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## Classical Chinese Theory of Knowledge

MANUEL B. DY, JR.

At the onset, this topic may seem at once out of place and a challenge: out of place, because the classical Chinese philosophers never developed fully a theory of knowledge, and a challenge, because consequently I am forced to extract one. The article is divided into two parts: the first deals with the reason or reasons why classical Chinese philosophers never developed fully a theory of knowledge, and the second treats of the Chinese concept of truth.

### PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

There is a story from the *Lieh Tzu*, a work traditionally attributed to the philosopher Lieh Yu-K'ao (450-375 B.C.) which poses the critical problem of knowledge:

A man of the state of Cheng was one day gathering fuel, when he came across a startled deer, which he pursued and killed. Fearing lest any one should see him, he hastily concealed the carcass in a ditch and covered it with plaintain leaves, rejoicing excessively at his good fortune. By and by, he forgot the place where he had put it and thinking he must have been dreaming, he set off towards home, humming over the affair on his way. Meanwhile, a man who had overheard his words, acted upon them, and went and got the deer. The latter, when he reached his house, told his wife saying, "A woodman dreamt he had got a deer, but did not know where it was. Now I have got the deer so his dream was a reality." "It is you," replied his wife, "who have been dreaming you saw a woodman. Did he get the deer, and is there really such a person? It is you who have got the deer: how then, can his dream be a reality?" "It is true," assented the husband, "that I have got the deer. *It is therefore of little importance whether the woodman dreamt the deer or I dreamt the woodman.*"

Now when the woodman reached his home, he became much annoyed at the loss of the deer; and in the night he actually dreamt where the deer

then was, and who had got it. So next morning he proceeded to the place indicated in his dream — and there it was. He then took legal steps to recover possession; and when the case came on, the magistrate delivered the following judgment: "The plaintiff began with a real deer and an alleged dream. He now comes forward with a real dream and an alleged deer. The defendant really got the deer which [the] plaintiff said he dreamt, and is now trying to keep it; while, according to his wife, both the woodman and the deer are but the figments of a dream, so that no one got the deer at all. *However, here is a deer, which you had better divide between you.*"

When the Prince of Cheng heard this story, he cried out, "The magistrate himself have dreamt the case!" So he inquired of his prime minister, who replied, "*Only the Yellow Emperor and Confucius could distinguish dream from reality, and they are unfortunately dead. I advise, therefore, that the magistrate's decision be confirmed.*"<sup>1</sup>

Confusing though the story may be as to who is dreaming or not and what is the reality, the story seems to bring out certain characteristics of Chinese philosophy with regards to the problem of knowing.

The words of the husband, "It is true that I have got the deer. It is of little importance whether the woodman dreamt the deer or I dreamt the woodman," indicate how little Chinese thinkers concerned themselves with epistemological questions. The Chinese philosophers did not seek knowledge for knowledge's sake; rather, they sought knowledge for the sake of living, of life. In the words of Lin Yutang, China is "a land where no one is trying very hard to think and everyone is trying very hard to live."<sup>2</sup> And if ever any philosopher bothers himself with questions on knowing, it is for the sake of something practical, such as getting a deer.

The Chinese character for philosophy, 哲, is written with a hand, a mouth, and a measurement. Perhaps this is to bring out the primary function of philosophy that is of measuring words and deeds, of harmonizing thought and practice. In the words of the greatest Chinese philosopher and China's first teacher, Confucius:

The superior man will give only names that can be described in speech and say only what can be carried out in practice. With regards to his speech, the superior man does not take it lightly.

[*Analects* XXII:3]

1. Raymond Van Oven, ed., *A Treasury of Chinese Literature* (Faucett Premier Book, 1972), p. 132.

2. Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (The New English Library, Ltd., 1962), p. 367.

This same idea is found in other sayings:

The superior man is ashamed that his words exceed his deeds.

[*Analects* XIV: 29]

The superior man wants to be slow in word but diligent in action.

