

The Universal of the “Way of Thinking”: A Comparative Study of the Way of Thinking of Whitehead and Marx

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Supported by Dr Innovation Fund in China University of Political Science and Law.

Received 5 February 2015; accepted 10 April 2015
Published online 26 April 2015

Abstract

Whitehead and Marx respectively stand at the peak in different times and they use different ways of thinking to think of the world. However, they two explain the same problem from different perspectives, and they both go beyond a static perspective to view the world of the various schools of traditional Western philosophy and have turned to using dynamic perspectives to think of the world. They answer the same question for people in different eras—the world is an organic whole world. This paper compares Whitehead’s “organic” way of thinking and Marx’s “practical” way of thinking to find something in common—a whole way of thinking. This way of thinking makes us understand questions, raise questions and solve questions from the perspective of the whole field of view, and then allow us to correctly understand and grasp the dynamic world.

Key words: Way of thinking; Importance; Expression; Understanding; Practice

Li, H. X. (2015). The Universal of the “Way of Thinking”: A Comparative Study of the Way of Thinking of Whitehead and Marx. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(4), 68-73. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/6749>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6749>

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is the essence of the spirit of the times and it is a product of the times. It always answers all the questions

in various forms raised by the times. The methods and perspectives of philosophers in different times to watch the world vary, and their ways of thinking to observe and evaluate things are different. All schools of traditional western philosophy use subject and object dualism substantial thinking to think about the world and to explain the world. For example, materialism and idealism respectively take material and spirit as the nature of own understanding of the world. They hold different opinions and fight over it all the time. Faced with problems handed down from traditional metaphysics dualism, in philosophers’ debates and different opinions, how would Whitehead and Marx solve the problem? They stand at the peak in different times. What kind of way of thinking do they use to think about the world? Is there anything in common in their way of thinking? If so, where is their commonality?

1. TO INTERPRET THE WORLD IN TWO DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING

Different ways of thinking often provide people with different approaches to observe, analyze and solve problems. Whitehead and Marx have abandoned the way of thinking of “ontology” (the way of thinking to pursue the truth of things and the existence of primitive) and established their own way of thinking. Whitehead’s and Marx’s ways of thinking are different from the ontological way of thinking. They do not explain the original issue of the world with static perspectives, but with dynamic perspectives in the course of interactive events between human and the world to grasp how to understand things when people act on an object, such a way of thinking.

Whitehead’s “organic” way of thinking: When people act on the facts (objectives including human beings), in the process in which human and things promote each other, people’s recognition of facts shows three characteristics: importance, expression and understanding.

The “organism” of this way of thinking shows that when people understand the facts, they interpret the world in the dynamic process in which people and facts promote each other. In this dynamic process, people’s understanding of facts shows interrelated and indispensable three characteristics.

First, the importance and facts are the experience foundation of all ranges. Facts are the foundation of importance and the reason why importance is important is precisely because facts are indispensable. We pay full attention when we have a feeling of importance. When we pay full attention, we will notice facts. As Whitehead says, “Those who make themselves rigidly pay attention to facts because they feel the importance of such an attitude.” (Whitehead, 2006, p.6)

For the understanding of facts and importance, Whitehead believes that, “facts are the concept of existence. When we try to grasp this concept, it will divide itself into a number of different types of subordinate concepts about existence. ...Any existing circumstance contains other existence concepts associated with but excluded in it.” (Ibid., p.8) “There is no importance in a vacuum. For a limited intellect, the complicity of facts demands making choices when we study them. The ‘choice’ requires the concept of ‘having this and not having that’.” (Ibid.) This means that when you know or analyze fact A (simple existence), at the same time you will distinguish facts B, C, D ... (individual purely existing facts). The relationship among facts A, B, C, D ... is co-existing and they mutually distinguish from each other. In the extensive world, there are millions of facts. How do we understand facts A or B or C or D in this time and get to know facts D or C or B or A in that time? In other words, in this time this is important, and in that time that is important. The difference between “this” and “that” reflects importance. The importance is the fact concept of human’s (the subject) selection of facts based on interest reflecting in human brain. Facts are not isolated facts which exist alone and facts and facts are interrelated. This relation is the essence of all types of things.

