

The Joy of Chinese Philosophy: A Commentary

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This is a commentary on **Chapter 7** of Michael Beaney's new book, **The Joy of Chinese Philosophy**. As indicated by its title, Chapter 7 is about logic in the Zhuangzi.

The discussion relates to the characterization of logic that Beaney introduced earlier in the book: logic is what brings about the transition between thoughts. What is potent about this characterization is that it subsumes Western logic, from the days of Aristotle to the present, and at the same time situates it in a typology of logics, plural, which includes a variety of ways of transitioning between thoughts. For Aristotle and his descendants, this transition is based on strength: the crucial relation is entailment. 'John is strolling and the fish are swimming' is stronger than 'John is strolling'. The first proposition entails the second. Similarly, 'all students smoke' is stronger than 'some students smoke', and so on. But entailment is just one relation in which two propositions, two thoughts, may stand. Another such relation, for example, is analogy: 'John is strolling' does not entail, and is not entailed by, 'the fish are swimming', but the two thoughts may be analogous. One of Beaney's points in the book is that analogy, not entailment, is the central relation in Chinese logic.

Beaney points out, very interestingly, that the typology of logics may be argued to include what he calls 'graphic logic', which is based on the written sign. As we know, Chinese writing is not phonemic, like Greek or Latin, but morphemic. Elements of writing represent not a pieces of sound, but pieces of meaning. The sign for a word, therefore, may give clues about how its meaning is decomposed by members of the speech community. Beaney discusses the example of 'you', which translates to 'stroll' or 'roam' in English. The written sign for 'you' include the sign for 'walk', but also the sign for 'swim', or 'move about freely'. This latter sign is in turn composed of one which means 'water', and another which means something like 'drift along'. So the sign for 'you' conveys a lot by way of connotation, or association. It also alludes to an 'analogy' between the fish swimming in the river and the two philosophers strolling on the side of the river. All of this transition between contents is made possible by the "graphic logic" which inheres in Chinese writing, and would not be possible if the grammatical units which the Chinese decided to represent in their writing is not the morpheme, but the phoneme, as in the case of Greek.

After graphic logic, Beaney goes on to talk about the logic of attribution, or perhaps more precisely, the logic of delegation. The central concept here is 'yu-yan' where 'yan' means 'speech' and 'yu' partakes in a host of concepts which share some family resemblance but which seem hard to identify by a standard definition. Thus, 'yu' can mean 'to ask for a favor from someone', or 'to stay at some place as a guest of someone', or 'to give someone something to bring it

somewhere'. I should note that in Vietnamese, 'yu-yan' is the word for 'parable' or 'allegory'. I wonder if the same reading is available in Chinese. Essentially, 'yu-yan' is 'delegated speech', that is, saying p by saying q , or more precisely, conveying that ' x says p ' by conveying that ' y says q ', where x and y may or may not be identical. Thus, the transition of contents that is brought about by 'yu-yan' is not merely a transition from one proposition from another, but a transition of one context of speech to another context of speech. As Beaney says accurately in the chapter: yu-yan contextualizes words.

As we know, the distinction between propositions and contexts of speech has been recognized and discussed quite extensively in both linguistics and the philosophy of language. If language were just an abstract system of signs existing in Platonic heaven independently of language users, then each sentence can in fact be identified with a function from an expression to a set of possible worlds. But because language is used, a sentence is only adequately described as a function from an expression and a context to a set of possible worlds. In other words, the interpretation of linguistic expressions is context-dependent. Well-known examples include indexicals such as pronouns ('I', 'you', 'she') and demonstratives ('this', 'that'), but context-dependency really applies to (almost) all of language. Adjectives like 'expensive' or 'happy', or nouns like 'tea' or 'water', are heavily dependent on the context for their interpretation.

Now, the context can be analyzed as the body of information about the speaker, the hearer, the time, and the place of utterance. This will suffice for the interpretation of indexicals. And I think this is close to the context associated with yu-yan. But the context needed to capture the whole message conveyed by an utterance is a much larger body of information, and might well include the whole of culture. It is this more comprehensive sense of context-dependency that brings me to the next sort of logic that Beaney discusses in Chapter 7, which he calls "goblet logic". This label is derived from the Chinese concept of 'zhi-yan', where 'yan', again, is 'speech' or 'language', and 'zhi' is a kind of 'goblet' which tips over when it is full and rights itself when it is empty. To the extent that I understand the texts, the 'transition of content' that 'zhi-yan' embodies is the transition from contexts to contexts where the 'context' is really the whole state of the world, that is, all of the information needed to understand all of language. So in a sense, 'zhi-yan' also contextualizes speech, just as 'yu-yan' does, but apparently to a much more radical, extreme degree: 'zhi-yan' moves from one language to a totally different language: the cup is emptied out before it is getting filled again.

At the end of Chapter 7, Beaney introduces a general term which encompasses both senses of 'context' that I just mentioned. This term is 'perspective'. Beaney subsumes 'yu-yan' and 'zhi-yan' under the rubric 'perspectival logic'. Before that, he provides a rational reconstruction of the Happy Fish story. I will not go into this part, but will just say here that I think Beaney puts his finger on the right analysis of this story. Very briefly, it plays on the well-known ambiguity of question semantics. A question is standardly analyzed as denoting a set of propositions, namely those that count as its possible answers. In one reading, the question presupposes the disjunction of these propositions. In another reading, it does not. I think this ambiguity lies at the core of the story, and Beaney indicates as much in Chapter 7.

The last part of my commentary will be some remarks about which I would love to hear what Beaney has to say. I think he did a great service to philosophy in bringing to attention how Chinese philosophy may provide a different approach to the problem of logic, and thus, how logic may be diversified. But I am wondering whether it may be equally worthwhile to explore the

uniformity in the diversity. Take ‘graphic logic’, for example. I think that in a sense, all of Western logic might be described as ‘graphic logic’. The search has always been for a symbolism, a notation, which enables us to transition between sentences in a mechanical way, with each step justifiable in terms of how the sentence is formally, or graphically, represented. This is true from the very beginning, with Aristotle’s syllogisms, to Frege’s *Begriftsschrift* and Whitehead and Russell’s *Principia*.

My second remark pertains to *yu-yan*, i.e. delegated speech. I see a connection between the logic of *yu-yan*, especially in its meaning as parable or allegory, and the conception of logic that Wittgenstein was after in the *Tractatus*. The claim in the *Tractatus* is that once you know what a sentence is, which is to say, once you have the grammar, you also know its logical properties, that is, you also know what it entails and what entails it. And what the sentence is, according to Wittgenstein, is a picture of the state of affairs that it depicts. In describing this picturing relation, Wittgenstein resorts to the concept of the parable, or *yu-yan*. I quote from proposition 4.014.

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| <p>4.014 Die Grammophonplatte, der musikalische Gedanke, die Notenschrift, die Schallwellen, stehen alle in jener abbildenden inneren Beziehung zu einander, die zwischen Sprache und Welt besteht. Ihnen allen ist der logische Bau gemeinsam.</p> <p>(Wie im Märchen die zwei Jünglinge, ihre zwei Pferde und ihre Lilien. Sie sind alle in gewissem Sinne Eins.)</p> | <p>The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and the world.</p> <p>To all of them the logical structure is common.</p> <p>(Like the two youths, their two horses and their lilies in the story. They are all in a certain sense one.)</p> |
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On that note, I end my commentary.