

Feng Youlan's Interpretation of Western Philosophy: A Critical Examination from the Perspective of Metaphysical Methodology

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Abstract: This paper concentrates on Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy from the perspective of metaphysical methodology and aims to display a limited observation of Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy through the window of metaphysical methodology.

Based on a brief review of the recent studies of Feng Youlan and Western philosophy, this paper analyzes the progress and insufficient aspects in current studies on this issue and particularly clarifies what are the metaphysics and metaphysical methods in the context of Feng Youlan's philosophy. In clarifying Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy from the perspective of methodology, this paper further critically analyzes Feng's positive metaphysical methods and negative metaphysical methods, and assumes that Feng's negative metaphysical methods essentially is a kind of attitude towards metaphysics but neither a kind of metaphysics nor a kind of metaphysical methods. Instead of characterizing metaphysical methods as positive and negative as Feng did, this paper suggests an alternative division of metaphysical methods: direct and indirect methods of dealing with metaphysical issues.

Keywords Feng Youlan; metaphysics; metaphysical methods; Western philosophy; negative metaphysics

In the twentieth century, Feng Youlan was one of the Chinese intellectuals most deeply involved in the dialogue and interaction between Chinese and Western philosophies. In addition to studying Western philosophy at Columbia University, he systematically conducted research on Western philosophy, specifically the philosophy of life. His research concentrated on three aspects: a comparative study of Chinese and Western philosophies of human life, which is represented by his book *A Comparative Study of Life Ideals*; a critical examination of the metaphysical methods in Western philosophy, represented in his work *New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics*; and his original efforts in employing Western philosophical methods and ideas to construct a new philosophical doctrine of *Li*, which can be seen across a variety of his writings, especially his *New Metaphysics of Li* (*New Lixue*).

These works make Feng Youlan a most outstanding representative of the Chinese philosophers who communicated with their Western counterparts. Naturally, scholars in China and the West have paid close attention to his work and contribution to philosophy. This paper, due to limited space, will not deal with Feng's comparative studies of Chinese and Western philosophies of human life, or his efforts in borrowing Western philosophical methods in order to merge them into his system of the philosophy of *Li*. Based on recent studies of Feng Youlan and Western philosophy, this paper concentrates on Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy from the perspective of metaphysical methodology. The first

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section of this paper briefly reviews the recent studies of Feng Youlan and Western philosophy in order to demonstrate that the topic has not yet been sufficiently studied. Based on the argument in section one, the second section critically examines Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy from the perspective of methodology. Since Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy's metaphysical methods was derived from his understanding of metaphysics and metaphysical methods, the third section clarifies Feng's understandings of metaphysics and metaphysical methods in order to explore how Feng Youlan shaped his opinions about Western philosophy from the angle of the methodology of metaphysics. Based on the examination in section one, the critical analyses in section two, and the clarification in section three, the fourth section of this paper further analyzes some confusion in Feng's attitude towards metaphysics and metaphysical methods, and proposes an alternative division. Focusing particularly on Feng's interpretation of the metaphysical methods in Western philosophy, this paper's aim is to display a limited observation about Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy through the window of metaphysical methodology.

I

From 1940 through the 1960s, Feng's contemporaries studied his philosophy and attitude towards Western philosophy. Most of them, such as Zhang Shenfu (张申府), Zhu Guanqian (朱光潜), Hong Qian (洪谦), He Lin (贺麟), and Jin Yuelin (金岳霖), had also studied philosophy in the West. They offered significant comments and criticism on Feng's work. One of their major concerns was deciding whether or not Feng's philosophy was westernized. Their studies have been briefly examined in my book *Metaphorical Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy: Illustrated with Feng Youlan's New Metaphysics*. Discussion of Feng's work on Western philosophy was unfortunately interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, and continued only in the context of political criticism. Fortunately, academic criticism has made significant progress since that time, and Feng's attitude towards Western philosophy has again become one of the major concerns among Chinese and Western scholars.

Li Zhonghua is one of the contemporary philosophers to examine the development of Feng Youlan's view on Western culture. Li indicates that Feng's approach developed from the idea that "cultural differences are differences of East and West" to one that went beyond regional division to the position that both East and West "shared thinking in common, shared philosophy in common, and shared culture in common" (Li Zhonghua 1994, 257). Li argues that Feng came to espouse the view that "the difference between Chinese and Western culture is actually the difference between medieval times and modern times," and finally to the standpoint that the difference between Chinese and Western culture consists in the different types of society (Ibid., 259). Li's studies reflect the changes of Feng's view on Western philosophy over several decades. Scholars had discussed the changes of Feng's own philosophical ideas for a long time, but the way his views on Western philosophy evolved had rarely been mentioned before Li's work. Li's work provided a wider background for the study of Feng and Western philosophy, including the study of Feng's views on metaphysical methods that this paper deals with.

In his book *A Study of Feng Youlan's Philosophical Thought* 《冯友兰哲学思想研究》 another scholar, Wang Jianping (王鉴平), examines the development of Feng's thought on Chinese and Western culture from another angle. He divided Feng's thinking into three periods: the explanation of the difference between Chinese and Western culture in terms of free will and desire, the consideration of the changes from antiquity to the present, and the discussion of the differences between Chinese and Western society (Wang 1988, 152-3). Meanwhile, both Li Zhonghua and Wang Jianping examined Feng's views on Western phi-

osophy from the perspective of the historical development of his attitude towards Western culture and philosophy, and several other scholars made efforts to clarify what influences Feng had received from Western philosophy.

