Subjectivity and Difference as Missing Aspects in

Un Sage est Sans idée

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The deliberately ignorance of the subjective aspect in “sage’s intention” (圣人之意) and the omission of the interplay of differences are two major problems within the interpretation of “Chinese wisdom” which is supposed to serve as the “other” perspective to western philosophy by François Jullien. The two missing aspects indicate the tendency of sacrificing the particularity (differences) for “the unity”. Ultimately, with the “help” of the misunderstanding of the “Chinese wisdom”, the divisions inherently in western philosophy are merely replaced by the hollow homogenization.

Keywords: Sage’s Intention, “Qi” (齐论) theory, differences, unity

Introduction

The description and evaluation of the “detour” strategy, as well as the “other” vision are the three usual ways to interpret the thoughts of François Jullien, the philosopher. In fact, much emphases have been put on the descriptions of communication between east and west. However, for the core of François Jullien’s intention, that is borrowing the ancient Chinese thoughts (“the other”) to restart and resolve a series of divisions and differences within western philosophy, is rarely evaluated. Especially, the validity of the following two conclusions made by François Jullien: “sages don not have pre-understanding” and “no differences in Tao” are worth debating.

The Contradiction between Subjectivity and Objectivity within “Intention”

In fact, in Un Sage Est Sans idée: Ou L’autre de la Philosophie, Jullien started the whole argument with the proposition: “sages do not intend to fill their mind with pre-understanding.” (圣人无意) At the same time, the statement “Sages don not have any ideas” is also the main title of this book, in fact, the proposition is rather the whole framework within the book than an special topic. It is clear that Jullien’s intention is to question western modern philosophy, the birth of which inevitably involves “Subjectivity”. Apparently, Jullien realized the trap within premise of “Subjectivity”, therefore, he struggled to avoid the potential danger which caused by modernity, that is a series of divisions. For instance, the splitting between subjectivity and objectivity, the tension between finitude and infinitude, etc. Jullien’s intention is to implement Chinese “wisdom” (instead of philosophy) as a mirror to reflect the problems within the modern philosophy, even the ancient philosophy in

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the western world. To obtain the goal, Jullien claimed that objective knowledge or “wisdom” is based on the objective instead of subjective mind of sage, which can be concluded as “Sages don not have any ideas”.

For the “no ideas” or “no intention”, Jullien defined it in this way: “the so-called ‘no intention’ means that the sages will not extract a specific idea from a lot of ideas: the sages do not have mind in mind (intention), as a principle, as a foundation, or simply as a beginning.” We have to ask that is it possible to start thinking from nothing? “Nothing”, according to Jullien, is not “concept of no”, but “pure nothing” in the sense of Parmenides. How “pure nothing” can avoid being “non-essential”? In fact, Jullien also thought about the issue, so he asked himself a question: “If nothing is raised before thinking, how do we think?” However, he did not directly answer this question put forward by himself, instead, he escaped facing it by making the following circuitous discussion: since the first philosophy concept has been presented, and philosophy is inevitably immersed itself in prejudice, so that we cannot grasp Truth itself, in the sense, ironically, philosophy claims itself is the agent of Truth. In order to solve the paradox above, the resources of the Chinese thought were introduced by Jullien, especially, the ideal “unintentional” theory, that is, from the beginning, there is no base, no history in sage’s mind, in short, “no pre-understanding”. All the ideas are equal, this is the way Jullien interpreted “Chinese wisdom”, which is different from western philosophy which has already been contaminated by the first principle (subjectivity). Meanwhile, the “Chinese wisdom” has the feature of anti-history. However, defined as no history and no time, “Chinese wisdom” has been weaken by the definition above, because this kind of description of absolute (“Chinese wisdom”) is self-contained in a void with empty existence. Interestingly, this kind of “wisdom” is similar to the concept of “God” in Hellenistic period. In the sense, Jullien actually returned to the “metaphysics” which he tried to escape.

How to avoid the tendency above? How can the “static” ontology become a living one which could be full of content and life? To solve the problem, Jullien stated that the sages don not have any prejudices, that is the so-called “no priority in mind”. Also he added that the ever-changing quality of the sages, which means sages don not attached to any fixed opinions: “The sages are not obsessed with any particular point of view and they will respond with the change of things, so it is said that the sages will not have a fixed position.” Meanwhile, he strengthened the argument with the quotation “don not be obsessed and don not have prejudices.” (勿意、勿必、勿固、勿我) from the Analects of Confucius (《论语》). In other words, Jullien was actually trying to introduce the concept of “change” as a supplement, so as to break the static ontology he actually realized.

