

A Social Ontology Based Study of Individual Intentionality Expressed by a Chinese Aphorism

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ABSTRACT. *Focusing on the perspective of social ontology and Chinese traditional philosophy, this article analyzes a Chinese aphorism (Being believed, it exists. Not being believed, it is inexistent) of individualism and existentialism. Firstly, through the interpretation and the aphorism, the origin and the evolution of the aphorism can be comprehended. Afterwards the view of Chinese people on social objects through this aphorism is explained. Finally, it is discovered that individuals frequently use this proverb as an answer for the unknown social existence and that it contains the people's self-awareness and social cognition. Meanwhile it is as well elaborated that the aphorism emphasizes the individual intentionality while ignoring the collective intentionality, which is vital in the definition of social objects in ontology.*

KEYWORDS: *Social ontology, Chinese traditional philosophy, Social objects*

1. Introduction

Ontology is an explicit specification of a conceptualization and it catalogues the world of life ^[1] ^[2]. As a branch, social ontology is the study of the nature and the properties of the social world. A number of philosophers believe that people are the basic components of a society. Meanwhile, Hegel has argued that self-consciousness-and hence the existence of the self-depends on recognition from others ^[3]. Similarly, some other views focus on how social entities are set up. Generally speaking, social entities are made up by agreements, such as laws and regulations. Among those, Searle has proposed the sphere of social objects and has explained that certain physical objects can be transformed into social objects, based on collective intentionality. Moreover, Ferraris has elaborated the definition of social objects, he regarded object as three types: natural (or physical), ideal, and social ^[4].

In China, for decades many scholars have exclusively focused on the study of ancient Chinese ontology, such as Taoism, Confucianism and Marxist practical ontology ^[5] ^[6]. Among the researches, they commonly neglected the social reality and the differences between various objects. For that reason, an aphorism that represents the existence of society among Chinese is studied by me.

The intention of the thesis is to elaborate the individual intentions and collective intentions in a Chinese proverb and to comprehend in a greater range about the view of Chinese on social entities. The study carried out starts by the overview of Chinese tradition culture about “xin”(信) and the introduction of the Chinese aphorism. Then two classical proverbs from the Orient and the Occident are compared. Subsequently, the oriental proverb in the field of social ontology is studied. Finally, the individual and collective intentionality are discussed.

2. The Origin and Evolution of the Aphorism

There is a centuries-old aphorism in China: “Being Believed, it exists. Not being believed, it is inexistent” (Xin ze you, bu xin ze wu / 信则有, 不信则无). This sentence expresses Chinese people's views on the nature and entities. Similarly, it is a classical case in the history of Chinese ontology, which is the “Xin” culture.

In the Chinese language system, “Xin”(信) is not only a noun which contains the meaning of beliefs and credits, but also is a verb, which signifies to believe and to trust. This aphorism can be tracked back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period when Chinese philosophers began to explore men's hearts or minds. In the meantime, they have explored as well the root causes and fundamental rules of the emergence, the existence and the development of beings. The Chinese ontology is derived from this period and the contemporaneous philosophers have formed the traditional ontological notions. In particular, Laozi and Zhuangzi have elaborated the theory of “Xin” in Taoism. Laozi regarded “Xin” as a truth called Taoism, which is hidden in the natural beings. On the other hand, Zhuangzi's “Xin” is not limited in the trust between human beings, but is magnified to the “great credit” between countries, which is a collectivist consensus. According to Confucius, “Xin” is among five virtues of mankind. As a summary, the traditional Chinese ontology has defined “Xin” as a rule for individuals and collectives.

In recent years this aphorism is integrated into every aspect of social life in China and embodies the populace's widespread attitude towards individualism and existentialism. When beliefs, religions, spirits, and unknown objects are involved in a discussion, many individuals would adopt this proverb as an answer. As a whole, the proverb represents people's attitude to the definition of subject, which is base on the individual intentionality. What's more, the proverb reflects the ontological consideration among Chinese people: who am I? What am I believing in and are they actually exist? If the response is positive, which sorts of entities are they and how are they created? In the following paragraphs, these issues from the perspective of Chinese traditional philosophy and social ontology are elaborated.

3. The Comparison of Two Classical Proverbs

René Descartes, one of the founders of the modern philosophy, has proposed the famous population: Cogito, ergo sum, which is usually translated into English as “I think, therefore I am”. It stresses the authoritative status of subject, which also

embodies that modern rationality is a kind of subjective rationality, a kind of subjects' rational cognitive ability. As Krauth asserted, "That cannot doubt which does not think, and that cannot think which does not exist. I doubt, I think, I exist"^[7]. Coincidentally, the antique proverb from China possesses the characteristics of subjectivism and existentialism, while there are as well some differences between them. By comparing these two proverbs, the features found are shown as follows:

3.1 Emphasizing on Different Subjects

In the proverb of "I think, therefore I am", "I", as the subject, was emphasized. It refers to the subject of a thought. It is beyond the form, which means "I" can be completely imagined as other subjects other than the first person. The subject can be the one who is not capable to move, but in any case, the "I" should have thoughts. The thoughts are the essential characteristics of "I". As long as the "I" stops thinking, it would cease its existence. On the contrary, the Chinese proverb, which is "Being Believed, it exists. Not being believed, it is inexistent", owns a different subject. In Chinese grammar, the subject of this sentence is omitted, and it can be considered as an individual or a group. Similarly, the "it", which people do not know if it exists or not, is neither the subject. In the context of Chinese culture, the proverb emphasizes only the action, which is to believe. Therefore, in the Chinese ontological cognition, defining the action is more important than determine the subject.