In his book *Biography of Feng Youlan* 《冯友兰》 Yin Ding (殷鼎) examines the influence of Platonic philosophy and Neo-Positivism on Feng (1991). In another paper, Yin says, “My study of the connections between Feng’s new philosophy and Western philosophical sources shows that two Western theories—Plato’s doctrine of universals and Montague’s theory of “subsistence”—contribute decisively to Feng’s metaphysical system” (Yin 1994, 337). Though Yin’s work is informative and important, Yin did not further explore Feng’s theory of metaphysical methods.

In the paper “Feng Youlan and Spinoza,” Li Chunping (李春平) examines Spinoza’s (1632-1677) influence on Feng’s writing. Li notes that Feng studied Spinoza in 1921, when he compared the similarities between Dao and Spinoza’s God (Li Chunping 1999, 440).

Yu Youxue indicates that “In the 1920s, the evolution of Feng Youlan’s philosophical ideas followed a course from Bergson, to Pragmatism, and then to Neo-Positivism, and finally to Neo-Realism, but in the same time he did not give up Bergson’s philosophy and pragmatism” (2004, 30).

Dan Chun’s (单纯) book *Old Doctrine and New System: A General Treatise on Feng Youlan’s Philosophy* 《旧学新统：冯友兰哲学思想通论》 examines Feng’s attitude towards Western philosophy in terms of Feng’s definition of philosophy, according to which philosophy is a kind of rethinking of thinking. Dan asserts that Feng’s definition contains traditional elements from Plato and Neo-Positivism. In other words, according to Dan, Feng did not completely refuse the elements of epistemology in Western wisdom. Instead, he believes that these elements can promote humans’ positive knowledge and are the content of philosophical rethinking (Dan 2005, 122).

On the basis of his studies of Feng, Plato, and Neo-positivism, Dan briefly examines John Dewey’s influence on Feng Youlan, especially in the aspect of Pragmatist methodology. Dan indicates that, as a kind of empiricist tradition, Pragmatism contributed a positive method to Feng, while the philosophy of Daoism offered a passive method to his work (Ibid., 394). In his studies of Feng Youlan and Western philosophy, Dan is mainly concerned with the influence of Western philosophy upon Feng’s positive and negative metaphysical methods. However, Dan does not examine how Feng employs these two methods to characterize the metaphysical models in Western philosophy.

Western scholars have also noted that Western philosophy deeply influenced Feng Youlan. Lauren Pfister offers Western philosophical sources that influenced Feng, and points out that he was also deeply influenced by Chinese philosophers like Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), Daoism, and Chan Buddhism. Pfister writes,

Feng’s philosophy reflected his response to aspects of Platonic metaphysics, Aristotelian logic, and Hegelian philosophy of history. He initially absorbed these Greek and European philosophical influences during his doctoral studies in the early 1920s at Columbia University, where his dissertation chairman was the famous American pragmatist, John Dewey (1859-1952). The modernized metaphysical and epistemological Platonism promoted by the New Realism of W. P. Montague (1873-1953) had a particularly notable influence on his work. (2002, 165)

Pfister also takes Hegel’s philosophy of history into account in examining Western philosophy’s influence on Feng Youlan. Although he is neither the first nor the last philosopher to count Hegel’s influence upon Feng Youlan, Pfister’s point of view is strongly supported by

Feng's own words in his *A Treatise of New Events* 《新世训》. In this work, Feng indeed uses Hegel's logical dialectic to deal with the changes of society.

Both Western and Chinese scholars make a common point regarding this subject: Western philosophy—particularly Plato, Aristotle, Pragmatism, Neo-Positivist philosophers, and Hegel—has deeply influenced Feng Youlan. It would seem, then, in my understanding, that the major Western schools and philosophers who influenced Feng Youlan have been efficiently studied by both Chinese and Western scholars. Based on this survey of recent studies of Feng Youlan and Western philosophy, I will turn to examine scholars' more particular claims about Western philosophy's influence on Feng.

With regard to the studies of Feng's philosophical methods, Yang Disheng's paper "Mourning Professor Feng Youlan: Method of Abstract Inheriting Should Not Be Denied" discusses Feng's abstract inheriting method: "Absorb what ought to be absorbed from it, and do not absorb what ought not to be absorbed from it" (Yang, 1994, 412). Yang writes, "One cannot say that these views are incorrect, but because [these views] do not have concrete content, the problem is really not resolved. Today's discussions on culture also cannot stop at the macroscopic principle of 'critical inheriting.' On the contrary, what we need to do is to go into details concretely and deeply" (Ibid.). As we know very well, the issue of abstract inheriting was an important one during the Cultural Revolution; during that time, Feng's method was criticized very seriously. After that time, many scholars put political criticism aside and revalued this method, observing that, in the case of Feng's attitude towards Western philosophy, he practically employed abstract inheriting to learn and borrow from Western philosophy, especially when constructing his new metaphysics. Tang Yijie offers reliable commentary about how and what Feng Youlan absorbed and adapted from Western philosophy. Tang points out that Feng accepted some Platonic content. According to Tang, the "structure of the terminology and perspectives of Feng Youlan's *History of Chinese Philosophy* were mainly borrowed from their equivalents in Western philosophy. These include concepts such as idealism and materialism, ontology and cosmology, monism and dualism (or pluralism), empirical and transcendental, phenomenon and essence, universals and particulars, thought and existence, and the like" (Tang 2007, 35).

