

# Bi-Level Virtue Epistemology: Ernest Sosa and Confucianism



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## **Bio :**

Prof. Chienkuo Mi is Distinguished Professor and Chairperson of Philosophy at Soochow University, Taipei, and Nankai Chair Professor of Philosophy at Nankai University, Tianjin. He has published widely in Chinese and English on topics in epistemology, philosophy of language, and Chinese philosophy. His recently published works include *Naturalized Epistemology and Philosophy of Science* (with Ruey-lin Chen, Rodopi 2007) and *Moral and Intellectual Virtues in Western and Chinese Philosophy: The Turn toward Virtue* (with

Michael Slote and Ernest Sosa, Routledge 2015). His recent research brings together issues in Virtue Epistemology, Philosophy of Memory, Epistemology of Testimony, and Chinese philosophy (including Confucianism and Zhuangzi).

### Short Introduction:

I have argued that the *Analects of Confucius* presents us with a full conception of reflection with two components, a retrospective component and a perspective component. The former component involves the hindsight or careful examination of the past and as such draws on previous learning or memory and previously formed beliefs to avoid error. The latter component is foresight, or forward looking, and as such looks to existing beliefs and various factors in order to hit the target or achieve knowledge.

In this talk, I would like to reinforce the idea of the skilful reflection in the framework of bi-level virtue epistemology, from both Ernest Sosa's perspective and the background of Chinese Philosophy. The point of the bi-level virtue epistemology, strictly speaking, is not to propose that there are different kinds of knowledge. The point is rather to emphasize the different kinds of competence or cognitive capacity which can help us acquire knowledge and gain certain epistemic status: either through the first-order competence or cognitive mechanism or by adding the second-order competence or meta-cognition on top of the given first-order one. Even for Confucius's two levels of knowledge, the focus of distinguishing different levels of knowledge is not on the "knowledge" *per se*, but on the different ways of achieving knowledge. For Confucius, the lower-level knowledge can be attained simply by our five senses or memory, while the higher-level (or the best kind of) knowledge can only be achieved by manifesting our skilful reflection.

To make this bi-level virtue epistemology more clearly and more significantly, it is important to notice the following different types of cognitive or psychological processes: simply seeing (hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching), simply memorising, simply reasoning, and simply introspecting, let's call these the type-one (or the level-one) processes; reflectively (attentively, or consciously) seeing (hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching), reflectively (attentively, or consciously) memorising, reflectively (attentively, or consciously) reasoning,

and reflectively (attentively, or consciously) introspecting, let's call all of these the type-two (or the level-two) processes. The type-one processes, cognitive or psychological, involve only the first-order cognitive mechanism, while the type-two processes apply not only the first-order cognitive mechanism, but also the meta-cognition or higher-level competence. It is also important to realise the fact that we cannot have only employed our higher-order cognition without using or functioning any first-order cognitive mechanism, in which case it is like to reflect on, be conscious of, or pay attention to nothing at all.

In the modern usages of Chinese language, the ways of expression concerning our cognitive processes or psychological states usually consist of and combine two different Chinese characters, for examples, sense perceiving by the expression of 感覺, thinking by 思想, hearing by 聽聞, seeing by 看見, and many more. However, these two-word expressions all combine and confuse the different levels of cognitive mechanism or processes in question. “感覺” combines the word “感” which means “sensing” (first-order cognitive sensing) and the word “覺” which means “consciousness” (higher-order cognitive state). “思想” combines the word “思” meaning “reflecting” (meta-cognition) and the word “想” meaning “merely thinking” (first-order cognitive mechanism). “聽聞” combines the word “聽” meaning “hearing” (first-order cognitive sensing) and the word “聞” meaning “listening carefully or hearing attentively” (higher-order cognitive mechanism). And “看見” combines the word “看 (or 視)” meaning “seeing” (first-order cognitive sensing) and the word “見” meaning “watching carefully or seeing attentively” (higher-order cognitive mechanism). Ironically, all those Chinese words above were used individually in ancient history of Chinese philosophy (without combining with others), and can stand for their own proper cognitive or psychological states without confusing their different levels of epistemic status.