[*Analects* IV:24]

He (the superior man) acts before he speaks and then speaks according to his action.

[*Analects* II:13]

The "superior man" in the philosophy of Confucius is none other than the *hsun tze*, the gentleman and scholar, the ideal man. Confucian philosophy which constitutes the major part of China's classical philosophy (with the Taoism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the Mohism of Mo Tzu, the legalism of Han Fei Tzu following), is primarily a moral philosophy. Once, Confucius was asked by Fan Ch'ih, one of his disciples, regarding *jen*, the primary virtue of the *hsun tze*. Confucius replied, "It is to love men." Then he was asked about knowledge, and Confucius said, "It is to know man." (*Analects* XII, 22). Confucian philosophy takes for its starting point the study of man, not just as he is, as he behaves, but as he ought to be, as he can be truly man in relation to his fellowman. The important thing in knowing, therefore, is that it leads and guides human action toward the good, that of being a *hsun tze*. Unless coupled with action, the full value of knowledge cannot be realized, and unless coupled with knowledge, no action can be intelligent.<sup>3</sup> In the words of a neo-Confucianist philosopher Wang Yang-Ming, "Knowledge is the beginning of action; action, the completion of knowledge," and again, "Knowledge is the direction of action; action, the effort of knowledge."

Because of this preoccupation with life, with the right way to live, Chinese philosophers hardly bothered themselves with asking the question: how do you know that you know? Life was much more important than knowing, and if knowing was important, it was only because knowing was part of life and knowing enriched life.

The knowing that enriches life is, of course, ethical thinking, the sense of right and wrong. For Mencius, Confucius's successor, this is what distinguishes the great man from the small man.

3. Wing-Tsih Chan, "Synthesis in Chinese Metaphysics," *The Chinese Mind* (Honolulu, East-West Center), p. 145.

Those who follow that part of themselves which is great are great men; those who follow that part of themselves which is little are little men . . . . The senses of hearing and seeing have nothing to do with thinking, and are obscured by external things. When one thing comes into contact with another, the effort is to lead a man astray as a matter of course. To the mind belongs the office of thinking. By thinking, it gets the right view of things; by neglecting to think, it fails to do this. These — the senses and the mind — are what Heaven has given to us. Let a man first stand fast in the supremacy of the nobler part of his constitution, and the inferior part will not be able to take it from him. It is simply this which makes the great man.

[Mencius VI, A]

It might be objected that this subordination of knowing to living is only true for Confucian philosophy but not for other classical philosophies of China like the Mohists, the Legalists and the School of Names. Yet if one examines their philosophies, their preoccupation with classifying knowing according to parts (sensory and mental), according to sources (personal experience, authority and inference) and according to object (names, actualities, correspondence, and action), is for the purpose of settling disputes, legal and political, and therefore *practical*. Confucius himself was concerned with names. His doctrine of the rectification of names was aimed at making the father *act* his role as a father, the son as a son, the ruler as a ruler, the minister as a minister, the wife as a wife, the friend as a friend. According to Hsun Tzu, the realistic Confucianist, "names were made in order to denote actualities, on the one hand so as to make evident the distinctions between superior and inferior (in society), and on the other hand to distinguish similarities and differences." Ultimately when one's critical and logical faculty of knowing fails, one has to resort to one's practical common sense — which brings us to our second observation of the story from the *Lieh Tzu*.

The magistrate in deciding the issue of who was dreaming and who was not, and failing to distinguish one from the other, decided to use his common sense of fairness — to have the deer divided between the two. The Chinese thinker, or any one using his common sense would hardly use the decision of dividing the deer into half as a general principle of settling disputes. And this is another characteristic of Chinese classical thinking — the fondness for the particular.

