

Experience Day Philosophy: Global and Comparative Perspectives

4th of April 2025



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Introduction

A student of Philosophy: Global and Comparative Perspectives will tell you about your first year at this programme.

Lecture

Title

Knowing other minds in ancient Chinese thought

Short description

Can we know other minds? This question has also been raised in Chinese antiquity when ancient thinkers strove to contextualise personal well-being in the flourishing of their community. The knowledge of other minds, thus, becomes crucial for personal and interpersonal flourishing. In this lecture, students will examine two cases. The first example is a thought experiment in a Confucian text that investigates how and why people feel alarmed upon seeing a child who is about to fall in a well. And the second example unfolds through a conversation between two friends who cannot agree with one another on what they can know about the joyful fish. The purpose of the discussion is to explore why the self and the other are interdependent without losing their respective identities.

Lecturer: Jingjing Li (j.li@phil.leidenuniv.nl)

Jingjing Li is a University Lecturer of Chinese and Comparative Philosophy at Leiden University's Institute for Philosophy.

Preparation:

Watch the two examples on youtube: the two examples can be found on YouTube. The joyful fish (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nMCrj3soDU&t=378s>); the child falling in a well (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvnxbdomk90&t=1s>)

Seminar

Title

“Knowing Other Minds in Ancient Chinese Thought – Tutorial”

Short description

Following up on Dr. Li's lecture session, the tutorial will follow up by having students read and discuss two major Chinese commentarial perspectives on the first of the texts in the Lecture, namely Mencius (Mengzi) 2A6. The 12th century philosopher Zhu Xi and the 15th century philosopher Wang Yangming, though both Confucius, had different explanations of how human beings can know other minds well enough to feel and react to sympathy for them. Students will be asked to read these two different interpretations, formulate their own questions about each, and discuss which reading, Zhu's or Wang's, seems more philosophically believable.

Lecturer: Douglas L. Berger (d.l.berger@phil.leidenuniv.nl)

Douglas Berger is Professor of Global and Comparative Philosophy in Leiden's Institute for Philosophy. He specializes in classical Indian and Chinese thought and Intercultural Philosophical Hermeneutics.

Preparation

The homework for the seminar is attached. Please read through the passages on the sheet and consider the questions at the end and perhaps bring with you some reflections in response to these questions, so you are prepared to discuss.

Q&A

Do you have any questions regarding the programme? The student will answer them all at the Q&A.

A Confucian Debate on Other Minds and How We Can Sympathize with One Another

Original Passage from *Mencius (Mengzi)* (372-289 BCE)

今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也... 苟能充之，足以保四海；苟不充之，不足以事父母。(Mengzi 2A6)

Even with people of today, seeing a child about to fall into a well, without exception, their inner hearts will be agitated with pity (惻隱之心 *ceyin zhi xin*). Not because they want to gain the favor of the child's parents, not because they want to gain the praise of their neighbors and friends, and not because they want to acquire a bad reputation for not feeling this way. For this reason, without the feeling of inner pity (惻隱 *ceyin*), one is not a person; without the feeling of disdain, one is not a person; without the feeling of deference, one is not a person; without the feeling of approval and disapproval, one is not a person. The feeling of inner pity is the beginning of co-humanity (仁 *ren*); the feeling of disdain is the beginning of rightness (義 *yi*); the feeling of deference is the beginning of ritual (禮 *li*); the feeling of approval and disapproval is the beginning of wisdom (智 *zhi*) ... If one can complete them, they will suffice to maintain all creatures all the way to the four seas; if one cannot complete them, they will not suffice for the affairs of one's father and mother.

Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) Commentary

惻隱、羞惡、辭讓、是非，情也。仁、義、禮、智、性也。心，統性情者也。端，緒也。因其情之發，而性之本然可得而見，猶有物在中而緒見於外也。(Mengziji Zhu 2A6)

Inner compassion, shame and revulsion, deference and approval and disapproval, these are emotions (情 *qing*). Co-humanity, rightness, ritual propriety and wisdom, these are nature (性 *xing*). The heart-mind (心 *xin*) is that which unifies nature and emotions. The edges (端 *duan*) are what is visible (緒 *xu*). Because it manifests in emotions, the root (本 *ben*) of nature can become visible. It is like things that are found within (在中 *zai zhong*) but their visible traces (緒 *xu*) are apparent on the outside.

Wang Yangming's (1472-1529) Commentary

大人者，以天地萬物為一體者也。其視天下猶一家，中國猶一人焉。若夫間形骸而分爾我者，小人矣。大人之能以天地萬物為一體也，非意之也，其心之仁本若是，其與天地萬物而為一也，豈惟大人，雖小人之心亦莫不然，彼顧自小之耳。是故見孺子之入井，而必有怵惕惻隱之心焉，是其仁之與孺子而為一體也。(Da Xue Wen 1)

Those of great personhood regard heaven, earth and the ten thousand things as of one substance with their own bodies (體 *ti*). They look upon all under heaven as one family, and the Central Kingdom as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate [from Heaven, earth and the ten thousand things] are petty persons. The ability that those of great personhood have to form one substantial body with heaven, earth and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally do (非意 *fei yi*); the co-humanity (仁 *ren*) of their heart-minds (心 *xin*) is originally like this. How could it be that only the heart-minds of great people are one with heaven, earth and the ten thousand things? Even the heart-minds of petty people are like this. It is only the way that such people look at things that makes them petty. This is why, when they see a child [about to] fall into a well, they cannot avoid being alarmed and concern for the child. This is because their co-humanity forms one substantial body with the child.

Questions to Consider

How does Zhu Xi interpret the relationship between the feelings we have and what he calls our nature? What is the most important reason Zhu Xi identifies for why human beings can understand one another—is it the emotions or our shared nature? And why do you think he takes this view?

How does Wang Yangming interpret the relationship between the heart-minds of people and the actual concrete, physical bodies of people? How does the way people regard their relationship to one another in this light help them understand one another?

Which Confucian commentator do you think has a better understanding of how people can know and sympathize with one another and why?

Or, are both commentators wrong and do you have a different idea of how people can know other minds and sympathize with one another than any of these texts, and what are your reasons for thinking this?