

Chinese Philosophical Epistemology and Its Defects

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The “University” proposes the proposition of “investigating things to acquire knowledge”, presenting the rudimentary form of Chinese philosophical epistemology. Over the following 2,500 years, it has undergone numerous debates on the relationship between knowledge and action; however, no philosopher has developed a comprehensive epistemological system that explores the nature, source, formation, application, truth, testing, structure of human knowledge, as well as the relationship between language and thinking. The concept of “know” in the philosophy of “investigating things to attain knowledge” is equivalent to concepts such as “idea” and “meaning” in Western philosophy. However, the cognitive state of “know” has not been fully explored and expanded upon, nor has the distinction between empirical and rational recognition of “know” been made. Confucianism advocated the “learning” of language communication as one of the ways to acquire knowledge, but it failed to evolve a method of using language to conduct formal logical reasoning to acquire knowledge and test truth. The “eight trigrams” deduction and yin-yang and five elements theory in the “I Ching” have stifled the emergence of modern scientific epistemological methods in China in terms of thinking mode. Confucian epistemology: focuses on “reason” and interpersonal relationships, with an emphasis on the establishment of moral ethics and social order. Taoist epistemology: pursues a realm beyond experience and social conventions, understanding the world through introspection and insight; it focuses on grasping “Tao”, providing vague guidance for determining universal truths and acquiring precise knowledge; it is prone to falling into the dilemma of nihilism and relativism. The concept of unity between heaven and man and unity between knowledge and action has led to the lack of differentiation in Chinese philosophical epistemology regarding the study of the relationship between subject and object, not involving the way in which the subject understands the object, the limitations of understanding, and the interaction between subject and object in the process of understanding.

Keywords: investigating things to acquire knowledge, learning to acquire knowledge, self-knowledge brings clarity, rationalism; epistemology

The epistemology of Chinese philosophy possesses unique perspectives and values. Compared to the analytical and logical reasoning of Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy places greater emphasis on observing the wholeness and intrinsic connections of things. This way of thinking endows Chinese philosophy with distinctive insights and profound wisdom, particularly in its contemplation of cosmology and the relationship between humans and nature. The epistemology of Chinese philosophy primarily encompasses two significant schools: Confucianism and Taoism. These two major schools share some commonalities and flaws in their epistemological views.

Epistemological Views and Thoughts in the Analects of Confucius

“To learn and to know” (Confucius, 2007) is the main characteristic of Confucian philosophical epistemology. “If one is trapped but does not learn, he will be considered inferior by the people.” (Confucius, 2007). In Confucius’s “The Analects”, he distinguishes “learning” from other cognitive activities such as “hearing”, “seeing”, and “thinking”. For instance, “If someone acts without knowledge, I do not do so. I listen to many and choose the good ones to follow; I see many and recognize them; knowing comes next.” In “Shu Er” (Confucius, 2007), there are phrases like “Hearing one thing and knowing two” and “Hearing one thing and knowing ten.” In “The Analects: Gong Zhi Chang” (Confucius, 2007), another example is “Learning without thought is futile; thought without learning is perilous.” from “On Governance” (Confucius, 2007) and “I have often fasted all day and stayed up all night to ponder, but it is of no benefit. It is better to learn.” (Confucius, 2007) from “Duke of Wei Ling”. There is also “One example is not enough to prove a general rule.” (Confucius, 2007) (“Shu Er”) and so on. Therefore, learning, hearing, seeing, and thinking are all ways and methods to acquire knowledge, with “learning” being the primary one. “Learning” mainly refers to cognitive activities such as reading and conversational language communication.

“Isn’t it delightful to learn and then practice regularly?” (Confucius, 2007). Confucius attached great importance to the combination of learning and practice. He believed that by repeatedly combining knowledge with practical experience, one can achieve joy and satisfaction.

“Know what you know, and admit what you don’t know.” (Confucius, 2007). This is Confucius’ attitude towards understanding things. He emphasizes having a clear understanding of what one knows and does not know, and being brave enough to admit one’s ignorance.

“By reviewing the old, one can learn the new, and then one can become a teacher.” (Confucius, 2007). Confucius believed that by reviewing (repeatedly reading and thinking) existing (written) knowledge, one can continuously accumulate new knowledge, thereby becoming a good teacher for others.

