

Proceedings

Study on Li Erqu's "Great Learning" Epistemology—From the Perspective of Information Philosophy [†]

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Abstract: Li Erqu is one of the three greatest Confucian at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. In his theory, Li Erqu thinks that everything in the world is changing, evolution and self generation process, and pay more attention to the first primitive in its movement in the world, which shows the thought of process and generative theory in ancient Chinese philosophy is not only rich but also profound. He inherits and develops Confucian Theory on epistemology and Gong Fu Ontology accomplished by Zhang Zai who put people's inside and outside together, and put forward one's heart makes appropriate and fast response to the changing environment outside. Therefore, he thinks the real Confucian has to build his morality inside and struggle to become a ruler in the real life at the same time. Based on the old version of Great Learning, Li Erqu thinks the core of this book is "Mingtishiyong", the first step of learning is "Gewu", and the guiding principle is "Huiguozixin". The mode of interpretation mentioned above reflects Li Erqu combines Neo-Confucianism with the Xin Xue which is proposed by Liu Jiuyuan in South Song dynasty. To an extent, Li Erqu's epistemology of the Great Learning happened to coincide with some theory of information construction in contemporary information philosophy on this point.

Keywords: Li Erqu; "Great Learning"; Xin Xue; neo-confucianism

1. Introduction

According to the history of Confucianism's thought, the work of Great Learning is more fundamental among the system of Four Books in China (compared with other three, the Analects, Mencius and Doctrine of the Mean), so that scholars pay more attention to it.

The academic differences on this point between Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming mainly focus on the understanding of the version of Great Learning and the philosophical problems derived from it, and gradually become the philosophical topic that the later generations of scholars cannot go around. Li Erqu (1627–1705) was born in Shanxi province, and known as the backbone of Guanxue (a school of Confucianism created by Zhang Zai in North Song dynasty). Li Erqu had established his theoretical system of the study of human nature based on ontology (Gong Fu Ontology) which inherits and develops Zhang Zai's Confucian theory. Besides, based on the old version of Great Learning, Li Erqu absorbs rational core of Wang Yangming's thought. To an extent, his annotation of "Great Learning" is to clarify the ideas from the overall perspective, so as to enrich the theory through further studies.

Here, there are three real innovation points:

1. the core of Great Learning is "Mingtishiyong"
2. the first step of learning is "Gewu"
3. the guiding ideology is "Huiguozixin"

This innovation is indeed objective and valuable, coinciding with some theory of information construction in contemporary information philosophy on this point.

2. Theory of Process and Generative Theory

The most remarkable feature of Chinese philosophy is that it does not have the logic, epistemology and methodology. Through the language's understanding and communication, a dialogical civilization can be realized. The present research on this point in China mostly was only using methods of History and Paleography, and focus on explanation of words in ancient books and historical narrative paradigm, which let experts cannot carry out an in-depth research around the work of Great Learning as a whole, and ignore its precious value in the whole history of Confucius thoughts.

Therefore, it is a good way to carry out research on Great Learning based on the background of Information philosophy and recreate Confucian classics' value through the special form of language and text. The world is expressed through language so that by changing traditional methods of hermeneutics and the concept of classic, we can seek another new way of China's classics' interpretation.

In his theory, Li Erqu thinks that everything in the world is changing, evolution and self generation process, and pay more attention to the first primitive in its movement in the world, especially diversity exists in this description. For example, Li Erqu inherits and develops Confucian theory on epistemology and Gong Fu Ontology accomplished by Zhang Zai who put people's inside and outside together, and put forward one's heart makes appropriate and fast response to the changing environment outside. Therefore, Li Erqu thinks the real Confucian has to build his morality inside and struggle to become a ruler in the real life at the same time. And it seems to be the common characteristics what ancient Chinese philosophers explained such relative theories. It shows the thought of process and generative theory in ancient Chinese philosophy is not only rich but also profound.

3. Combine Neo-Confucianism with Xin Xue Which is Proposed by Liu Jiuyuan in South Song Dynasty and Developed by Wang Yangming in Ming Dynasty

The understanding of theory of "Gewu"(theory of knowledge acquisition, a way for Chinese ancient scholars to investigate and research things) of Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming is totally different. Zhu Xi explains that "Gewu" means "Zhi" (toward), while Yangming is from the angle of Gongfu Ontology. The former prefers knowledge acquisition from outside, while the later concentrates on improving the morality inside. Here, there is a real innovation point in Li Erqu's theory:

Li Erqu combines Zhu Xi's theory of knowledge acquisition ("knowledge coming from the study of the physical world") and Wang Yangming's thought of the rediscovery of intuitive knowledge.

The value of Li Erqu's combination these two thoughts is as followed. Firstly, it widens the scope of Wang Yangming's theory. Secondly, it limits Zhu Xi's theory of knowledge acquisition so that in the theory of Gongfu Ontology knowledge acquisition gives way to Moral cultivation, which makes Zhuxi's theory directly beneficial for Confucian Ideology. In addition, it shows the sustainable development of Chinese civilization.

4. Moral Epistemology

Western experts prefer to discuss about a problem about morality, where human morals come from, which is still an important issue in China. Actually, the problem is central in moral epistemology. From sociological angle in western countries: The best explanation of the depth of moral disagreements and the social diversity that they reflect is one of two things, while evolutionary theory thinks a familiar and widely accepted answer is that human morals are in essence, despite their modern variations, Darwinian adaptations. In China, scholars are also engaged in the same issue but in different way. For example, Li Erqu thinks about how to improve one's own morality. In his view, the realization of life lies in the integration of both external factors and internal ones. Because

goodness which man is born with is shadowed, some faults occur that include improper words and actions, selfish motives inside as well. Therefore, one significant step for people to do moral epistemology is to correct one's own faults so as to go back to one's good nature which exists at the very beginning.

5. Conclusion

As western experts, Chinese still pay attention to the relationship between moral civilization and practice. So in Li Erqu's theory, he considers the Confucianism's theory of Xinxing as the best way of practical utility, which is the origin that scholars express their ambition and willing by annotations of classics. Firstly, Li Erqu's thought of "Great Learning" reflects he views reflexive practice as the final aim. At the same time, in general we also should emphasize the interpretation of "Great Learning" by Li Erqu shows he is not limited by bias between different schools of thought. Although such relative fair research attitude is still not thoroughly carried out in the philosophy, the direction and path of thinking what he had displayed in his work seems a stream surging intensified in the early-Qing Dynasty when thoughts of Zhuxi and Wang Yangming dispute increasingly. Additionally, his respect and construction toward the study of Confucian classics has gradually changed the academic atmosphere in the Ming Dynasty which is considered as the reason why the study of Confucian classics revival later in the history of Chinese Confucianism. Li Erqu's thought coincides with some relevant ideas of information construction theory in the course of human cognition, occurrence and cognition in the contemporary information philosophy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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