

# EASTERN WISDOM AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY SEVERAL COMPARATIVE POINTS

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**Abstract:** The two conceptions “the Eastern” and “the Western” have been known for several recent decades. The Eastern is used to show the area of the sunrise, including Asian countries - the civilizations in the valleys of Nile River, Ganges River and Yellow River (*Huang He River*); whereas, the Western is used to show Western European countries such as England, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Spain etc..., but not all the rest countries of the world. There are a lot of differences between the Eastern wisdom and the Western philosophy, due to particular social features in each area in terms of the approach, nature, objectives, objects, methods of awareness, ways to reach the truth, intelligence, knowledge, relationships between subject and object, means of consciousness, development ways, and dialectics as well.

**Key words:** Philosophy, wisdom, Eastern, Western.

The East - West concept has been known for just several centuries. The Eastern world is used to show the area of the sunrise, including Asian countries - the civilizations in the valleys of Nile River, Ganges River and Yellow River. Thus, the East concisely and basically consists of Egypt (including mainly Arabic countries at present), India and China. In the meanwhile, the Western world is used to show Western European countries such as England, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Spain etc..., but not all the rest countries of the world. Consequently, we can see that almost all religions started in the East. Karl Marx did realize this, when he argued that India specifically and the East generally were the very religious cradle of mankind; and, the history of the East had the form of history of religions. Philosophy and wisdom are

types of ideology in the superstructure. They are determined by infrastructure and social existence. What are differences in the social basis between the East and the West, eventually? In my recent publications and newspaper articles, I already explained about this through so-called Asian means of production. Due to differences in the social basis, the ways of thinking and concepts are also different between the two worlds. In the Western world, for example, ones just used the word “Philosophy”, but in the Eastern world the words “Wisdom” or “Principles of reason” were used instead. This does not mean that there was no wisdom in the West and no philosophy in the East. As we all know, at the time of the ancient Roman – Greece, the word

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“Philosophia” was already used; herein, “Philo” means “love” and “sophia” means “wisdom and principles of reason”. Plato (427-347 BC) acknowledged that wisdom was the power of the gods and human could not get it; what human could do was just to express love to it; i.e. human could get philosophy at the most. At the time of Plato, therefore, wisdom was considered higher than philosophy. From the Renaissance time to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, Western philosophy developed vigorously and became a specialized discipline. Thence, the circle of professionals working in the field of philosophy was formed. A lot of Western ideologists, including also Ludwig Wittgenstein, considered wisdom too boring and dull like the thought of old people, although Friedrich Nietzsche did denounce philosophy as pretending and humble to disguise ambitions. In reality, I suppose that philosophy and wisdom are the two aspects of knowledge and the two ways of thinking among people in the earth; they are closely related to each other and cannot be separated from each other, only that each world is inclined towards one of them. Following are some comparative points between Western philosophy and Eastern wisdom, based on the fundamental and general features:

### **1. Regarding to approaches of Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy**

Western philosophy usually developed from the abstract to the specific, from the general to the particular, from the worldview or universe-view to the outlook,

and, from the ontology to the epistemology. It has therefore created a relatively complete and close system. In the meanwhile, Eastern wisdom developed reversely; i.e. it came from the specific to the abstract, from the particular to the general, from the outlook to the worldview. At the time of ancient Roman – Greece, for example, Western philosophers often looked for the first elements that constituted the world such as: water, fire, air and atoms. In the East, however, two great and typical ideologists, including Confucius and Buddha, did not do the same. At the troubled time of the Spring and Autumn Period (771 to 476 BCE), Confucius developed a theory with the rule of virtue, aiming at stabilizing social orders. Consequently, some people view Confucius’ theory as socio-political and ethical but not philosophical, because it does not consist of the metaphysical part; i.e. ontologism or the universe-view. It is not by accident that “Jen” plays the fundamental and key role in the Confucius’ theory. This still remained the same till the time of Mencius in the Warring State Period. Later on, at the Song Dynasty, it was added with the worldview and the universe-view of Buddha and Tao.

