



Life and Knowledge: Perspectives from Ancient Chinese Philosophies to Ancient Near East Cultures

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Abstract. This paper evaluates philosophies from Ancient Chinese philosophies and Ancient Near East cultures to consider their potential for applying second-wave positive psychology, also known as positive psychology 2.0 (hereafter “PP 2.0”). This book chapter offers alternative insights into alternative psychological perspectives related to knowledge and life. Rather than adopting the popular aphorism of *scientia potential est* (knowledge is power), we posit that dialectical philosophical thoughts in ancient China, based on Confucian and Daoist perspectives, suggest that lifelong learning and knowledge acquisition may have both positive and negative effects on life. Likewise, similar dialectical attitude towards knowledge and life is prevalent in the Ancient Near East cultures in the Book of Proverbs and Book of Ecclesiastes. These philosophies/cultures are compared and contrasted and critically discussed to unravel the nuance whereby knowledge may be viewed as a source of power or strength vis-à-vis a burden or source of grief at the same time. The book chapter concludes with a synthesis based on PP 2.0 that seeks to achieve a mid-point balance, where the pursuit of knowledge should be contextual and circumstantial, allowing for nourishment and flourishing in life while avoiding the burdensome quest for knowledge for its own sake.

Keywords. Daoism, Confucianism, Hebrew Bible, Knowledge, Life, Positive Psychology 2.0.

1 Proposition

This book chapter starts with a personal anecdote that we have pondered divinity and spirituality and how to live well and happily since the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g. Epperly, 2020). Introspection during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic era have focused our thoughts on examining the ups and downs—how the ups and downs reflect the value of meaning in life, the happiness and sadness at times, the existential meanings, and hence the importance of a positive psychology in contemporary life. The pursuit of knowledge is widely regarded as a noble one, which not only helps improve the self but wider society, often providing a way of adding meaning to life (Stevenson & Stigler, 1992). Indeed, Western scientific and philosophical arguments have promoted knowledge as a source of power (*scientia potential est*) (Bacon, 2002 [1597]; Hobbes, 2006 [1668]). Thus, pursuing knowledge

can have putative benefits in advancing individual and societal aims, including through practical steps such as technological and medical advances that may have an important impact on health, well-being and life quality (Ng & Lim, 2019).

While the pursuit of knowledge may be viewed in the aforementioned linear manner, this overlooks the broader and more complex philosophical perspectives on knowledge and life. For instance, the *raison d'être* and existential meaning of life may be seen to reflect a less proactive approach than the pursuit of knowledge, where an individual accepts his/her position and engages with the world around him/her. This chapter explores Ancient Chinese philosophies where a sharp contrast is seen between Confucian advocacy for lifelong learning as a means to fulfil one's life vis-à-vis the parable of Daoist philosophy that lifelong learning may jeopardise life. Similarly, within the Hebrew Bible of Ancient Near East culture, there appears a divergence of thought between the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes. While the Book of Proverbs advocates knowledge which yields strength, the Book of Ecclesiastes argues that knowledge increases grief. While Confucian philosophy/the Book of Proverbs appear to contradict Daoist philosophy/the Book of Ecclesiastes, it is the prime aim of this chapter that we consider that there are nuances between Confucian and Daoist philosophies and nuances between the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes. In other words, Confucian and Daoist philosophy as well as the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes do not reflect polar opposition in thought per se, but can be construed to be complementary towards the pursuit of knowledge with an emphasis of moderation or balance.

