

Circle of Life

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1. Introduction

“[T]he route to knowledge is through philosophical reflection” (Lindberg 14).

It is most fascinating to know that most areas of studies nowadays stem from philosophy. The more knowledge accumulates, the more we realise its complexity and relation with other fields of study. As a student studying both General Education Foundation courses at the same time this semester, I have found my learning experience challenging yet fruitful. Not only was I able to connect various concepts with what I have learnt in my major, the courses also enabled me to view my surrounding in a new perspective.

2. Enlightenment from the Course

To begin with, I think the “origin” of the human race is an issue almost all intellectuals are interested in. Who are we? Where do we come from? What have we to accomplish in our lives? In *DNA: The Secret of Life*, Schrödinger (1887–1961) argues that “life could be thought of in terms of storing and passing on biological information” (Watson 115). Watson’s discovery of the

double helical structure of DNA further supported Darwin's evolution theory and explained how human characteristics were determined. "The double helix made sense chemically and . . . biologically" (133). The scientific discovery provided an alternative explanation on the origin of humans to the explanation provided by religion. From his findings, Watson could answer Schrödinger's question on what is life and conclude that "[l]ife was just a matter of physics and chemistry" (141).

Politicians have an entirely different understanding of origins of humans. The famous political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes thinks that the origin of humans referred to how humans transform from a "state of nature"¹ (Wolff 6) to the creation of a legitimate state. Humans who act by impulse without any constraint will inevitably lead mankind into a state of war. The existence of a legitimate state is referred to the origin of human beings because it is the basis of all social convention and further development. It is necessary for protecting its citizens and maintaining peace within a community. In the absence of government, there is no body to ensure conduct among citizens. As human nature tends to be selfish, and wishes to maximize the gain, people would be inevitably brought into "severe conflict" (8).

Although the two views are very distinctive, I think both of them help me understand more about human origin. While the former focused on the scientific aspect, which can be supported by various observations and analysis, the latter focused more on the philosophical meaning of human existence and his position within the state. Both views have profound influence on our lives. For example, the scientific view of human origin may affect our religious belief, leading some to become atheists; while on the other hand, in

1 "State of nature" refers to humans without a government, ruling themselves by self-discipline and cooperation with one another.

modern society, it is impossible for most of us to imagine a society without any kind of political system.

Despite understanding of human origin differs from various perspectives, there are some concepts I have learnt in this course that completely agrees with my major—the importance of education on mankind.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato discusses the effect of education on individuals in order to make them realise the distinction between perception and reality. Education plays an important role in bringing one through the “upward journey and the seeing of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm” (9). Humans can only be free from their fetter through education, such that they can bathe themselves in “the light of the sun” (7) and truly understand the world. Plato divides the world into visible and intelligible realms. “The shadows of the allegory represent the world of sense experience” (Lindberg 13) (the visible realm), while the intelligible realm is only accessible with true knowledge. To gain access to these “higher realities” (13), education helps us to climb out of our own caves until we enter “the realm of true knowledge” (13).

Similarly, Rousseau believes that a state should “place a high value on the education of the citizen” (Wolff 78). Education is essential such that “everyone acquires the appropriate skills” (78) in order to take an active part “as part of the ‘Sovereign’” (78). The function of education is to ensure that citizens will have “nothing contrary to the will of society” (78).

Both Plato and Rousseau agree that education is vital. It shapes a person’s values and belief. Education is necessary for enlightenment, rescuing them from ignorance, providing them with wisdom. Ultimately, a person is able to reach goodness through education. However, two differences lie between the two views.

Firstly, they have different understandings on the “goodness” brought by education. Plato’s view focuses on a personal level, how the individual pursuit of knowledge leads to spiritual enlightenment. Rousseau, on the other hand, stresses on the social impact. A state can only operate smoothly if all individuals transform their individual will² into general will³. Education is needed in educating citizens the general will, eventually causing society to reach the “common good” (18).

Secondly, in terms of the impact of education, Plato’s view is more abstract. He believes that education is to rescue people from their misconception of reality, freeing prisoners from darkness of the cave. This involves the vague concepts such as differentiating between illusion and reality. The impact of education is to help people access true knowledge. Rousseau, on the other hand, focuses more on practical issues. He believes that education is for the sole purpose of the state. Education causes people to vote on “their idea[s] of the right solution” (Wolff 81) on what they think is good for all. In this way, the state and its people can be mutually beneficial to each other.

3. Interdependence between Scientific and Humanistic Knowledge

This session of my essay is no longer text-based analysis. Instead, I would like to discuss how this course has enlightened my ways of seeing things. Before, I would consider myself a student more of the humanity stream. My knowledge always comes from reading classics instead of

2 Making decisions based on individual benefits.

3 Making decisions based on what you think is morally correct.

studying scientific laws and conducting experiments. To me, science-related knowledge is hard to digest. Surprisingly, after this course, I have come to understand that both the humanistic and the scientific perspectives have their own limitations.

Many people understand science as a systematic presentation of facts. It is more objective because it's based on positive claims instead of normative claims. However, as Sivin said, "notion of a universal and value-free modern science . . . is wishful thinking" (227). "That translation into analogies and metaphors steeped in values must precede all public discussion of science, and almost all philosophic discussion" (228). This is to say that no matter how neutral science appears to be, people's views, shaped by their culture and living environment, inevitably affect the accuracy of people's understanding towards it.

On the other hand, seeing the world from the humanistic perspective is even more susceptible to bias. In particular, although my major is sometimes named as "political science", whether it is "scientific" in its substance is not universally agreed. In *Experimental Methods in Political Science*, Professor McDermott says the following:

Political scientists typically prefer archival work, case studies, field work, surveys, quantitative analysis, and formal modeling instead. Yet these other methods need not compete with experimentation [as they are less accurate].
(31).

Most political theories are developed based on methods other than statistics analysis. They often include personal views and values, and how people view society and government. Although political scientists try hard to

make their arguments more convincing by performing experiments, we must admit the fact that politics cannot omit subjectivity completely.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, although this course seems completely irrelevant from what I am currently studying, I think I can benefit a lot in pursuing my major subject. Nature and humanity are actually interdependent from each other, and each cannot exist solely on its own. We should learn to adopt a broader perspective, and be open yet critical to new experiences. Being in university is more than adopting knowledge. It is also a place for developing our mindset, doing final preparation before entering society. Only when we have a constantly curious mindset can we attempt to learn more, and make improvement to both ourselves and society.

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Teacher’s comment:

Taking both “In Dialogue with Nature” and “In Dialogue with Humanity” at the same time, in her term paper, Michelle took the opportunity to compare

and connect several ideas discussed in the two courses. More than that, through these discussions and based on her professional knowledge, Michelle started to realise the distinction and interdependence between nature and humanity, as she said “adopting a broader perspective”. This is indeed one of our objectives in the course. From this article, I wish our students could appreciate not only the texts in each of the General Education Foundation courses but also the connections between the two courses. (Wu Jun)