Buddha did not start with building the universe-view or ontology. For him, the most urgent issue was to save from misfortune. He, therefore, presented specific methods and measures to save people from misfortune first, instead of metaphysical philosophical issues. He kept silent. Like a person, who was shot with a poisonous

arrow, the most urgent act was to get the arrow out and cure the wound, instead of considering what the nature of the arrow was. For Buddha, to save from misfortune and danger was the same urgent; it was much more urgent than to raise issues of the metaphysical philosophy that could not be solved from generation to generation. Thus, initially Buddha mainly presented the theories of Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path in the hope of helping people get over misery. Long later, the Buddhist metaphysics was set up by some Buddhist priests, including Asvaghosha, Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu...

In conclusion, both the two typical theories in the East, including the Confucianism and Buddhism, started with human life and the outlook; and then, the worldview was developed. They were at first focused on conceptions of morality, lifestyles, and proper behavior; later on, theoretical grounds were sought to prove the conceptions. The Confucianism emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. According to it, ones should do self-improvement and household management first, and then do national governance and pacify the world. On the contrary, Western philosophies seemingly started with the worldview and then came to the outlook; they started with theories on the world and universe and then concretized them into human and society, due to the needs of production, natural conquering, natural improvement, and external demands. Thus, Western philosophy

mainly comes from the worldview to the outlook; from the general to the particular; from the abstract to the specific; whereas, Eastern wisdom come reversely, from the particular to the general, from the specific to the abstract, from the outlook to the worldview. When a theory is developed from the general to the particular or from the bigger to the smaller, the smaller or the particular will be based on a sound ground; whereas, when it is developed from the particular to the general or from the smaller to the bigger, some factors must be reasoned and the bigger or the general will lack of a sound ground. This makes Eastern wisdom less logical than Western philosophy. Certainly, these are just two dominant trends of philosophy, which are determined by social features in the two worlds.

In the East, there were no typically great-scale slaveholding regimes like those in ancient Roman and Greece. In China, for instance, the slavery regime germinated at the time of Shang Dynasty (from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to 1027 BC). At the time of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1027 – 770 BC), the slaveholding state came out into society, but there were no iron tools at all, as the word “iron” was not found in documents at that time. The slaveholding state was not really typical, when there were no iron tools. This is reversal to the foundation of the ancient Roman – Greece State. Iron tools enabled the productive forces develop much in the ancient Roman – Greece, owing to which the tribal clan regimes were removed rapidly; new productive relations

followed by the State were formed. In the ancient Roman – Greece, infrastructure determined superstructure; whereas, in the East, superstructure was built first and subsequently it promoted development of infrastructure. Are they perhaps the two halves of a whole? This is also proved by Ho Chi Minh, when he argued that economic structure in the East was not similar to that in the West and class struggles were not as drastic as those in the West. This partly explains why Western philosophy developed from the worldview to the outlook; whereas Eastern wisdom developed reversely. The very social conditions determined approaches of Western philosophy and Eastern wisdom as well.

## **2. Regarding to the features of Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy**

Eastern philosophy was often attached closely with religions (in India) or moral and socio – political principles (in China) and philosophers were named as sages or wisemen. In the meanwhile, Western philosophy was often attached closely with scientific achievements, especially those in natural sciences; philosophers were named as scientists or scholars. Thus, the East was connected with wisdom; whereas the West was connected with great scholarship. This further illustrates the difference between the two modes of thinking in our mankind.

## **3. Regarding to the Aims of Philosophy**

The aim of Eastern philosophy is to stabilize social orders (for the philosophies in China, of which typical is the Confucianism, the aim is to save people (*salvation*); and

for the philosophies in India, of which typical is the Buddhism, the aim is to help people live harmoniously with nature). For the aim of salvation, philosophy is considered a vehicle. If the target is the moon, the Buddhist dogmas are viewed as a finger pointing to the moon. If the target is the other side of a river, the Buddhist dogmas are viewed as a boat. And, when ones have reached the target; e.g. they have been saved or they have reached the other side of the river, they no longer need the vehicle; it means that philosophy is no longer need. In the meanwhile, the aim of Western philosophy is completely different. It is seemingly inclined towards the external world; it is focused on making interpretations, improving and changing the world.

