

Thinking in the Post–Modern Era

By Chen Jiaying

Where are we in the realm of thinking? I cannot view what is being thought about today while not being in the thought process per se. The topic has drawn me into THINKING itself.

We all think, but the word thinking, with its noun thought, has a more sublime meaning, signifying thoughts that are to grasp the eternal Tao instead of whimsical thinking pertaining to ordinary life. As an ancient Chinese saying goes, “the Heaven remains unaltered, and so does the Tao.” The Greeks understood episteme as the knowledge of the beings that has never changed — exemplified by heavenly bodies and mathematical entities.

Once the eternal Tao is grasped by the philosophers, it is put into the System of Metaphysics and Principle of Philosophy, in which all the smaller taos, as theorems and rules, are united by an overarching Principle. Nothing is more contradictory than what Bin Laden strives for and what George Bush does; however, they must have the same Good deep in their heart and agree on the same Tao in the final analysis, according to Mencius.

What troubles the philosophers is the problem of whether the Principium is the ultimate beginning of things. There always seems to be something prior to the beginning. It always seems possible to respond to the reasoning that “thy shall not do this for it is morally wrong” by the counter question “why must I be moral.” It may be a reason good enough to talk someone out of smoking because it is harmful to health, but it does not seem to have decided if health is more important than taking pleasure whenever possible. Philosophers have been seeking the absolute starting point and have offered various suggestions, cogito ergo sum, sense–data, self–evidence, the bottom–line of morality, just to name a few. Disappointedly, a starting point asserted by one of them is always rejected by another. What is self–evident to one often appears ridiculous to another. No sooner has a bottom–line of morality been found than it is broken by some extravagant event.

The philosopher persists in the hope that the ultimate Tao will eventually fall into his hand one day in spite of the fact that no ultimate truth has ever been accepted universally since Adam’s fall. In order for taos to be grasped with certainty and exactness, they must be turned into objective natural laws first. Accordingly, philosophers are turned into scientists. Natural laws, as it turns out, are not the taos sought by philosophers that are supposed to run through different domains of the world. As a

matter of fact, the more certain and exact natural laws are, the more they are detached from the life world, for they are made certain and exact at the price of cutting (draining) off their implication to human life. Economics can teach us what impact the increase in value of the primary currency has on foreign trade, but it never teaches us how one may happily live in poverty. Biology may teach us how genes are related to longevity, but it never teaches us the tao of sacrificing one's life for a just cause. The Tao of noble life and noble death is not something purely objective lying out there before it is conceived by us humans.

Natural laws are independent from how they are made intelligible to humans. Taos, on the other hand, are what things are meant to us. Meaning can be fixed only in a context. What does the fact that water flows downwards mean to us? It may mean that man should strive to reach higher since he is led by spiritual forces in contrast to material gravity. Then, it may also mean that the highest virtue is just like water, flowing downwards and ultimately reaching the great unity of ocean. The same example can tell different taos to different people on different occasions. Taos, unlike natural laws, can hardly be formulated uniformly and accepted universally.

By the same reason, even if all taos are connected to the one great Tao, we would not be able to say what it is. The closer the philosopher comes to the ultimate One, the more impotent speech becomes. He would find himself utterly speechless if he ever got there. Are Tao, Logos, Nous, the Idea, the eternal return and das Sein the same thing? Words are created to differentiate, and they fall listless when brought face to face to the Great One. There are indeed plenty of occasions where we are not satisfied with garrulous ordinary taos and want a more coherent understanding of the world. This, however, cannot be achieved by ascending step by step to the abstract One. Different taos are brought together only by what is at issue. The Tao that makes connections of different taos is a dialogue that draws concerned parties together.

I attended a meeting of activists concerned with animal protection a few days ago. They expressed annoyance for having been constantly asked the question "won't it be more important to go help the kids who are not able to go to school?" A young man ready to be a volunteer worker may ask himself if he would go to protect abused animals or help children who are out of school. A philanthropist may have to decide to what cause his donation should go. A theorist may join them in their deliberation, trying to sort out involved issues in a more orderly fashion. Now there is a man, who has no intention, whatsoever, either to help the abused animals or children out of school, yet who has all the intelligence

to ask “won’t it be more important to go help the kids who are not able to go to school?” How is he to be answered? And what difference does it make to answer the question one way or another? What is more important — building a state opera house or providing more low-rent housing? What is more important — taking a vacation in a resort or helping AIDS patients? These can of course be genuine questions, as long as they are raised from a genuine concern and in a sensible context.

We may find a true answer to our question only when our search for an answer is instigated by genuine perplexity. “Truth” is not a name for some ready-made thing. I’d rather think it is a term of achievement, indicating what we have achieved in the search for tao so far, instead of something that will remain unaltered forever once discovered. Absolute and eternal truth is the residue of Christian theology yet to be cleaned up, as Heidegger puts it. A thinking man knows no truth that is beyond any doubt and must be agreed upon by everybody. Those who long for absolute certainty have to turn elsewhere. One who thinks must learn to bear with the void of uncertainty, so much as one who holds faith in God must learn to bear with unshakable certainty.

Won’t all taos become faltered if no absolute Tao serves the foundation for them? We have no idea how hot absolute hotness is and how cold absolute coldness is, yet we can tell hot and cold all right. The fact that none of us has ever encountered absolute truth by no means amounts to our inability to tell the truth from the falsehood when it appears in a concrete situation.

Lament is heard that we are losing the ability to distinguish between the true and the false nowadays. It is so to some degree; but it is not so because there is no overarching ideology offering unmistakable criteria. I do not remember how good we were in telling the true from the false in the days when an overarching ideology reigned. Truth will not make her appearance in a room opened in a dialogue participated by parties who are concerned with finding it.

A thoughtful dialogue does not take place automatically, however, when the overarching ideology collapses. We are having a show of noisy doctrines on the stage of ideas, individualism, nationalism, populism, religious fundamentalism, Confucian fundamentalism and scienticism, not to mention consumerism. Every ism sings loudly and none of them listens. With few serious dialogues between different taos, our era has heard only a hotchpotch of thin voices but no philosophy of profound significance. It remains a fresh task for the thinkers today to find a way to build criteria for telling the true from the false by engaging in a dialogue in a world already done away with the absolute.