The Deconstructionism of Chuang-Tzu and Derrida : A Comparison

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Abstract: Chuang-Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, developed deconstructionist philosophy. Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher, developed deconstructionism. Both Derrida and Chuang-Tzu exposed the flaws of dichotomy pairs. This essay mainly discusses major theories of Chuang-tzu and Derrida, comparisons between Chuang-Tzu and Derrida's theory of language, and the difference in their respective deconstruction methods.

1. Introduction

Chuang-Tzu, a Chinese philosopher who lived around 300 B.C., had a significant impact on the development of Taoist philosophy and to this day remains one of the most influential Chinese thinkers. Derrida, an influential French philosopher from the mid-twentieth century, developed deconstructionist philosophy, which has been at the center of controversy since its introduction. From completely different cultures and time periods, Chuang-Tzu and Derrida both challenged the tyrannical control of accepted reason and other hierarchical traditions of their times, and instead advocated the liberation of thoughts, freedom of action, and the legitimacy of diverse interpretations. Both men's theories are based upon the deceptive nature of language, where signifiers are inevitably lost and absent from the center of discourse. In addition, both Derrida and Chuang-Tzu exposed the flaws of dichotomy pairs (even though Chuang-Tzu focused mainly on certain dichotomy pairs while Derrida refuted dichotomy as a structure in general). The main difference between Derrida and Chuang-Tzu begins to become apparent only after analyzing how they have deconstructed existing theories and hierarchies. Chuang-Tzu sought to release the world from socially constructed sign systems, which he viewed as the primary reason for discriminations and chaos, so as to achieve the ultimate goal — the "Tao." Derrida simply aimed to point out the instability within every hierarchical structure and to demonstrate the limitations of ration and logic. For Derrida, there is no ultimate goal, but only a playground open susceptible uncertainty and interpretation. In part 1 of this article major theories of Chuang-tzu and Derrida will be discussed in detail. In part 2, comparisons between Chuang-Tzu and Derrida's theory of language will be made and evaluated. Finally in part 3, the difference in their respective deconstruction methods, which is determined by the different goals of two philosophers, will be examined and explained.

2. Main Theories of Deconstructionism and Taoism

Both aware of the deceitful nature of language and limitations of logic, Derrida and Chuang-Tzu developed their theories of deconstructionism upon controversial ideas. For Derrida, words have no stable meaning. Words simply function as a reference to other words and. Following this logic texts serve a function only as reference to other texts. In opposition to the logocentric tradition, he also argues that any dichotomy pair could be combatted by its own logic as long as readers expose the gap in its logic, a process he refers to as deconstruction. Chuang-Tzu takes a more relativistic approach. Introducing "Tao", or "The Way" as the ultimate guide and goal of the universe, he argues that everything functions following "The Way", which forces action through inaction. Expanding this idea, he deconstructs not only the difference between seemingly opposing concepts like good and bad, but also "the difference of things," which, as he explains, exists as a result of the establishment of sign systems which lead to all disputes and hierarchies.

2.1. Derrida and Deconstructionism

Deconstructionism, an idea originating with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, seeks to point out the limit of the metaphysical and logocentric tradition of western philosophy by unravelling internal contradictions and inconsistencies in texts of all kinds. Based on the metaphysical tradition, past philosophers are confident in the transparency and rationality of language and believe that a stable and clear definition of terms can be ultimately achieved, through which we could reveal the nature of a given philosophical issue. Derrida, however, raises doubts about the metaphysics of presence and assumptions that meaning can be fully captured in the form of strict definitions that remain stable across space and time (Moran, 2000). He states that meaning has no origin or end but was always produced by the difference between signs where words refer to other words ad infinitum. Therefore, the meaning of a text comes varies every time one repeats it, and the reading process thus becomes an extension of the very text. To further develop such thought, Derrida refutes the logocentric tradition of constructing dichotomies. The two sides in these binary oppositions are not as symmetric as the author often aussumes. Instead, dichotomies reveal a hierarchical structure where one side is privileged to the detriment of the other. It is the job of the reader to expose the gaps and breaks in the logic to demonstrate how the oppressed and disadvantaged aspect of the pair is often the bedrock that nurtures the other. Ultimately, the internal logic of a text will destabilize and deconstruct the text itself. Derrida aimed not to destroy every philosophical invention, but to liberate philosophy from its original restraints and to show the possibility of various interpretations, springing from the eternal uncertainty of texts.

