

Topics 3—1

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Introduction

Humans are all prisoners. Since we were born, we have been chained and made to sit in front of the wall of a cave. It's a long dark cave that we can see little things in the outside. Everything we see and believe to be real is actually shadows projected on the wall. One day, one of us happened to get out of the cave. He saw a bright world lighted by the sun. ----- You may have heard about this famous allegory of **Plato**'s. This allegory implies that all that we humans understand about the world are depending on our senses. In our brains, our senses make a number of “common senses” about things and phenomenon in this world. When you see they changed suddenly, you may expect that mankind is moving out of the cave. Is it possible for human beings to see the truth of the world? If possible, is the ability gifted to human beings? In this essay, I will discuss human beings' ability to understand the world.

I. The place of *idea*

From the very begging of civilization, people have believed that there is truth in the world. Searching for truth equals to understanding the world. Each person has perfect images about things they know about. Since the images are quite similar among many people, they can understand what road sign or emoji (picture writing) mean when they see those pictures. In this essay, I will call it *idea* expediently. When you hear the word *idea*, you may associate it with **Plato**'s *idea* theory. Yet in this essay, I am not going to unfold my discussion with the base of **Plato**'s *idea* theory, but with another perspective related to a comparison between mankind's *idea* and other animal's *idea*, which will be explained in the latter paragraphs.

It seems that people have very unified recognition about everything in the world. Actually, they are all slightly different and everyone has various ways of understanding things. Let's say, what do you imagine when you hear the word ‘glasses’? Two lenses made by glass fit in a frame... yes they are, and what color is the frame? How about size of the lenses? A hundred people may imagine a hundred types of glasses. Another example, in Chinese traditional culture, they regard symmetry as beauty, while in Japanese culture, they think asymmetry as beauty. Sometimes even an easiest concept about a thing can differ from person to person. For this, I think that *idea* exists nowhere but in our minds.

This premise will take a critical role in discussing human beings' ability to understand the world. In following paragraphs, the source and the use of *idea* will also be keyed which are leading to the conclusion.

II. Classification of *idea*

Only a few part of *idea* is innate conceptions of a person. A baby does know only a little

thing in the world, and she learns more things as she grows up. *Idea* can also be formed as one's growth. The formation of *idea* is represented by two patterns.

Much of our *idea* has come from our surroundings, especially from nature. As it is represented by planes whose shape is based on birds, great deals of human inventions are inspired by things in nature. When a person sees a moving, impressive thing, the image will remain in his or her mind and he or she will recall it when he or she sees similar things. In this case, the person is accepting something outside as his or her *idea*. I will call it "passive *idea*" in this essay. Not only humans, but also bees, spiders, and almost all animals have this kind of *idea*, because they have abilities to distinguish their food, offspring, or predators.

The rest of *idea* is consequences of creativity, which is an ability of only human beings. I will call it "active *idea*". When an engineer or inventor creates something new, he often does not know the look of its final shape but its purpose. Firstly, he constructs each part according to its use. After several trials and errors, he will be succeeded in making the components work together. But at this time, it is still a working model. He makes a case which he can place all these contents in the most efficient way. In the end, his product will be the first and widespread *idea* to help produce contemporary counterparts. You may clearly get the process when you remember the history of a mobile phone. At first, it was nothing different from ordinary black domestic phone, only it had a belt to hang on one's shoulder. As time goes by, it became smaller and thinner, and finally smart phones were released. Who could imagine it when the first mobile phone was released in the market?

This shows that it is possible for mankind to create new *idea* without knowing its concrete form, as long as its purpose is clear. Apparently, mankind has an *idea*, has the ability to learn and create things. It is this ability that makes human society improve constantly. What about other animals?

III. Bee's *idea*

The quotation infers that bees don't know how their hive will look like when they start building it, yet I seriously doubt if it is true. Every beehive is built finely balanced so that it won't drop from a tree or an eave. How do they manage to do this without drawing a rough image of their finished hive? In addition, every generation of bees make combs similar in their shapes. None of them builds a comb composed of square-shaped rooms. For this, it can hardly be said that their hives are just an accidental product. It is more suitable to say that certain images about beehive are written in bees' genes, which can be classified as a type of passive *idea*.

Talking about works of an architect and a working bee, it is concerned that bees build their combs only according to the increase of population, while an architect constructs a building according to his design, which the numbers of windows and rooms are solidly fixed. Actually, there is a conversion of conception that makes you seeing this fact in a very different way. Bees live with their society, and their community is concluded in their hive.

It can be said that a whole hive for them corresponds to our town rather than our house, and each room of a comb is a house for a bee. In building, each room (house) of a comb, the bees know its usage and its resident. When population increases, they build similar rooms (houses) to expand their beehive (town). Still, this is nothing more than a guess. No one really knows by what rules do bees build and expand their houses. As the states of brain activity are quite different between humans and other animals, we cannot understand what other animals think, either can they understand what we think. **Zhuang Zi** said, “As you are not a fish, how may you know the joy of fish?”

I have mentioned in chapter II that all animals have passive *idea*, of course bees are not the exception. So it is sure that bees know the final shape of their hives. However, it is hard to figure out the rules of construction of beehives. The occupations of a working bee seem to be similar to a human architect in some points, but incomparable in other points.

