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Possible approaches to the comparative study of William James and traditional Chinese philosophy

In the current era of globalization, to engage in the dialogue and comparative study of Chinese and Western philosophy is not only a general trend but also an academic responsibility that contemporary Chinese philosophers cannot avoid. One positive way to pursue this engagement is by developing comparative research on William James and traditional Chinese philosophy as a case study.

In fact, the dialogue between American pragmatism and Chinese philosophy was originally explored when pragmatism was first introduced into China. As early as the 1920s, Hu Shi and Jiang Menglin initially attempted to bring the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey into comparative dialogue with traditional Chinese philosophy. Due to various reasons, such work stagnated for quite a long time after the 1930s. Since the 1980s, thanks to widened and thus smoother channels of academic exchanges, and thanks also to the increased attention that Western scholars have been paying to Chinese culture and philosophy due to the great increase of China's collective strength, in-depth dialogue between pragmatism and Chinese philosophy seems to have been inevitable. Currently, the most impressive American in the comparative study of classical Western pragmatism and traditional Chinese philosophy lies in the area of comparative research on John Dewey and traditional Chinese philosophy.

Compared with the earlier results and achievements of the comparative study between Dewey and traditional Chinese philosophy, comparative research on William James and traditional Chinese philosophy has a much greater potential field of development. On the one hand, previous scholarship over the last forty years has already done valuable work in furthering the comparative study of James' philosophy by bringing it into dialogue with the thought of, for example, Yan Yuan (1635-1704) and Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), two early forerunners of Confucian pragmatism (Chen, 1992, pp. 27-32 & Struve, 1990, pp. 26-31). We are convinced that further research work in this area is fundamental to the comparative project between Western pragmatism and traditional Chinese philosophy and that it has an academic value that cannot be ignored, and therefore it is absolutely necessary for contemporary scholars to resume and strengthen research on the historical roots of Confucian pragmatism.

On the other hand, and more importantly, it is also necessary for contemporary scholars to thoughtfully decide on which key concepts from James' philosophy are most decisive for comparative research on Jamesian pragmatism and traditional Chinese philosophy. This work should gradually proceed from the basic comparison of similarities and differences between key concepts in Jamesian philosophy and traditional Chinese philosophy to the more complex set of considerations about their comparative values and functions within their separate philosophical projects as a whole. In view of our current understanding of their differences and commonalities, comparative research in this area can be carried out from at least the following two approaches:

The first approach prioritizes James's concepts of "pure experience" and "stream of consciousness" and it brings them into a relevant comparative dialogue with certain concepts and views central to Buddhist philosophy. The concepts of "pure experience" and "stream of consciousness" are foundational in James's philosophy, and he devotes considerable discussion to both of them

in his major works, including *The Principles of Psychology*, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

About “pure experience,” for example, James (1976, p. 46 & 1981, p. 219) wrote that it is “the name which I gave to the immediate flux of life which furnishes the materials to our later reflection with its conceptual categories.” At least as far as we understand this concept, it is comparable with certain fundamental epistemological views of the consciousness-only theory of Buddhism.

More specifically, James’s notion of consciousness-only proposes an innovative approach to the ultimate truth through epistemological and logical exploration. With respect to the source of knowledge and the means for seeking truth, some representative figures put forward the idea of *shiliang* (cognition) or *liang* (sense), that is, *xianliang* (direct sense), *biliang* (perception by inferences) and *shengjiaoliang* (cognition based on authority). In particular, *zhengliang* (cognition based on personal experience) no longer refers to sense experience in general terms, but rather to intuitive experience with specific definitions. Although this is a type of cognition, it attempts to signify that which is meant by the condition of being “unable to distinguish between things although directly looking at them.” (Du, 2006, p. 127) In other words, “only the perception of sense organs directly in face of objects belongs to *xianliang*, which is therefore always fragmented and transient, and can never form a complete image, i.e., the sum of multiple senses, while such sum is the result when thinking is functioning, and does not belong to the range of *xianliang*.” More clearly, the sense of one single quality does not mean the perception of a bottle, and the *xianliang* (direct sense) of a bottle merely means the perception of its color, smell, taste and feeling, but not of its existence as a bottle. The perception of a bottle as it is does not belong to the category of *xianliang*. Therefore, the object of *xianliang* is thought to be a single quality of a particular object, that is, the self-nature or self-image that cannot be separated anymore.” (Du, 2006, p. 127)

Logically, the comparative study of Jamesian and Buddhist philosophy should be an essential part of the comparative research on traditional Chinese philosophy.

The second approach prioritizes discussion about the ineffability and noetic quality of the mystic state of consciousness to which James devoted much attention, and certain states of mysterious existences recognized in traditional Chinese culture. There is a distinct religious philosophy that informs James’ body of work on the whole, and his pragmatic outlook about religion continues to exert a significant influence in Western religious philosophy even to this day. Closely related to his religious philosophy and his radical empiricism, James specially discussed mysterious states of consciousness that deeply resonate with closely comparable states recognized in traditional Chinese culture.

In his eyes, the mystical state of consciousness has the following four important characteristics: (1) Ineffability in that it “defies expression ... no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced.” (James, 1985, p. 302) (2) A noetic quality in that mystical states “seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.” (James, 1985, p. 302) (3) Transiency in that “mystical states cannot be sustained for long.” (James, 1985, p. 302) (4) Passivity in that “once the characteristic sort of consciousness has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.” (James, 1985, p. 303) It is not hard to see that these four mysterious states in James’s mind are very similar and comparable to a wide body of notions about consciousness in Eastern thought.

James himself was quite familiar with Buddhist philosophy, and in fact when he further discussed these mysterious states of consciousness, he sometimes used Buddhist concepts to explain them. A primary example is his use of the Buddhist notion of samadhi to prove that a human being in certain mysterious states of consciousness can directly apprehend the truth that

instinct and reason fail to grasp. (See James, 1985, p. 303) James even went so far as to discuss the Buddhist notion of samadhi in its application as referring to higher states of contemplation that Buddhism often refers to as dhyana. He explored the concrete states of dhyana and how they differ from the state of nirvana. Unfortunately, however, since James was familiar with ancient Indian philosophy but not ancient or traditional Chinese philosophy, he therefore remained unaware of the value for his own philosophy of the thought of such figures as Laozi, Wang Bi, as well as many other ancient and traditional Chinese philosophers who had much to say about mysterious states of consciousness. Therefore, in advocating for further comparative research on the characteristics of the mysterious state of consciousness that takes the thought of James as foundational, we ought to reassess the value of the relevant perspectives and lines of thought from the Lao-Zhuang tradition of philosophical Daoism as well as from subsequent traditions of Daoism in China (Shang, 2002, pp. 207–209).

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