An Investigation on the Thoughts of Dongsun Zhang’s Moral Philosophy and the Reason of his Diversion

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Abstract. From a purely introduction of western philosophy on the early period to advocate “Chinese essence western utility” on the later period, Dongsun Zhang has gone through a tortuous diversion in his academic idea. It is well-known that his moral philosophy is mainly from western philosophy or ethics and his diversion is based on his focus on reality, but how the diversion can do is still less researched. By investigating the thoughts of his moral philosophy, it’s not difficult to find that the Chinese cultural confidence is the deep reason for his diversion.

Keywords: Zhang Dongsun; moral philosophy; diversion; cultural confidence.

In the Chinese modern history of philosophy, Dongsun Zhang was at the same era with Yuelin Jin and Youlan Feng and he was as important as them for they constructed a knowledge theory for the Chinese traditional philosophy, changed the overall structure of the Chinese traditional philosopher and established a new paradigm for the Chinese philosophy. To be more specific, the thoughts of Dongsun Zhang had deeply influenced by the new Kantism, the new realism, the Buddhist philosophy and the modern natural science (such as the theory of evolution and the theory of relativity). In philosophy, Dongsun Zhang put forward generic structure, pluralistic epistemology, layer revolution and comprehensive ethics; in the view of history, he did not agree with historical materialism or history-based destiny and he used his historical view of objects to debate with the historical materialism. From a purely
introduction of western philosophy in the middle 1920s to the construction of the new philosophy system and insisting on “Chinese essence western utility” in the late period, we could see that the academic ideology of Dongsun Zhang presented a diversion. It’s well-known that the diversion is based on his focus on reality, but how the diversion can do is still less investigated. According to his basic writings and some researches, it’s not difficult to find that cultural confidence is the deep reason by investigating on the thoughts of his moral philosophy.

1. Introduction to the moral philosophy of Dongsun Zhang

In the opinion of Dongsun Zhang, moral philosophy could be also called as ethics and philosophy of life. By analyzing western moral philosophies of various schools, Dongsun Zhang summarized western moral philosophies and divided them into naturalism and rationalism with the former which including hedonism, utilitarian and evolution theory and the latter covering internalism (self control, intuition and happiness) and transcendentalism (including liberation and self-discipline). However, in western academic ideas, naturalism and rationalism were incommensurable, but Dongsun Zhang used culture which had a larger containment to link them up. In the viewpoint of ethics, Moral Philosophy refined major contents of moral philosophy as: studying ethics with a natural scientism attitude; analyzing moral issues with critical philosophy; explaining moral basis with the speculation attitude of metaphysics and guiding abstract general principles with the pragmatic technological attitude. In the view angle of origin, he divided ethics into types like sociology; psychology; intellectual history; political law and religion; value theory and metaphysics and the book had the study mainly from the aspect of intellectual history; in addition, the book also summarized that moral development had experienced three stages, namely: convention; individual and repeated reflection which just corresponded to the three tendencies: socialization; individuation; rationality. From the analysis, we could see that the moral philosophy of Dongsun Zhang mainly involved in the origin of morality, evaluation of morality and function of morality and they were featured with that his analysis was focused on the form of the western moral thoughts.

2. Analysis of origin of the moral philosophy of Dongsun Zhang

Dongsun Zhang integrated ideas of various schools and inspected the connotation of moral philosophy with the idea “culture explained morality” of the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. In Science and Philosophy, Dongsun Zhang clearly expressed that he had been doubted contributions of philosophers and he believed that if what people learned had nothing to do
with happiness of human beings, then their value was doubtful. He was surely not to doubt the value of theory since he studied the theory of knowledge and read many books of Kant. And later, he started to study the theory of knowledge form the aspect of sociology and moved his interest to social research instead of discussing the metaphysical mystery. Therefore, he combined sociology and the theory of knowledge and matched up cultural advancement with sociology. From the self-report, we could know that Dongsun Zhang walked on a road from strict pursuit of philosophical thoughts to broad cultural thoughts because he wanted to bridge Chinese and western philosophical and cultural thoughts as well as to leave a room for the Chinese traditional culture in particular.

2.1 Cultural origin of morality

Life was fresh and lively and it was limited to experience of certain space-time cross points. However, the goal of life required to amplify the cross point at this moment, or in other words, to amplify the freedom which was the value of life was called “tengfāng” by Dongsun Zhang. The individual scope of “tengfāng” could communicate, thus forming objective value or culture. There were a lot of definitions about culture, but Dongsun Zhang defined it from its origin: the real life of human beings was restricted by space-time cross points which leaded people not to surpass them, that was to say, culture was named only after people’s efforts to exceed these cross points. In other words, all results of joint efforts of human beings to amplify life got together to form a kind of culture.