Due to the features and aims, the more Eastern philosophy develops, the better moral and spiritual life as well as the greater wisdom people will get. On the other hand, the more Western philosophy develops, the more profound knowledge people will achieve.

## **4. Regarding to objects of Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy**

Objects of Eastern philosophy mainly include society, human, and mind; in general, it uses human as the core object. Consequently, knowledge of Eastern philosophy is mainly related to social, political, moral and spiritual issues; and generally, it is somewhat inclined towards the inner world. In the meanwhile, objects of Western philosophy are diversified, including all fields such as nature, society,

and mentality. Especially, the philosophy in English-spoken nations mainly uses nature as the core object. As the objects are so diversified, the range of knowledge is also very wide, including all fields of the world. Thus, in one world, human is used as the basic for philosophy, but in the other world, nature is used instead. These are the two modes of thinking in the East and the West. As nature is used as the basic, Western philosophy, especially in English-spoken nations, tends to be inclined externally; it uses external grounds to interpret internal phenomena. This makes the philosophy more inclined towards materialism. In the meanwhile, Eastern philosophy tends to be inclined internally. This can be explained by the fact that Eastern wisdom gives prominence to the viewpoint on the homogeneous entity of all things; i.e. human carries the nature of the universe; in order to understand fully the universe, therefore, it is just necessary to study the human inner. While Western philosophy, especially in English-spoken nations, uses the external to explain the internal, Eastern wisdom uses the internal to explain the external (like a line of verse written by Nguyen Du: “*The scenery can be never seen joyfully beautiful, when one feels unhappy*”). In other words, Western philosophy is inclined towards materialism; whereas Eastern philosophy is inclined towards idealism. This partly explains why the West is more developed than the East, especially in terms of material facilities and science-technology. In the ancient India, there were

nine schools of philosophy, of which eight were idealistic and only one was materialistic (this only school was named as Lokayata or filthily and ironically as Charvaka – *gluttons*). Eastern philosophy is said to be inclined towards the inner and idealism, because it is a dominant trend in Eastern philosophy. Although I argue that Eastern philosophy is inclined towards the inner and idealism, I do not mean it is not involved with the external or materialism at all. I just want to mean that the trend of the internal and idealistic inclination is dominant in Eastern philosophy. For Western philosophy, especially in English-spoken nations, it is completely reversed. Western philosophy originated from the ancient Roman-Greece. In the meanwhile, of seven schools of philosophy in the ancient Roman-Greece, five ones were more or less inclined towards materialism; the rest two were inclined towards idealism (*Pythagoras and Plato*).

#### **5. Regarding to means and methods of awareness in Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy**

While Western philosophy, especially in Western Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, tended to be rationalistic and analytic, Eastern philosophy tended to be intuitional and visual. What are advantages and disadvantages of those methods? The advantage of the former method is that it promotes scientific and technical development, followed by development of industries and technologies. It is not by accident that Western and Westernized countries gained the most advanced achievements in sciences

and technology in the world. From the perspective of philosophy, however, this method also has some disadvantage. As we all know, everything and every phenomenon consists of innumerable linkages, attributes and essences at different levels. It is, therefore, never possible to realize all the eventual essences of a thing or a phenomenon. The further we study things or phenomena, the more we realize that knowledge is infinitely immense; the more we have learned, the more we feel that our understanding still remains too little; what we have known is by far inconsiderable in comparison with what we haven't known yet. It is like a comparison between a pinch of leaves and a vast forest. It is not by chance that at the last years of life Newton started to learn the Bible and Albert Einstein was much fond of Buddhism. Anyway, we have to try our best to understand about nature in order to serve our life. Regarding to consciousness, man can never understand fully nature as a whole. According to V.I. Lenin, all what man can do is to go closer to it by creating abstractions, conceptions, laws and a scientific picture of the universe. To come to the ultimate truth and the final essence, we thus have to make step-by-step progress, from the 1<sup>st</sup> level essence to the 2<sup>nd</sup> one and then the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> etc... This is an endless road; whereas our lifespan is limited. It is a contradiction and a tragedy of man that we want the limited to reach the ultimately and absolutely endless. On the other hand, everything moves and changes incessantly. V.I Lenin assumes that we