Indeed, after Hu Shi's *The History of Ancient Chinese Philosophy* was published, Chinese scholars began a new approach to the thousands of years of history of Chinese philosophy. Immediately after Hu Shi's work, Feng reconstructed the history of Chinese philosophy according to the framework of Western philosophy, and Feng's contemporaries criticized him for doing nothing more than using a new bottle to contain old wine. Nonetheless, because of Hu Shi and Feng Youlan Chinese intellectuals started to take a new approach to their understanding of Chinese philosophy. They began to communicate more effectively with Western philosophers and rethink traditional Chinese philosophy as operating within a wider background. We might have to acknowledge that the changes in their philosophical methods led to a revolution in the understanding of the history of Chinese philosophy. Of course, changes in philosophical methods necessarily lead to changes of angles of explaining traditional Chinese philosophy, clarifications of the degree of abstractness of Chinese philosophical concepts and propositions, and reconceiving of the purity of traditional Chinese philosophical ideas. In other words, absorbing Western philosophical ideas when dealing with traditional Chinese philosophical thought is to some degree unavoidable. In the process of changing, traditional Chinese philosophy may lose some components, or even cease to be entirely "Chinese" philosophy in itself. These concerns have partially become reality. Is this a good or a bad thing? Different scholars will have different opinions, but one thing is almost certain: Feng's methods of dealing with traditional Chinese philosophy are

still effective.

Tang Yijie points out that Feng's approach resulted in the introduction of the Platonic notion of "universals" (*gong xiang*) and "particulars" (*shu xiang*) into Chinese philosophy, as well as ideas from Neo-Realism (*xin shizai lun*). Using this schema, the world is divided into "truth" (*zhenji*)—or principle (*li*), or great ultimate (*taiji*)—and "reality" (*shiji*) (Tang 2007, 36). Tang further indicates that, "According to Feng, Western philosophy excels in analysis while traditional Chinese philosophy excels in intuition. [Feng's] treatment of Neo-Confucianism combines, and reaps the benefits of, both these approaches" (Ibid.).

II

The examination above shows that the studies of the influence of Western philosophy upon Feng Youlan have made significant progress and have laid a wide background for us to further study how Feng interprets Western philosophy from a particular perspective, namely the perspective of metaphysical methodology.

Feng separately examined Plato's dialectic method, Descartes's and Spinoza's Self-thinking method, Kant's (1724-1804) critical method, Hegel's dialectic logical methods, and the Vienna Circle's logical analytical method from the perspective of metaphysical methodology. Feng characterizes Plato's dialectics in this way: "Plato calls his method 'dialectics,' dialectics is also called analytical method" (Feng 2000a, 158). However, Feng stresses that the inductive method in Socrates's dialectics and some of Plato's dialogues do not acquire metaphysics (Ibid., 160-1). Feng summarizes Plato's metaphysical methods in the following way:

In the part of metaphysics in his *Republic*, Plato did not point out the content of any types. He says there is absolute beauty, absolute good, but he did not indicate what beauty is, and what good is. Because his theory of types (classes) is originally derived from an analytical method. This method only conducts formal analyses of things. By doing so, we may know there are classes (types), but this method cannot let us know what the content of a certain class is. However, if know there are classes, we would have another world. This knowledge lets our heart have another realm/sphere. The metaphor of the cave in the *Republic* is just to demonstrate this point... Plato build up his metaphysics in this way, and became a real master of philosophy in the West. His philosophy is the orthodox example of a philosophy that employs a positive method." (Ibid., 162).

Since the positive metaphysical method is a formalist method, the components of formalism become criteria to value philosophers' methodology. It seems to Feng that although there are also formalist components in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, "Aristotle's metaphysics is almost a kind of science. He was a scientist rather than a philosopher" (Ibid., 164-5).

Feng characterizes the method of Descartes and Spinoza as the "Self-thinking method" (反观法). This method was initiated by Descartes and further formed by Spinoza (Feng 2000a, 166). What is Descartes's Self-thinking method, exactly? Feng takes the procedure by which Descartes forms his famous proposition, "I am thinking so I exist," to indicate that the process of Descartes's thinking went back to an original point where nothing is doubtable. "I" could doubt everything, including my feeling, my inference, my ideas in "my" mind..., till finally I found I am thinking, so I am. This is true, and this is not doubtable. It is because of Descartes's thinking of "I" in a reverse direction, that Feng calls it the Self-thinking method, namely, letting our thinking go back to its original starting point by doubting everything, until one acquires the most general principle, "I am thinking therefore

I am” (Ibid., 166-7).

Feng argues that both Descartes’s and Spinoza’s methods are Self-thinking methods, but Descartes’s Self-thinking method is different from Spinoza’s. Feng points out:

There is a big difference between Spinoza’s Self-thinking method and Descartes’ Self-thinking method. Descartes’ Self-thinking method is in the mind/heart, while Spinoza’s Self-thinking method, at least partially, is logic. Both of them believe that clear and distinct ideas are true ideas, but Descartes’ criterion of clear and distinct is subjective, while Spinoza’s criterion of clear and distinct is not subjective. (Feng 2000a, 171)

Feng extends his point by saying, “Descartes’ metaphysics takes ‘I am thinking therefore I am’ as the first principle, Spinoza’s metaphysics takes ‘God exists’ as the first principle” (Ibid.). Feng identifies Spinoza’s proposition “God exists” as an “analytical proposition,” and an eternal truth (Ibid., 170). Feng believes that Spinoza’s “God exists” is not a religious proposition, and his God not a religious God. Rather, Feng argues that Spinoza’s “God” is actually what Chinese philosophers call the “universe” or “Great Totality” (大全). In religion, “God exists” is not an analytical proposition, but in Spinoza, “God exists” is an analytical proposition because “universe exists” is an analytical proposition. Universe includes everything, and the proposition “universe exists” is true (Ibid., 170.) For Feng, Descartes’ Self-thinking method is psychotic, and the truth of the first principle is doubtful. “Spinoza’s Self-thinking method is partially logical, and the truth of his first principle is not doubtful. Seen from this point of view, the pure, psychotic, Self-thinking method is not a good metaphysical method” (Ibid., 171).

