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The Platonic Triad and Its Chinese Counterpart

Abstract:

“The Platonic Triad and Its Chinese Counterpart” reviews two parallel traditions of semiotic realism represented by Plato and Husserl in the West and Mo Zi and Ouyang Jian in China respectively. These traditions were largely independent of each other before the 20th century, but they share two fundamental assumptions with regard to meaning. First, there exists an extrasemiotic world with its own qualities and attributes. Second, human consciousness is capable of knowing and then representing the external world with the help of language. Although there have arisen some different theories on this issue over the centuries, few of them seem to have systematically challenged Mo Zi and Plato’s presupposition of an ontological reality which gives rise to meaning, hence the historical dominance of the realist theory.

Keywords: The semiotic triangle, Plato, Chinese semiotics, Semiotic realism

This paper examines the ontological tradition of philosophical speculations over meaning which was started by Plato (c. 428-347 BC) in the West and Mo Zi (c. 476-390 BC) in China some two thousand four hundred years ago and has remained very influential ever since. One might argue that Platonism has received much criticism, especially in the past century or so, but the fact of the matter is that most modern language philosophers have applied themselves to criticizing Plato’s inadequacy in explaining the referential function of language rather than challenging his underlying assumption of an immaterial world of “Ideas”.

For the Greek philosopher, there are three correlates in a word, that is, sound, idea/content, and thing and their relationship to each other can be illustrated with the following diagram:

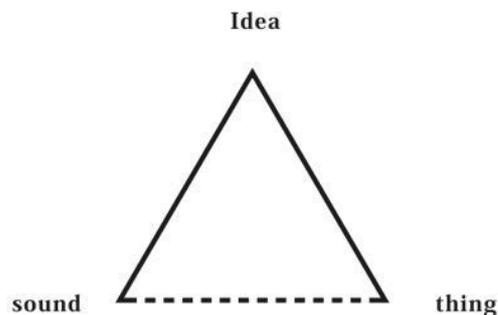


Figure 1: Plato's Semiotic Triangle

The dotted line at the bottom of the triangle indicates the indirect nature of the relationship between sound and thing: they are related to each other through a third correlate which is called Idea. Take the word /table/ as an easy example. By using the word form for a particular piece of furniture of a certain size and color made of a certain kind of material in a specific historical period, the speaker or writer is actually linking the object in question with all other objects that share the same quality of <tablehood>. The meaning of /table/, in other words, is not a singular occurrence of the object but a set or class which is a conceptual entity.

Many 20th-century language philosophers are dissatisfied with Plato's tripartite division of the verbal sign. For example, it has often been argued that there is no mediation between the word form and the object of a proper name. On close analysis, however, this argument does not seem to hold water because, strictly speaking, the great majority of proper names used in our daily life are not to be counted as elements of a language system. Under normal circumstances, their referents are known only to less than one hundred speakers, and therefore belong to what may be called "a much more limited code". Take for instance a person with the name Steven Cramer. Because he is not a star in any field nor an

occupant of some important public office, the identification of the name with the actual person holding it is restricted to a small circle of relatives and friends plus a limited number of schoolmates and colleagues or co-workers. That is why ordinary names do not make their way into the dictionary as components of a lexicon. And when they do make their appearances in the dictionary as commonly used names, the nature of their function changes, that is, they have taken on a universal meaning over and above the fact of pointing to objects. The name /Sue/, for instance, contains the semantic property of <femaleness> and /David/ indicates that of <being used by a human being of the masculine sex>. In the case of proper names referring to known historical personages, we find the same kind of mediation between the word form and object. The expression /Nixon/ does not just refer to a physical person, but serves as a well-defined lexical unit alongside other semantic entities of historical figures. To say the very least, the meaning of /Nixon/ should contain a semantic property of <dishonesty> because of the Watergate scandal the name-carrier was involved in during his presidency.

For a very recent discussion of the issue, we may turn to Willy Van Langendonck's *Theory and Topology of Proper Names* in which he invites his readers to consider the following:

- (4) John attended a meeting today.
- (5) The Emperor Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo.
- (6) You are talking about a different John.
- (7) He is becoming a second Napoleon.

