the non-human world becomes inhumane. We may thus risk a hypothesis that the devices constitutive of the anthropological difference serve the purpose of rendering bearable the inhumane condition of nature. Here, inhumanness should be understood in a way so aptly grasped in another great Chinese classic, *Daode-jing*: the nature which in its in-humanness treats people like “the straw dogs” (see Lynn 1999, 60), perfectly indifferent towards the thin line of social and cultural constructs that differentiate human and non-human existence. This, however, brings us to a very different set of questions, which could set ground for a wider, comparative investigation into the philosophical peculiarities of the human condition. However, this is an investigation the greatly exceeds the scope of this paper.

Acknowledgement

Research for this article was funded by the National Science Center in Poland (Grant number: UMO-2019/31/D/HS1/00864).
References