2.2. Tao — "The Way"

Chinese philosophers have been aware of the deceitful nature of language and limits of reason since the beginning of Chinese philosophy (Yang, 2006). Chuang-Tzu is considered as one of the most eminent of Chinese philosophers. Inspired by Lao-Tzu, he observed the discrepancy between language, whether spoken or written, and the author's real meaning behind words. In his self-titled masterpiece, Chuang-Tzu further claims that language is a distortion of the "Tao", otherwise known as "the Way", the fundamental principle that ultimately and universally rules everything. According to Chuang-Tzu, "The Way" is both the origin of the universe and the objective rules of nature. It is invisible and intangible, but it has an objective existence that surpasses the limitations of time and space. However, despite its predominance, "The Way" does nothing but follow natural laws. It exists, but does not wield any force; it achieves action through inaction. Based on these ideas, Chuang-Tzu applied relativism to refute the difference of things; he argued for the liberation of mind from disputes and the liberation of people from all kinds of social norms and hierarchies. He discovered that language is the origin of all disputes, agreeing with Lao-Tzu that "The Way that can be told of is not an unvarying Way; the names that can be named are not unvarying names." (Lin, 2006) In other words, the presence of the sign itself is a symbol of the absence of stable meaning. Something immutable like the Tao can never be captured by words, since the words are ever-changing in their connotation and limited in expressing meanings. Chuang-Tzu's Taoism demonstrates great effort in the exploration of the essence of language and advocates liberation after denying the traditional restraints.

3. Deconstruction of Language according to Chuang-Tzu and Derrida

"Words are like wind and waves; actions are a matter of gain and loss."(Watson, 1970) From ripple to ripple, words refer to other words which refer to other words ad infinitum, leaving the central point of the ripple empty and unobtainable. Derrida and Chuang-Tzu both recognize that once meaning is denoted by signs, the real meaning is forever absent, and all that is left is an infinite interplay of words.

3.1. Chuang-Tzu's distrust toward language

Distrust toward language is a basic tenet for Chuang-Tzu. "What is acceptable we call acceptable;

what is unacceptable we call unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so… Things all must have that which is so; things all must have that which is acceptable. There is nothing that is not so, there is nothing that is not acceptable. "(Watson, 1970) In the "Discussion on Making All Things Equal", Chuang-Tzu points out the arbitrary and artificial nature of the connection of a signifier to a signified. Neither the signifier nor the signified by itself have any function until people bind them together as a social construct, but such connection inevitably pollutes and distorts the original meaning of the signified, because such combinations inevitably emphasize only a limited aspect amongst all the characteristics and meanings of the signified. In addition, assigning names to things not only makes things lose what they "all must have", but also deviates from the continuous and unpolluted nature of things; it can turn factual judgements into value judgements. To illustrate this, he purposefully names certain criminals and ignorant people in his allegories "Confucius" or "The Sage", and observes how people could easily be fooled by their names (Peng, 2014). At this stage, the signifiers are at a such a position where they can influence what is signified. Even before the start of social interaction, signifiers already denote only a segmented and biased portion of the signified. When social interaction starts, value judgements gradually replace more and more of the factual judgments under the power of a social norm. Therefore, Chuang-Tzu reaches the conclusion that the presence of the sign is intrinsically an absence of meaning, which can never be denoted.

3.2. Difference and the Absence of Meaning

Derrida also endorses the dual-direction interaction of signifiers and the signified. Ultimately, he comes to a very similar conclusion that meaning can never be reached through words. He first observes that the signifiers and signified weren't equal counterparts as Saussure, the first linguist who constructed the dichotomy of signifier-signified, had presented them. Because Saussure assumes the presence of a stable and clear concept waiting to be denoted at the center of this structure, signifiers and signified were actually in a hierarchical structure where the sole purpose of signifiers is to point to what is signified. In short, these compose. a sufficient unit that can exist on its own. (Derrida, 1982). Realizing this, Derrida deconstructs such a dichotomy, arguing that while what is signified impacts its signifiers; signifiers are actually bedrocks for the signified, and that the existence of meaning completely relies on the endless interplay between signifiers. According to him, signs have meanings by referring to and differentiating from other signs; just like the concept of "horse" relies on the concept of "fur," and the meaning of "stop" from the red traffic light relies on its difference with traffic lights of other colors. Therefore, a sign refers not to its own stable meaning, but to an infinite set of other signs. In this infinite movement of reference and differentiation, which Derrida coins as "différance," the signified is ultimately lost in endless deferral, never stable nor transparent, and certainly not present at the center of language. This conclusion is very similar to Chuang-Tzu's conclusion that meanings are blurred, distorted and inevitably lost by the inter-reference of words.

