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Abstract

Extract:

Chuang-tzu is traditionally classified as the second greatest Taoist after Lao-tzu. He is a remarkable thinker who deliberates on almost everything, including epistemology, morality, statecraft and behaviour, and his thought has influenced China for more than two thousand years. Since he loves to utilise fable, tales, humour, irony and other poetic techniques to express his views, he is often distorted by commentators. Therefore it is important to give him a more precise evaluation.

Keywords

Chuang-tzu, Confucius, chapters, tolerance

Tolerance: Chuang-Tzu's Epistemological Approach

by Zhang Xiangming(1)

Introduction

Chuang-tzu is traditionally classified as the second greatest Taoist after Lao-tzu. He is a remarkable thinker who deliberates on almost everything, including epistemology, morality, statecraft and behaviour, and his thought has influenced China for more than two thousand years. Since he loves to utilise fable, tales, humour, irony and other poetic techniques to express his views, he is often distorted by commentators. Therefore it is important to give him a more precise evaluation.

For many years, Chuang-tzu has been widely recognised as 'a thinker who holds society in detestation'.(2) Some scholars in China generalise his epistemology as 'relativism'(3) and 'mystical agnosticism'.(4) After having made a comprehensive survey of the thought of Chuang-tzu, I conclude that the above-mentioned interpretations distort the approach of Chuang-tzu's epistemology. I maintain that the approach of Chuang-tzu can be summed up in the word 'tolerance'.

Tolerance is a reasonable method of observing and analysing grounded on the rationality of plural value conceptions. It consists of the following elements. First, it means the recognition, respect and equal treatment of the social subjects who share diverse values. Second, it concerns the acceptance of the objectivity of different value standards. Third, it relates to the confirmation, and scrupulously abiding by, of one's own value conceptions. Tolerance is based on a specific approach. It not only welcomes different opinions, but it also upholds its own criterion; it is not only definite but also unbiased. The epistemology of Chuang-tzu represents the spirit of tolerance. On the one hand, Chuang-tzu rejects imposing one's own value conception upon others and endorses the diversity of an individual's cognition. On the other hand, he affirms the infinity of the world and the infinitude of knowledge and recognises the importance of pursuing knowledge.

The book *Chuang-tzu* consists of three parts: the Inner Chapters (chapters 1-7), the Outer Chapters (chapters 8-22) and the Mixed Chapters (23-33). Academics continue to debate which chapters were really written by Chuang-tzu and represent his thought, and this has been problematic for those who intend to study his thought. Liu Xiaogan holds that the Inner Chapters were written by Chuang-tzu and that the Outer and Mixed Chapters were written by Chuang-tzu's disciples, among which chapters 17-27 and chapter 32 inherit and explain Chuang-tzu's thought.(5) I favour Liu's view, so I utilise the Inner Chapters and the above-mentioned twelve chapters as the basis of my research.

Chuang-Tzu's Understanding and Acceptance of Plural Value Conceptions

Humankind must know the world in order to survive. Different individuals or schools usually come to different conclusions in the cognitive process because they utilise diverse positions, methods and perspectives to observe the world and analyse questions. Therefore, different opinions, thoughts and values come into being. It is a problem facing everyone as to how to treat these varying conceptions and values. The Chinese philosophers in the pre-Qin Dynasty conducted high-level discourses in this regard. Although the Confucian school represented by Confucius and Mencius, the Mohist school represented by Mo-Tzu, and the Legalist school represented by Han Fei have sharply opposed conceptions as to how to administer society, they all believe in the supremacy of their own thought and maintain the use of their ideas to unify the mind of the people to achieve the goal of universal well-being. It might strengthen their internal cohesion to enhance their development that Confucianism, Mohism and Legalism demonstrate a strong theoretical self-confidence, and this is beyond reproach. However, it is bigoted and narrow-minded for a school to be egocentric and despise others because this obviously ignores the contradiction between the relativity of individual cognition and infinitude of the world. Confucianism, Mohism and Legalism display an obvious defect in this regard. Chuang-tzu does not. Since he realises the divergence of individual cognition and the infinitude of the world, he favours plural value conceptions.

Chuang-tzu is good at using metaphor to express his ideas. He says: 'Being restricted by living space, the frog living in a well cannot talk about the sea; being restricted by life-span, the worm living in the summer cannot talk about ice'.(6) In other words, everybody's consciousness is limited by space and time, which presumes that a

human being is necessarily unable to know the world in its entirety. Moreover, each individual has different interests, education, occupation and life-span, so his or her judgement is inevitably affected by his or her own experience and knowledge. This results in personal prejudice - a major obstacle to understanding the real world. Chuang-tzu says: 'Forming one's own judgement without one's prejudice being involved is just like starting today but arriving yesterday, that is, entirely impossible.'(7) That is to say, having a judgement means having a prejudice and abolishing prejudice means abolishing a judgement. Therefore, an individual's cognition is inseparable from his or her prejudice. Since people tend to analyse the objective world with their prejudices involved, different individuals often draw variant conclusions even if they perceive the same cognitive object, displaying the diversity of cognition.