cannot show, measure, and imagine exactly movement, if we do not interrupt its continuity; if we do not simplify it; if we do not coarsen or separate it; and, if we do not kill living things. Imagination of movement always coarsens and rigidifies movement. To illustrate this, we can take one example as below: if there is only an orange in the world, but no-one knows about it. How can we understand about the orange at that time? The method used previously by the West is to split the orange into pieces and then see, touch, taste and smell it, in order to understand about it. And then, they join the pieces into an orange as a whole. Yet, the orange is already dead at that time. As a result, they have to kill the orange, in order to understand about it. Similarly, to understand about life, ones have to constrict, simplify, coarsen, isolate, and kill living things. According to this sense, analyses deprive life of its flavor. To avoid this impasse, the East used the method of intuition (*Zhí-jué*). In Chinese meaning, “*Zhí*” means “straight” and “*jué*” means “to perceive or feel”. At that time, intuition (*Zhí-jué*) means to understand straight the essence of things and phenomena. Intuition at a low level is similar to the sixth sense. When we meet somebody for the first time, we often have some feeling and impression. That's why there is love at first sight. There is a popular short story titled “*The face can't be friends with*” written by Nam Cao, a great writer in Vietnam. In reality, one day he suddenly saw a person for the first time. At that time, he felt that it was impossible to make friends with the person.

And then, he went home and wrote the short story. Almost everyone in Vietnam knows this story. Thus, intuition can help us to reach what rational analyses cannot. It is an appropriate method for awareness of moving objects. Almost all scientists, artists, and inventors often have some feeling or some intuition, before they obtain their first achievement. Intuition is like a flash of lightning; it is the very germ of an idea; and it is extremely important for all great inventions. Together with intuition, man can reach absolute things, according to the religious viewpoint. How useful, however, is the understanding of so-called absolute things in the viewpoint of religions, when it is not applied in the relative world! What is to be a big tree that alone stands the stormy billows of life for? It would be better to be a grass that lives happily with fellow creatures in the wind and sun! Yet, the world is like a forest, in which there must be both big ancient trees and grass. If there is no ancient big tree, it will be no longer called a forest. In reality, this is both strength and weakness of intuition, since it does not promote development of sciences and technology. The materialism in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century enabled Western countries to make great strides in development with landmark inventions of the epoch. At that time, Eastern lions still remained in deep sleep and correspondingly became colonies for years later. On the other hand, not everybody has intuition and not all intuitions are correct.

The two dominant methods of awareness in the two worlds are closely linked with

each other. They are not completely separated from each other, but they are supplementary for each other. Without analyses, we cannot understand about things and phenomena. In the meanwhile, it is also a mistake, if we view it as the only and absolute. There are many ways to reflect and describe the world; for instance, we can describe it by sound (music), color (painting), gesture (dancing, pantomime), concepts (sciences), formulas (mathematics), or images (literature and poetry) etc... For many fields, the method of analysis seems not to be effective; whereas the method of intuition seems to be more appropriate. Depending on specific situations or objects, consequently, we can determine which method the most appropriate, but we should not exclude all other methods anyway.

The ways to reach verities and knowledge are also different between the two worlds. In the Western world, ones tend to study and quantitatively accumulate knowledge until it is great enough to result in qualitative changes. On the contrary, in the Eastern world, ones tend to follow the moral way to make qualitative changes; i.e. it is necessary to focus the whole body and mind, which is called Zen in Buddhism. In order to do Zen, ones must have pure mind; it means that they have to cultivate virtue and morals (to keep the commandments). In this world, knowledge is not separated from morality. In conclusion, to reach knowledge, Western philosophy tends to study and accumulate knowledge; whereas Eastern wisdom tends to cultivate morals and wash cleanly mind. The way to reach knowledge

in the Eastern world has to experience following steps: commandment, composure, and perspicacity (in Buddhism); or nature investigation, single - mindedness, self - improvement, household management, national governance, and the world pacification (in Confucianism). In the meanwhile, the way to reach knowledge in the Western world often comes from simplification to complication; from the phenomena to the essence; from the sense-perception to reason-perception; from the 1<sup>st</sup> level essence to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> level essence etc... In our opinion, it is a relatively interesting difference between the two types of philosophy that we need to study further.