Therefore, Jullien put forward that sages have “no individual self”, which means sages do not reason and judge on the basis of subjectivity, such as emotion, but only rely on the requirement of “Zhongjie” (中节). That is to say, sages uphold or oppose a certain law totally according to a changing position which is based on a special situation. However, all judgments and choices contain a core principle that is called “Zhong” (中). “Zhong” is not any fixed rule or law, instead, it changes according to different situations. It is the beginning of judgment and also the telos. It is debatable that since “Zhong” is not a specific principle, it may not be viewed as a legitimated starting point, as we all know, a start means a fixed point. For this question, Jullien might argue that “Zhong” is rather a kind of practical philosophy than an abstract concept. Indeed, Chinese philosophy supports Jullien’s assumption that there is no gap between practical philosophy and theoretical philosophy, in other words, “Zhong” is a principle but with blurry and dynamic boundary. Meanwhile, the concept of “Zhong”

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could only be understood in the content of “time as a cycle” in Chinese philosophy, which indicates “change” and “immutability” are not opposite to each other, for all the variation must be ruled under certain rules, however, at the same time, the principles or the rules (“immutability”) are always realized by changes, which is called “mutability within immutability”. For example, on the discussion of what is “immutability”, Wang Bi (王弼), an ancient philosopher in Wei, Jin dynasty, pointed out in the book of Interpretation of Laozi (《老子指略》): “Ancient and modern is same, the end and beginning is also be connected.”5 (“古今通，终始同”). The meaning of the judgment is profound, because the word “same” implies a cycle of time which connects “ancient” and “modern”. Another example is in Gong yang zhuan (《公羊传》), the author also explained the Spring and Autumn’s (《春秋》) narrative structure as a cycle of time.

The premise of “change” is “immutability”, Jullien also implies that “Zhong” features “immutability”. However, if the “Zhong” was explained as a kind of “Tao” (道) (as Jullien claimed), it couldn’t be concluded that sages do not have their own intentions or opinions, because if sages are the outsiders of history and time, there is no need for them to judge, therefore, no need to choose “Zhong” in changeable situations in real world. As we mentioned above, Chinese philosophy thought “Zhong” is not an epistemological concept, but the combination of ontology and practice, meanwhile, the combination has to be grasped only in the history and reality. In other words, “Zhong” represents the “knowledge of practice”. In fact, Jullien also conceded that “Zhong” is not an abstract concept, as he stated: “Therefore, the human behavior can be completely the opposite, the two opposite acts are ‘Zhong’, and both acts are legitimated.”6 Actually, by tracing back to the overall context of Laozi (《老子》) and grasping the original meaning of Laozi and Zhuangzi’s (庄子) discourse, it is clear that despite the expression of “sages do not have ideas” does exist in Taoist thought, but we tend to believe that, the emphasis of the expression is not on thinking from the nothing, as Jullien explained, but on Truth cannot be grasped by the intellectual thinking. In sum, if the sages could follow the principle of “Zhong”, they cannot begin with thinking from the “nothing”, because the judgment of right and wrong must be made according to particularity, and it requires sages to carry all their historical and special pre-understandings.

In order to understand why sages do not have subjective ideas, it is necessary to know what the real meaning of “idea” in Chinese philosophy. Actually, instead of “idea”, “intention” is a more precise translation for the original meaning of Laozi. “Intention” in Chinese philosophy reaches both the subjective and objective levels. in the Shuowen Jie zi (《说文解字》), Xu Shen (许慎) explained “Zhong” as: “Intention is mind, and is known by words from the heart.”7 It seems that “intention” and “heart” (心), which indicates subjectivity are closely related with each other. Book of Rites (《礼记》) also said: “The sages view the whole world as a family, China as a part of it, this doesn’t come from their intention, but from the rightness”8It shows that “intention” means one’s personal understanding. “Intention” inevitably contains a certain sense of “individual”, in particular, in the perspective of interpreters in Han Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty, “intention” is more inclined to the personal level and it is closely related to “heart” and “mind”.