When one reads the *Analects* of Confucius, one seldom finds a

general ethical maxim (the Golden Rule is one of the few); instead one discovers many particular moral situations, each one bringing out a concrete ethical course of action. In other words, ethics is grasped and taught on the basis of concrete particular experiences, and not according to universal logical propositions. This tendency of the Chinese way of thinking to stress the concrete and particular can be seen also in Chinese art, psychology, and language. Abstract art is hardly known to the Chinese. Chinese psychology relies heavily on sense perception, especially visual perception, and the Chinese language consists mostly of characters conveying concrete images to express abstract concepts.

Tsze-lu, a disciple, once asked Confucius whether he should immediately carry into practice what he heard of the master's teachings. Confucius said, "There are your father and elder brothers to be consulted; why should you act on that principle of immediately carrying into practice what you hear?" Then another disciple, Zan Yu asked the same question, and Confucius gave a different reply, "Immediately carry into practice what you hear." A third disciple, perplexed, asked for an explanation to this inconsistency. "The latter is retiring and slow; therefore I urged him forward. The former has more than his own share of energy; therefore I kept him back" (*Analects*, x I. 21).

Because of this emphasis on the concrete and particular, the abstract way of thinking was neglected, and consequently epistemology which has to be abstract in order to reflect on knowing as knowing, was set aside. In its place, an *intuitive* understanding through direct perception of particulars predominated.

Of course, to stress intuitive understanding is not to deny the place and importance of doubting, of critical reflection. The spirit of doubting, crucial to the growth of any philosophical enterprise, never disappeared in the history of Chinese philosophy. In the *Analects*, Confucius once made a sarcastic remark with regards to his disciple Hui Shih, "Hui gives me no assistance. There is nothing that I say which does not please him." In other words, Hui swallowed everything that Confucius said.

Formerly I, Chuang Chou, dreamed that I was a butterfly, a butterfly flying about feeling that it was enjoying itself. I did not know that it was Chou. Suddenly I awoke and was myself again, the veritable Chou. I did not know whether it had formerly been Chou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Chou.

But between Chou and a butterfly there must be a difference. This is a case of what is called the transformation of things.

[*Chuang Tzu*, Bk. II]

Let us not try to resolve the doubt of Chuang Chou for the moment. Going back to our original story, we find that the Prince of Cheng doubted the wisdom of the magistrate. And his minister retorted, "Only the Yellow Emperor and Confucius could distinguish dream from reality, and they are unfortunately dead." Here we find a third characteristic of Chinese classical philosophies — the tendency to exalt the old, antiquity, because accompanying age is experience, and accompanying experience is wisdom. The Yellow Emperor was one of the legendary sage kings of China, respected and revered by Confucius as an ideal example of a man of *jen*. Authority is associated with antiquity. And Confucius himself said,

I do not invent, but merely transmit, I believe and love antiquity.

I am not a man born wise. I favor what is ancient and strive to know it well.

[*Analects*, VII]

The Japanese scholar in Asian thought, Nakamura, has rightly observed that "etymologically, the Chinese word 'to learn' has no other meaning than 'to imitate.' This is especially obvious in the Confucian teachings. The most important plea of Confucius was that man should take his norm for living from previous examples and the classics.<sup>4</sup> The thought and life of the Chinese was always examined in relation to the five classics: The *I Ching* (Book of Changes), the *Shu Ching* (Book of Documents), the *Shih Ching* (Classics of Songs), the *Li Chi* (Record of Ritual), and the *Ch'un Chui* (Spring and Autumn Annals). The word "ching" (classic) also means "tien" (law) or "cheng" (eternity). Nakamura ventures to explain that a people stressing concrete and particular perception would be inclined to set a basis of law in past customs and recurrent events, in previous examples as precedents. "The fruit of past experiences of people of older times arouses in the Chinese mind a sense of validity . . . . Thus, for the Chinese, learning implies full knowledge of the precedents of a past age, and is therefore referred to as '*Chi-ku*,' i.e., searching out the ancient ways."<sup>5</sup>

4. Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People* (Honolulu, University Press of Hawaii), p. 214.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Thus, philosophers would challenge one another concerning how far they could go back in history for support and validity of their ideas.