Second, the concept of importance is set by expression. “In the environment, expression is the spread of something initially accepted in the expresser’s experience. It does not necessarily contain conscious provisions, and it only has the impulse to spread. This desire is one of the easiest features in the kingdom of animals.” (Ibid., pp.20-21) In the kingdom of animals, the central activity of higher animals (human) is developed when they have contact with new things. Some of the new things gather a variety of expressions (dominance) of body together, while some of the new things felt are booting out by possibilities that the higher animals have never demonstrated (recessivity). In other words, higher animals (human) through the feeling of a variety of receptors of the body express a variety of feelings to the central organ, and then the central organ makes a general expression. They would

transfer expressions not showing up (such as the moral feeling and religious mysterious feeling) to the central organs. The difference between higher animals (human) and lower animals having the similar ability is that they have the ability to directly accept new things.

Third, understanding is the associated cause in the process of understanding things. There are two ways of understanding: one way is the internal understanding, and that is “the understood thing structured and then we can follow this factor in this thing and the interleaved way of these factors constituting this whole thing to understand it.” (Ibid., p.42) Another way is external understanding and that is “to take the thing as an entity (whether it can be analyzed or not), and to obtain evidence of its ability on the environment.” (Ibid.) That is to say, the internal understanding is the understanding of the thing’s structure and the thing itself and the external understanding is a perspective of understanding associated things and it is the motivation to understand things. Internal understanding understands things themselves, and external understanding understands the linkages between things. Internal understanding and external understanding together constitute the horizon of understanding of things and constitute a real cosmic view of understanding of things.

Every fact, no matter what type it belongs to, in essence, contains links of its own with other things in the universe. We can take these links as the universe which we see from this fact, whether it is in complete or in the potential. (Ibid., p.60)

In spite of this fact is presence or absence (dominant fact or recessive fact), it is linked with other facts there.

Importance, expression and understanding is sort of a way of thinking in the interactive dynamic process between people and facts (objective existences including human) in which people choose and express facts, and then connect the relationship between people and facts, people and people, facts and facts into a network and clarify each context in this network.

“Practice” way of thinking from Marx: in order to meet the subsistence needs, people access to the material means of subsistence from nature through labor. In the dynamic process of interaction between human and nature, human is constantly engaged in the creation of objects and its own. This dynamic creative process uses practical activities as a link to interpret the world with a whole network of relationships between man and nature, man and society and man and man.

The first is the needs for the organism to survive. Animals and plants, as a part of nature, in order to survive, are exchanging energies in the natural world. Plants absorb nutrients in the soil and breathe the carbon dioxide in the air. Animals ingest plants or animals other than themselves to maintain the body’s own survival needs. Marx says, “In order to be able to ‘make history’, people must be able to live; but in order to live, they

first need to eat, drink, wear and house as well as a few other things to live through; therefore, the first historical activity is to produce these materials to meet these needs, and that is the production of material life itself." (*The German Ideology*, 2003, p.23) The most basic needs for people to survive are food, drinks, clothes and houses to live through, and the existence of these basic needs of life is not owned when people are born. People need to get a substance from an object other than themselves to supply energy to organism through a way or a means. Which way do people use to get it? Marx proposes human practice.

Second, human practice is free and conscious activity. In contrast to the people and animals, Marx identifies human activities are free and conscious activities. Animals are under the absolute control of the inevitability of nature, while people not only are able to recognize the nature but also to transform the nature. Free and conscious human activity is reflected in the process of interaction between man and the object and it is an activity through a way or by means to access to get a substance from the nature to maintain their own survival and also get a self-improvement. In other words, this "free and conscious activity" only applies when human transform the object to obtain material goods for their own needs, and then human activity is free and conscious. As Marx says,

The conscious life activity directly distinguishes the life activity of human from that of animals. Because of this, human is kind of existence. Or we can say, because human is kind of existence, he is the presence of consciousness, and that is, his own life is an object for him. Just because of this, his activity is a free activity. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 1]*, 1995, p.46)

The active process in which free and conscious human practice in the form of being useful for their lives occupies natural substances connects man and nature, man and man, man and society, man and himself as a whole. Why do people have such connectivity? And how does human practice connect people and the world as a whole?

Finally, people's practice connects human and the world as a whole. Human survival needs practice and it is inseparable from practice. Without practice, it cannot reflect that people's practice is a

free and conscious" activity, nor make people survive. The human practice is precisely the central nervous cell to understand the relationship between human and objects in the outside world. As Marx says, "Labor is first the process between man and nature in which the man uses his own activities to mediate, adjust and control the exchange of material between man and nature. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 2]*, 1995, p.177)

Without either human or nature, we cannot interpret the practice of human life. Man is part of nature, and human gets natural objects through labor.

Without nature or sensuous external world, the workers cannot create anything. Nature makes it possible for workers to achieve labor; the workers' labor conduct activities in the nature; workers' labor produces their own products from nature.