2 Ancient Chinese Philosophies

2.1 Confucianism

Confucianism is an Ancient Chinese religion and philosophical approach that may be viewed as a conservative in nature (Liu, 2014). Some of the core tenets of Confucianism include a focus on etiquette, rituals or rites [*ru* (禮)], the need for actions that are civilised or proper, with being gentlemanly as the focus [*junzi* 君子]) and the importance of numerous virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, filial piety, loyalty and integrity (Chia, 2003). As such, an individual is expected to put effort into self-improvement and life in general to gain benefits and happiness by aspiring to these values (Moon, 2015). Within Confucianism, there is an emphasis on social harmony, hierarchical relationships and a conduct that is ethical in nature (Liu, 2014). Furthermore, there is an important emphasis on the development of knowledge as a means of understanding one's self and the world, which is central to achieving free will (Chia, 2003). Indeed, modern Confucianism arises out of an analysis of Western philosophy and scientific thought by Chinese scholars who sought to advance their civilisation and compete with advances in science and technology of the Western nations in the 18th and 19th centuries (Chia, 2003). For example, in the wake of the First and Second Opium Wars, the Qing Dynasty had the first wave of reform titled Self-Strengthening Movement in the latter half of the 19th century. The historian Wang Erh-min considers that the Confucian philosophy was not incompatible with Western ideas given that some pro-Confucian Chinese officials at that time were receptive to Western

science and technology (Pong, 2003). Hence, knowledge and understanding are embedded within Confucianism as a means to promote advancement through learning and knowledge acquisition.

This can be seen from various classic texts of Confucian thought, which link knowledge not only to happiness but also extend to individual and social improvement (Ames & Rosemont, 2010). For instance, the Analects of Confucius says, “When one studies and regularly does revision and practice, won’t you be happy?” (子曰：「學而時習之，不亦說乎。」《論語・學而》). Similarly, the value of knowledge in expanding one’s horizons and opening opportunities to practical achievement has all along been noted in Confucian thought (Hansen, 2025): “When one does the reading, there is a way to walk the path; learning/knowledge is as vast as seas which have no boundaries.” 「書山有路勤為徑，學海無涯苦作舟。」—Tang Dynasty’s (唐朝) Hanyu (韓愈) (AD 768–824) “The scholars apologia” 《進學解》. Finally, knowledge as a means of self-enhancement and the importance of engaging in active knowledge acquisition for the good of the soul is recognised in Confucianism (Wang, 2021): “One should struggle hard for self-enhancement for nourishing the soul.” 「力欲爭上游，性靈乃其要。」—Qing Dynasty’s (清朝) Zhaoji (趙翼) (AD 1727–1814) “Five-word poems: readings for leisure no. V” 《甌北詩話・五言古・閒居讀書作之五》. As seen from the above texts, constant pursuit of knowledge is both a noble and prerequisite element of life in Confucianism (Kang & Zhang, 2021). Till today, ongoing efforts are needed to ensure happiness and a worthwhile life (Ng & Lim, 2019).

2.2 Daoism

Daoism suggests that there is a need to align one’s life with the natural force or order [*dao* (道)]—literally, the way/the path (Wei, 2022). Rather than maintaining a hierarchical approach, including concerns over societal structures and norms, individualism and introspection may be favoured in Daoism, and individuals are encouraged to minimise interfering with the natural state of the world (Miller, 2012). *Dao* (The way/The path) is considered a fundamental order of the universe and is the key to human wisdom, knowledge and fulfilment (Komjathy, 2012). The overarching nature of order within the cosmos [*ziran* (自然)] and the focus on non-action [*wu wei* (無為)], where action occurs without the need for agency and intentions by humans, suggests that an effortless approach to knowledge acquisition and happiness embedded within Daoism (Wei, 2022).