3.2 Judging through Different Criteria

Descartes asserted that the first method of research questions was never to accept anything for true; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise nothing more in his judgment than what was presented to his mind so clearly and distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt. Therefore, a crucial method to understand Descartes is to suspect everything, so as to assess the world with a fresh perspective, clear of any preconceived notions. Moreover, he has found that all of these human cognitions could be reasonably questioned, but only the authenticity of "I", as the subject of thinking, is unquestionable. Therefore, the conclusion is absolutely authentic, which is Cogito.

The proverb from China is seemed to be more idealistic. The criterion of judgment is not skepticism, but is subjective idealism. Literally speaking, people only trust what they believe to exist. But in reality, there are various objects from nature and society, and to recognize all substances by individual consciousness is never accurate. It is noteworthy that the previous occidental proverb judges the existence of beings by suspicion, while the criteria of the latter oriental one come from personal consciousness.

4. Analysis of the Proverb from the Social Ontological Perspective

4.1 The Classification of Objects in the Proverb

Social ontology is not only a study of all beings from the social world, but also is concerned with analyzing the various social groups, and it explores the relationship between social groups and social entities. Therefore, utilizing social ontology to comprehend the Chinese proverb is highly appropriate, especially in the classification of objects. American philosopher Searle has pointed out the differences between social reality and brute reality is observer-relativeness or intentionality–relativeness^[8]. And according to Ferraris, there are three types of objects in ontology: natural (or physical), ideal and social objects^[9].

The first categories are physical objects, such as mountains, rivers, human bodies and animals. They exist in space and time, which they are independent from the subjects who know them. For instance, before people discovered that the molecular structure of water is H₂O in the 18th century, the component of water was H₂O, not negated by the people's cognition. Similarly, in the context of the Chinese proverb, those natural objects exist without question.

The second types are ideal objects, such as basic atomic structures, chemical formulas and biological chains. They are ontological independent of human intentions. However, as these objects have been discovered, they can be socialized. In the Chinese proverb, it is necessary to recognize these objects, and it is absolutely not correct to doubt the existence of scientific truth.

The third types are social objects. These are objects in the proverb that people doubt whether they exist or not, such as currency, matrimony, government and election. Ferraris asserted whose existence depends on the subjects who know, or at least can use, them and who, in certain cases, have constituted them^[9]. If no one intentionally admits and believes that they exist, they cannot exist. The typical case is that the United States Federal Government completely inexistence until the promulgation of the United States federal constitution in 1787. By means of promulgating the Constitution, which is one of artificial methods, the government, the constitution and the parliament have been founded. It is an interpretation of the proverb that we believe in social entities and thus they exist.

4.2 Individual and Collective Intentionality

The general form of constitutive rules of social objects that is “X counts as Y in C”. An object X is the description of what we want to identify, Y is the status of function that we give to X and C is the context in which this is given. For example, the reason why Renminbi exists is due to the printing process performed by the People's Bank of China, and then these pieces of paper are given the function of currency and carry equivalent values for commodity exchange. Therefore, the banknotes called Renminbi (X), issued by the People's Bank of China, are counted as currency (Y) in China (C). Ferraris further has indicated that the constitutive rule of social objects is “Object = Inscribed Act”. For instance, Banknotes are born because of the special watermark inscribed on the piece of paper. Identically, in the

Zhou Dynasty, the first son of the emperor and the queen was regarded as the legal heir of the emperor, and the legal heir was written on the imperial edict by the emperor, as an inscribed act. Therefore, in the absence of the citizens' collective recognition or of the inscribed act, the social entity would not exist.

As a consequence, the difference between social ontology and the Chinese proverb is that the latter one emphasizes more on whether an individual believes in a particular fact or not. Firstly, in the sense of social ontology, it emphasizes that human beings, as social group organisms, possess the collective intentionality. All social entities, from marriages to presidential decrees, are public and can be involved in citizens. In order to obtain such publicity and objectivity, the recognition and commitment of social entities must be collective, but not individual. This is contrary to the emphasis on individual intentionality in the Chinese proverb. Secondly, as Ferraris pointed out that social objects are the result of social behavior, involving at least two people or one person and a restricted machine. However, the Chinese aphorism does not go to the common recognition by two people, nor to a commitment, but it is a personal attitude to social objects and represents the personage intentionality.

In reality, this truly reflects the actual attitude of Chinese people towards social objects. Due to the rapid development of China's economy, it has brought about a series of social and natural problems. Chinese are always full of doubts about the emerging social objects. Therefore, this proverb is used increasingly frequently. The deep meaning behind the phrase is "You can believe that it exists, but I don't."

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the proverb, "Being Believed, it exists. Not being believed, it is inexistent" as a typical perspective of Chinese social ontology, can be recognized through "Xin" cultural. The traditional Chinese ontology defines "Xin" as the rules of individuals and groups, while "Xin" in this aphorism emphasizes the action, which literally means "believe". In addition, through the comparison of "I think therefore I am" of Descartes and the oriental proverb, two differences are summarized: they emphasize different subjects and are judged by different criteria. Moreover, the proverb is analyzed from the social ontological perspective. It can be concluded that the Chinese are not suspicious of natural and ideal objects. They mainly suspect the existence of social objects, such as the formulation of social rules and the formation of social entities. Meanwhile, in the aphorism, it is emphasized more the individual intentionality than the collective intentionality. Therefore, it remains unclear if the Chinese phrase is in line with the social ontology or not, since the collective intentionality is not evidently expressed.

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