Comparison of Lao-Tzu and Plato on Their Philosophies

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Comparison of Lao-Tzu and Plato & Their Values For the world

Abstract:

As a famous ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu was contemporary with Plato, who was much more well-known all over the world, but he and his ideas might not be as familiar with people as Plato. So I’d like to give an illustration of their similarities and then primarily give a comparison between their philosophies with respect to the virtue, the law, the relation of humans and nature, the way of governing a state, styles of thinking and doing things and so on. Anyway, both of their philosophies are extreme important for both Chinese and westerns to take them in.

Key words: philosophy, comparison, virtue, emotion, behavioral pattern, nature, government

Introduction:

1) The motive of me doing this study is quite understandable. Plato and his philosophies are as well-known all over the western countries as Lao-Tzu’s ideas in China, while, there shouldn’t be any boundaries of culture and philosophies among countries and people all over the world have chances to know about their brilliant philosophies. So I’d like to give a comparison between them, therefore people who are interested in them can comprehend their philosophies much more clearly, so that the essence can reach people’s heart and be applied throughout their lives.
2) Two different countries are involved in this conference; therefore the communication and exchanging ideas are encouraged so that through my presentation people in both countries can get a chance to know more brilliant philosophies that are usually ignored.

(I)

Both Plato and Lao-Tzu had pursued the virtue owing to their actually similar living circumstance---- Different states co-existed fighting each other for the territory, people and the like, and people had to struggle for living hoping they could see the sunrise of the next day during endless warriors, therefore discipline and virtue atmosphere went down day by day---- although their ideas of calling up virtue were of conspicuous differences.

Plato put forward two main points about virtue. One is that knowledge and virtue are combined to one, or knowledge is virtue to some extent, the other is that education can lead to virtue. What’s more, he used an example to illustrate his idea.

One person know nothing when he is a baby except eating and sleeping, let alone what is right and what is wrong, so his parents continuously tell him what is encouraged or unappreciated by people. Gradually he grows up becoming a polite and elegant teenager, but there is a confusion of the genuine and the false preventing him from making a clear distinction between right and wrong. Then his teacher sets out to tell him some stories about saints from whom he can learn lots of principles to be applied in his life. Plato believed that they can grow up to be virtuous like this person
who is educated all the time.

Different from Plato, Lao-Tzu proposed that virtue was obtained by continuous introspection instead of education, because human beings were kind-hearted and virtuous from birth. And everyone would keep his good essence unless he was influenced by someone evil. In his opinion, the best virtue is like water in that it never do anything on purpose or struggle for something, and flowing conforming to nature to those places where need it, water becomes the most essential factor in nature. So if people want to be virtuous, they don’t have to do anything intentionally but follow their heart and introspect themselves. The less things they want to do, the less greedy and more virtuous they will be.

So Lao-Tzu believed that introspection can lead to virtue instead of education.

Although there are limits, both of their ideas are brilliant and of momentous current significance about people establishing virtue and proper worldview. What we need to do is combining their essence into one to apply them.

(Ⅱ)

Besides, their philosophies as for emotion embody their great impact on thinking and behavioral patterns of descendants. In Lao-Tzu’s opinion, all kinds of emotions prevented soul from being calm. Therefore people had better refrain or conceal their emotion and feeling instead of expressing it. While Plato held the view that emotion is the window of people’s mind, so it was apparently necessary to express it, or else others never knew what you were exactly thinking. For that matter, we can see their great impact that Chinese are usually so euphemistic and veil that
they seldom speak out what they really want or hate. That’s totally different from westerners who are frank, straightforward, open and romantic.

In addition, Lao-Tzu advocated collectivism and emotionalism, while Plato upheld individualism and rationalism that people should have a logical thinking pattern and he embodied his idea on logics in his development on language that is inherited until now. At the beginning of the western logics, Plato’s principle played a very important role. For instance, in English that has complex internal grammar of phrases, clauses and sentences, there are much syntax that language users have to obey governing the word order, the tense, the voice and many other sentence elements. The complex syntax reflects their rigorous logics. While compared with English, in Chinese; the demand of grammar is not that strict for users, and Chinese syntax is much more free, for example, any elements like the subject or object are allowed to be missed without changing the sentence’s original meaning and listeners still understand you.

All in all, their different thinking and behavioral patterns both have an enormous impact on descendants until now.

(III)

Except virtue, another remarkable characteristic to distinguish their philosophies is the difference between their assertions of enacting and using laws in a state. Their opinions are based on materialism and idealism relatively. Lao-Tzu is primarily of materialism while Plato, mainly idealism, so Lao-Tzu proposed that governing should
obey the nature law and the emperor needn’t do anything on purpose, or what he should do is let people live freely without strict even severe laws. While Plato believed that an emperor had better use explicit laws to regulate and confine people to do nothing evil. We can find out some proofs in their ideas about the status of nature and the relation of nature and human being.

Lao-Tzu raised the theory of “Tao(law) following the example of the nature”. He realized that contradictions about nature and human being were what human being went against the Tao (natural law). He pointed out that nature and human being should combine into one, and human being should adhere to the natural law, so with governors. The emperor needn’t do anything on purpose, and this is the core of his philosophy that is called “non-contention”. He had “water” to get across his view: as we all know, water is the most significant factor on the earth, but it never struggles for anything, and never flew to anywhere intentionally, just following the natural law. It always flows conforming to the natural terrain, arriving at the place where is low-lying and where need it. That’s what an emperor is supposed to be like---- the most successful emperor seems like he don’t exist at all in peacetime, and only when people need a leader, he appears to point out how to get onto a right path, to encourage them to overcome any troubles.

While Plato paid less attention to the relation between nature and human being, holding the view that everything that can be seen and felt is illusory and changeable, including the whole world, in that everything is the shadow or inflection of ideas of God. So the changeable world need some explicit rules, in another word, laws, to
divide people into three parts as governors (wise philosophers), soldiers (strong men) and supporters (farmers and workers) who performed their own functions so that the state would operate regularly and be full of peace and less fighting. Plato has regarded the law as the most authoritative behavioral standard and should be adhered to like God’s order.

Attaching importance to the law is of great implication, but the specific hierarchy he proposed is almost out of date, because everyone has his right to choose his future and decide what he would be. On this point, we can mix Plato’s idea of law with Lao-Tzu’s idea of taking everything as it comes freely to make society change for the better.

**Conclusion:**

Both Plato and Lao-tzu have obtained tremendous achievements in the line of philosophy and greatly influenced our world, although they have some differences on some opinion like the virtue, law, governing and so on. But nothing is perfect forever, as to the globalization now, only if we combine the proper essence, can we apply it in life to establish a better world.

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