However, why did human beings have culture and why would they surpass reality? In the opinion of Dongsun Zhang, it would be hard for individuals to surpass the practical life, thus human beings worked together. Human beings were social animals and people who lived isolated were few. People must learn to cooperate, thus producing culture, and culture coexisted with human beings from beginning to end. This was the main idea of Dongsun Zhang about the origin of culture. Surely, his idea was not generated from the view point of sociology and anthropology but from cultural origin, it was just one of the many and was hard to be convinced. After that, Dongsun Zhang turned to investigate morality in the view of sociology and anthropology as some studies pointed out.

2.2 The formation and development of social culture layers

Studies indicated that Dongsun Zhang explained morality with layer evolution and solved moral issues with the goal of culture in the View of Life ABC in 1928. In 1931, in the book of Moral Philosophy, Dongsun Zhang synthesized and compromised ethics of various schools and discussed moral phenomenon and moral issues under the guidance of layer evolution, thus forming his unique moral philosophy. From the view of culture, he
investigated morality from culture layers so as to explore the origin of morality. Therefore, his moral outlook was also called cultural morality.

According to the relations between material, life and mind, Dongsun Zhang discussed the formation and development of social culture layers with the cosmology of layer evolution. He believed that the universe could be roughly divided into material, life and mind. Material created life and thus giving rise to “tengfang” which forms objective value. Therefore, life generated mind with feelings in the lowest level and culture in the highest level. As a creation[8], culture referred to a new layer outside individual psychology[9] which was similar to the social spirit of Wilhelm Wundt. Dongsun Zhang stressed that people could never speculate what the spirit was according to individual psychology. Therefore, social spirit was not a gathering or accumulation of individual psychology; we could only say that individual psychology generated social spirit[10].

Culture was a creation formed by individual spirits. Although it was generated from but higher than individual philosophy, when it was generated, it became social spirit which was an objective existence, or objective value, being in the highest level of the universe and called social culture layers[11] or culture by Dongsun Zhang.

Culture was a melting pot. And as a part of culture, morality stood in a relatively higher layer in the social culture layers and regulated behaviors of people. After discussing the theory of social culture layers, Dongsun Zhang pointed out that the universe could be generally divided into several layers with material generating life and life generating mind. In the layer of mind, culture was in the highest level and was called social culture layer. The low level of the culture layer included economic value (economic civilization), political value (civilization), value of beauty, value of belief, value of rationality and morality. Morality had cultural value[12]. He also proposed that all parts of culture were closely related with each other. Social culture layers were generated from the universe. According to the theory of layer evolution, although it was in the highest layer of mind, it would never cease to advance but have breakthrough. Therefore, after explaining the formation of social culture layers with the idea of layer evolution, Dongsun Zhang used it to discuss cultural evolution. Just as mentioned above, culture was generated from “tengfang” and transcendence. “Tengfang” and transcendence was the internal impetus of cultural progress and culture was in progress with the continuous “tengfang” of life.

2.3 Morality and surpassing activities of human beings

People created culture and culture had invisible and visible influence on people once it was generated just like a tin or iron hand that was melted or a fish in water. People had been in the influence of the culture created by them.
Surely, the relation between people and culture was not only reflected in the influence of culture on people but also in the promotion of people in culture. On the one hand, people kept to creating new culture; and on the other hand, people always made up flaws of culture.

Culture was generated from life transcendence, but what was the impetus of the transcendence? In the opinion of Dongsun Zhang, the impetus was the will of life. However, where did it come from? Zhang Dongsun believed since morality was generated from culture, the characters of morality were natural instincts forged by culture. Personalities were not pure natural or cultural but under the influence of the two and thus characters of morality coming into being, or moral sense which was called the “the third character”. And “the third character” had a great impact on cultural evolution; In addition, Dongsun Zhang accepted the ideas of Kant and he divided the universe into the phenomenon and the transcendence. Cultural phenomenon and cultural issued belong to the transcendence instead of the phenomenon and they could not be obtained with scientific methods. Thus, morality was originated from the transcendence. In other words, although morality had been affected by acquired factors, innate factors could not be ignored. The problem why culture was culture and why morality was morality could not be explained by nature. But Kant made clear the problem with practical reasons and his ideas were convincible. And Dongsun Zhang proved them with the metaphysical ideas of Kant.