4. Similar Approaches, Contradictory Goals: The Deconstruction Methods of Derrida and Chuang-Tzu

After demonstrating the deception of language, both philosophers build on this notion to deconstruct orthodoxy and hierarchies through similar methods. The basic logic of both philosophers is to challenge long-existing dichotomies, in which one element is presented as superior to the other. Chuang-Tzu argues for the forgetting of the self and of the external world, through which people could completely abandon the sign system and enter the higher level of understanding known as the "Tao". Derrida deconstructs language by refuting dichotomy as a general structure. He exposes the internal contradictions and inconsistencies of dichotomous pairs, which become destabilized by their own logic. Their methods of deconstruction reveal the different goals of Chuang-Tzu and Derrida; while Chuang-Tzu sets an ultimate end to his journey of deconstruction, Derrida simply leads his readers to an open ground, where no dictating rules exist and where diverse interpretations and ideas find their legitimacy.

4.1. Forgetting: Loss of the Mind

Chuang-Tzu argues that the distinctions between right and wrong and self andother are result of imperfect sign systems which are products of social norms and traditions. The imperfect structure of our language, where a sentence structure demands the separation of the subject and object, is what deceives people into distinguishing between the self and non-self. The distinction between right and wrong is invented and dictated by the ones in power as tools to justify and enhance their own authority (Zhu, 2016). Most people construct their understanding of the self and of the world based on such systems, which is why they are prevented from realizing the harmonious and homogeneous nature of the world, and fall into the trap of insisting on the distinction of the right and the wrong and of the self and non-self. Therefore, only by forgetting all such socially constructed systems and thoughts can one approach the "Tao." Forgetting only external "benevolence and righteousness" and "rites and music" are not enough. One must also "mash up [their] limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make [themselves] identical with the Great Thoroughfare. " (Watson, 1970) Only by forgetting the socially constructed subject "Wo"(the accusative case for "I" in ancient Chinese), can people achieve the object "Wu"(the nominative case for "I" in ancient Chinese), which is the state at which people can approach the "Tao." Just as Chuang-Tzu said, "Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgetter of self. The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven." (Watson, 1970). Chuang-Tzu advocated for liberty from social restraints and the return to an unbiased stage.

4.2. Deconstruction of Dichotomy

Exposing the restrictions and violence of dichotomy rests at the core of Derrida's deconstructionist philosophy. Derrida believes that the way to deconstruct dichotomy is to let the logic of dichotomy deconstruct itself. As previously mentioned, signifiers are a constant movement of inter-references named "différance," which implies that meaning can never be captured by words, and the boundaries between words are often unclear. In these boundaries, readers can always discover a place where they can not differentiate the two elements in a dichotomous pair from each other. From that place, it can be argued that the inferior element of the two is homogeneous to its counterpart, and perhaps nurtures and contributes to its counterpart, leading to the conclusion that the dichotomy is inconsistent and self-contradictory. The violence of dichotomy is obvious to Derrida: in a dichotomy one element is always inferior to the other even though the elements appear to be equal at first sight. For example, in the western tradition, spoken language is superior to written language and the signified is superior to the signifier. This notion that there are only two elements and that one element is always superior to the other, upon which most ancient philosophers constructed their theories, is the foundation to justification of every hierarchical structure and ruthless tyranny (Derrida, 1982). In a culture of dichotomy, any narration of equality, democracy, and human rights becomes essentially useless and absurd. Therefore, the refutation of dichotomy is not only an academic necessity but also a much-needed improvement to decrease discrimination and violence in society.

4.3. Different Ends: The Achievement of the "Tao" and a Free Playground

Even though the deconstruction methods of Chuang-Tzu and Derrida both involve denial of dichotomy, Chuang-Tzu's deconstruction points to an ultimate goal which serves as a guide while Derrida's deconstruction leads people to a free playground where no orthodoxy exists. A conflict between Derrida and Chuang-Tzu is thus revealed; since Chuang-Tzu offers an ultimate goal for his deconstruction, which is the achievement of "Tao." Ironically, he inevitably constructs the dichotomy of "secular — 'Tao' ", where "Tao" is clearly superior to its counterpart. Under the logic of Derrida's deconstruction, such dichotomous pair is essentially flawed and should be abandoned. However, many, especially critics of Derrida, would consider a way with an end guarantees more certainty and is therefore more soothing and preferable than a way with no end but infinite possibilities. Freedom without restriction and interpretation with no standard answer could be considered dangerous. Despite similar means of deconstruction, the conclusions of these two

extraordinary philosophers are completely different and in essence paradoxical. However, there is no doubt that these two extraordinary philosophers have both contributed to the development of liberty and freedom, challenged the pre-existing dictatorship of dichotomy and logocentrism, and weakened the violence and legitimacy of tyrannies — both social and intellectual.

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