Symposium for an Asian Link

In Pursuit of an Alternative Humanism? On the Convergence of Early Daoism and Deconstruction

Ruyu Hung
National Chiayi University, Taiwan

Drawing on Steven Burik's notion of comparative thinking, I attempt to manifest the consonance of Early Daoism and philosophy of deconstruction as a constant pursuit of an alternative humanism—or in Michael Peter's term, a profound humanism, or in Biesta's term, a radical humanism—and to reveal implications in relation to education. To be human in this sense is not to fulfil or actualise the pre-existent and pre-programmed essence as defined in the mainstream philosophy as human nature, but an endless seeking and inventing of self. Early Daoists (Laozi and Zhuanzi) use the concept of 'wuwo' (non-I, self-undoing) to describe the state of not being aware of selfhood. In Derrida, the 'subject' and the discourse of subject need to be questioned, re-examined, re-conceptualised, and re-constituted all the time. There is a certain sort of consonance between the Daoist undoing of self and Derrida's deconstructing subject, which may shed new light on our understanding of education.

2012 PESA Conference

Introduction

This paper employs Derrida's and early Daosist philosophies to rethink, re-examine, and reposition the meaning of self in education. This approach of comparative thinking is adopted from Steven Burik's (2009, p. 306) perspective as he states that 'comparative philosophy should (and does) also take a critical look at itself and open itself to dissenting, different views of how to interpret thinking in other cultures'. The comparative exploration of Derrida's and Daoist philosophies shall open possibilities for reaching new understanding of self or subject during the interlocution in between. I will first argue that the idea of non-I (or non-self) in early Daoism is indeed a 'question of the self' as well as a doubt cast upon the 'junzi' (君子) or sage (聖賢) in Confucian orthodoxy. Then I explore the concept of subject in Derrida. It will be revealed that a certain sort of consonance between the Daoist undoing of self and Derrida's deconstructing subject, which may shed new light on our understanding of education.

The Tradition of Confucian Humanism and Anthropological Machine

'Subject' or 'human being' has always been an issue in Chinese philosophy. The subject in traditional Chinese culture, which is decisively determined by Confucianism, is not an independent self-interested individual, but one who has virtues to play a good part in maintaining social order and harmony. The Confucian subject—junzi, representing the ideal person in traditional Chinese culture, is

expected to show the virtues of modesty, benevolence, filial piety (xiao 孝) and loyalty (忠), which are extremely crucial elements in Confucian ethics. These virtues are moral as well as political since the Confucian subject is not a single person in the universe but one who is embedded in social and political context. In the Confucian teaching, one's identity and one's self-awareness is determined by one's family and social relationships. The Confucian virtues are the key features for one to play one's role appropriately in the society. For example, how one deals with one's family, parents, children, neighbours, superiors and inferiors. More important embedded in one's social connections in ancient China is how to be a loyal subject. Cultivating the virtues in young generation has been an important task in education in the area influenced by Confucian culture.

Yet the means of fostering Confucian virtues in young people may involve a certain sort of division, discrimination or exclusion. As Confucian moral theory is 'rooted in the natural order of a community' (Lai, 1995, p. 292), the virtuous subject is one who has a role to play in the ordered community and one must play properly as the role demands. For example, Confucius in the *Analects* (Watson, 2007) describes a harmonious society wherein 'the ruler be a ruler; the subject, a subject; the father, a father; the son, a son' (Analects, 12: 11; Watson, 2007, p. 82). Everyone must hold a particular role and position in the society and acts, behaves, speaks, performs, and even dresses properly so that the order of society can be maintained well. The social order is founded on the social hierarchy. To maintain the order of society, it is inevitably important to safeguard hierarchical order by binding one to a particular and unchangeable position and status. More importantly, the Confucian anthropocosmic vision regulates not only the social position and role that everyone must play but also the identification/definition of human being. This might cause the predicament of discrimination and exclusion.

In the Confucian context, the differentiation between humans and nonhumans 'is not biological but moral and political' (Møllgaard, 2010, p. 128). 'Those who are aware of socio-ethical distinctions and cooperate harmoniously with the culture-state are humans; those who are not aware of these distinctions and resist cooperation are not human' (Ibid.). What is to 'cooperate harmoniously with the culture-state'? That one behaves, speaks, acts, and dresses as one is demanded and expected by the society because of one's position and status can be understood as the harmonious cooperation. In this view, the nonhuman could be humanised if they behave properly whereas human beings could be animalised if they behave improperly. Discussing about the criteria of determining what is proper from improper is not the focus of this paper thus I bypass this part. What interests me here is that when one is judged as not behaving properly, not cooperating harmoniously, one can be seen no longer a human being. One becomes nonhuman. I agree with Møllgaard that, on this point, Confucianism could imply the possibility of turning into an anthropological machine, a term borrowed from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

According to Agamben (1998), the anthropological machine is a political mechanism to produce the human by exclusion of the inhuman. The human denotes a politically qualified form of life and the inhuman an unqualified one (Hung, 2012). The anthropological machine in Western culture, from ancient to modern times, has never stopped working. In ancient times, the machine produced slaves, barbarians

2012 PESA Conference

and foreigners. In modern times, it produced Jews (Agamben, 2004). A similar tone can be found in the early Confucian doctrines.