Feng obviously prefers Spinoza’s metaphysical method. It seems to him that Spinoza’s first proposition, “God exists,” necessarily includes in the category “God” that which is equal to the “Great Totality” or universe in Chinese philosophy, and Feng is right. In Spinoza’s ethics, “God” is indeed just another name for “nature” or “universe.” According to Feng’s understanding of the analytical method, we may acquire the feature “existence” by analyzing the categories “God,” “Great Totality,” or “universe,” because these concepts include all possible features, including the feature of “existence.” So, saying that “God exists” is stating a necessarily true statement. Although Feng did not say it in exactly this way, when he deals with his first group of metaphysical propositions of *Li* he exactly follows this method, which will be discussed more in the next section.

Now, let us move on to Feng’s characterization of Kant’s metaphysical methods and of Hegel’s dialectical method. Based on some translations and explanations of Kant’s discourses on metaphysics, Feng characterizes Kant’s metaphysics as a kind of negative method. Feng states: “Kant neither argues against metaphysics, nor eliminates metaphysics. What he did was to save metaphysics from Hume’s empiricism. In the history of Western philosophy, he created a new method for metaphysics. That is what we called in the first chapter a “negative method of metaphysics” (Feng 2000a, 182). Why does Feng think that Kant’s method is a kind of negative method? Feng points out that, for Kant, “The object of metaphysics is unknowable. Once it is knowable, it will become the object of science. Unknowable, therefore unthinkable, cannot be spoken of. However, it is already a kind of thinking and speaking of saying when the object of metaphysics is unthinkable and unspeakable. This is just the negative method to speak of metaphysics” (Ibid., 183).

I argue that Feng confuses Kant’s attitude towards metaphysics and his method of dealing with metaphysical objects. In my understanding, philosophers could claim either that metaphysics, particularly metaphysical objects, are unthinkable and unspeakable, or claim

that metaphysical objects are thinkable and expressible or can be spoken of. What philosophers do is just to express their attitudes towards metaphysics, but they do not employ any metaphysical methods since they do not deal with metaphysics or metaphysical objects at all. Here, Kant believes that metaphysical objects are unthinkable and unspeakable; what we can see from this view is his attitude, but not his method.

On the other hand, Feng does not simply characterize Kant's metaphysical method as a purely negative method. According to Feng, "[Kant] unconsciously discovered the negative method of metaphysics. It is because of the unconsciously discovered, he did not efficiently use this method" (Ibid.). Feng believes that Kant also used a positive method to deal with some metaphysical issues. Feng asserts that when Kant dialectally uses the critique of pure reason to deal with the three issues "God exists," "Immortality," and "Free will" he uses the "positive metaphysical method" (Ibid.). In my understanding, Kant did not leave a space for God in his *Critique of Pure Reason* because he made efforts to unite reason and experience. Thus, instead of demonstrating that God exists by analyzing the concept "God," Kant attributes these ideas to faith, but not to reason. Unlike Feng, I do not characterize Kant's method of dealing with metaphysical propositions like "God exists" as a positive metaphysical method.

Feng refers to Hegel's *Logic* and *Spiritual Philosophy* when he interprets Hegel's metaphysical method, and comes to the conclusion that Hegel's dialectic is not a philosophical method, but rather a philosophical principle. However, Feng thinks that when Hegel seeks the beginning of logic in his *Science of Logic* he touches upon a philosophical method. Feng also believes Hegel uses a logical analytical method in his *Science of Logic*, and the Self-thinking method in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ibid., 183-6). According to Feng's division of positive and negative metaphysical methods, we may say that both Hegel's logical analytical method and Self-thinking method belong to what Feng calls the "positive method." But are Hegel's two methods really both metaphysical methods? Feng does not clarify his position on this question.

The reason I raise this question is because Feng recognizes Spinoza's Self-thinking method as a metaphysical one, but not Descartes's. Furthermore, I wonder whether Hegel's logical analytical method is a kind of metaphysical method in Feng's sense and what is the difference between the logical analytical method which Feng admires and Hegel's logical analytical method, which Feng criticizes? As we know, Hegel's logic is quite different from Western traditional logic. Feng did not clearly address these questions, because he did not have clear concepts of his own positive and negative metaphysical method, as I will show in section four of this paper. We may further see this problem in his characterization of Hegel's metaphysical method. Feng states,

Hegel's metaphysics also uses these two methods [logical analysis and Self-thinking method], but he did not strictly use these two methods. His famous dialectics cannot be acquired by logical analysis. With regard to the heart of universe, nature and history are all the reflection of the universe heart's development, certainly cannot be acquired by these two methods. (Feng 2000a, 186)

Here, Feng acknowledges Hegel's metaphysics and recognizes that Hegel used both a logical analytical method and the Self-thinking method. This is good news for Hegel and his followers, but Feng finally assumes that "Kant proposes the hypotheses such as the world is the work of the highest understanding (理智) and will etc., Hegel realizes these hypotheses. So what Hegel did was just like how Aristotle realizes Plato's formalist concepts. Realization means to affirm the real existence, so Hegel's metaphysical methods do not correspond

to the criterion of soul-like-emptiness (空灵)” (Ibid.). Because of this, Hegel’s method was eventually excluded from Feng’s own metaphysical methods.

In regard to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, Feng did not have a coherent and consistent criterion to characterize these philosophers’ metaphysical methods. It is very much possible that the incoherence and inconsistency we see in Feng’s writing on these philosophers is because of the complexity of their philosophical systems. There is indeed no coherent and consistent criterion to be used to characterize their various methods. Personally, I would not reject this possibility, and prefer to keep this question open to be justified by further studies. However, I would also suggest another possibility, which is to assume that Feng’s criterion of real or true metaphysics and his division of positive and negative metaphysical methods has some limitations when used to characterize Western philosophy. I will propose an alternative division of Feng’s two types of metaphysical methods in the last section of this paper.