In order to explain the source of the existence of individual cognition, Chuang-tzu vividly likens human cognition to natural sound (*tianlai*). For example, in the natural world there may be many apertures in a stone. The wind makes different sounds when blowing across the stone because of these differently shaped apertures. Chuang-tzu holds that it is because many apertures have their unique shapes that varied natural sounds come into being. Human cognition is the same. According to Chuang-tzu, humans face the world as apertures face the wind. As different individuals try to know the world with their own bias involved, they tend to come to divergent conclusions even if they encounter the same cognitive object. This is to say that the diversity of individual cognition is natural and unavoidable. As far as the cognitive objects are concerned, Chuang-tzu maintains that the world is complicated, which is displayed by the fact that matter is mobile, changeable and infinite.

As to how the world came into being, Chuang-tzu contemplates this topic and poses his own view. He says: 'Heaven is blue because of its quietude, and Earth is tranquil because of its quietude. It is the interaction between Heaven and Earth that makes everything come into being . . . There are myriads of things that took shape by themselves.'(8) In other words, the interaction of Heaven and Earth makes the world exist, everything comes into being spontaneously.(9) Since everything existing comes into being spontaneously, Chuang-tzu maintains, 'everything existing has its origin in nature; nothing is not so, nothing is an exception'.(10) In the process of creation, Chuang-tzu contends that Heaven responds to the Earth through the interaction between Yin and Yang. It is stated in Chapter 21: 'Yin is extremely cold, Yang is extremely hot; Yin originated from Heaven, Yang originated from Earth; Yin descends and Yang ascends, and they interact harmoniously to bring everything into being.'(11) As Yin and Yang never cease motion from the opposite poles, Chuang-tzu maintains that: 'Everything emerges quickly and is always in motion and change.'(12) Seeing that everything is universally and constantly in motion, Chuang-tzu holds that everything is 'simultaneously living and dying, simultaneous affirmative and negative'.(13) There are positive and negative elements within everything, and the joint force of the two elements determines the process of development and change. In the process of development, the conversion of contradictory elements goes closely with the change of quality. When something is split, a new thing is formed, when something is built, some other thing must be destroyed. Just as 'sexual intercourse between man and woman brings new life into being'(14), the constant creation of the natural world results from the interaction of contradictory elements. Since the motion of contradiction is always going on, newborn things never cease appearing, 'the amount of things is beyond counting'.(15)

Contradictory elements are always interacting, and matter is permanently changing, so matter is 'infinite in quantity'.(16) That is to say, 'the smallest has no shape at all, the greatest cannot be encompassed'.(17) Therefore the ultimately great has nothing outside it, and the ultimately small has nothing inside it. 'The lifespan of matter cannot be fixed'(18), it could be extremely short or extremely long. Owing to this phenomenon, Chuang-tzu holds: 'Nothing in the world is bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, but Mount Tai is small; no one outlives the cut-off in childhood, but Peng Zu died young.'(19) The world is unlimited in time and space, so human cognitive objects are immeasurable.

The world is infinite. In space, the Four Seas between Heaven and Earth are like a stone hole in a land abounding in water, China in the Four Seas is like a millet seed in a big granary, an individual among innumerable things is like one hair on a horse. In time, the world is boundless, having neither beginning nor end, but an individual's life is definite, 'his or her lifespan is far shorter than the time during which he or she is not alive'.(20) Therefore the lifetime of an individual is insignificant compared with the boundless world, and when one tries to come to know it all, the result must be this: 'The knowledge an individual acquires cannot outnumber the knowledge of which he or she is ignorant'.(21) Added to this, the diversity in individual cognition makes any one person's conception of the world strongly relative. Therefore, Chuang-tzu maintains that the egocentric conception is absurd. He detests people who love consensus and oppress dissidence. According to Chuang-tzu, every individual must realise the limitation of his or her knowledge, even as famous a person as Confucius should do so. In fact, one coexists with another as far as individual cognition is concerned. 'That comes out from this, this likewise goes by that.'(22) It is not important whether I am right or others are right - what matters is that different opinions interact. From the viewpoint of cognitive objectivity, any individual's cognition is the understanding of the world

originated by a specific person, which is inevitably relative. From the cognitive function, any diverse cognition represents the attempt made by the subject to explore the world. According to Chuang-tzu, any individual should have a correct attitude towards different conceptions. Whether we listen to other's speeches or express our own view, we should adhere to our own opinion but not be obstinate, imbibe new knowledge but not follow blindly. We should not only believe in ourself but also respect others, we should not only advocate homogeneity but also tolerate heterogeneity. In brief, an individual should establish a right self-consciousness and treat different conceptions justly.

Tolerance Is Not Relativism

Since Chuang-tzu advocates tolerance, many scholars assert categorically that Chuang-tzu abolishes knowledge, confuses right and wrong, and publicises relativism. These assessments are a distortion of Chuang-tzu's thought.