Indeed, it is noted that there is potential for both intent and action to increase knowledge that lead to negative consequences given that knowledge is vast and unlimited (Ondich, 2021). Consider the opening sentences in “Nourishing the Lord of Life” by Zhuangzi 《莊子・養生主》 (our emphasis in bold): “There is a limit to our life, but there is no limit to knowledge. With what is limited to pursue after what is unlimited is a **perilous** thing, and when, knowing this, we still seek to increase our knowledge, the **peril** cannot be averted.” 「吾生也有涯，而知也無涯。以有涯隨無涯，殆已！已而為知者，殆而巳矣！為善無近名，為惡無近刑。緣督以為經，可以保身，可以全生，可以養親，可以盡年。」

In addition, poetry from a Daoist tradition illustrates the focus on nature and the importance of accepting the natural order, rather than striving to seek knowledge endlessly. As Wang Bi (王弼) (226–249 CE, p.14) captures the essence of Daoist naturalism in *The Commentary to Laozi's Daodejing* 《老子道德經注》: “Man follows earth; earth follows heaven; heaven follows the *dao*, and the *dao* follows its own course.” 「人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。」 This is illustrated by the following examples. In the rhyme-prose titled “Oh, Let Me Go Home” 《歸去來兮辭》 by Tao Qian (陶潛) (365–427 CE), the poet’s dramatic decision to leave a post as a government official and return to a simple life in the countryside emphasises how self-cultivation can be found without effort: “Why not let our heart be the guide? Why hurry to follow every empty tide? Wealth is not my wish; Nor the immortal’s abode for me to abide. I follow the great transformation to the very end. Without hesitation, but with my fate content.” 「曷不委心任去留，胡為乎遑遑欲何之。富貴非吾願，帝鄉不可期。……聊乘化以歸盡，樂乎天命復奚疑。」 As Zhang (2016, p.368) puts it, “Following nature thus means both following the natural course of things, observing and admiring what nature offers in the garden and fields, and also following one’s own nature, that is, one’s natural disposition and desires.” Tao Qian exemplifies the utopian vision of going home and foregoing wealth or kudos from work. Similarly, the work of Li Bai (李白) (701–762 CE) is suffused with an appreciation of natural pleasure and pursuit that enriches life (Varsano, 1988), including massive consumption of wine, such as the poem titled “Bring in the wine” 《將進酒》: “Bring in the wine and let’s drink. My flower-dappled horse, My furs worth a thousand, Hand them to the boy to exchange for good wine, And we will drown away the woes of ten thousand generations!” 「將進酒，君莫停 ……五花馬，千金裘；呼兒將出換美酒，與爾同銷萬古愁。」

The above quotations from poets imbued with Daoist philosophy across various dynasties in different eras illustrate how acceptance of the natural order and communal pursuits (such as drinking wine and ploughing the farm) may serve as a path to spiritual and philosophical happiness. By contrast, constant pursuit of knowledge with a view to striving for kudos and fame along societal hierarchies and social ladders can lead to unhappiness.

3 Ancient Near East Wisdom Literature

After examining the Far East (i.e. the Ancient Chinese philosophies) in Section 2 above, we now turn to Ancient Near East cultures, especially its wisdom literature that can be viewed as an contrastive approach pertaining to knowledge acquisition as a virtuous practice vis-à-vis the practice fraught with danger (Farmer, 1991). In the Book of Proverbs, there is an emphasis on teaching and thinking about life to provide a foundation for living well. This book emphasises the link between conduct and consequences and rewards and punishment, where knowledge is deemed to reflect an active process necessary for achieving positive outcomes in life (Yee et al., 2014). Within the Book of Proverbs, wisdom is equivalent to strength. Consider the following quotations:

“One who is wise can go up against the city of the mighty and pull down the stronghold in which they trust.”

—Proverbs 21:22

“The wise are more powerful than the strong, and the learned, than the mighty.”

—Proverbs 24:5

In contrast, the Book of Ecclesiastes relativises wisdom and illustrates that experiences of the world challenges accept wisdom constantly, leading to the potential to question all of the ways and norms of life (Dell, 2020). This has the potential to risk the foundation of life itself, undermining a firm basis for reality and a good life. Furthermore, in contrast to the conduct-consequence nexus in the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes suggests that conduct and consequences are not always directly related, with rewards and punishments unpredictable due to natural forces, influences and aspects of fate (Dell, 2020). As a result, attempts to control these outcomes through knowledge acquisition may be doomed (Barton & Muddiman, 2001). Consider the following quotation:

“For in much wisdom there is much sorrow; whoever increases knowledge increases grief.”