Feng’s characterizations of the metaphysical methods of Hume and the Vienna Circle are more complex. His general view on Hume and the Vienna Circle is that they eliminated both metaphysical questions and metaphysics itself because they believe that metaphysical issues can neither be justified by reason nor verified by experience (Feng 2000a, 172-3). Feng claims that the true metaphysical method is the logical analytical method, while the Vienna Circle uses the logical analytical method to eliminate metaphysics. What is the difference between the analytical method that Feng characterizes as a true metaphysical method and the Vienna Circle’s logical analytical method? Feng distinguishes between these two methods in this way: he says that the logical analytical method as the true metaphysical method is one which “identifies names and analyzes principles” (辨名析理). “We think that analyzed principles/pattern/*Li* must exist in identifying names and identifying names we must finally attribute to analyzing principle/pattern/*Li*. The Vienna Circle believes that there are only names to be identified, but no principle/pattern/*Li* to be analyzed. According to their opinions, logical analytical method is just the method to identify names; so-called analyzed principle/pattern/*Li* is only identifying names” (Ibid., 202). What is the Vienna Circle’s “identifying name” procedure? Feng gives the following example: the name “red” is the name of a kind of color. This is to identify names. What is Feng’s “analyze principle/pattern/*Li*”? Feng exemplifies the idea by this example: “Red comprises color” (红蕴涵颜色) (Ibid., 213). According to Feng’s definitions and examples, we may say that identifying names means to define names, and analyzing principle/pattern/*Li* means to reveal the relationship between subject and object.

Since the Vienna Circle’s logical analytical method is used only to define names, and does not analyze the relationship between subject (name) and predicate, why does Feng regard it as the most highly developed philosophical method? Feng points out the most important reason why the Vienna Circle claims to eliminate metaphysics: “The Vienna Circle believes that all propositions in metaphysics are synthetic propositions, and all cannot be justified, so all propositions in metaphysics are meaningless” (Ibid., 189). Probably this is the reason Feng announces that the propositions in his new metaphysics of *Li* are analytical ones. His new metaphysics of *Li* is a response to the Vienna Circle from a Chinese philosopher’s stance. Feng agrees with the Vienna Circle that propositions in Western traditional metaphysics mostly are *zonghe mingti* (synthetic propositions), so that the position that traditional metaphysics should be eliminated has its reasons. He further stresses, though, that real metaphysics does not belong to the range that the Vienna Circle criticized, and real metaphysics will not be eliminated with the Vienna Circle’s criticism. The metaphysics that was dealt with by the “negative method” does not belong to this range, according to Feng

(Ibid., 191). We may read between the lines of Feng's explanations to uncover that according to him true metaphysics makes use of the negative method, while his new metaphysics of *Li* is built with a logical analytical method, and all of his metaphysical propositions are analytical propositions.

Another question arises here. Which method is the true metaphysical method, the positive or negative one? If both are true metaphysical methods, why does Feng himself make his best efforts to construct his new metaphysics of *Li* by what he calls the logical analytical method, although he essentially still uses traditional metaphorical metaphysical methods to construct his metaphysics, as I indicated in my previous study (Chen 2011)? If the logical analytical method is the only true metaphysical method, why does Feng claim that the metaphysics that the Vienna Circle eliminates does not include the metaphysics built up by his negative metaphysical method? How should we locate the negative metaphysical method if it is really a method?

It seems to Feng that some of philosophers in the Vienna Circle speak of metaphysics using a negative method (Ibid.). Feng did not specify who these philosophers were and how they speak in this manner, and neither did he clarify how the two methods—logical analytical and negative methods—are integrated by “some” of the philosophers of the Vienna Circle. How did they use the logical analytical method to eliminate metaphysics and simultaneously speak of metaphysics using a negative method? Further, what is the metaphysics that “some” of the philosophers of the Vienna Circle eliminate and what is the metaphysics that they speak of?

Feng did mention that “what the Vienna Circle criticized is bad science, and indeed should be eliminated. It should be a contribution of the Vienna Circle, but it is the Vienna Circle's mistake that it does not know what it wants to eliminate is bad science. In the same way, what the Vienna Circle makes an effort to eliminate is bad metaphysics, and this is also its contribution to metaphysics” (Feng 2000a, 192). We know that Feng believes that there are true metaphysics, such as his metaphysics of *Li*, and that there are true metaphysical methods, such as the logical analytical method. Since there is also bad metaphysics, there should be another criterion by which to judge what metaphysics is bad and what is good. What is the difference between true metaphysics and good metaphysics? By saying something is good, we have let values become involved in our judgements. Thus, the criterion of true metaphysics must be different from the criterion of good metaphysics, although true metaphysics might also qualify as good metaphysics.

Feng's well-grounded interpretation and characterization of Western philosophy from the perspective of metaphysical methodology are knowledgeable and full of information; however, in the critical analysis above, I recognize that Feng's characterizations of the metaphysical methods in Western philosophy are not clear enough and require further clarification. In order to figure out why Feng Youlan did not adhere to a coherent and logically consistent analysis when characterizing Western philosophy from the perspective of metaphysical methodology, we need to explore the starting points from which Feng deals with the metaphysics and metaphysical methods in Western philosophy. This is the task of next section of this paper.

