

Comments on subjectivity and objectivity: The Chinese perspective

Modern Chinese dialects have translations for both *subjective* and *objective*. These derive from concepts used to introduce Buddhist Idealism in the second century AD. The concepts borrowed to formulate Buddhist “everything is illusion” and “no self/mind/ego” doctrines were used in classical Chinese as social rather than psychological concepts: the view of the master (host) vs that of his ministers (guests). These borrowed concepts were joined to the character for “view” as Chinese terms to render European theories of the mind and its ideas (actually the Japanese coined the terms and the Chinese borrowed them back). These terms for translating the Western concepts “subjective” and “objective” emerged in the late 18th and early 19th century.

The matter is less clear for the classical written language. Translators typically claim Chinese thought of the physical heart (心 left inclined organ with 3 drops of blood) as the center of thought. The problem is with the notorious vagueness of our concepts *idea* and *thought* which seem to embrace philosophy, religion, beliefs, feelings, concepts/notions/interpretations, feelings and phenomenal contents. Chinese intellectual tradition did not distinguish religion from philosophy (their religions were broadly *naturalistic*) but regularly invoked a term I’m inclined to unpack as “reflection”—clearly related to remembering and imagining. No one seemed to blend the memory/imagination/reflection inner process together with either the process of perceiving-acting in the natural or with language use (though there are many caveats and interpretive issues here)..

The heart, however, also had the traditional faculty-heart role—motivation, guiding and control of behavior. It was trained by learning, by copying masters, and by practice to acquire *dé* (typically ‘virtue’ but I prefer ‘virtuosity’). Reflection was a version of practice to perfect our *dé*. The heart was otherwise decidedly not the spectator-container mind of Plato’s cave analogy. So, the counterpart of subjectivity was the here-now-me-on-this-trajectory perspective on the world—what I can make out from here. The perspective is of an outside world from a position and momentum in that world, not some inner representation of that world. The senses do not transmit pictures or sound images to the heart. They find and report *biàn* 辯 (distinctions) that mark where we can identify parts of that world and socially agree on a name for them. The distinctions metaphorically inform the heart of the boundaries of permissible/possible paths of behavior.

The Chinese philosophers of language called these parts *wú* which translators render as Arf’s hated “things.” I recommend translating *wú* as “natural kinds.” What Arf is right about is that *wú* are not linked to the grammar of subject and predicate. *Wú* have past histories and future probabilities—their *dào*s (ways) which are parts of the great *dào* of the cosmos of which they are parts. As long as we don’t take these as Aristotelian constructions of matter/pure-particularity + abstract properties, I differ from Arf only in not objecting to the word *thing*.

The counterparts of belief structures in classical Chinese did not take propositions as objects of a belief verb. The complex structure is more suited to treatment as a de-re stance toward some object and a socially permitted “name” for that distinguishable part of the world. Error in these complex belief states can come from two directions. My senses may fail to recognize the distinction between dogs and cats or I may be mistaken in my mastery of the social norms of the

use of these terms. Terms of language also have *dào*s and I may follow the path of my hillbilly peers and use terms in ways that would provoke the Master to reprimand or correct me. Confusing cats and dogs would presumably provoke Arf to such a reaction and I would emerge from the interaction with a more accurate *dé* for communicating with my fellow students.

The heart helps us navigate the paths in the world using the distinctions and the social training in following the norms of use. In the classical period I find a radically altered version of the belief + desire analysis of behavior. There are clearly desires that affect behavior—whether by improving our accuracy in these two aspects or by distracting us from them. These are usually attachments to parts of the world that we identify and name, not propositional desires. Desires are not the opposite or enemy of reason. (There is not even an approximate counterpart of *reason* in Classical Chinese apart from correctly following the normative path structure for humans in this natural world of which they are parts of parts of parts). Those Indo-European concepts and that analysis of human functioning came with Buddhism. Besides desires (which Laozi tended to treat as caused by learning names governed by social norms for grouping distinction in different ways), the moods and feelings arise more naturally in the heart internally. Insofar as a heart is a container of things it is the container of these moods and the socially learned distinctions and names. With the distinction information from the senses the heart “rules” the body, chooses paths of learned behavior and monitors how well we perform them in following a possible path.

In sum, subjectivity in classical China reduces to a particular space in a fully relative perspectival relativism, not to an ontology of subjective objects or in an inner thought-world.

As an aside (if anyone is still reading), Modern Chinese now also has two belief verbs that take propositional objects just the way *belief* does in English. One is a compound of ancient terms meaning something like *mutual(ly)* and *trust(worthy)*. It is used like “**P**, I believe,” like Fred’s modest assertion of P.

The other belief verb compounds the two parts of the ancient *de-re* structure *S yi /with/of X wei/deems-behaves-as-permissible-for Y*. The modern compound takes XY as its propositional object. The best guess I can find is that both these terms were coined and introduced in the early 19th C under pressure to find translations for European *to believe*. I had originally learned them as synonyms (because both translated believe that’) and discovered relatively recently that they differ in meaning in both dialects of modern Chinese. The modified *de-re* structure is used like “**I believe** P” with the emphasis on “I believe” and implies the belief is false or dubious. The other one signals probability or my best guess.

I speculate that this reflects the ancient obscure concept of *Wu-wei*, (lack deem-doing—the Daoist theory commonly and confusingly translated as “non-action”). The Daoist naturalist argument was we should not let desires linked to social constructs dominate our behaviors. Zhuangzi, however pointed out that socially agreed human distinctions are natural because humans are both natural and naturally social animals.