

書評

Tao Yue,

*Moral Metaphysics and Metaphysics of Morality:
Between Mou Zongsan and Kant.*
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曹珊珊

Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995) is one of the representative figures of contemporary New Confucianism and is regarded as the most original philosopher in modern China. Mou Zongsan (“Mou”) had a life-long dialogue with Immanuel Kant (“Kant”) and he devoted himself to recast the moral metaphysics of New Confucianism through an encounter with Western philosophy (and especially Kant’s critical philosophy). Mou’s philosophy has gained tremendous attention in China and Taiwan. However, few professional philosophers in mainland China have engaged in a comprehensive and meticulous comparison of the philosophies of Mou and Kant. In the book *Moral Metaphysics and Metaphysics of Morality: Between Mou Zongsan and Kant* (道德形而上学 牟宗三與康德之間), Tao Yue 陶悅 (“Tao”) attempts the arduous task of untangling Mou’s complex metaphysical system to thoroughly examine the relation of Mou’s thought to the philosophy of Kant.

The book is divided into an introduction and eight chapters. By comparing Mou and Kant’s life experiences and personality traits, as well as several key concepts in their work, Tao tries to reveal the similarities and differences between the two philosophers’ thoughts, and then to provide an impartial opinion on Mou’s philosophy.

I. Between Mou and Kant

i. “Things-in-themselves”: A Concept of Fact or A Concept of Value

In Chapter 2 of the book, Tao summarizes the two philosophers’ different ideas of “things-in-themselves”.

Tao believes that in Kant’s philosophy, the idea “things-in-themselves” has at least three layers of meanings: first, it is the ultimate source of our sensible faculties; second, it is the boundary of human knowledge; and third, it is the rational ideas.

In the book *Phenomena and Things-in-Themselves* (現象與物自身), Mou focuses on developing his own interpretations of the Kantian concept “things-in-themselves”. He denies the first meaning above. He believes that the origin of the phenomena or appearance cannot be derived from “things-in-themselves”, a phenomenal world is formed because our minds make the distinction between the subject and the object. He argues that “things-in-themselves” are not within the scope of scientific cognition, but can only be approached and exemplified by another method which is the moral practice. In other words, Mou refuses to take the epistemological significance of “things-in-themselves”, but considers the idea as a concept of value. The distinctions between phenomena and “things-in-themselves” are attributed to science and philosophy, knowledge and morality, theoretical reason and practical reason.

Mou develops the disproof of “things-in-themselves” as a concept of fact in two ways.

First, if the idea “things-in-themselves” is a concept of fact which means “the reality as it really is”, then it is not absolutely unknowable but only in some degree unknowable. The difference between the phenomena and “things-in-themselves” lies in the fact that our sensibility grasps the objects in specific ways which distort “the reality as it really is”. Mou believes that the true meaning of unknowable “things-in-themselves” should be a concept of value in the realm of morality and theology because our concept of value is not through sensible intuition (sensibility) and rational speculation (understanding), but rather through moral practice (Mou 2003d, p. 7).

Second, Mou believes that if “things-in-themselves” is a concept of fact, then “things-in-themselves” should be finite. Because everything is created by God, with respect to the infinite nature of God, things must be finite. However, for Kant, “things-in-themselves” are not in space and time, in that sense, “things-in-themselves” should be infinite. Therefore, Mou believes that if the idea “things-in-themselves” is a concept of fact, it will result in a contradiction. To solve the contradiction, we must admit that it is a concept of value for which we can discuss the infinitude of a finite thing (Mou 2003d, p. 109–119).

Tao comments that Mou creatively interprets the idea of “things-in-themselves” with a purpose of founding his own metaphysical framework.

ii. Free Will: A Postulate or A Manifestation

Kant argues that because of the limited form of understanding, free will can never be known or proved within the scope of human experience (in the phenomenal world). Free will therefore is only a postulate. The three postulates (freedom, God and immortality), though can't be theoretically proven, are incorporated into the ethical structure of Kant's philosophy (Kant, 1996, p. 238).

Mou criticizes the view that if free will is a postulate rather than a manifestation, then it is only an empty logical structure. In other words, if free will is only a postulate, then whether the will can give moral law is also problematic. Mou believes that moral practice is real, so free will must be real as well. Mou criticizes Kant's view that moral feelings are subjective and empirical, and that we cannot grant the moral laws through moral feelings. Mou follows Confucian tradition in his view that reason and emotion both have their seats in the mind (xin 心). He suggests including the moral feelings in both noumena and phenomena so that moral feelings are promoted to the transcendent realm as the most essential element of the representation of the moral laws. It is the moral feelings that the mind is interested in and delighted with the moral laws and actively, readily, and thus in accordance with the law it has established (Mou 2003a, p. 131–133).