To many people, the proper names in the sentences above may seem to have the same referential function, but that is not exactly the case as is made clear by Langendonck's analysis:

In (4) and (5) *John*, *Napoleon* and *Waterloo* function in a way that reflects what is commonly considered the primary function of proper names, i.e. to refer to individual entities. ... By contrast, in (6) one is speaking of at least two different persons called *John*. In sentence (7) the NP *a second Napoleon* is about another man resembling Napoleon. (2007: 11)

What needs to be emphasized again is that because the “individual entities” referred to by Langendonck’s first group of proper nouns are known to only a small number of people, they are not listed as formal entries of a dictionary. In contrast, Langendonck’s second group of proper nouns are counted as fixed units of a national language because they have acquired new lexical meanings that are “universal”. As such, /John/ does not just refer to <the specific person known to the speaker and a few other people>, but <any person called Johnson>; likewise, /Napoleon/ is not just the name for <the real person who once served as the Emperor of France>, but <any one who shares the personality traits of Napoleon>.

A more respectable, although equally erroneous, challenge comes from those who contend that to understand a sentence is to know what state of affairs would make it true or false and the notion of meaning is best explained in terms of truth rather than reference. The sentence /Snow is white/, for instance, can be considered true if, and only if, snow is white. For a layman, such a formula may look very attractive because it depends on a simple mechanism of pairing linguistic entities with nonlinguistic states of affairs, but the correlation is not really helpful for the reason that referent as a concept should cover not only people, objects, and places that actually exist in the world but also those that are imagined or invented by language users. In a sentence like /Cheng Shujian dreamed of a dragon/, the subject /Cheng Shujian/ refers to a real person living

in one of the residential towers in Gold Coast, Hong Kong at the present time, the verb /dreamed of/ indicates a particular (subconscious) way of encountering things or events, but the object /dragon/ is a gigantic flying reptile that exists only in Chinese mythologies. Does the fact that one of its words has no physical correspondence make the sentence less referential? Umberto Eco has the following to say:

If I declare that /There are two natures in Christ, the human and the divine, and one Person / a logician or scientist might observe to me that this string of sign-vehicles has neither extension nor referent – and that it could be defined as lacking meaning and therefore as a pseudo-statement. But they will never succeed in explaining why whole groups of people have fought for centuries over a statement of this kind or its denial. Evidently this happened because the expression conveyed precise contents which existed as cultural units within a civilization. (Eco 1976: 68)

From a liberal semiotic point of view, in other words, it does not matter if a lexical unit refers to a product of fantasy or hallucination as opposed to a real person, place, object, event, or state of affairs; what is important is “to know which cultural unit (what intentionally analyzable cultural properties) corresponded to the content of that word”.

Finally, there is a widely held view that a linguistic utterance may refer to one thing but mean another. According to J. L. Austin, the founder of speech act theory, every time we say something we are also performing a particular linguistic function indicated by the verb which is contained or implied in the sentence. For example, if we utter /I shall be there/, the sentence can be interpreted as a prediction, a promise, or a warning depending on the circumstances. The meaning of the utterance in this case, or any other case by

extension, is nothing but its illocutionary potential. As such, speech act theory has certainly alerted us to the importance of language context in the process of human communication, yet its definition of meaning is too broad to be of much use given the fact the possibilities of employing a word in different situations are almost limitless. Besides, the fact that an utterance may have illocutionary and perlocutionary forces does not entail a total loss of meaning for ordinary words like /school/ and /students/. In the final analysis, all words are used to refer to something, in one way or another, and this referential fact brings us back to where we started: the ancient semiotic triangle propounded by Plato.

Modern language philosophers' failure to go beyond Plato's semiotic triad, however, does not mean that the model cannot be re-examined from a different perspective. One may, in fact, call into question Plato's metaphysical explanation of the logical sequence of the three correlates of a sign. Going back to the example we used earlier about <tablehood>, the notion, according to Plato, is not a mental entity or an idea in the mind of a person formed as a result of his having seen many concrete tables; rather it is an unchanging universal or an immortal Idea that exists independently of space and time. On the level of referentiality, Plato's theory of Ideas certainly makes sense in that when we are given /table/ as a lexical item in the dictionary, we are actually encountering something that is apart from space and time, but it raises another question which is epistemological in nature: how are abstract universals or general ideas related to concrete things or specific objects of the experiential world?

Plato's own answer to the question comes from his doctrine of shadows. According to his explanation, all things we perceive with our senses are imperfect copies of eternal Ideas. In the famous myth presented in Book VII of *The Republic*, he compares the ordinary person to a man sitting in a cave looking at a wall but seeing nothing except the shadows of the real things behind his back. Only the wise person, who is almost non-existent, has direct access to reality and

is therefore likened to a man who has got out in the open and seen the real world of Ideas.