As mentioned, in the perspective of Confucianism, one who is qualified to be seen as a true human must play one's social role properly. Humanity consists in the virtues that are prerequisite for one's achieving the role as a filial son and a loyal subject. According to early Confucian philosophers like Confucius and Mencius, the virtues are inherent in human nature. Thus all human beings have the potential to be 'true' human. The potential as the 'beginning of humanity' lies in four cardinal virtues: the heart of compassion (怵惕惻隱之心), the heart of shame (羞惡之心), the heart of courtesy and modesty (辭讓之心), and the heart of right and wrong (是非之心) (*Mencius,* 2A6; Lau, 1979, p. 73). Whoever is devoid of any one of the above four emotions is not human. Mencius claims that everyone is born with the potentialities and therefore is able to develop them to full extent to be human. Whoever denies oneself able to bring out the potentialities is to self-impair. In this sense, he or she is not human.

The above shows an important point of the Confucian moral philosophy that the definition of being human depends on what one has done rather than what one was born. I pay high respect to this point which deserves more deliberation. However, the focus of this paper is to put on the dark side. Let us go straight to it. The problem is that in many places Confucius and Mencius relate the disloyal and unfilial conducts to nonhumanity or beastliness. Mencius (3B9; Lau, 1979, p. 141) castigates his contemporary philosophers Mozi and Yanzi for they deny prioritising ruler and father as occupying a particular and premier position in the hierarchy of ethics and politics. 'Yang advocates everyone for himself, which amounts to a denial of one's prince; Mo advocates love without discrimination, which amounts to a denial of one's father. To ignore one's father on the one hand, and one's prince on the other, is to be no different from the beasts' (*Mencius,* 3B9; Lau, 1979, pp. 141-143). This truly is a serious accusation. Mencius declares that the doctrines of Mozi and Yanzi are heresies which shall be banished without hesitation just as the *Odes* describe about what the former king—the sage ruler, the Duke of Chou (周公)—had done in old times:

> It was the barbarian that he attacked. 戎狄是膺
> It was Ching and Shu that he punished. 荆舒是懲 (*Mencius,* 3B9; Lau, 1979, p. 143)

According to the above, Barbarians and the alien tribes (Ching and Shu) should be attacked and punished because they are not human, not civilised. 'They' are the others. This is where the Confucian anthropological machine works. One who disobeys one's ruler or father can be seen as a nonhuman, e.g., a barbarian or a beast or an alien. This nonhuman creature can legitimately in the Confucian sense be attacked. As Lewis (1990) gives an account of how the human society is separated from the animal world in the early Chinese culture: 'in earliest times men hadn't been naturally separated from animals, but that the work of this separation had been accomplished by the "former kings," superman sages who physically expelled the animals, invented the technologies necessary for civilised existence, and introduced the moral practices and social hierarchies that defined humanity' (p. 210).

2012 PESA Conference

The sage-ruler employs the political power and military force to separate the human from the nonhuman, the civilised from the savages. In this vein, an approval of separation and exclusion which can be understood in terms of anthropological machine can be found in Confucianism. The Confucian version of anthropological machine works to produced the human—the filial and loyal subjects—and the nonhuman—the disobedient beasts. There has been widely acknowledgement that Confucianism is an ethical humanism. One of its most concerns is 'how to become a true human'. I cannot help but wondering if the so-called Confucian 'true' human being is 'truly' 'humane' or 'just' when he or she is on the side of attacking, punishing and excluding the barbarians. If the Confucian human being is a part of the anthropological machine which works to attack, punish, divide and exclude the other, this version of humanism has to be questioned or deconstructed because it turns into a pretext of authoritarianism on the political level and foundationism on the ontological level.

Early Daoist philosophers might have seen the potential violence implied in Confucian doctrines. Laozi and Zhuangzi criticise Confucianism for its persistence in human nature and its social conditionality. In Derrida's questioning of subject striking resonances are found. Derrida's questioning of subject is to problematise the conventional version of humanism. As Biesta (2009c, p. 102) states:

> The problem with humanism, so we might say, is that it posits a norm of 'humanness', a norm of what it means to be human in doing so excludes all those who do not live up to or are unable to live up to this norm.

This humanism is underpinned by logocentrism that covers a wide range of interrelated metaphysical ideas, e.g., humanity, self-presence, immediacy and univocity (Peters, 2009a).

I do not mean that early Daoists' and Derrida's philosophies can easily be seen as fully compatible. Nor do I take their critiques toward Eastern and Western orthodox philosophies as identical. Yet they both show interesting resonances in problematise humanism in the mainstream understanding and propose alternative ways of conceptualising of human being. Hereafter I explore two themes to interpret the resonances of early Daosists and Derrida by focusing on their critique or deconstruction of humanism and unpacking their versions of humanism, which are put under the neologism of anthropo-non-centrism. These two themes are dialectic of presence/absence and second, self-cultivation as self-deconstruction.

2012 PESA Conference