—Ecclesiastes 1:18

Within the Hebrew Bible, we see two books that belong to the genre of wisdom literature, and that are contiguous, and yet seem to present contrasting views of knowledge within the context of living well (Adams & Goff, 2020). While knowledge may have value as a means of directing effort towards positive outcomes in the Book of Proverbs (Vayntrub, 2020), extensive reading for the purpose of acquiring knowledge can expose how sorrow emerges from ignorance and reveals challenges (such as systemic injustices) that may be difficult to overcome, hence leading to sorrow (Grillo, 2020).

4 Moderation and balance

This Section synthesises the lessons learnt from both Ancient Chinese philosophies and Ancient Near East cultures. One may appreciate that knowledge per se and the pursuit of knowledge through action are neither binary nor linear. Rather than representing clashes within Ancient Chinese philosophies and Ancient Near East cultures respectively, we posit that these views are complementary and reflect the need for balance and moderation insofar as how and when knowledge is pursued. This reflects the *yin-yang* (陰–陽) dialectics, including the duality of nature, which is fundamental within Daoism (Wong, 2009). A dynamic balance between opposing aspects of human nature and the human condition leads to integration of both contrastive ideas where compromise may be achieved (Wei, 2022; Ondich, 2021). As such, we are of the view that understanding knowledge of the *yin-yang* dialectics should be sought, and efforts

made to learn and contribute to society within the bounds of a good life should be recognised, but this should not come at a cost of ignoring the natural order and pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Knowledge should be sought actively to allow flourishing of life, while non-action (*wu wei*) may be promoted in the circumstances that knowledge would have no tangible benefit or else may risk worry.

Both Daoism and Confucianism have co-existed for generations in Chinese traditions, while the Hebrew Bible comprises both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, suggesting that co-existence of these views on knowledge is possible. In the Ancient Near Eastern context, the Book of Ecclesiastes primarily presents questions for debate and reflection (Strine, 2012). In contrast, the Book of Proverbs presents a black and white view that may reflect more fundamental concepts and ideals. As one gets older, one appreciates “shades of grey” (Strine, 2012, p.72; Bokhary, 2017, p.105) following life experiences and exposure to the world, leading to deeper thought and introspection, and hence the Book of Proverbs may be seen as a transition to the Book of Ecclesiastes as a rite of passage. As such, context and circumstances are important to justify the approaches to knowledge in these books.

Similarly, while Confucianism adopts a more black and white view of the world, one may change from abiding by Confucianism in *stricto sensu* to be receptive to Daoist philosophy along with ageing and contexts given that Daoism pertains to issues that are open to debate and strikes a balance between action [*wei* (為)] and non-action [*wu wei* (無為)]. As seen by the above examples in Section 2 above concerning the poets imbued with Daoist philosophy, with age and experience, rejection of hierarchies and societal strains may encourage a natural approach to engage in leisure and introspection for the pursuit of happiness (Ondich, 2021; Zhang, 2016). Therefore, while knowledge is accentuated in both Confucianism and Proverbs as a way of learning the basics and fundamentals (e.g. efforts bear fruits), Daoism and Ecclesiastes may reflect a more nuanced approach to balancing knowledge with non-action (*wu wei*) and introspection to avoid harm to the self and encourage living well through ups and downs, which embraces the essence of *yin-yang* dialectics in PP 2.0 (Kristjánsson, 2010).

