

Valences of the “Thing-in-Itself”: the Concept of the Noumenon in the Philosophy of Li Zehou and the Religious Dimension of his Ethics

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In this paper, I will attempt to situate Li Zehou's creative appropriation of the concept of the “noumenon” (wu ziti 物自体) in the broader historical context of the reception of Kantian thought in modern China. In doing so, I will point towards certain parallels between the critical encounter with the idea of the “thing-in-itself” in Western Marxism (Lukács) and fundamental ontology (Heidegger) on the one hand, and the conceptual function of the “noumenal” in New Confucian philosophy (Mou Zongsan) and the thought of Li Zehou on the other. Additionally, I will engage with the paradoxical fact that the approach towards the noumenal (denoting that which is necessarily located beyond the limits of human knowledge) is both historically and culturally variable. In other words, the dimension of an “in-itself” foreclosed to cognition would seem to refer not so much to an absolute outside of thought, but rather to a certain horizon of observation in which thinkers can reflect on the situatedness of knowledge within the the specific conditions of modern society. I will argue that Li's identification of Kant's notion of the noumenon with what he calls the “syncretistic communal existence” (xietong gongzai 协同共在) of the universe as such reflects a distinct shift in the interpretation of the unknowable noumenon from a (restrictive, limiting) epistemological to an ethico-religious perspective and explore some of the ethical ramifications of this shift with reference to Li's “theory of two morals” (liang de lun 两德论).