Mou promotes free will to the position of “free infinite mind (自由無限心)” which is self-evident and therefore not a postulate but a real manifestation.

According to Mou, the moral mind of human beings is connected with the *dao* of the heaven (tiandao, 天道). In other words, the moral reality is the cosmic reality. His arguments are as follows:

First, if the free will is finite, then its command cannot be unconditional, in other words, the moral law will lose its universality and inevitability. Kant insists that the moral law be categorical imperative, thus he must admit the infinity of free will. In other words, free will is infinite because the commander of unconditional command cannot be with finite power. Moreover, because there cannot be two ultimate infinite things in the cosmos, so the free will must be the ultimate reality of cosmos (Mou 2003c, p. 246–247).

Second, he tries to prove the transcendence of free will using the first cause argument. The free will has the characteristics of “being a reason rather than a result” and “restraining others but not restrained”; therefore, he considers free will to be the first cause of the universe. In effect, in his argument, God is replaced by free will. Mou argues against Kant's separation of the free will and God into two postulates. He says that unconditional commands (the “categorical imperative”) are sufficient to prove that the commander should be an absolute and infinite free will. Therefore, even if there is a God, God should be bound to this free will (or free infinite mind, in Mou's words) (Mou 2003c, p. 247~248).

It is Tao's opinion that Mou's interpretation and transformation of the idea of “free will” does not outstrip the original idea of Kant. Kant's free will is not to dissolve the limited nature of man, but to highlight the limitation of man as a moral agent. By contrast, Mou's thoughts are based on Confucian tradition which holds that finite and infinite are interlinked, being and ought to be are in

line. Kant said that “how pure reason could be practical—all human reason is entirely incapable of explaining that” (Kant, 2002, p. 77). Mou has not provided answer for this question either, because his idea of free infinite mind cancels the question. Tao comments that Mou’s idea of free infinite will tends to oversimplify the whole issue.

iii. Intellectual Intuition: God's Knowledge or Human Potential

Based on Tao’s understanding, Kant uses the notion “intellectual intuition” in an almost exclusively negative sense. Through the critical investigation of many aspects of human cognition, Kant does not endorse the view that human beings can have intellectual intuition, but he claims we can intelligibly ascribe intellectual intuition to God.

Mou thinks that the issue whether human beings can have intellectual intuition is the most important difference between his theory and Kant's philosophy, and it is also the fundamental difference between Chinese and Western traditions (Mou 2003c, p. 5).

Mou claims that “intellectual intuition” is, first of all, a term in relation to a “principle of ontological creative actualization” rather than a “principle of cognitive presentation” (Mou 2003c, p. 237); and secondly, intellectual intuition creates “things-in-themselves” rather than phenomena (Mou 2003c, p. 241).

To prove that human beings have “intellectual intuition”, the method Mou adopted was to seek out classic text of Chinese philosophy in order to exemplify the “intellectual intuition”. Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism all agree that certain supra-sensory knowing is available to everyone, though the concept is known by different names, Mou labels the idea as “intellectual intuition”.

In particular, Mou believes that Confucian tradition has always affirmed the intellectual intuition possessed by human beings. Confucian moral knowledge is different from sensory knowledge. Moral knowledge is not derived from the empirical world but from the original moral mind (original mind and the nature of benevolence, 本心仁體). The original moral mind, which grounds the moral law, actively creates rather than passively perceives. Intellectual intuition is the unity of knowledge and action; the original moral mind is not only self-knowledge and self-evidence, but also with its categorical imperative continues to turn into moral actions, knowing the moral law and taking the moral action at the same time (Mou 2003c, p. 237–260).

Mou argues that human beings can have a kind of intellectual intuition which is reflexive, creative, and not in relation to phenomena but in association with “things-in-themselves”. In addition, as Confucian understanding of intellectual intuition (“innate moral knowing”) is essentially moral, it

is superior to those similar ideas in Buddhism and Daoism.

Tao comments that Mou's method cannot fully prove the objectivity, universality and inevitability of intellectual intuition. His method can neither pass the test of contemporary empirical science, nor stand up to critical analysis from Western philosophy, because those Chinese classics he cited cannot fundamentally get rid of the shadow of mystical experience. In addition to supplying arguments from ancient texts, Mou needs to provide logical proof of whether it is possible for human beings to have intellectual intuition.