Therefore, it was not hard for us to discover the metaphysical opinions of Dongsun Zhang. The problem about the origin of culture could not be explained by the phenomenon but the transcendence or the social culture layer itself. In this way, it was not necessary to prove the origin of culture since it was a metaphysical problem. Studies indicated that Dongsun Zhang believed that philosophy was metaphysics in the early days which went against the idea of not discussing culture from the view angle of metaphysics expressed in the book Knowledge and Culture in 1937. But latterly, Dongsun Zhang inspected culture from the viewpoint of sociology thus realizing his transformation in academic idea.

3. Modern significance of the moral philosophy of Dongsun Zhang

As mentioned above, Dongsun Zhang had a diversion in academic idea. How could his diversion do? People believed that his diversion just conformed to the western academic trend. In other words, just as Russell said, there should have other philosophies besides western philosophy. It was regarded as a negative on western centralism from the inside of the western philosophy, thus leaving a space to the validity of the Chinese philosophy. Moreover, the diversion was related to the cultural awareness and cultural confidence of
Dongsun Zhang. Considering his education experience of Confucianism in the early days and his social practice, the diversion of Dongsun Zhang was inevitable. Through the diversion in academic idea, he tried to integrate Chinese and western philosophy so as to strive for a room in the world cultural cycle for the Chinese philosophy, which revealed his deep national consciousness and forward-looking. From the point of view of culture, he found a path to blend Chinese and western philosophy, which was beyond doubt. However, except for political reasons, the academic impact of Dongsun Zhang was far behind that of Youlan Feng and Yuelin Jin at the same era, his philosophical thoughts and inner world had not been attached great importance at home and abroad. The reason was that the practical effects of studying culture from the view point of philosophy and studying philosophy from the view angle of culture were different since the former was deep and the latter was broad. Just as the cultural philosophy in the book of Science and Philosophy indicated, Dongsun Zhang viewed philosophy from the point of culture and tried to contain philosophy with the bigger concept, culture, so as to obtain the validity of the Chinese philosophy or the Chinese traditional culture, which weakened the penetrating power of his core thoughts. It was noteworthy that the debate of Youlan Feng and Shuming Liang about cultural types was discussed from the view point of cultural philosophy. However, researchers (such as Xuanmeng Yu and Xianglong Zhang) that inspected traditional culture from a static angle believed that Youlan Feng moving the new realism into the Chinese philosophy would probably incise the Chinese philosophy or just like cutting the feet to fit the shoes; while some else from the dynamic angle approved this research method and believed it was a new development of the Chinese philosophy by learning from western philosophical thoughts. And the western philosophy to the Chinese philosophy was what Yangming psychology to the pre-Qin Confucianism. Without the reference, there was no Yangming psychology. Therefore, we should view the reference of Dongsun Zhang from the development tendency of world history objectively. Moreover, it was noteworthy that the transformation of Dongsun Zhang seemed to conform to the change within the various schools of western philosophy. Some did not belong to the mainstream of western philosophy and some did not have great influence on China. The problem was that although he was not aware of the Chinese philosophy strongly, that was why he did not stick to walking on the road of western philosophy like Kang Chen. Through analysis, it was easy to find that it was resulted from his deep cultural consciousness and cultural confidence, his characters and forward-looking consciousness was estimable in a time when western philosophy held the dominant position. On page 624 of the book Moral Philosophy, Dongsun Zhang pointed out that culture was an integral whole just like various parts of
human bodies working together. Western culture was also an integral whole and philosophy was a part of it. If only one part was picked out, it must be inconsonance. Thus we could know that the thought of Dongsun Zhang was contradictory. According to opinions of Hegel and Martin Heidegger, the western philosophy came from ancient Greece and the methods to investigate philosophy had been also from Greece by now. In the opinions of Greek philosophers, philosophy was an abstract cognition about first principles and causes (principle and cause was that there was and there existed respectively). For example, Aristotle divided experience into phenomenon and essence; He integrated them into a whole through the causality of Logos, presenting a rational existing way consciously. And he established experience with rationality, dealt with life with experience and acknowledged a world outlook with rationality. In a word, Aristotle helped Greek to decide an existing way of philosophy and bridged there was and there existed, generating linguistics; poetics; logic; taxonomy; physics; animal and plant. In this way, philosophy and science was inseparable and they were two sides of a body, being in a cognate relation instead of a derived relation. We could know that it lacked a homology by reviewing the Chinese culture. From the aspect of science and the civilization of technology, the conditions of the human beings were just as showed by the world outlook of Greece. However, the world outlook brought people with insurmountable difficulties and even great calamities while it brought convenience. Therefore, the Chinese traditional philosophy which took good manners, good management skills and peace as major targets came to the front again. Without doubt, to bring about a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, learning from success of the thinking mode was an essential and significant link.

4. References

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