However, nature on the one hand in this sense provides labor with life subsistence, that is, without labor processing objects, labor cannot exist; on the other hand, it also provides life subsistence in a more narrow sense, namely the way to maintain physical survival of the workers themselves. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 1]*, 1995, p.42)

Labor (human practice) is a bridge for the unity between man and nature. Human existence and development need material and energy exchange with nature through human labor. Through labor, human beings have their own way of existence and development.

By practice people act on the nature. People change the nature and themselves while accessing to material goods from the nature. The process of people's practice which integrates man and nature, man and society, man and himself as a whole also integrates man and the world as an organic whole world.

2. THE COMMONALITY OF THE TWO WAYS OF THINKING

The way of thinking of Whitehead and Marx to understand the relationship between people and the world is different, but they both believe that the human world is an internally related whole and the world is a development process full of innovations, which is the commonality of their way of thinking.

First, they regard the world as an organic whole. On the one hand, on ontology and epistemology, their theories are different, but they both think the inherent relationship of the world is an organic whole relation. Whitehead believes the experience comes from the material world and people's experience is different due to the ever-changing and different substances in the nature. Material and consciousness are in the unity and all things in the world are endless and ever-changing. They form an interrelated network. "The concept of facts in human brain is a reflection of facts. The concept of pure fact is purely existing feature emerging in people's thinking so that it is coordinated with the inevitable thing of external activities." (Whitehead, 2006, p.9) Marx believes that consciousness is the reflection of objective material world in the human brain. Without the object to be reflected, there is no reflection; without the objective material world, there is no consciousness. This view of Marx is the same as Whitehead's view, namely material and consciousness are in unity and they are in an organic whole relationship, as Marx says: "Conceptual things are nothing more than material things which are moved into and have been transformed in people's minds." (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 2]*, 2012, p.93)

On the relationship between the finite and the infinite, Whitehead believes that the three characteristics of people knowing facts make people's understanding always from the finite approach to the infinite.

Perceptual experience is a description of the integrity of the reality of things and makes it have the integrity of abstraction. It has increased importance. However, the importance of such results is not just a color chart with red, white and blue. It involves infinity of real facts hidden in its present finite. (Whitehead, 2006, p.101)

“Every piece of material is self-contained, is in a passive, stationary spatial relationship net, and is wound into an infinite and eternal unified system of relations.” (Ibid., p.122) Humans are physical living individuals and their experience is limited, but human beings always want to go beyond the limited reality and get to know the infinite field of the universe. This combination of finite and infinite understanding of the universe constitutes the process of human beings knowing the universe.

Marx believes that people maintain their existence in practice. The finite and the infinite of human existence manifest the finite and the infinite of man’s practice. He says: “Individuals are how they express their life. Therefore, what they are is consistent with their production – consistent with both what they produce and how they produce, and what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production.” (*The German Ideology*, 2003, p.11). That is to say, practice is the way human exists, and positive and innovative “activity” is the nature of “practice”. This positive and innovative practice is the process how people continue to go beyond the existing survival environment and take efforts to create an ideal living situation. This process contains the infinity of human existence, and the human practice is usually constrained by nature, humans’ own conditions and other aspects of factors. Practice is the bridge connecting the finite and the infinite of human existence. Therefore, from the perspective of ontology and epistemology, they believe that everything in the world is an ever-changing, endless and interconnected network and it is an organic whole. People cannot simultaneously know the endless facts, but one can start from the finite facts and integrate the finite facts and the infinite fact as a whole to understand things.

On the other hand, it is about the relationship between man and the world, that is the relationship between man and nature and man and society. Whitehead and Marx believe that man is part of nature and man and nature are in a unified unity. Whitehead believes that

The human body is part of nature, and because of that, every moment of human experience is closely fit in. There are factors that flow in and out between the physical existence of body and human experience, therefore each factor contains the presence of other factors. Human body provides the most intimate experience of the interaction of the reality of things in the nature. (Whitehead, 2006, pp.102-103)

The material world flows into and out of the human body as Whitehead says; in other words, people as part of nature, enjoy the material resources provided by nature, but also they constantly know nature and transform nature. Man and nature are an organic whole which promotes

each other. Marx says, “Labor first is the process between man and nature, and it is the process in which man uses his own activity to mediate, adjust and control the material exchange between man and nature. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 2]*, 1995, p.177) That is to say, human practice acts on nature and changes the nature, and meanwhile it changes man himself. Man and nature are in a unified whole. They two interact with each other and one cannot be separated from the other.