“One should not worry about not being known by others, but rather about not knowing others.” (Confucius, 2007). Confucius emphasized that individuals should focus on their own understanding and cultivation, rather than overly worrying about others’ opinions of them.

“The Analects” primarily focuses on moral, political, and personal cultivation aspects, with relatively few purely philosophical epistemological views. However, the ideas and perspectives contained within still provide certain inspiration and value for discussions on epistemology.

Epistemological Views and Ideas in the *Tao Te Ching*

Tao and Name: As stated in the first chapter, “Tao can be spoken of, yet it is not the eternal Tao; names can be given, yet they are not the eternal names. The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth, while the named is the mother of all things” (Laozi, 2016). The *Tao Te Ching* posits that Tao is the fundamental principle of the universe, an existence that transcends language and concepts. On the other hand, names are concepts that serve to name and define things, which can easily lead to misunderstandings and prejudices. This implies the limitations of cognition and the epistemological idea that language cannot fully capture the essence of things.

“He who knows others is wise, but he who knows himself is enlightened” (Laozi, 2016, Chapter 33). This is an important epistemological viewpoint in Chinese philosophy, which embodies the importance of understanding oneself and others, as well as one of the core principles of individual cultivation and wisdom

development. It emphasizes the importance of the ability to understand others, perceive their inner thoughts, and understand their behavioral motivations for wisdom. At the same time, it emphasizes that the ability to understand and comprehend oneself is crucial for personal growth and the cultivation of wisdom.

“To see it but not perceive it is called ‘Yi’, to hear it but not recognize it is called ‘Xi’, to touch it but not grasp it is called ‘Wei’” (Laozi, 2016, Chapter 42). This sentence describes the subtle and invisible nature of the Tao, suggesting that there are dimensions of understanding the world that transcend the senses and common knowledge; it also resonates with the intuition of modern epistemology.

“Those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know.” (Laozi, 2016, Chapter 56). This sentence emphasizes the modesty and restraint of the wise, suggesting that truly intelligent individuals do not flaunt their knowledge, while those who are good at boasting often lack genuine insight.

The above statements and viewpoints demonstrate the epistemological reflections in the *Tao Te Ching*, emphasizing the finiteness of knowledge and the limitations of language, as well as the pursuit of inner cultivation for true knowledge.

The Relationship Between Know and Action

“To investigate things and thereby acquire knowledge” (Ancient classics, 2007): The Great Learning states, “To acquire knowledge, one must investigate things. Only after investigating things can one attain knowledge.” This means that one should act first and then seek knowledge.

Knowing is easy, but doing is hard (from “Shangshu”-Shangshu-“Shuoying”) (Ancient Texts: “The Great Learning”, 2007, p. 3) states, “It is not difficult to know, but it is only difficult to do.” Also, “Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan”-“Zhao Gong Shi Nian”) (Ancient books: “Shangshu”, 2007, p. 463) states, “It is not really difficult to know, but it lies in doing.”

Knowledge precedes action: Cheng Yi said, “Knowledge is inherent in me, but without striving, I cannot acquire it. However, there must be a way to attain knowledge, hence the saying, ‘To attain knowledge lies in investigating things’” (Cheng & Cheng, 2000, p. 373). Here, “the knower” refers to one’s cognitive ability, “attaining knowledge” denotes acquiring knowledge content, and the “way” and “investigating things” in “attaining knowledge” are actions. This embodies the epistemological thought of “knowledge precedes action”.

Unity of knowledge and action: To demonstrate the viewpoint of “unity of knowledge and action”, Wang Yangming regarded “learning, inquiry, contemplation, and discernment” as categories of “action”, and used “action” to explain “knowledge”, such as “the place where action is clearly perceived and scrutinized is knowledge” (Wang, 2011) (from “Reply to a Friend”).

Action precedes knowledge: Wang Fuzhi used the viewpoint of “knowing is easy, but doing is difficult” to argue and arrive at the conclusion of “action precedes knowledge” (Wang, 1975).

Knowing is difficult, but doing is easy: Sun Yat-sen (1981) proposed the viewpoint of “knowing is difficult, but doing is easy” in his “General Plan for National Governance” and extensively used the concept of “knowledge”, which marked the budding and beginning of the transition from ancient Chinese epistemology to modern epistemology. For example, society vigorously established schools to impart knowledge.