Another difference is related to methodology. Western philosophy separates object from subject, objective from subjective; perceiver from perceptible objects. On the contrary, Eastern wisdom claims that it is essential to mix with object, when we want to understand about it. In the two-dimensional space, we can make only one line through two certain points, but it is not true for the three dimensional space.  $1+1=10$  in the binary system, but  $1+1=2$  in the decimal system. To understand each other, to talk and discuss with each other, therefore, ones necessarily rely on the same basis and the same system of reference. According to Lie-zi, furthermore, when we mix ourselves with all living beings, the living beings will not harm us. Zhuang-zi mixed his mind with nature so deeply that he dreamt of becoming a butterfly (when he woke up, he asked himself: "Did I dream of becoming a butterfly or is the butterfly dreaming of

becoming me?"). According to Eastern wisdom, to understand the understanding of others does not mean to understand truly. This is similar to the fact that one can never be full up, when eating what others are eating; or it is not a true love, when one loves what other are loving.

While the means of awareness in Western philosophy are conceptions, those in Eastern wisdom are metaphoric and associational images and allegories etc... As Western philosophy uses conceptions, objects become more precise via analyses and descriptions. If we rely on conceptions too much, however, what we analyze may not be the very objects, but just shadows of the objects reflected in the net of the conceptions.

This reminds us of Confucius' statement that learned people enjoy waterway areas, but virtuous ones enjoy mountainous areas; learned people are active, but virtuous ones are calm; the learned people live happily, but the virtuous ones live long. Based on this argument, Western philosophy seems to be more like a learned one; whereas Eastern wisdom seems to be more like a virtuous one.

## **6. Regarding to development of Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy**

In terms of the two factors, including quantitative change and qualitative change, Western philosophy is more inclined towards the latter. According to Western philosophy, quantitative change will result in qualitative change; and even, the final result may reject the beginning. In the meanwhile, Eastern wisdom is more inclined towards the former. According to



it, fundamental principles were set at the beginning in the ancient time; and then, ones just developed and completed the principles. Correspondingly, Western philosophy goes further and further from the origin and becomes more and more diversified; whereas, Eastern wisdom is like a river that runs forever; although there are sometimes some changes, it still remains linked closely with the origin. In this sense, Aldous Huxley named Eastern wisdom as the perennial philosophy.

### **7. Regarding to the dialectics in Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy**

Both the Eastern and Western ways of thinking affirm that the truth is the only, but errors are extremely diversified. There are, however, differences in the dialectics between Western philosophy and Eastern wisdom. The former is more inclined towards movement and struggles, but the latter is more inclined towards calm, unity and harmony. While the former tends to follow the straightforward development, the latter tends to follow the circular development. This partly illustrates Ho Chi Minh's opinion that class struggles in the East were not as drastic as those in the West.

Philosophy is inclined towards knowledge enhancement, analysis, activeness, talkativeness, eloquentness, discovery of the truth, and externality; whereas wisdom is inclined towards awakening, reticence, silence, generalization, harmony, sensitiveness, internality, and non-influence.

Today, some scholars argue that the dominant features of the West include external inclination, activeness, thought

of reasoning, vital struggle, bellicosity, individualism, analysis, rational knowledge, scientism, competitiveness, expansiveness, mechanical thought, and entity attentiveness etc...; whereas those of the East include internal inclination, passiveness, mysterious intuition, harmonization, unity, equalitarianism, psychologism, spiritualization, collectiveness, generalization, wisdom, intuition, religiousness, collaborativeness, cooperativeness, conservativeness, organical thought, and relational attentiveness etc... This is, however, a very broad topic, about which this paper just outlines several basic points relating to differences between Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy.

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