However, Tao continues to cite the analysis of other scholars, and explain how to understand Mou's logic of endorsing intellectual intuition within his metaphysic system. As previously mentioned, Mou believes that “free infinite mind (自由無限心)” is not a postulate but a real manifestation, and we must only rely on intellectual intuition to grasp the free infinite mind. Mou has proposed that the free infinite mind can replace God, and the intellectual intuition must be a function of the free infinite mind. Thus human beings with a free infinite mind naturally have intellectual intuition. In addition, Mou claims that intellectual intuition creates “things-in-themselves” by conferring on them moral value which can only be manifested to human beings. In other words, Mou's transformation of the concepts “things-in-themselves” and “free infinite mind” provides the premise for the proof of intellectual intuition.

Another question is how to attend to intellectual intuition. Mou's answer is through personal moral practice, or self-cultivation. In Mou's view, intellectual intuition can only be cultivated through personal moral practice. Tao criticizes that, if this is the case there would be no objective and clear standards of the presence of intellectual intuition, but the standards would be limited to individual feelings and experiences, which cannot ensure the universality and inevitability of intellectual intuition.

iv. Moral Metaphysics and Metaphysics of Morality

Tao introduces the basic structure of Mou's moral metaphysics in chapter 6.

Mou distinguishes between metaphysics of morality and moral metaphysics. While the former investigates the nature of morality and corresponds to what is usually termed meta-ethics, the latter is a metaphysical system founded on Mou's understanding of Confucian morality. Mou's moral metaphysics is to seek a moral basis for metaphysics, it is a study of metaphysics which emphasizes the union of fact and value (truth and goodness), immanence and transcendence (finitude and infinitude). Moral metaphysics is a unity of ontology, epistemology and teleology. Mou thinks that Kant has only developed a metaphysical study of morality, while Confucian philosophy reached the

level of moral metaphysics which Kant failed to achieve because in the context of Confucianism, the oneness of “mind (xin, 心), nature (xing, 性) and heaven (tian, 天)” shows that the moral reality is the cosmic reality (Mou 2003a, p. 178–196).

Mou's moral metaphysics contains a two-level ontology: the ontology of phenomena (or, ontology with grasping) and the ontology of noumena (or, ontology without grasping). He attempted to use the Buddhist conceptual context to parallel the Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal realms (Mou 2003f, p. 281).

The doctrine of “*One Mind Opens Two Gates*” comes from the Chinese Buddhist text *The Awakening of Faith* (大乘起信論). According to this text, all of reality is said to consist of mind, but a mind that has two aspects. “*Two Gates*” refers to *the Gate of Real Mind* (心真如門) or the category of reality, noumena, and so forth, and *the Gate of Passing Mind* (心生滅門) to the category of appearance, phenomena, and so on (Mou 2003f, p. 293).

“*One Mind Opens Two Gates*” in Mou’s moral metaphysics means that the free infinite mind is the moral reality and also the cosmic reality, so there is only one mind in the universe; within the free infinite mind, there is the two-level ontology. The upper level is the “ontology without grasping” which is related to Confucian innate moral knowing (the “intellectual intuition”), thus the mind actively creates and directly knows “things-in-themselves”; the lower level is the “ontology with grasping” in which the “cognitive mind” (認識心) employs passive sensible intuition to apprehend things as objects. The two levels united in the free infinite mind are not isolated, and the way to move back and forth between the two levels is the essential idea of “self-negation of the innate moral knowing” (良知的自我坎陷) which is used by Mou as an dialectical idea (Mou 2003d, p. 127).

The phrase “self-negation of the innate moral knowing” first appeared in Mou's *Wang Yangming's Teaching of Extending Good Knowing* (王陽明致良知教). Wang Yangming's famous idea of “innate moral knowing (or moral consciousness, 良知)” refers to the moral mind, not the cognitive mind; it is only responsible for providing a code of conduct that determines what we ought to do rather than responsible for providing the knowledge of the objective universe.

Mou transforms the idea “innate moral knowing” to contain both moral knowledge and knowledge of the objective universe. In the book “Politics and Administration (政道與治道)”, he states: “The moral reasoning as a practical reason intends to guide our behavior and plays a direct role in cultivating the sage personality. However, pursuing knowledge sincerely is also a kind of action, it must be also required and determined by moral reasoning. . . when we take such action, from the perspective of the activities of the mind, we must convert from the dynamic moral

reasoning for practice into a static cognitive reasoning for knowledge. This step can be called self-negation of the moral mind, from the dynamic state to the static state, from no subject nor object to the distinction of subject and object, from the consistency of moral practices to the listing out of understandings of objective things" (Mou 2003b, p. 64).