It is of no wonder then that the history of Chinese philosophy is often simply described as a history of one philosopher commenting on the philosophy of the preceding philosopher or philosophers. Yet this is not to discount a philosopher's creativity, for one can always see the old from a new angle, through a new pair of spectacles.

Because of this reliance on authority, the classical Chinese philosophers did not bother to develop a theory of knowledge to question the validity of the ancient truth. It was considered logical enough to believe in the experience of the past, because the past somehow had a bearing on the present and future. For them, the past, present, and future form a synthesis.

This synthetic spirit of Chinese philosophy also accounts for the nondevelopment of formal logic in China, and consequently of epistemology and natural sciences. For the Chinese mind, man and the world are one, the subject and the object cannot be separated. This is especially evident in the Taoist philosophy which seeks for the harmony of the subject and the object, of man and nature and whose logic, therefore, is not of "either-or" but of "both-and."

To yield is to be preserved whole

To be bent is to become straight

To be empty is to be full

To be worn out is to be renewed.

To have little is to possess much

To have plenty is to be perplexed

Therefore the sage embraces the One

And becomes the model of the world

He does not show himself, therefore he is luminous

He does not justify himself; therefore he becomes prominent

He does not boast of himself; therefore he is given credit

He does not brag; therefore he can endure for long

It is precisely because he does not compete that the world cannot compete with him

As the ancient saying, "To yield is to be preserved whole," empty words?

Truly he will be preserved and (prominence, etc.) will come to him.

[*Tao Te Ching*, ch. 22]

Because of this holistic, synthetic character of the Chinese mind,

logic, scientific thinking and epistemology never became separate branches of philosophizing. The possibility of logical, scientific, and epistemological thinking presupposes an analytic mind, an ego able to stand outside itself and the world.

Because man is one with the world, part of a wider cosmos, then he must admit that, though he can ask and be perplexed, he cannot know everything. Confucius once said.

You, shall I teach you the way to acquire knowledge?  
To say that you know when you do know and  
say that you do not know when you do not know  
— that is the way to acquire knowledge.

[*Analects* II:17]

And Lao Tzu,

To know that you do not know is the best  
To pretend to know when you do not know is a disease.  
Only when one recognizes this disease as a disease can one be free  
from the disease  
The sage is free from the disease  
Because he recognizes this disease to be disease, he is free from it.

[*Tao Te Ching*, ch. 71]

And so, in our story, the magistrate's decision was confirmed because he happens to be more holistic, more total by not taking any side and pretending to know who was dreaming or not.

To summarize the points of our first part; let me say then that the classical Chinese philosophers did not develop fully a theory of knowledge because of

1. Their preoccupation more with right living than right thinking;
2. Their insistence on the concrete, particular experience rather than on the abstract and general;
3. Their high regard for the authority of the ancients;
4. Their passion for the unified whole, the harmonious one, rather than the separated parts.

## CONCEPT OF TRUTH

For the classical Chinese philosopher, truth is essentially *moral*. It is interesting to note that for the Chinese, typical of his synthetic mind, there is no clear distinction between physical things and human activities. Both are "*shih*" 事. Thus, what is "*shih-fei*" 是非, true-false for things is also allied with "*hao-pu-hao*" 好不, good-bad of human affairs. In other words, truth

cannot be divorced from human affairs; it comes to life only in human action. Thus, the famous dictum of Confucius:

"It is not the Way (or truth) that can make man great, but man that can make the way (truth) great."

[*Analects* XV:28]

Because truth lives in the moral experience of man, and since the moral experience of man is the concrete and particular, it follows that truth is grasped *relatively* and *intuitively*. Truth is relative to man in the situation that he lives, and intuitive insofar as the process of knowing right from wrong is by direct apprehension and not by logical inference or experimentation, for after all, man as man is equipped, according to Mencius, with an innate knowledge of the good. Of course, one has to nourish and develop this innate capacity by reducing one's desires to as few as possible (Mencius VII B), or in the steps of *The Great Learning*, by rectifying the mind, making the will sincere and extending one's knowledge.