IV. Comparison of *idea* ---- between architect' s and bee' s

In chapter II, I classified *idea* into two types. So which *idea* do the laborer mentioned in the quotation use in his work? If what he uses is the latter one, it means that the laborer has creativity. Maybe he does ---- maybe he is a sculptor on weekends ---- but who knows? The only thing we may know is that he is working in somewhere like a factory, and he makes his living by his body, not his brain. As long as he is in his workplace, he accepts existing *idea* on what they are to make, so he may imagine the complete figure of the product.

On the contrary, an architect is generally regarded as a profession which requires creativity. Indeed, they can design and build unique, artistic structures. What' s more, not only in building those special buildings, they also exercise their creativity in building ordinary houses. When an architect designs each structure, he considers the size and shape of the land, materially use, the use of the building, the number of residence... and so on. In each time, he creates new *idea* in his mind. Of course his passive *idea* may help his work a lot, but their creativity is also constantly generating his active *idea*.

We cannot decide which is better between these two professions. As different kinds of *idea* are used in each one' s work, it is no use comparing a laborer and an architect. The same logic can be applied to between an architect and a bee. The working bee' s occupation is similar to that of a laborer' s. In other words, **Marx** cannot prove that even the worst architect is better than the best working bee. If he could, it is no more than to declare a person guilty in court, for nothing could prove that he is innocent. Though no one cannot decide which work is better than the other, one thing is clear, an architect' s work is strongly related to social needs, while a bee' s work is basically led by its instinct.

V. Illusion of mankind having priority to other species

In **Marx**' s quotation, “even the worst architect is superior to the best working bee,” he implies that the difference between humans and other animals is whether having subjective initiative or not. I interpret his word ‘subjective initiative’ as ‘creativity’, which

is the source of active *idea*.

Seeing this quotation, people tend to think that mankind is superior to other species because of its creativity. But I dare suspect this popular belief here. Does the fact having creativity can lead to mankind's superiority to other animal species?

In the respect of physical features, mankind is a weak animal on this planet. We have neither strong, large bodies like gorillas or elephants, nor huge brain like whales. In order to survive in the harsh history of Earth, mankind has developed their creativity to make up for their physical weakness. To be sure, we have used our creativity to interfere nature. We have been using a great deal of resources in a short period of time, now even have ways to control genes and create new species. It isn't any doubtful that the ability to control other species has made mankind the most distinguished animal on this planet.

However, we are not superior to other species in every respect. Some kinds of insects are so efficient at their reproduction that we have no way to get rid of them completely from our houses. In not only physical strength, but adjusting environment, breeding efficiency, and so on, we are no match for many other animals and plants.

In short, being the most distinguished species doesn't always equal to being the most superior species. Creativity cannot be the only standard to compare mankind and other species.

VI. Can humans understand the world accurately?

The "common sense" that mankind having priority to other species has turned out to be an illusion. In the history of human beings, many things which people had believed to be true have turned out to be wrong in later period of time. Why does it occur? The possible answer is because humans actually cannot understand the world accurately.

Maybe in our daily life, we think we are feeling this world as they are. When we put our hands in front of our eyes, they are certainly our hands. If we feel it painful when we pinch our cheeks, then we are not dreaming. Here I will discuss the time we feel the world "differently".

Our recognition changes when the state of our brain changes. The following is an example of it. Anorexia patients often have an abnormal perception on their faces and figures, to think that they are fatter than actually. In addition, recent research says that these patients tend to overly pay attention to other people's face just like looking at their own faces. Doctors say these symptoms are caused by an increase of flowing blood in certain part of their brains.

Since we have similar physical senses, we grasp matters similarly. However, what we think "common sense" is very unstable. Moreover, they are often settled by majority decision. For example, in the present state of affairs, color-blinded people, who are a minority of the population, cannot distinguish some colors which most people can. But if they occupy 99 percent of our population, then does a rainbow still have 7 colors? Is our "common sense" still lasting?

We have five kinds of senses. Sight, hearing, smell, taste, and sense of touch. But many

things in the world are out of the reach of our senses. For instance, we cannot recognize the magnetic field by our innate senses. However, when we scatter some iron sand on a piece of horizontally placed paper and put two magnets from the other side, we can see the iron sand moving and forming a pattern like a ribbon. This time, we are indirectly confirming magnetic field by our sight. From this experiment, we can know that everything we can feel in the world is converted through our senses before our brains recognize them.

We are feeling the world through our sense, but nobody can prove that the *idea* formed by these senses is truth. So I would like to answer “no.” to the question, “Can humans understand the world accurately?”

Conclusion --- The real power of human

Let me summarize this essay. We all have some images which we believe to be true in our minds (=idea). It can be classified into two kinds, “passive *idea*” and “active *idea*”, and only human beings have the latter one because it is a product of creativity. Since we rely on our senses in forming *idea*, it slightly differs from person to person, moreover, it may change over time. This shows that we do not always understand things in the world accurately.

Through the history, human beings have created a lot of active *idea* and have made use of it in their lives. Sometimes they have brought happiness to people. Sometimes they have brought tragedy. After World War I ended in 1919, not 25 years had passed, World War II started. After the biggest war ended, the world was soon divided into two sides by Cold war. Through those years, people have created and destroyed their *idea* again and again. It seems that human beings’ creativity has always let people suffer themselves, but in fact, human beings are moving forward little by little. Taking nuclear power, the same *idea*, the same product, which was used as a weapon is now used for medicine and lifeline. We have an ability not only to improve our *idea* but also to improve the way we use it. Human beings evolve according to their own needs, while other species do being forced by the change of the outer environment. Isn’ t it the very real power of human?