Nevertheless, Plato's belief in an immaterial world should not be interpreted as a total negation of language and other types of signs we use. Although the world of Ideas is not directly accessible to us, he argues, we can at least approximate to the nature of things by resorting to various instruments of thought. To get closer to the truth of circle, for instance, we can achieve our purpose either by uttering and hearing the word /circle/ or by explaining and learning what is meant by the word or by drawing and seeing a sensuous image of it in the sand. No one can deny that the shape of a word is ephemeral and changes with time and its phonetic form is variable and differs from person to person, but a certain relationship of correspondence obtains between words and Ideas which serves as a bridge for sign users to reach the other world.

Although Plato propounded his metaphysics in ancient Greece well over two thousand years ago, such thinking, or at least its theoretic likeness, has not been confined to the time and place of its origin. Edmund Husserl's phenomenological theory of the sign, for example, is in many ways a 20th-century version of Plato's theory of Ideas. Like his Greek predecessor, the German philosopher also conceives meanings as *a priori* entities that may or may not be realized in the human semiotic systems. This is best exemplified by the fact that although all numerical figures are theoretically possible, only a small portion of them have actually been used. As Husserl himself puts it,

As numbers – in the ideal sense that arithmetic presupposes – neither spring forth nor vanish with the act of enumeration, and as the endless number-series thus represents an objectively fixed set of objects, sharply delimited by an ideal law, which no one can either add to or take away from, so it is with the ideal unities of pure logic, with its concepts, propositions, truth, or in

other words, with its meanings. They are an ideally closed set of general objects, to which being thought or being expressed are like contingent. There are therefore countless meanings which, in the common relational sense, are merely possible ones, since they are never expressed, and since they can, owing to the limits of man's cognitive powers, never be expressed. (Quoted in Nöth 1990: 99)

Whatever percentage of those objectivities which do find their way into the repertoire of human signs, they get there by dint of what Husserl calls a silent intuitive consciousness which is immediately "directed" toward the states of affairs or facts of the world and then re-creates them in words and other signs for the purpose of inter-subjective communication. This is so because consciousness has the ability to re-present meanings ideally: physical objects or states of affairs cannot always be there for us, but they can be re-presented as ideal entities and thus be repeated in the process of communication.

As has been shown in Jacques Derrida's later critique of the Husserlian theory of the sign, Husserl struggles to justify the absolute correspondence between pre-existing objectivities and their semiotic representations in the human world. By neglecting the constitutive nature of language and other types of signs, he stops short at consciousness as a neutral vehicle through which meanings and their expressions can "coincide", hence employing a metaphysical presupposition and adding to a tradition which he set out to reject in his manifesto of phenomenology.

Turning our attention to the East for a while, there have been many Chinese philosophers since ancient times who are likewise concerned with the relationship between names and actualities which, from the modern perspective, constitutes an important aspect of semiotic studies. Of those who have contributed to the knowledge in this field, one group stands out in the sense that

they are concerned with the name-actuality relationship not for its moral and political significance but for the metaphysical and epistemological aspect of the dichotomy itself.

The earliest name usually associated with this line of thinking is Mo Zi, who advocates a mimesis theory of meaning. According to him, names and actualities are distinct categories, but the two can be unified because the former are derived from the latter. The most quoted aphorism in relation to this topic by Mo Zi is “yi3 ming2 ju3 shi2”¹ (以名举实), where /ju3/ means to imitate or designate, /shi2/ means extralinguistic actualities and /ming2/ means names that are used to imitate or designate.

The Chinese philosophical discussion of the relationship between verbal signs and extralinguistic actualities reached a high tide during the subsequent period of the Warring States (403-222 BC). Unlike their predecessors and successors in the history of Chinese philosophy, scholars of this historical period as a whole showed a concentrated interest in the problem of the correspondence of names and actualities, for which they were given the collective title “the School of Logicians” (名家). Among them were Gongsun Long (c. 325-250 BC) and Xun Zi (298-238 BC), whose actual texts were not only known to their contemporaries but also preserved and therefore read and studied by later generations.