III

Feng's interpretation of Western philosophy from the perspective of metaphysical methodology was derived from his understanding of metaphysics and metaphysical methods. In order to determine how Feng Youlan defines metaphysics we need to clarify the following three aspects of his understandings of this concept. First, for Feng, metaphysics is beyond

any particular science and cannot be interpreted by means of any particular science. He criticizes some scholars who interpret metaphysics in terms of physics in order to construct a kind of scientific metaphysics, or who interpret epistemology in terms of psychology in order to construct a kind of scientific epistemology (Feng 2000b, 11). It seems to Feng that the philosophy interpreted through a particular science is neither real philosophy nor authentic metaphysics. According to him, “Philosophy is to analyze, summarize, and interpret experience intellectually, and then speak of it in logical language (名言). This is to define philosophy from the perspective of philosophical method and philosophical starting point” (Feng 2000a, 143). Feng stresses that metaphysics is beyond concrete things, and beyond form. In his words, “What we call Above Form and In Form, are roughly equal to abstractness and concreteness in Western philosophy” (Feng 2000b, 32). Feng uses the words “roughly equal” (相当于), but does not say they are the “same as” metaphysics in Western philosophy. With this clarification, we must note that Feng confesses there is similarity between Above Form in Chinese philosophy and metaphysics in Western philosophy; both of them deal with abstractness. Then what is the difference between metaphysics in Western philosophy and metaphysics in Chinese philosophy?

Feng distinguishes between his concept of “metaphysics” and the concept of “metaphysics” in Western philosophy in this way. He states,

For instance, what Realism calls the heart of universe or the spirit of universe although it is metaphysical, is not Above Form. Also, in religion, God is believed to be one who can create and work. This God, if God really exists, is In Form (形而下). (Ibid., 33)

It is hard to understand that the concept of “metaphysics” in Western philosophy is not the same as the concept of Above Form in Chinese philosophy. As we know, no matter the kind of metaphysics in Western philosophy or Chinese philosophy, what they deal with is essentially abstractness, beyond physical existence and beyond experience of the empirical world. For Feng, only his new metaphysics is really Above Form, because it alone deals with the abstract concepts of myriad things, or with the forms of myriad things. It concerns only the *Li* (Principle/Pattern) which determines myriad things as myriad things but nothing else. For instance, his metaphysics does not deal with concrete things with the shape round, nor with the “form” of round, but only with the *Li* of round. For Feng, it is the *Li* that determines something is round. In this sense, only *Li* metaphysics is really Above Form. *Li*, the object of his metaphysics, is not just Above Form, but even above all forms. In regard to degree of abstractness, the degree of abstractness of *Li* is the highest.

Second, Feng claims that there are two real metaphysical methods: one is the positive method, and another is the negative method. The positive method deals with metaphysics by logical analysis. Feng says that the “positive method of metaphysics takes analytical method as its major method, and Self-thinking method is a supplement. So-called analytical method is logical analytical method” (Feng 2000a, 202). Feng defines his positive metaphysical method as a logical analytical one. Feng’s analysis of experience means to examine how people acquire experience, while his analysis of the content of the experience is intended to explore the experience we have acquired. The analysis of the content of experience is a kind of pure thinking about the content of experience, but this is different from the analysis of experience conducted by empirical science.

The negative method is to say that metaphysics is unspeakable. In the article “The Place and the Methods of New Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy,” Feng uses another expression to characterize these two metaphysical methods. He says,

There are two real metaphysical methods: one is formalist method, and another is intuitional method. The formalist method talks about metaphysics in the way of formalism. The intuitional method claims that metaphysics is unspeakable, Saying that metaphysics is unspeakable is also a method to talk about metaphysics. (Feng 2000c, 496)

The Formalist method actually refers to logical analysis or the positive method, and the intuitional method refers to the negative method. The negative metaphysical method is quite different from the positive one. Feng describes the method in this way: saying that metaphysics is not unspeakable means making the object of metaphysics show in a certain way. This way of speaking of metaphysics can be regarded as “drawing a moon by painting clouds.” Feng further explains that to speak of metaphysics in the positive method is like drawing a moon by using a single line, or using colors to paint a moon, while speaking of metaphysics in the negative method is like drawing a moon by painting clouds. He says, to “speak of metaphysics in negative method is to speak of ‘what it does not speak’ (讲其所不讲)” (Feng 2000a, 150).

According to the negative method, we cannot talk about metaphysics since it is unspeakable; according to the positive, we can speak of metaphysics, but only indirectly. In my understanding, however, the former expresses an attitude towards metaphysics, but only the latter can be regarded as a method to talk about metaphysics in a strict sense.

Scholars have different opinions about Feng’s distinctions between methods of metaphysics. For instance, Tang Yijie, Nicholas Bunnin, and Azuma Juji believe that Feng uses both logical analysis and the negative method, and they believe that Feng’s logical analytical method is very important for his new system of metaphysics. Li Jinglin criticizes the use of the negative metaphysical method in Feng’s early years but recognizes the consistency of Feng’s philosophical system in his later work.

Tang Yijie appropriately identifies Feng’s *A New Treatise on the Methodology of Metaphysics* as a book dealing with the “methodology by which Western philosophers established their philosophical systems,” and thinks that Feng used both positive and negative methods in different works. According to Tang, the method Feng used in *New Metaphysics* is “logical analysis, this kind of method which from the positive side (*zhengmian*) elucidates and explains metaphysical questions,” and in his *New Treatise on the Nature of Man* Feng “uses *even more* the method of direct experience and recognition (*zhijue tiren*) from the negative side (*fumian*) to elucidate and explain metaphysical questions” (Tang 1994, 272).

Nicholas Bunnin holds an affirmative attitude towards Feng’s metaphysical methods. He thinks that “logical analysis was the key to Feng’s monumental project of discovering or reconstructing arguments to explicate and defend positions throughout the history of Chinese philosophy as a prelude to a new flowering of Chinese thought” (Bunnin 2003, 348-9). Azuma Juji recognizes Feng’s metaphysical method as logical analysis and highly values it. Juji says,

This is but one example of the kind of logical analysis which is contained throughout Feng’s *New Lixue*. His method can be generally formulated as adding logical analysis to concepts or propositions, thereby giving them precise definition; then carefully, like a craftsman, one by one he linked them together to construct one great system. Fine logical analysis, complete, detailed, and thorough construction are the very special marks of his *New Lixue*. (Juji 1994, 314)

In these cases, what Tang Yijie and Bunnin considered was how Feng used metaphysical

methods, but they did not question the reasonability of his division of positive and negative methods.