Tao holds that Mou's so-called "innate moral knowing" is not the same idea as Wang Yangming's moral consciousness, but closer to the notion of rationality in Western philosophy. The idea of "self-negation of the innate moral knowing" is quite similar to Hegel's account of dialectical development of absolute spirit.

Tao affirms Mou's efforts of reviving moral idealism by emphasizing that the moral agent must enforce a moral guidance or value restriction on the cognitive activities of the agent.

v. *The Highest Good (Summum Bonum): Believe in God or Becoming Sages*

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that the highest good consists of virtue combined with happiness (Kant, 1996, p. 228). Kant insists that there is no causal relationship between virtue and happiness. The possibility of the highest good necessarily requires us to postulate the existence of God (Kant, 1996, p. 240). Tao emphasizes that Kant takes happiness to be nothing more than the satisfaction of one's sum total of desires. She concludes that Kantian happiness is "a state of happiness".

A Treatise of the Highest Good (Yuanshan Lun, 圓善論) is one of the most important work in Mou's later years. The book focuses on the relationship between morality and happiness and gives the answer of how to coincide virtue and happiness. According to Mou's "perfect teaching (圓教)" theory, sages necessarily enjoy happiness through their realization of the simultaneous finitude and infinitude of human existence. Mou holds the traditional Confucian idea that ordinary people can become sages or Buddhas if they continue their moral practice perfectly. Based on their different stages of manifestations of the moral mind, people can be classified into 4 categories: scholar (shi, 士), philosopher (xian, 賢), sage (sheng, 聖), god (shen, 神) (Mou 2003e, p. 324). Tao considers the happiness in Mou's perfect teaching theory as "a sense of happiness". Rather than pursuing satisfaction of desires, sages enjoy a subjective sense of well-being because they have a sense of freedom through their perfect moral practice.

II. Reason for the differences between Mou and Kant: infinite vs. finite

In Chapter 5, Tao claims that the fundamental reason for the differences between the two philosophers' thoughts is that they inherit different ideas of finitude and infinitude from the traditions

of Chinese and Western philosophies.

As per Tao's understanding, Kant is based on the Western Christian tradition that finitude and infinitude are a pair of opposite concepts: human beings have finite existence while infinitude is only attributable to God. Therefore, free will is a postulate; "things-in-themselves" are unknown because only God has intellectual intuition.

By contrast, Mou's theory is based on the Chinese traditional thought that there is no barrier between finitude and infinitude, and it is possible to live in a way beyond reality to achieve transcendence. Chinese traditional culture holds that the existence of man is connected with the existence of the universe as a whole. Man is finite, the universe is infinite, and the connection between man and the universe means that man has the possibility of breaking the limitation and achieving infinity. Man does not exist as a limited being merely confronting infinitude, but serve as a bridge connecting finitude and infinitude. As the human mind is part of the *dao* of heaven, through self-cultivation and the process of moral perfection, individuals are able to combine themselves with the universe and realize the value of life. Neither Confucianism, Buddhism nor Daoism have established barriers for the infinitude of human beings. The sage of Confucianism, the real person of Daoism, and the Buddha of Buddhism all share an infinite meaning. However, they all come from ordinary people. Mou concludes that human beings are "finite yet infinite". Starting from this premise, free will is a manifestation, intellectual intuition is human potential, "things-in-themselves" is a concept of value created by man. Tao emphasizes that Mou thinks that the unity of finitude and infinitude is a dynamic process of development, in the sense that ordinary people can transcend their own limitations through their own continuous moral practices.

Therefore, Kant finally achieves a metaphysics or theology of morality: the realization of the highest good relies on the belief in God. In contrast, Mou develops a moral metaphysics: the free infinite mind brings the possibility that virtue and happiness can coincide; thus, the realization of the highest good is actually a spiritual state.

III. Tao's overall comments on Mou's philosophy

In the last chapter of the book, Tao provides her overall assessment on Mou's philosophy.

On one hand, Tao highly appreciates that Mou makes it possible for traditional Chinese Confucianism to have a direct dialogue with Western philosophy. In her opinion, the most important contribution of Mou's moral metaphysics is to revive and reconstruct traditional Confucianism into a more systematic and speculative theory.

On the other hand, Tao criticizes Mou's Chinese nationalist thought that Confucianism is superior to Western philosophy. She also questions the relevance of Mou's New Confucianism to the reality of the contemporary world and to modern Chinese society.

I would high recommend this book to anyone who desires a good introductory to Mou's philosophy in relation to Kantian philosophy. It introduces the key concepts and the general structure of Mou's complex moral metaphysics in easy to understand language making it a helpful starting point for those who are not familiar with such topics. In addition, I also recommend this book to those who are interested in the compatibility of Chinese and Western philosophies.

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