Derived from the human process of perceiving the real world and acquiring knowledge, absolute truths consist of innumerable relative truths and their acquisition requires unceasing human effort. The discovery of relative truths is realised by a specific individual or group under a specific historical circumstance. Since specific individuals or groups are always restricted by specific production conditions and life circumstances, the truths found by them are always relative, on which Friedrich Engels makes a brilliant exposition. He says: -

But as for the sovereign validity of the knowledge in each individual thought, we all know that there can be no talk of such a thing, and that according to all previous experience such knowledge without exception always contains much more that is capable of being improved upon than is not or than is correct. In other words, the sovereignty of thought is realized in a succession of human beings whose thinking is most unsovereign; the knowledge which has an unconditional claim to truth is realized in a series of relative errors; neither the one nor the other can be fully realized except through an unending duration of human existence. Here again we find the same contradiction as we found above between the character of human thought, necessarily conceived as absolute, and its reality in individual human beings who think only limitedly. This is a contradiction which can be resolved only in the course of an infinite progress, in what is - at least for us - the practically endless succession of generations of mankind. In this sense human thought is just as much sovereign as not sovereign, and its capacity for knowledge, just as much unlimited as limited. It is sovereign and unlimited in its disposition, its vocation, its possibilities and its final historical goal; it is not sovereign and it is limited in its individual fulfilment and in reality at any particular moment.(23)

Here lies the pith and marrow of tolerance. On the one hand, Chuang-tzu sees that the world is infinite and knowledge is inexhaustible; on the other hand, he realises that there exists diversity in individual thought and finitude in human knowledge. It is the integration of these two aspects that constitutes Chuang-tzu's tolerance. Tolerance embodies respect for human epistemic law.

Chuang-tzu tolerates the coexistence of different conceptions, thought and theories, which does not mean that he abolishes knowledge and fails to distinguish right from wrong. Conversely, he affirms the human rationality of pursuing knowledge.

According to Chuang-tzu, any individual has a definite lifespan and a limited experience, so on a personal basis the opportunity to seek knowledge and the capacity to master knowledge are surely finite. Therefore, any individual who lives in society must choose which knowledge to seek and which subject to learn. 'Learn what one can and stop searching on what one cannot is the best way.'(24) No matter how erudite one is, what one knows cannot be compared with what one does not. Seeing this phenomenon, Chuang-tzu says: 'My life is limited, but knowledge is unlimited, if I pursue unlimited knowledge with my own limited life, the result must be dangerous. If one has realised this but still does so, the result must be even more dangerous!'(25)

Conclusion

The Warring-States Period (approx. 463 to 222 B.C.) is a turning point in Chinese history during which various contradictions intensified. Chuang-tzu lived in the state of Song, which was established by the descendants of the Shang clan with the permission of the Chou emperor. The Shang clan loved thinking and arguing. It is the specific space-time circumstances that make Chuang-tzu thoughtful, argumentative, tolerant, and open-minded.

Since people are always the producer of their own conceptions and thought, engaging in reality restricted by the development of their own production and corresponding associations, consciousness is permanently the perceived existence which is people's actual life. That is to say, any intellectual products, such as options, thoughts, conceptions are unexceptionally the products made by the specific people who engage in specific production and life activities in a specific period. Hence any intellectual product is necessarily something that is

imbued in and remodelled by the mind. They are strongly subjective, temporary and one-sided. Therefore, it would benefit the development of thought and culture to be tolerant of different opinions, thoughts and theories without imposing one single criterion upon the human mind. This is the merit of tolerance.

Most of the thinkers in Chinese pre-Qin Dynastic history longed for a sage to come into being. They demanded that the sage be a criterion upon whom to judge what is right or wrong and hoped that the common people under Heaven would follow the sage-king into universal well-being. Such a proposition is advantageous in order to inculcate officials loyal to their sovereign, to operate a unified autocratic state apparatus and to consolidate a unified empire, but it violates the developmental law of mind and culture. Therefore, it obstructs the development of science and culture, the formation of independent personality and the permanent tranquillity and lasting prosperity of the state. Chuang-tzu advocates tolerance, he favours the co-existence of diverse thoughts and values, and opposes a human recognition system conforming to one single standard. This, surely, would be beneficial to the development of knowledge and the process of civilisation. In this sense, the thought of Chuang-tzu is a unique flower in the philosophical circle of pre-Qin China.

Footnotes

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2. Guo Moruo *Si Pi Pan Shu*, China, The Orient Publishing House, 1996, p197.
3. Zao Jibin, *The Collected Works of Zao Jibin*, China, People's Publishing House, 1985, p68-69.
4. Liu Yuhuang *The Primary Research on Pre-Qin Schools*, China, Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 1984, p185.
5. Liu Xiaogan *The Philosophy of Chuang-Tzu and Its Evolution*, PRC, China Social Sciences Academy Publishing House, 1988.
6. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 17. All translations from this work are by the author.
7. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2.
8. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 18.
9. Chuang had the idea that the world is originated by Dao, which embodies naturalism but is the synonym of God.
10. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2.
11. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 21.
12. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 17.
13. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2.
14. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 25.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 17.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2. Peng Zu is a legendary figure in Chinese history. He lived to the age of seven hundred years.
20. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 17.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2.

23. Friedrich Engels *Anti-Dühring*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1976, pp108-109.

24. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 2.

25. *Chuang-tzu* Chapter 7.

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