Regarding the relativity of truth, Chuang Tzu has this to say: Supposing I am arguing with you, and you get the better of me. Does the fact that you win and I lose imply that you are really right, and I, wrong? Or if I get the better of you, does that imply that I am right and you, wrong? In that matter, must one of us necessarily be right and the other, wrong? Or may we not both be right or both wrong? Neither you nor I can know.

[*Chuang Tzu*, chap. 2]

The Taoist is aware of the relativity of the truth in our knowing because he is also aware of the constant change occurring in nature, and the finitude of the subject knowing. "You cannot speak of an ocean to a well frog; its sphere is limited — you cannot speak of ice to a summer insect; its capacity is restricted by time." Nevertheless, there is some truth to any changing event, and consequently one has to be tolerant of others' different views.

Truth for the Chinese is *historical*. Antiquity is a source of truth because the past possesses a certain finality, an immutability and invariability. Since history has a tendency to repeat itself not exactly but creatively, the one test of truth is history itself, when the future will have become part of the past.

For the Taoist philosopher, even if things are constantly changing, there are certain laws perceptible in this change, certain constants amidst the variable. One of them is the law of reversion;

that when one thing reaches one extreme it reverts to the opposite extreme. (For example, to gain much is to lose a lot). The other law is the law of *Wu-Wei*, of doing nothing, of simply being natural and spontaneous. This is the truth of nature that nature runs its course spontaneously, and man, being part of nature, has also something constant within him, a human nature. It is to the credit of Taoist philosophy that we have, for example, such rich insights as "a journey of a thousand miles begins from where one stands," for "a tree as big as a man's embrace grows from a tiny shoot," and desire leads to more desires.

Lastly, true to the synthetic holistic spirit of Chinese philosophy, truth for the Chinese philosopher is *absolute*. While truth may be moral, relative and intuitive, and historical, it is above all absolute. This is rather difficult to explain because the concept of the absoluteness of truth is conveyed in the Chinese concept of *Tao* which is not actually a concept. *Tao*, literally meaning "Way," is indescribable because it is that which accounts for the being of all things, their harmony, and their nature, in short the *One*. One cannot know the *Tao* in the sense of proving or disapproving it but he can have an intuitive knowledge of it. To be one with *Tao* is to transcend the relativity of knowing and to be in the pivot of things, thus becoming universal.

The wise man, therefore, instead of trying to prove this or that point by logical disputation, sees all things in the light of direct intuition. He is not imprisoned by the limitations of the "I," for the viewpoint of direct intuition is that of both "I" and "not-I." Hence he sees that on both sides of every argument there is both right and wrong. He also sees that in the end they are reducible to the same thing, once they are related to the pivot of *Tao*.

When the wise man grasps this pivot, he is in the center of the circle, and there he stands while "Yes" and "No" pursue each other around the circumference.

The pivot of *Tao* passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge. He who grasps the pivot is at the still point from which all movements and oppositions can be seen in their right relationship. Hence he sees the limitless possibilities of both "Yes" and "No." Abandoning all thought of imposing a limit or taking sides, he rests in direct intuition. Therefore I said: "Better to abandon disputation and seek the true light."

[*Chuang Tzu*, II, 3]

I would like to think that this is what the classical Chinese

philosophers were searching for in their philosophizing – the Way, Tao. For the Confucianist, he sought it in the realm of human action; for the Taoist, in the light of nature. But whether Confucianist or Taoist, the truth remains that man is in constant search for the Absolute, the Real, the Unchanging. Man and the world change but Tao itself does not change, although there are various ways of realizing it, although it can assume many forms. In the ultimate analysis, the important thing is to be receptive to the Tao,

fishes are born in water, man is born in Tao . . . . All the fish needs is to get lost in water. All man needs is to get lost in the Tao.

[*Chuang Tzu* VI, 11 ]