

On the knowledge of nature and life:  
With a Focus on Ancient Greece and India as the Origins of Philosophy

NAOYA KANEKO (Part-time lecturer, Rissho University)

### 1. Introduction

In many cases, we understand reason and intelligence as a character of humankind; on the other hand, instinct as a character of animals. By this understanding, we tend to regard that humankind is completely separated from animals and plants etc. This idea derives from modern western thought, that is the result of encounter between Hellenism and Hebraism. But ancient Greeks never think that they have special status in this world just as Hebrews think that they can utilize animals and plants created by God for their interest. For ancient Indians as well, humankind, animals, plants and deities seem to be the part of this world, probably because the encounter with other civilization was limited. In any case, we can find interesting features in the knowledge of nature and life in ancient Greece and India. Their arguments are as follows: what is life, how living beings are born, how instinct functions and what is the basis of classification. The knowledge is probably based on common experiences by observation, but they have different interpretations according to their own world views. Therefore I take up Aristotle, some Brahmanists and some Buddhist scholars. In Japan Dr. Hajime Nakamura (1912-99) and Dr. Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-93) have already compared Greek philosophy with Indian thought. Although both scholars take up the knowledge itself, they do not deal with the knowledge of life at all. Due to the above reason, it is worth paying attention to the knowledge of nature and life, and comparative thought will show us ancient unique ways to interpret common life phenomenon in Greece and India.

### 2. Observation of life in Greece and India

It is well known that Aristotle (BC.384-322) states the existence of *Eidos* against his master Plato. *Eidos* exists in individual things and is not only the basis of knowledge but also the cause and the end of forming individual things. Aristotle starting his study in biology, relates Nature (*physis*) to *Kinēsis*. *Kinēsis* includes motion, action, change, formation, birth and death etc. If we understand nature as true character, plants and animals have the nature called instinct, and instinct brings about meaningful action. According to him, plants have the ability just like taking in nutrition, growth and breeding (De Anima413a26-31, 415a22). And animals, in addition to these tree functions, have the ability just like perception, thinking, desire and transference (ibid 414a33-b6, 434b9). By instinct plants and animals fulfill their own purpose (Physica199a20-30). Their own purpose is completion

of individual body and reproduction of the same species. Though they are not immortal because of their death, they take part in eternal *Kinēsis* in the form of genus or species (*Eidos*). In this way, Aristotle finds out the law of nature as fulfillment of purpose in the life of living beings. In reference to the law of nature and the Deity, Dr. Izutsu indicates as follows: All things because of their imperfection, adore the Deity and desire to return to him as the origin in order to become perfect. Here the order of the world comes into existence. This kind of tendency that living beings desire to be complete is called instinctive desire (Mystic Philosophy: the Greek Part p.196-198). In this way, Dr. Izutsu depicts the mystic aspect of Aristotle philosophy. How then does a child succeed to *Eidos* from its parents? After fertilization embryo changes into heart with which soul resides, and at that time *Eidos* is succeeded to in order to make a child resemble its parents (De generatione animalium 735a4-14). However male's sperm is not *Eidos*, but only a means of carrying it. Because it is not material factor. The above is Aristotle's explanation of life and instinct.

Some Brahmanists have the idea of instinctive action (*itikartavyatā*). This means an action which accomplishes specific purpose. There are two types of argument. First, Grammarian Bhartṛhari (ca.450-510) deals with instinctive action which arises as a result of inherent linguistic intuition. Linguistic intuition is found in infant who is in the process of mastering how to speak (Vākyapadīya I 129-130). Moreover, the same kind of intuition is found in the activities of bird and insect just like courting or nesting, and he explains that their intuition is precisely the product of inheritance (Vākyapadīya II 146-151). Second, Naiyāyika scholars take up instinctive action like infant's emotional expression and appetite (Nyāyasūtra III a 18-23). Both groups accepting transmigration as Indian common sense, think that the cause of instinct is repetition in previous life. However according to Naiyāyikas, plants are not thought to be living being, because blooming and closing of lotus flower depend only on climate and temperature. Thus plants do not transmigrate. In this way, Brahmanists show interest in instinctive action of humankind and animals.

Among the schools of Indian Buddhism, Sarvāstivāda scholars showing interest in living beings' mode of life, take up the factor like *Eidos*. Based on Abhidharmakośa written by Vasubandhu (ca.4c), they think that living beings have vitality and it differs depending on homogeneous character (*Nikāyasabhāga*), and thus homogeneous character plays a role in inheritance (Abhidharmakośa II 45ab, Bhāṣya 73,13-74,8). These two factors are not material nor mental. The mechanism is as follows: For living beings, homogeneous character functions together with two kinds of previous action, here the generic status of their rebirth state is determined by homogeneous character according to their skeletal action, in addition to this, fleshing action gives them individual difference (cf. Collett Cox, Disputed Dharmas, p.110). By the way, homogeneous character is