Meanwhile, it is no deniable that the objective aspect exists in sages’ “intention”. For example, in the Five
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Classics (《五经》), the proofs that sages’ intentions as the universal ones can also be found, it is in the sense, Jullien concluded “sages do not have ideas”. *Shangshu* (《尚书》) stated: “people who think every tiny things and know everything can be called sages.” In this discourse, intention is a no longer personal but a universal existence. In the context of daily life, “heart” is considered as a organ that conveying subjective thinking, however, in this context, “heart” is omnipotent. In other words, the sages have “omnipotent heart”, and with the omnipotent heart, sages know everything in the world. Ordinary people only perceive things with sensory stimulations which is confined by its limitation, while sages obtain a kind of objective knowledge of the world. The knowledge gathered by sensory stimulations or daily experience is subjective and biased, while, “omnipotent heart” is beyond the intellectual thinking and step into the field of understanding of the whole world. Therefore, it is clear that in the second dimension, “general meaning” produced by the “omnipotent heart” is exactly what Jullien talked about.

Is “sages’ intention a subjective one or objective? Obviously, on the issue of this dilemma, evidences can be found on both sides. Obviously, this is the problem that Jullien confronted, on the one hand, he cannot deny the sages’ subjectivity by admitting “Zhong” as the crucial feature in Chinese philosophy; on the other hand, he is eager to apply ‘sages’ unintentional to eliminate prejudice in modern western philosophy which results in “subjectivity”. However, the deeper reflection on the premise of this problem indicates the origin of the dilemma actually results from the division based on the misuse of intellectual reason. The intellectual reason implies ‘sages’ intention, if regarded as a subjective one, it cannot be universal; if interpreted as a universal one, it is impossible to be special. Thus, causing the contradiction between the personal ideas which is the foundation of “Zhong” and universal level of “saints unintentional”. As a result, Jullien deals with the dimensions in a quite simple way that is the omission of historical aspect sages. However, in Chinese philosophy, there is no “paradox” within this topic, because in the horizon of sage, subjectivity and objectivity are not being separated. Certainly, there are differences between subjectivity and objectivity, but the differences only exist in the process of cognition, rather than the true law of nature. In a comprehensive sense, “objective” is from “subjective”, of course, this is not a kind of George Berkeley’s judgment which is to deny the existence of outer world, and withdraw the cognition into inner world. Subjectivity is also carried out as substances, because the subjectivity has been already in the objective order. This process cannot be completed through a single individual, but “sage”, the metaphor of human being in collectively sense, is the only agent could do this.

In the *Book of Songs* (《诗经》), it says: “Tian gives life to men and is the origin of law.” Obviously, Tian (天) is not just an abstract concept, but reality as well. That means Tian has two dimensions: subjectivity (law) and objectivity (substance including men). Jullien also conceded that: “In other words, the sages also know right and wrong, but he is not prejudiced when judging them.” However, “right and wrong” are actually based on the special historical period and reality. For the absolute “Tao” or “Tian”, there is no differences between right and wrong, but sages must choose the right way according to different situations. The

9 The division between Confusion and Taoism has not appeared until Han dynasty by purpose, two schools focus on different topics, they still share the basic values in most common topics. Actually, “intention” is one of them.
10 [魏]孔安国传，[唐]孔颖达等正义：《尚书正义》，见于《十三经注疏》，北京：中华书局 1980 年影印世界书局阮元校刻本，第 134 页下栏。
conflicts in the argument suggest that Jullien is conscious of the duality of the sage’s subjective and objective dimensions, but in order to avoid the “contradiction” between the subjective meaning and the “unintentional” heart, the subjective aspect of sages is casted deliberately.

“Equality” is not “Equal”: The Differences Within “Change”

In order to dispel the “subjectivity” in western philosophy, the second step for Jullien is to weaken the concept of differences, for the differences are viewed as fragments resulting in the separation of the integrity of the world.