Gongsun Long holds the belief that all things in the world appear in particular shapes and substances, and as such, they are given different names. To know whether the meaning of a word corresponds to its actuality or not, we have to know the conditions which give rise to it. As he puts it in Section 6 of his “On Names and Actualities”, “A name is to designate an actuality. If we know that this is not this and know that this is not here, we shall not call it [‘this’]. If we know that that is not that and know that that is not there, we shall not call it [‘there’].” (Chan [1969] 1973: 243)

Xun Zi is a more systematic thinker on the word-actuality relationship,

probably the most systematic among all ancient Chinese philosophers. He was born in a historical era which witnessed an epidemic of “discrepancies between words and actualities”, a deplorable situation which drove him to write his famous tract “On the Rectification of Names”. According to that essay, the motivations for rectifying names are political as well as epistemological. On the one hand, there is a need to distinguish the higher from the lower in terms of social status; on the other hand, we must discriminate the different states and qualities of things. “When the distinctions between the noble and the humble are clear and similarities and differences [of things] are discriminated,” he says, “there will be no danger of ideas being misunderstood and work encountering difficulties or being neglected.” From there Xun Zi proceeds to discuss the theoretical possibility of achieving linguistic universality which is very similar to that proposed by his Greek counterpart Aristotle (384-322 BC). As is for his near contemporary in Greece, names or words are symbols of mental impressions for this Chinese philosopher. He argues that although forms and colors are distinguished by the eye, sounds and tunes are heard by the ear, sweetness and bitterness are differentiated by the mouth, freshness and foulness are smelled by the nose, and pain and comfort are felt by the skin, in the end the information we acquire through all these senses have to be processed by the mind, for it is because the mind collects knowledge that it is possible to know sound through the ear and form through the eye. Nevertheless, the collection of knowledge depends on the natural organs first registering it, and “the organs of members of the same species with the same feelings perceive things in the same way. Therefore things are compared and those that are seemingly alike are generalized. In this way they share their conventional name as a common meeting ground.” Finally, Xun Zi lays down what he calls “the fundamental principle on which names are instituted”. When things are similar, they ought to be given the same name; when things are different, they ought to be given

different names; when a simple name is sufficient to express the meaning, a simple name ought to be used; when a simple name is not sufficient, a compound name ought to be used. “Knowing that different actualities should have different names, one should let different actualities always have different names. There should not be any confusion in this respect.” (Chan [1969] 1973: 125)

After Xun Zi, the discussion of the word-reality relationship gradually moved away from the center of Chinese intellectual speculations and never regained its position of dominance over other areas of human concerns till the 20th century when Western epistemology as an important branch of the social sciences was introduced into China through Marxist philosophy. This does not mean, however, that the Chinese curiosity in this respect stopped with the period of the Warring States. On the contrary, the debate about the word-reality relationship has continued, be it sporadically, throughout the history of Chinese thought. One important example of this can be found in a Chinese scholar by the name of Ouyang Jian (c. 267-300), who picked up the same topic four and half centuries later and whose expositions further consolidated the realist theory of meaning in ancient China.

A well known essay by Ouyang Jian is entitled “On the Fullness of Speech in Expressing Ideas”, where he propounds a purely instrumental theory of the verbal sign. Continuing the realist theme but pushing it to its ontological extreme, he argues that

[h]eaven says nothing yet the four seasons run their course. Sages say nothing yet their distinguishing wisdom exists. The difference between square and round has been evident before the concepts of shapes arise; and the antithesis of black versus white has been obvious before the names of color are given. Therefore names add nothing to realities and speech

contributes nothing to [objective] principles.

However, for both the past and the present, to rectify names is always an important task; besides, sages and worthies have to use speech. Why? Because it is sure that one who finds a principle will not feel satisfied until he can express it by speech; a thing that already exists will not be identified from others without a name. If speech could not express ideas, people would not be able to communicate with each other. If names could not distinguish things from each other, it would be impossible for sages to show their distinguished wisdom evidently. (Shi [1988] 1996: vol. 1, 317)

What is spelled out there in simple but emphatic terms are two important principles of the realist theory of meaning. First, independently of language, there exist ultimate qualities of things and states of affairs in the extralinguistic world. Second, meanings of words and expressions should and can correspond to extralinguistic actualities that are their sources as well as their measurements.

If situated in the context of a world history of semiotics, Ouyang Jian's text acquires a further dimension of intercultural and intertextual significance. Its example of the self-existing square can be linked to "The Seventh Epistle" by Plato, where the nature of the circle is also conceived as a pre-semiotic "form" which is then represented either in language or in painting. The second example of pre-semiotic color differentiations has even more relevance to modern Western semiotics, for the formation of color terms in language not only furnishes a point of departure for Saussurean and Hjelmslevean linguistics in its attack on the traditional language theories but also becomes one of the most debated issues in the 20th century humanistic scholarship.

