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The Integrality of Qi Ontology from the Perspective of System Theory: Wang Fuzhi's Qi Theory †

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Abstract: As a new perspective of understanding and explaining the world, system theory provides a new approach for studying Chinese ancient philosophy. Starting with a systematic perspective, this paper takes Wang Fuzhi, a philosopher in ancient China, as a clue and through the regularity and hierarchy of the integrality of a system to analyze the ontology of Qi (air) in order to explore new discoveries about the interaction between the Chinese ontology of ancient philosophy and system theory.

Keywords: system theory; Qi (air); integrality; regularity; hierarchy

1. Introduction

Along with the development of the times, the emergence and application of systems theory has provided a whole new path for people to view the world. At the same time, systems theory has also influenced the pace of people's awareness and understanding of the composition of the world in a profound way. Therefore, it is necessary to change the traditional perspective to a systemic one to re-examine the Qi (air) theory in ancient Chinese natural philosophy. This paper, starting with the idea of system, takes the ancient Chinese philosopher Wang Fuzhi's thought as a clue and analyzes his views on Qi theory with a view to uncovering more possibilities from it.

Throughout the development of Chinese ontological thinking, the view on Qi is an important thread that runs through it. The birth of the Qi can be traced back to the Western Zhou period [1]. The writings of the ancient Qin period, such as *Guanzi*, *Lao Tzu* and *Yi Zhuan*, also contain a wealth of ideas about Qi. Zhang Zai, a philosopher of the Northern Song period, who was the master of ancient Chinese Qi monism, regarded Qi as the root of all things, and that Qi gather together so that everything in the world emerge. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Wang Fuzhi inherited Zhang Zai's idea of Qi monism and regarded Qi as the only entity in the world, further expounding Qi monism. It can be seen that since ancient times, Qi has been an essential element of the universe, and the concept of Qi as the origin of all things has occupied an important position.

2. The Integrality of Qi

In the ontology, there are many properties that are used to describe Qi. For example, in ancient Chinese philosophy, Qi is flowing, and it is the smallest and most mobile substance. The universe can be explained by Qi, that is, Qi is the fundamental substance of everything [2]. Wang Fuzhi stated in *Zhang Zi Zheng Meng Zhu*:

> "There should be things in the world. . . . . big as mountains, small as insects, spiritual as human, solid as material, everything in the world is various. . . . . Qi is constructing and flowing within everything." [3].

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Qi has no shape. It gathers to form everything and disappears while everything dissipates, which is a continuous entirety to reflect its integrality.

According to Bertalanffy, the founder of general systems theory, the world as an entirety and everything in it exists as a system, which is a combination of several interrelated elements. Integrality as the most fundamental characteristic of things is equivalent to its own systemic nature [4]. From such a systemic perspective, it is easy to determine that ancient Chinese Qi ontology can be seen as a complete system. In the system, the totality of things and the relationship between the elements are repeatedly emphasized, while the fluidity of Qi itself keeps everything in a constant state of generation and change. Therefore, Qi can be seen as an organic dynamic system.

3. The Regularity and the Hierarchy of Qi

The existence and operation of the system as a whole has its regularity, while the regulation followed by entirety regulates the nature and movement of the system itself, both of which limit each other while enabling the development of the system as a whole [4]. Wang Fuzhi regards *yin* and *yang* as the basic elements that construct the universe, while *yin* and *yang* themselves have the characteristic of being in eternal flux and their movements follow a certain regulation, thus constituting the system of generation. According to Wang Fuzhi, the regulation followed by *yin* and *yang* is Li. As he stated in *Zhou Yi Nei Zhuan*:

> "The world is filled with *yin* and *yang*. In this world, there are nothing but only *yin* and *yang*." [3].

Qi and Li interact with each other in the same system but are interdependent. Therefore, when Qi exists as a system, it follows the regulation of Li, and at the same time, the regulation of Li determines the operation and flow of Qi. The regulation of the entirety makes the operation of the elements in the system depend on each other. Through the regulation of the whole, they are governed by the unity, and then work together to achieve the behavior of the whole.

The hierarchy of the system is embodied in that it is composed of subsystems or elements of different levels, among which all levels and elements maintain an interactive relationship of mutual restriction and influence. The hierarchical structure in the system means that the levels are arranged according to grades, and the low-level system exists as an element of the high-level system.

In Wang Fuzhi's view of Qi ontology, Qi is an organic dynamic system, which can be regarded as the highest-level system. At the same time, his interpretation of Dao, Qi (objective matters) and Xing can be regarded as subsystems or elements of Qi (air), the highest hierarchical system, and there are hierarchical relationships among these elements. In Wang Fuzhi's view, the relationship between Tao and Qi (objective matters) is similar to the relationship between Li and Qi (air). As an organic whole, one provides the environment for the operation of the other, and the two maintain the order and interaction of hierarchical structure, so that the system and its constituent elements can play their roles properly.

In addition, Wang Fuzhi's exposition of Xing and Cheng is also in line with the relationship between such system levels. His theory of Xing is based on the ontology of Qi. As he stated in *Zhang Zi Zheng Meng Zhu:*

> "*Yin*, *yang* and the five elements construct human beings, Li coagulates Xing of human beings." [3].

In his system, Qi is the real substance, yin, yang and the five fundamental elements are transformed while the whole system operates according to Li. When Qi and Li are used in the physical world, they turn into Xing to construct the lowest-level system. Xing is closely related to Qi and Li, and the relationship between them connects the universe and people, that is, the interaction between high-level systems and low-level systems is achieved. And Cheng runs through all things in the universe. As he said in *Zhang Zi Zheng Meng Zhu:*

> "Cheng is the Dao of the nature, the entity of *yin* and *yang* is Cheng." [3].

4. Conclusions

The embodiment of system integrality is based on its structural level. The relationship between subsystems enables the system to generate rather than to accumulate. Wang Fuzhi's thought of Qi ontology and its related viewpoints combine the achievements and deep thinking of his predecessors, and develop a more complete and logical system on this basis. Compared with the binary opposition explanation given by his contemporary philosophers, Wang Fuzhi unified all the constituent elements, and showed the complex relationship between them by reasonable inference, thus constructing his more adequate and comprehensive theoretical framework of Qi ontology, which reflects profound systematic thinking and integrality thinking [5].

System theory has gradually become one of the important ways for humans to view and explore the world [6]. Studying the ontology through the perspective of system provides humans a new possibility to analyze the unknown field from the known one. As the most basic principle of systems theory, the integrality defines the system, that is, the existence of the system itself. The hierarchical structure of the system enables the system to be called a system. Whether it is an internally constructed subsystem or element, or an externally interactive system in parallel, the hierarchy enables all interrelated matters to be included by the system.

As an important branch of ancient Chinese philosophy about ontology, Qi ontology holds that the construction of everything in the universe is composed of one or more systems. As a master of Qi theory, the meaning behind Wang Fuzhi's novel based on the thinking of his predecessors has further developed the ontology of Qi, and at the same time, he made the framework construction of the ontology of Qi become more comprehensive and complete. From the perspective of systems theory, Wang Fuzhi's conception such as Qi (air), Li, Dao and Qi (objective matters) and their close connection are endowed with systematic significance, and the mechanism and law of its internal operation, change and development are revealed for people. Furthermore, the approach of Qi theory can be explained in a new level of system, which brings new possibilities for analyzing and understanding the ontology of ancient Chinese philosophy.

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