Therefore, Zhuangzi’s “Qi theory” (齐论) has become the cornerstone of Jullien’s thought to defeat fragmentation. The discussion started with the contradiction between the limitation of language and the infinity of Tao which is proposed as “the opposition of utterance and wisdom”. The solution to the problem is raised by Jillien as : “Only through the ‘homogenization’, people can obtain a ‘fundamental, indifferent plane, this is the internal resources.’”13 Jullien told us the negative role of discourse is to distinguish “is” from “is not” in the intellectual level which would lost the connection with Tao (道), therefore, Jullien tried to transform the external differences into internal level, in other words, he took a wholistic opinion that there are no differences between ontology and phenomenon. However, there is a contradiction within Jullien’s statement, on one hand, Jullien proposed that, we shall take Taoist’s perspectives that is viewing everything as equality, on the other hand, he pointed out that language is always extrinsic to ontology. Meanwhile, Jullien also stated: “Pyrrhon and Zhuangzi are so close, because they not only dissolved the Truth, but also dissolved the existence.”14 However, even though, Jullien cannot deny the “skepticism” eliminates all the differences without avoiding encountering many difficulties.

Actually, “skepticism” contains paradoxes within itself as Hegel pointed out in Phenomenology of Spirit: “What skepticism causes to vanish is not only objective reality as such, but its own relationship to it, in which the ‘other’ is held to be objective and is established as such, and hence, too, its perceiving, along with firmly securing what it is in danger of losing., viz. sophistry, and the truth it has itself determined and established.”15 All the differences disappear in front of the skepticism, but paradox still exists between universal and special: “It pronounces an absolute vanishing, but the pronouncement is, and this consciousness is the vanishing that is pronounced. It affirms the nullity of seeing, hearing, etc. Yet it is itself seeing, hearing, etc. It affirms the nullity of ethical principles, and lets its conduct be governed by these very principles. Its deeds and its words always belie one another and equally it has itself the doubly contradictory consciousness of unchangeableness and sameness, and of utter contingency and non-identity with itself.”16 In other words, “skepticism” always struggles between adhering to the particularity of self-consciousness and following common principles. However, even the unavoidable contradictions pointed by Hegel is interpreted as “conform to nature”(la vie confort) in the sense of Zhuangzi (庄子) by Jullien: “Pyrrhon was not bound by dogmas and opinions, but in his daily lives, he had to say and act as everyone did.”17 It is clear in the process of the interpretation of Zhuangzi, Jullien is still influenced by skepticism, though, he named the chapter as “Ni scepticisme” (no skepticism).

The root of the contradiction lies in that Jullien viewed Zhuangzi’s “Qi” theory (齐论) only as an intellectual logic of the words, rather than a reality of the world: “Being and not being are related to each other, if one doesn’t belong to either of them, it must be the other. The other cannot exists without its counterpart.”18 Thus, in this sense, Jullien concluded that Zhuangzi’s thought is closest to western logic. “Being” and “not being” are mutually defined in the sense of concept level, so they can be converted, indeed, “Qi” is the premise of “not Qi”, and only by “change”, they turn to be each other. Therefore, Jullien borrowed a metaphor (the “hinge” of a door) (枢) from Zhuangzi’s discourse and deducted: “the reason why the hinge is changeable, because it is not in a fixed position, it is full of activities and always in motions. This kind of changes follow no rules, no standards.”19 Therefore, Jullien thought “hinge” is the best manifestation of “change”. 

Strangely, Jullien ignored the premise of this “change”, that is, “Zhong” as mentioned by himself above. According to the deduction in the first chapter, in the surface, change seems to be with no rules and no standards, but following the principle (“Zhong”). In fact, Jullien also mentioned the importance of “Zhong” in other chapters, like “Le juste milieu est dans l’légale possibilité des extrêmes”, he compared the differences between concept of “middle way” in ancient Greek and “Zhong” in ancient Chinese philosophy, then he pointed out “Zhong” in Chinese philosophy contains the meaning of dynastical process: “In Chinese wisdom, it is not to put ‘reality’ on the one side and ‘good’ on the other side; ‘Zhong’ is seen as the reason for the development and the fulfillment of reality, and actually, ‘Zhong’ is the criterion of ‘good’.”20 Jullien believed that “Zhong” is the driving force, however, as we all know, “change” is generally viewed as a driving force in ancient China, rather than “Zhong”. “Change” is the negation of “immutability”, in other words, the premise of change is immutability, even though, and “immutability” contains changes in itself. Meanwhile, the principle of “Zhong” is related with “time”, wise men could choose according to “time” rather than responding randomly.