In summary, various viewpoints on the relationship between knowledge and action in the history of Chinese philosophical epistemology emerged through mutual criticism. In fact, these viewpoints respectively reflect the cognitive states where knowledge and action interact at different stages or links in the cognitive process. They do not mutually exclude or negate each other, and each possesses relative truth.

The Taoist theory of the Way and the Confucian theory of Neo Confucianism both serve as interpretations of the epistemological concept of “the unity of heaven and humanity”.

Fourth, compared to Western philosophical epistemology, Chinese philosophical epistemology has its unique features, but there are also some shortcomings.

Compared to Western Philosophical Epistemology, Chinese Philosophical Epistemology has its Unique Features, but There are Also Some Shortcomings

Main characteristics of Western philosophical epistemology

Rationalism and empiricism. There are two major schools of thought in Western philosophical epistemology, namely rationalism and empiricism. Rationalism emphasizes acquiring knowledge and truth through reason, thinking, and reasoning, believing that human rational ability is the foundation for understanding the world. On the other hand, empiricism holds that knowledge originates from experience, acquiring knowledge of the external world through perception and observation.

Analysis and synthesis. Western philosophical epistemology often adopts an analytical approach in its methodology, decomposing complex issues into simple elements to facilitate in-depth research. At the same time, it also emphasizes synthesizing different viewpoints and theories to achieve a more comprehensive and systematic recognize

Logic and language. Logic and language occupy an important position in Western philosophical epistemology. Logic is regarded as the foundation of thinking and reasoning. Through the application of logical rules, a rigorous rational system can be established. Language, as a tool for expressing thoughts, is studied for its structure and function to explore its impact on cognition and truth.

Reference to scientific method. Western philosophical epistemology draws on the scientific method, emphasizing the principles of scientific research such as observation, experimentation, verification, and theoretical construction. It attempts to establish reliable knowledge and truth through rigorous methods and logical reasoning.

These characteristics are not absolute definitions, but rather significant features of Western philosophical epistemology throughout history. Different philosophers and schools of thought may have varying perspectives and methodologies, thus making the research field of Western philosophical epistemology extremely broad and diverse.

Compared to Western Philosophy, the Main Characteristics and Flaws of Chinese Philosophical Epistemology Are Clearly Manifested

The importance of intuition and experience. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the significance of intuitive experience in cognition, believing that true knowledge can be acquired through direct perception and experience. This emphasis on empiricism has led to the neglect of rational thinking, stifling the emergence of scientific methods and limiting systematic research. It also results in insufficient pursuit of objective truth and restricts individuals' freedom of thought and innovation capabilities. In the “Tianxia” (Ancient book: Zhuangzi, 2015) chapter of *Zhuangzi*, there is a saying: “A one-foot-long stick, taken half every day, will never run out for ten thousand generations.” However, this viewpoint did not lead to the development of the atomic theory. The Yin-Yang and Five Elements theory in the *Book of Changes* posits that all things in the universe are composed of five basic elements or energies: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, which mutually restrict and generate each other.

This cognitive model has been widely applied in ancient Chinese philosophy, medicine, divination, and other fields, becoming the sole thinking mode for explaining changes in nature and human affairs. Due to its limitations, mathematicians like Euclid did not emerge.

Unity of cognition and morality. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the close relationship between knowledge and morality, believing that human cognitive activities should be combined with moral practice. For instance, “Acquire knowledge and then cultivate sincerity of mind,” followed by rectifying the mind, cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the country, and bringing peace to the world. This viewpoint helps to emphasize human subjectivity and wholeness, but it may also lead to subjective biases and an overemphasis on individual perspectives.

Unity of knowledge and action. Chinese philosophy emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action. It believes that only by putting knowledge into practice can one truly understand and master it. This viewpoint helps to emphasize the importance of practice, but it limits pure theoretical thinking and stifles the birth of a thinking mode based on logical reasoning of concepts.

Lack of scientific methodology. Compared to the systematic scientific method in Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy lacks a similar systematic approach in epistemology and has not developed methods for studying natural sciences.

The epistemology of Chinese philosophy requires exchange and dialogue with other philosophical traditions, which can bring a broader perspective and theoretical development, and promote the research on epistemology towards a more open, diverse, and inclusive direction.

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