different from the concept of *Eidos* in the following points: (1) The classification of homogeneous character is more complicated than *Eidos*. Sarvāstivādins apply it not only to humankind and animals, but also to deities, demons and people of different social status (Abhidharmakośa II 41a, Bhāṣya67,15-16). (2) Since Buddhists as well accept transmigration, living beings can change homogeneous character after death. Among the four possibilities of transmigration, the best is to attain enlightenment. Whether they can get better homogeneous character or not is dependent on their present action (Abhidharmakośa II 41a, Bhāṣya67,18-21). Moreover, according to Saṅghabhadra (ca.5c), Sarvāstivādins never admit homogeneous character of plants same as Brahmanists do, because plants do not transmigrate (Nyāyānusāra 29,400b11-26). In this way, Sarvāstivādins have the system of classification which can explain the mode of life.

### 3. The basis of classification

Now, what is the basis of classification? Aristotle using Plato's concept "hierarchy of Universal" for classification of living beings, defines genus by similarity and species by the way of formation. Aristotle states that parents and child share *Eidos* (Metaphysica1032a24-25), and this fact brings about the common name between them (De generatione animalium735a20-21). In this way, he seems to consider the sharing of *Eidos* to be the basis of sharing name. As long as accepting this view, a name of a specific living being is not just a designation by convention, but expresses its essence and reality (Metaphysica1043a29-43b4).

Vaiśeṣika scholars sharing the doctrine with Naiyāyikas, have the idea of hierarchy of Universal (*sāmānya*). Among them, general Universal makes people notice something existent, and specific Universals are the basis of knowledge of cow or pot etc., as the essence of cow or pot in the form of cowness or potness (Padārthadharmasaṃgraha311,14-312,17). Latter corresponds to specific knowledges and words regardless of living beings or non-living beings. In this way, Vaiśeṣika scholars assume that external Universals correspond to individual things as a basis of classification. Dr.Izutsu regards them as those who argue the correspondence between name and reality (Consciousness and Essence p.310-311). As another understanding, Dr.Nakamura by comparing Plato, Aristotle with Vaiśeṣikas, finds their reflective thought contained in their idea of category about the usage of Greek or Sanskrit grammatical rule (Naiyāyika-Vaiśeṣika Thought p.609-610).

Contrary to the above views, there is no consensus among Buddhist scholars. On the one hand, Sarvāstivādins assume the hierarchy of general homogeneous character and specific one as real entity based on the similarity or dissimilarity of living beings. On the other hand, Vasubandhu interprets homogeneous character as a state or continuous energy for a definite term (*cf.* Collett Cox,

Disputed Dharmas, p.109-110). For this reason, he assumes that homogeneous character is no more than a conceptual being. As a matter of fact, since homogeneous character itself is not perceptible nor inferable, one cannot help but demonstrate its existence relying only on the cognition of similarity, but it is not enough demonstration (Abhidharmakośa II 41a, Bhāṣya67,23-68,9). His view is clear nominalism, and we could also say that it is a clue to Mind-only theory explaining that all existence is subjective. Against this, Saṅghabhadra from Sarvāstivāda's position, in order to prove that homogeneous character is not just a conceptual being, replies that it is the cause which makes a certain creature resemble among the same species in terms of bodily structure, action and feeding habit or is the cause of seeking the same purpose (Nyāyānusāra 29,400a18-20). This reply steps into the view point of formation. It seems that by dealing with homogeneous character as the cause of forming and excepting plants etc. from living beings, Saṅghabhadra makes up for shortcomings of the demonstration by similarity (cf. Yoshihiko Sakurai, The Definition of nikāyasabhāga in the Sarvāstivādins p.118-119). This demonstration resembles that of Aristotle and could be effective against Vasubandhu's nominalism.

#### 4. Conclusion

- (1) Though Greeks and Indians have different views over the range of living beings, it is common that both understand the instinct of living beings as fulfillment of their own purpose. Then, because Aristotle denies transmigration, the world is ruled by necessity. But many Indian Philosophers accept transmigration, therefore the life in the world is changeable dependent on their action.
- (2) Aristotle assumes that *Eidos* plays a role in inheritance and Saṅghabhadra as well thinks that homogeneous character does so. Moreover, Bhartṛhari refers to the fact of inheritance. On the other hand, Vaiśeṣika scholars try to prove the existence of Universal only by epistemological point without referring to the cause of formation.
- (3) If one tries to prove the existence of Universal only by epistemological point, this stand point can only show the fact that individual A is similar to individual B or one can give common name to A and B. Therefore since this kind of demonstration tends to be insufficient, one cannot help referring to the cause of formation.
- (4) Beginning with biology, Aristotle shows interest in world's hierarchy and seeks objective knowledge. In contrast to him, some Buddhist scholars like Vasubandhu depending on nominalism and Mind-only theory, seem to have lost interest in classification of outer world.