5 Application and examples

The classic examples of the poets Li Bai and Tao Qian in Section 4 above have contemporary relevance insofar as employees either reject to be promoted lest there be stress, or feel frustrated for not having been promoted although they consider themselves capable of shouldering higher responsibilities. The examples of Li Bai and Tao Qian who adopted the pursuit of non-action (*wu wei*) may be a way forward to processes complexities and sustain happiness. From the perspective of the workplace context, deferring promotion or extending probation may be seen as a moderating strategy to avoid stress and undue pressure, allowing for balance and moderation in life which may be blessings in disguise. Similarly, the risk of stress associated with taking up more and more workload in the pursuit of key performance indicators amid cut-throat competitions have been forewarned in a time of care ethics (Hamington, 2024). Nevertheless, hard work does not necessarily secure a promotion (Gregersen, 2019). In academia, academic depression has been observed (Campbell, 2018; Hau & Ho, 2010)

when academics/teachers adopt the all-or-nothing mindset by “internali[sing] a hidden discourse of inadequate or deficient selves and adopt[ing] a sacrificial position in order to maintain a positive sense of identity” (Hilde, 2013, p.iv) and “accept[ing] unequal practices as ‘normal’ ” (Hilde, 2013, p.v). In Section 6, we discuss important concepts that embrace all aspects of PP 2.0 and utilise *yin-yang* dialectics which enable oneself to be tolerant of misfortunes, viz. seeking balance and questing satisfaction.

6 Positive Psychology 2.0 (PP 2.0)

PP 2.0 is a term to describe existential positive psychology, which embraces both Daoism and existentialism (Seligman & Koocher, 1999; Gable & Haidt 2005; Wong, 2011). Rather than assuming polarities in terms of flourishing versus suffering as part of a life experience, PP 2.0 frames suffering as a necessity for flourishing and that dialectical integration of opposites is necessary for long-term well-being and happiness (Wong, 2011; Wong et al., 2021). Similarly, our thesis statement is akin to PP 2.0 that rejects polarity within the context of ignorance versus learning. We posit that there is a balance/moderation to encourage pursuing knowledge while avoiding the extreme of acquiring knowledge without enough rest/sleep that may lead to grief, suffering and harm. Hence, a dialectical integration of philosophical thoughts on the nature of knowledge versus ignorance as well as active exploration and learning versus effortless living are proposed to navigate the issues of knowledge and life of individuals. Much akin to the existential view that suffering can be redemptive and transformative to promote flourishing, the pursuit of knowledge may be linked to self-flourishing and improvement but only when it is not for the sake of knowledge itself. Both the Hebrew Bible and philosophical thoughts in Confucianism and Daoism illustrate the benefits and admonitions of acquiring knowledge having regard to contexts and circumstances, suggesting universality that how knowledge shall be sought with limits (Wong, 2016).

7 Conclusions

This chapter provides a contemporary evaluation of philosophies and cultures ranging from the Far East (i.e. Confucianism and Daoism *qua* Ancient Chinese philosophies) and the Near East (i.e. the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes as wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible). We debunk the potentially dichotomous attitudes in both Ancient Chinese philosophies and Ancient Near East cultures towards knowledge and life. Instead, it may be argued that knowledge is valued in the philosophical thoughts of Confucianism and Proverbs while knowledge is deemed to be burdensome or a source of grief in the philosophical thoughts of Daoism and Ecclesiastes. However, analysis of the texts suggests the potentially complementary nature of these philosophical/cultural positions, where the pursuit of knowledge needs to be considered having regard to contexts and circumstances. We suggest that PP 2.0 can be extracted from the emerging position that a balance of *yin-yang* dialectics needs to be struck taking into account how knowledge is pursued. Specifically, we consider that one should allow shades of grey when pursuing knowledge, where contexts and

circumstances are important to ensure that knowledge is sought to facilitate nourishment and flourishing in life, and not for the sake of pursuing knowledge itself (Sinn, 2025).

Biography

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- “Oh, Let Me Go Home” 《歸去來兮辭》 by Tao Qian (陶潛)
- “Nourishing the Lord of Life” 《養生主》 by Zhuangzi (莊子)
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- The Commentary to Laozi’s *Daodejing* 《老子道德經注》 by Wang Bi (王弼)
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- The Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew Bible
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