Generally, “ontology”, “epistemology” and “methodology”, deal with different objects, however, Jullien argued that sages encourage people to take a wholistic view of the world, in which way, he tried to fight against the divisions deriving from denying the integrality of the world. However, the problems is Jullien eliminated the differences of “being” and “not being” only in the dimension of concept. Indeed, by doing this, the world seems to be harmonious, however, this kind of harmony only exist in the intellectual or logical world, rather than the real one, in other words, the differences still exist in western philosophy. In fact, Chinese philosophy has never conceded there is no differences in harm ony, for “harmony” doesn’t mean the elimination of differences. Zhong Tai (钟泰), a scholar, summarized the theme of “On Qiwu” in On the Subtleties of Zhuangzi (《庄子发微》): “Beauty is beauty; Ugliness is ugliness. Ugliness can’t cover beauty up and vice versa, in this sense, ugliness is equal to beauty. This rule can also be applied to ‘right and wrong’. Therefore, the theme of ‘On Qiwu’ is moderation which means everything has its limitation and boundary.”21 In fact, by reviewing “Xiao-Yao Tour” (《逍遥游》) in which it makes a description of real freedom, it is understandable that in order to rush to “harmony”, disregarding the differences is misinterpretation of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. For the process is much more complicated, in other words, to acknowledge differences exist in reality and to state all the differences coming from infinity are actually two dimensions.

The temptation to eliminate the differences through Chinese thought is the foundation of Julian’s thought.

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21 钟泰著:《庄子发微》，上海：上海古籍出版社，1988 年版，第 26 页。
By doing this, Jullien wished the reappearance of the “integrity world” in western philosophy. The intention is obvious whether in the discussion of “Sage don’t have intention” or in the argument of “all things are equal”. However, how changes connect and interplay with each other within differences are barely mentioned in Jullien’s statement. It is known that the premise of equality is differences, and through changing, the interactions among various “differences” would happen. Therefore, “change”, “difference” and “equality” are three inherent concepts connecting with each other. So it is strange that, on one hand, Jullien appreciated the principle of “Zhong” which means one could choose according to changing situations, on the other hand, he interpreted “Qi” as tranquillies substance containing no differences and changes. The reason why such a chaos appearing in Jullien’s discussion is that, he eliminated differences in the dimension of concept rather than reality, such as “right and wrong” or “yes and no”, although on the logical level, it is undisputable to do it through the interaction between the concepts, however, the situations in realistic level is more complicated than logical world. Especially, the dimension of logic of the concept is the abstraction of the complexity of reality.

In the process of interpreting the theory of Zhuangzi’s “Qi”, Jullien sometimes took a risk of falling into the trap of skepticism, though he denied the attitude of indiscrimination of differences with the belief that it would lead to relativism. Especially, after comparing Plato and Aristotle’s discourse with Laozi and Zhuangzi’s view, Jullien stated that relativism will lead to ethics confusion, as he pointed out: “Relativism inevitably leads to the situation that viewing everything as the same, therefore, it can give rise to confusions between reality and behavior which would result in the consequence of disappearance of differences, everyone could act randomly without common value. Ontology has responded to this so as to prevent the deterioration of ethics.”22 On the contrary, Jullien also asserted the existence of differences is bound to “infinite retrogression”: “Each argument has two opposite meanings, the discourse would be torn apart from the inside because of differences which results in endless retrogression. Meanwhile, the language itself is constantly destroying themselves, if we insists ‘right and wrong’, thus being paralyzed.”23 In the quotations above, we could find out that Jullien tried to open up a new path through “Chinese wisdom”, that is, “neither to eliminate the differences, nor supporting the differences. The alternative way is to accept differences and conform to its specific characteristics.”24 His attitude clearly shows that “No returning to Ontology” and “No relativism”. However, Jullien interpreted “Chinese wisdom” in a way of nihility. The expression such as “compliance Nature” is actually telling people the way to imitate the nature in order to gain a kind of ability to maintain differences, while at the same time to transform them.

**Conclusion**

François Jullien tried to reconcile the contradiction between Ontology and relativism, however, the reluctant acceptance of differences is not the intention of the sages, Chinese philosophy would never accept a closed state without conflicts and opposing resources, instead, Chinese philosophy would view it is the process that always towards an active transformation state. In the sense, François Jullien still misunderstood Chinese Philosophy, or we could put it in this way, he failed to solve the problems within western philosophy with the tool of “Chinese wisdom”.

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Reference


钟泰著: 《庄子发微》，上海: 上海古籍出版社，1988年版。