The unified whole relationship between man and nature also explains that the relationship between man and society is an organic whole relationship. Whitehead says, “The characteristics of life are absolute self-enjoyment, creativity and purpose. Here ‘purpose’ obviously includes accepting pure ideal things, making it the guidance of the creative process.” (Whitehead, 2006, pp.133-134) “Every interpretation of human activities regards ‘purpose’ as an essential factor to be included in the interpretation.” (Ibid., p.136) Whitehead believes that people’s “purpose” pulls people to choose to understand the nature purposefully, and continue to transform nature to meet their needs. Purpose has served as a guide for people’s actions. People have a choice of purposefully transform nature together with others. In the process, the different organizational ways of people have caused different functional activity ways so as to form staggered complex human social activities.

Marx starts from human practice to analyze the relationship between man and society. In order to make a living, people need to produce material life substances. People’s production of material subsistence activities acting on the nature creates the relationship between man and man and man and society. That is to say, human practice integrates man and nature and man and society together to form an organic whole. As Marx says, “society is not a solid crystal, and it is organism which changes and is often in a process of change.” (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 2]*, 1995, p.102)

In this way, the production of life, whether through labor to achieve the production of his life, or through birth to achieve the production of the lives of others, immediately shows a dual relationship: One is a natural relationship, and the other is a social relationship; the meaning of social relations here means the common activities of many individuals, regardless such common activity is under what conditions, in what way and for what purposes. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 1]*, 1995, p.80)

Therefore, the issue of unity between individuals and nature and individuals and others can only get a reasonable solution on the basis of the material production way.

Second, both their understanding of the world is “process” thinking development way. Whitehead believes that,

the process has a rhythm and the creative activities thereby cause a natural pulse. Every pulse forms a natural unit of historical

facts. In this way we are able to identify finite fact units in associated infinity of the universe. (Whitehead, 2006, p.79)

The human creative activities constantly act on nature. Every human creative activity has formed a natural unit of historical facts. In this process of changing the nature, we can clearly recognize certain historical fact in the interconnected historical facts and in the process of human creation activity, there are an infinite number of different forms that together constitute the universe (that is, the universe consists of things that now exist, and that may exist in the past and at present), creating a mutual connected and evolving world of all things.

Marx believes that the world is a collection of processes. All things, without exception, exist as processes; from micro to macro, from the inorganic world to the organic world, from the animal kingdom to human society, they all are in a constant process which never ends. Marx points out that, "The so-called world history is nothing more than the process by which human beings are born through human labor and it is a generation process for nature to people." (*Complete Works of Marx and Engels [Vol. 42]*, 1979, p.131) History itself is human activities and their results. Materials in the world are not standing still, but in constant motion and are constant changing. All materials are in the process of changing.

It can be seen that, Whitehead analyzes the characteristics that people manifest when they get to know the facts and Marx starts from people in practice. They take people out of the activities in the world, come to a halt, "observe" and "understand" the world through people's characteristics of knowing facts and people's activities. They both are asking how people and the world integrate into one. Such questioning makes Whitehead's "organic whole" way of thinking and Marx's "practice" way of thinking point to the same direction of thinking - the "whole" way of thinking.

3. TO THE WHOLE WAY OF THINKING

Whitehead and Marx use different ways of thinking to interpret the organic and whole relation between man and the world, and then together they provide us with a "whole" way of thinking. I call it the "pupil" way of thinking. "Pupil" way of thinking I'm talking about here refers to the way of thinking using a "pupil" perspective to explain the whole world. It shows as the following figure:

The first circle is the characteristic circle and that is the characteristics people manifest when they get to know objects. In this circle, Whitehead tells the three characteristics people manifest when getting to know the facts: importance, expression and understanding. In the circle Marx tells the free and conscious characteristics of people when they get to know objects (nature).

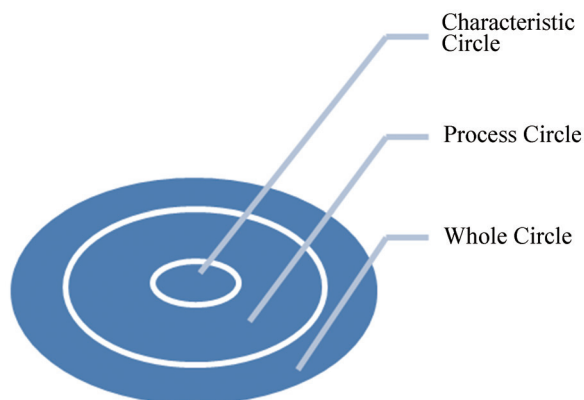


Figure 1
Mode of Whole Thinking

The second circle is the process circle. In this circle, Whitehead discusses the process of how the three characteristics integrate into all things in the world when people understand facts. In the circle, Marx discusses that the practice of people is a process of integrating with the world.