Although contemporary Chinese theorization of language professes to be an application of Marxist philosophy to the study of language, on a deeper level it remains as much an heir to its native tradition of ontological realism. To a great

extent, it still assumes the independent existence of an extralinguistic world, natural as well as social. That is, to most contemporary language theorists, the essential characteristics of things exist in themselves and would exist even if there were no words to reveal them. However, there is one important difference between the ancient and the modern. Unlike their ancient predecessors, modern language theorists are more acutely aware of the trap of word-reality dualism where the correspondence between the two cannot be logically guaranteed.² For this reason, they try to insert into the dichotomy a third element, that is, human cognition which is capable of achieving linear progression. In a wordless world, they argue, actualities of things are available for discovery, but such discovery is made possible by the formation of human consciousness after millions of years of evolution. Whereas consciousness reflects reality, language is the means that makes it possible. Humans use words to designate surrounding objects and phenomena, their connections and relations, and so on. Words in a way substitute for objects, representing them in the human consciousness, but it also records the abstractive activity of human thinking. This means that words and phrases are the result of a generalized cognition based on sensations and perceptions engendered by the impact on the human sense organs made by the objects and phenomena of reality. Furthermore, the process of cognition is an endless one in the course of which human thought draws closer to the essence of things of the extralinguistic world. From this perspective, the form of a language expression, due to its close connection with human consciousness, ultimately communicates the essential nature of whatever is denoted by it.

¹Notes:

1. The Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3, and 4 immediately following the Pinyin of Chinese characters are used here to indicate the four basic tones that exist in the Chinese language. As a picto-phonetic system, the Chinese language can generate a much smaller number of potential syllables than its alphabetic counterpart, so it has to resort to the use of different tones to make further semantic differentiations among words that otherwise sound the same.
2. As recently as late 1970s, there began a heated debate among Chinese intellectuals about whether the nature of truth is absolute or local. Most, if not all, discussions that followed tend to go to either of the two extremes: if a “non-subjective” criterion is insisted upon, they have to rely, consciously or unconsciously, on an omnipotent agent who is capable of knowing a reality-in-itself which is historically impossible; if “objectivity” is viewed as a “thing of this world”, they are usually forced to abandon all distinctions whatsoever between truth and falsity. Then, there is a theoretical variant of the first perspective which appears to have most followers in China, that is, the theory of praxis which upholds that “practice is the only measure of truth”. Understandably, the authority comes from Marx, who includes in his early notebooks a critique of abstract materialism in the name of active human practice: “The chief defect of all materialism up to now (including Feuerbach’s) is, that the object, reality, what we apprehend through our senses, is understood only in the form of the object of contemplation (*anschauung*); but not as sensuous human activity, as practice; not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the active side was developed abstractly by idealism - which of course does not know real sensuous activity as such.” (McLellan 1977: 156) This is to say that human praxis is the guarantee of cognition as well as its point of departure. The world exists independently and attains its qualities and meanings for humanity by means of a mediating relationship of human labor, but besides serving as the mediating link between the world and human thinking, praxis also provides a means through which the latter can be measured against the former. As Mao Zedong put it in one of his philosophical essays:

Marxists hold that man’s social practice is the criterion of the truth of his knowledge of the external world. What actually happens is that man’s knowledge is verified only when he achieves the anticipated results in the process of social practice (material production, class struggle or scientific experiment). If a man wants to succeed in his work, that is, to achieve the anticipated results, he must bring his ideas into correspondence with the laws of the objective external world; if they do not correspond, he will fail in his practice. After he fails, he draws his lessons, corrects his ideas to make them correspond to the laws of the external world, and can thus turn failure into success; this is what is meant by “failure is the mother of success” and “a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit”. The dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge places practice in the primary position, holding that the human knowledge can in no way be separated from practice and repudiating all the erroneous theories which deny the importance of practice or separate knowledge from practice. (1971: 67)

Here, true and objective knowledge is defined as that which brings fruits in praxis. However, the proposition constitutes at most a theoretic postponement, but not a solution, for in the end one still has to presuppose the existence of a super-subject (the working class, the proletariat, the Party or the great leader) who is capable of correctly measuring the result of “industry and experiment” against an independent reality.

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