Li Jinglin criticizes the negative metaphysical method expressed by Feng in his early years. Li points out,

Undeniably, some of Feng's earlier ideas are not well-founded. For instance, he defined the negative method as 'discussion of the inexpressible of metaphysics,' without explicitly noting the inherent unity between the expressible and the inexpressible in a metaphysical system; he placed a particular stress on the 'formalism' of philosophical concepts, while ignoring their 'peculiar content'; and so on. For all that, if we look at Feng's opus in the light of his later theoretical reflections, we can see that his thinking has been consistent; and his new interpretation of his own philosophical system and the nature of philosophy in terms of the concrete universal are the inherent meaning embedded in his whole philosophical system. Only from this perspective can we gain a better understanding of the true spirit of Feng's philosophy and philosophical methodology, and draw inspiration for the modern reconstruction of Chinese philosophy and culture. (Li 2011,76)

Li's criticism of Feng's negative metaphysical method focuses on his definition, which is on point, but Li did not further identify the nature of the negative method: is it really a metaphysical method or just an attitude towards metaphysics? Or, does Feng's negative metaphysical method contain both his attitude towards metaphysics and his method? Li's study did not go further. However, the above-mentioned scholars' studies inspire me to clarify these questions; this is the task of the next section.

IV

In this section, I will first critically analyze Feng Youlan's definitions and division of the positive and negative metaphysical methods, and then I will propose an alternative division of two kinds of metaphysical methods. In my alternative division of metaphysical methods, the importance of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and the Vienna Circle to the world of metaphysics will be highly emphasized.

As I have argued earlier in this paper, Feng's definition of the positive metaphysical method is in fact limited to logical analysis, which narrows the range of the positive metaphysical method considerably. Moreover, Feng believes that only the metaphysics that consists of analytical propositions is a true metaphysics and, accordingly, logical analysis becomes the only effective metaphysical method. In his discussions of metaphysics, including his *New Metaphysics of Li*, Feng limits his understandings of metaphysics in this way. With this criterion in mind, Feng almost excludes Aristotle, Descartes, and Hegel from his list of true metaphysicians, as I have shown in section three of this paper.

Should Aristotle be excluded from the list of metaphysicians? There are two possibilities: either Aristotle was indeed not a real metaphysician, or Feng's criterion for choosing metaphysicians was not appropriate. If we say that Aristotle was not a true metaphysician because he did not use logical analysis and his propositions are not analytical ones, we would be saying that there is only one kind of metaphysics and one metaphysical method. However, in the history of Western philosophy there have been many metaphysicians who dealt with issues in different ways, from different perspectives and different dimensions. The assumption that there is only one kind of metaphysics and one metaphysical method does not correspond to the facts of Western philosophy.

Similarly, Feng's negative metaphysical method, strictly speaking, cannot cover multiple

metaphysical methods. In my division, Feng's negative method is just one of a number of indirect metaphysical methods. As we have seen, Feng repeatedly claims that saying metaphysics is unspeakable is what he calls the "negative" metaphysical method. Following this line of thinking, we have to believe that his negative method means philosophers must not speak of metaphysical objects because they are inexpressible. Although we may believe that saying metaphysics is unspeakable is also a way to speak of metaphysics, I would argue that, strictly recognized, the premise that "metaphysics is unspeakable" simply announces that we can have no metaphysics at all.

I propose to clarify the meaning behind Feng's negative method as the understanding I mentioned in the previous section, which is "drawing the moon by painting clouds." In this case, the negative method is essentially a kind of indirect approach. Following this line of thinking, we may employ this method to deal with multiple objects of metaphysics. For instance, metaphysical objects are invisible, but we may deal with them through visible objects; for the objects with unlimited features, we may deal with them through objects of limited features, and so forth. My point is that although metaphysical objects are unspeakable, and unthinkable, as human beings as well as thinkers we continue to try to speak of these objects, and think of these objects. All we can do is either keep silent or speak and think of them indirectly. Following the former, we would have no metaphysics; if we follow the latter, we could have metaphysics. Thus, the first approach of the negative metaphysical method leads to the elimination of metaphysics, and the second approach leads to a possible metaphysics. For me, the essence of the negative metaphysical method consists in speaking of metaphysical objects indirectly. The question is not whether or not metaphysics is expressible or inexpressible, but the question is how to express or speak of it, directly or indirectly.

How is it possible to speak of unspeakable and unthinkable metaphysical objects indirectly? This is actually not a theoretical issue but rather a historical one. In the history of Chinese philosophy, philosophers spoke of metaphysics, but most of them spoke of metaphysics indirectly, in other words, metaphorically. However, in Western philosophers' eyes, all metaphysical concepts are not concrete but abstract, so it is hard for them to recognize Chinese philosophers' talk about metaphysics as metaphysics in the Western philosophical sense. Once they go beyond the literal meanings of many Chinese philosophical expressions, though, Western philosophers will recognize the nature of metaphysics in Chinese philosophers' language. Let's take the typical word "Dao" as an example. Once Western philosophers understand the word "Dao" as going beyond its literal meanings, they will not only understand the word "Dao" as "road" or "path," they will recognize that the word "Dao" also reveals the abstract nature and common law of the world. It is a metaphysical concept in the context of Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophers metaphorically used the physical "road" or "path" to express their metaphysical ideas. This is an indirect way to talk about metaphysics. Feng's negative metaphysical method is also essentially one of indirection. Feng uses this method to construct his *New Metaphysics of Li*, despite his announcement that he has developed his metaphysics by pure logical analyses. As I indicated in my book *Metaphorical Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy: Illustrated with Feng Youlan's New Metaphysics*, Feng's four major metaphysical categories—"Li," "Qi," "Daoti," and "Daquan"—are all metaphorical concepts and are metaphorically described.