The third circle is the whole circle. In the whole perspective, people manifest the features of the characteristic circle and the process circle when they understand present facts and facts that are not present. The characteristics people manifest when they understand facts and the process of understanding facts are comprehensive considerations of the present facts (dominant facts) and facts that are not present (recessive facts). People from an infinite number of absent facts extract recessive facts to help to understand the present facts. In other words, when people understand the present facts, they need to consider a lot of recessive facts, that are, people have to stand at the whole horizon to grasp the present and absent facts. In the circle Whitehead and Marx discuss the whole relationship between people and the world.

The three circles are in a progressive relationship. The first to enter the pupil is the first circle, which is the interpretation of the characteristics people manifest when they understand objects. The second to enter the pupil is the second circle, which is the interpretation of the process how man and the world integration, and the last to enter the pupil is the whole circle. This circle is the integration of present and absents facts of the first two circles. People's pupil is of diffusion and contraction (in this case, I am not talking about the nature of the pupil itself, but use its image to metaphorize the sight of observing problems). When people's sight is less than the whole circle, people can only see facts of characteristic circle and process circle, and when people's pupil diffuses in the whole circle, people can see facts of the infinite whole circle (a circle of an infinite extension of the universe, that is the integration circle of the present and absent facts). For example, we all know how the water wave circles form. Throw a stone into the river. The point

where the stone hit the river is the beginning of a wave source that we see. I refer it to as the wave point source. This point is the point that we see most clearly. The stone hits the river and they vibrate to generate countless wave circles. They point to the wave source and take it as the axis and continue to expand outwards. We see the wave circle closer to the wave point source more clearly, and there may be countless wave circles farther away from the wave point source which our naked eye cannot see. Similarly, the human sight is the same. When we understand the world and facts, we need to understand not only the wave point source and clear wave circles, but also the invisible wave circles, that is, we need to see the present and absent facts (dominant and recessive facts). As shown in the above figure, the pupil circle is just as the sight of people. People need to understand not only the characteristic circle, process circle, but also the infinite whole circle which continuously expands outward taking the characteristic circle as its axis. Only in this way can people grasp the integrity of the universe, fully grasp the development of facts and the development of the universe.

Recently people have different opinions on Chai Jing's haze investigation *Under the Dome*. Some support her and some criticize her, which shows that people stand at different positions and result in different perspectives. Some people stand at the characteristic circle, arguing that Chai Jing starts from her motherhood and observes the source of haze for the health of her daughter; some people stand at process circle, arguing that historical development process at home and abroad and industrial development process is the origin of haze; some people stand at the whole circle, arguing that the present and absent factors between human beings and nature cause haze and its harm. They have different views when they stand at different sights and then the problem-solving approaches are different. We live under the same dome. Facing haze, one cannot avoid it. This is a common problem faced by mankind. We should stand at the whole circle to consider the issue, encourage those who dare to raise questions, dare to challenge and dare to speak for human development and human health rather than unreasonably criticize or slander those who walk in the forefront of the times and dare to challenge.

Both Whitehead's "organic" way of thinking and Marx and Engels' "practice" way of thinking discuss the integration relations between man and nature and man and society in the "whole circle". The world is an organic whole world. Whitehead takes the characteristics people manifest when they understand facts as the perspective,

discusses the integration way and process between man and the world, and understands the interactive net-like relationship between people and the world from the whole relationship between man and the world. Marx takes human practice as the perspective, expands the role of people in the world as a whole and the process of integration of people and the world, and grasps the development process of people and the world to promote each other in the overall relationship between man and the world. They have pointed out a correct direction for us: use the "whole" horizon of view to consider problems and use the "whole" way of thinking to think about problems; they point out the right path that only standing in the whole perspective to understand problems, raise questions and solve problems can we correctly understand the world and grasp the world.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Whitehead and Marx stand at the peak in different times and use dynamic perspective to interpret the world and thus reverse the situation that all schools of traditional Western philosophy see the world in a static perspective. They each use a different way of thinking to think about the world, but they have the same "universal", which is that Whitehead's "organic" way of thinking and Marx's "practice" way of thinking have something in common — a whole way of thinking. Whole thinking is not only a way of thinking that Western scholar Whitehead uses to understand the world, but also Marx's way of thinking to "interpret the world and change the world". That is to use the "whole" to think about the relationship between man and nature, man and man, and man and society, and thus answer that man and the world is an organic whole world.

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