Of his four basic metaphysical propositions, only the first is analytical; all the others are not strictly analytical. Feng's metaphysics of *Li* is one example of metaphorical metaphysics in the history of Chinese philosophy and, accordingly, his metaphysical method is essentially an indirect method; more particularly, it is a metaphorical method (Chen 2011,

139-77).

According to Feng's new metaphysics, the only affirmation about reality is "things exist" (事物存在) (Feng 2000a, 195). It seems to me that the "only affirmation," no matter what the particular content is, belongs to what I call a direct method. "Things exist" is a direct statement; it is not a result of logical analysis. Instead, philosophers like Feng Youlan regard it as a fundamental premise from which to acquire other propositions. Following this proposition, we find that Feng actually uses an indirect metaphysical method. The following analyses may support this assumption.

Among Feng's four groups of metaphysical propositions, the first one says: "Anything must be some kinds of things. Being something, must be a certain thing. A certain thing is a certain thing, and must have something by which something is something. Just borrow ancient Chinese philosophers' words: 'There is something there must have the principle (Pattern/Li) of something'" (Ibid.).

His second group of metaphysical proposition is "Things are all that exist" (事物都存在) (Ibid., 195-7). It seems to me that these two propositions are conveyed via the direct metaphysical method because both of them directly affirm something about metaphysical objects, although the affirmation is no more than formal.

Feng's third major group of metaphysical propositions says "Existence is flowing" (存在是一流行) (Ibid., 199). This group of propositions is actually metaphorical, or we may say that he speaks of the metaphysical object's "existence" metaphorically. Existence does not mean any specific visible concrete thing, while "flowing" is an expression describing a feature of visible things, like the dynamic status of water or river. Feng borrows this dynamic status to characterize "existence." This method is metaphorical, neither analytical nor logical. How is it possible to acquire the visible physical attribute "flowing" from the pure metaphysical abstract concept of "existence"? I would suggest that Feng just reverses the relationship between the visible physical world and the metaphysical realm.

Feng's fourth major group of metaphysical propositions says, "Conclude all existence/being is called Great Totality, the Great Totality is just all things/beings" (Ibid.). I consider Feng's fourth metaphysical proposition to be a synthetic one. This proposition shows itself to be synthetic because in the proposition the term "generalize/conclude" (总) indicates its method: we start to acquire an understanding of the attribute of existence from one thing, two things, three things... then all things. To put this in another way, one thing has "existence," second thing has "existence," third thing has "existence"...all things have "existence." We then generalize the "existence" of all things, finally acquiring the metaphysical concept "existence" and forming the proposition "All existence is a flowing." Feng did not say anything about this process, but to gain the term "Generalize/conclude" (总) certainly requires following this procedure, and its method is essentially intuitional, not analytical at all.

The above analyses show that Feng in fact uses a variety of methods to construct his new metaphysics. Since he uses multiple methods to deal with his new metaphysics, it is hard to characterize these different methods in terms of his categories of positive and negative. Feng himself did not clarify this division. Is metaphysics speakable or unspeakable? Feng's explanations are not clear enough. When it comes to the essence or nature of the so-called positive and negative metaphysical methods, Feng's definitions are not adequate.

Once we distinguish Feng's negative attitude towards metaphysics from the metaphysical methods themselves and exclude this attitude from what I call the indirect metaphysical method, we may confidently say that an indirect metaphorical approach is an effective metaphysical method. According to the division I make between direct and indirect metaphysical methods, I would suggest that it is mainly Western philosophers who deal with

metaphysical issues directly. Examples of direct metaphysical methods include Socrates's dialectics; the way Plato deals with Ideas; Aristotle his ten categories; Spinoza his "God" and relevant objects; Kant his concepts of God, Soul, and Free Will; Hegel his Absolute Idea; and Heidegger his Being, etc. Wittgenstein's "keep silence as to what we cannot say," however, is just an attitude towards metaphysics, not a metaphysical statement.

In the history of Chinese philosophy, most thinkers employed indirect methods to speak of metaphysics. Lao Zi spoke of the Dao, which is unspeakable, indirectly through metaphorical expressions and discourses. Zhuang Zi spoke of Dao (or One) by means of a number of metaphorical stories or descriptions. Zhu Xi deals with the relationship between Dao and myriad things by means of the metaphorical relationship between moon and rivers. Feng Youlan himself describes the Embodiment of Dao (道体) as "flowing," a word which is usually used to describe the movement of physical things like water or a river. All of these methods used by Chinese philosophers are indirect metaphysical methods.

Generally speaking, in the West, direct metaphysical methods are the major metaphysical methods, but indirect metaphysical methods are also used in the process of dealing with metaphysical objects, including the metaphorical metaphysical method. In China, indirect metaphysical methods are the major metaphysical methods, especially metaphorical metaphysics, but direct methods are also occasionally used by some philosophers, including logical analytical methods. Feng is among those who claim to employ logical analytical methods to deal with metaphysical issues.

In the sense of metaphysical methodology, the difference between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy is essentially the difference between indirect metaphysical statements and direct ones. The similarity between China and the West consists in that both Chinese and Western philosophers made and are still making efforts to speak of transcendent objects indirectly or directly in order to satisfy humans' curiosity about the universe.

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