

Psychotherapeutic Interpretation and Enlightenment of Feng Youlan's Theory of Life Realm

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Abstract: This study mainly interprets Feng Youlan's "Theory of Life Realm" from the perspective of psychotherapy, redefining the concepts of "juejie" (awareness and understanding) and the criteria for realm classification. "Juejie" has two meanings: the psychological activity of processing cognitive objects and the awareness of the spirit itself. Realm is inherently a spatial-temporal concept. According to people's different time, space, and awakening levels, realm can be divided into clearer spatial-temporal dimensions. Such classification is more conducive to grasping its essence and realizing realm transformation. This study improves Feng Youlan's "Theory of Life Realm" and realizes the possibility of constructing a Chinese-style psychotherapy paradigm through the realm theory.

Keywords: Feng Youlan; Life realm; Juejie (awareness and understanding); Psychotherapy; Self-expansion; Realm elevation

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1. Introduction

Chinese philosophy is known as life philosophy, characterized by solving puzzles and settling the mind and body, with the method of promoting the elevation of human realm. The elevation of life realm can reconstruct the meaning and value of life and realize psychological healing, which is essentially the expansion of the "self" in time, space, and awakening level. The differentiation of psychological functions causes "division" between them, leading to blocked connections between psychological function modules. The "self" cannot freely transition between consciousness and unconsciousness, in the time dimension of past, present, and future, and in the spatial dimensions of body, psychology, society, and nature, thus generating a sense of psychological conflict and leading to psychological problems. Reconnecting these functional modules and realizing the free movement of the "self" in time and space is the process of realm transformation and psychological healing. Throughout the history of Chinese thought, the common point of various theories is to help people achieve the realm elevation of "from

ordinary to sage” through self-cultivation. In this process, various psychological puzzles and pains of people will be gradually resolved, which is the main paradigm of psychological healing in Chinese culture.

Mr. Feng Youlan proposed the theory of four life realms in *Xin Yuan Ren*: the Natural Realm, the Utilitarian Realm, the Moral Realm, and the Heavenly Realm. The criterion for distinction is the degree of “juejie”. People in the Natural Realm act according to instinct and habit, lacking awareness of self and society; those in the Utilitarian Realm take “seeking profit” as the core, with actions centered on the “self”; those in the Moral Realm “practice righteousness” and prioritize social interests; those in the Heavenly Realm “identify with heaven” and reach the highest state of harmony between man and nature^[1]. The classification criteria of the four realms integrate Confucian and Taoist thoughts such as “theory of mind-nature”, “distinction between righteousness and profit”, and “harmony between man and nature”, and construct a metaphysical system through logical analysis and the “combination of positive and negative methods”^[2,3]. However, many scholars have controversies and criticisms regarding the understanding of “juejie” and the criteria for realm classification. Liang Fuchao and Lu Yongzhao (2025) believe that the criteria for realm classification are vague, advocating “profit” and “self” as the classification criteria, and subdividing the four realms into seven, making the realm classification easier to understand and operate^[4]. Liu Jinpeng (2010) compares Feng’s four realms with personality types such as fools, ordinary people, virtuous people, and sages, emphasizing that realm elevation is a process of personality improvement^[5]. Chen Xiaoping (2025) proposes the “transcendental-empirical duality of the self”, understanding realm elevation from the perspective of the “self”, and emphasizing that its essence is the collaborative result of the transcendental self and the empirical self, which corrects the one-sidedness of Feng’s understanding of the “self”^[3]. However, scholars’ criticisms mainly proceed from philosophical and ethical perspectives with strong subjective colors, leading to constant controversies.

Up to now, there have been more and more research results related to realm and psychology. These studies have enriched the theory of life realm, but research from the perspective of psychotherapy needs to be further in-depth. Zhang Kezheng (2014) points out that the leap from the actual to the ideal realm is essentially the self-transcendence of spiritual life, which is inherently consistent with “self-growth” and “trauma recovery” in psychology^[6]. He Ganggang (2025) believes that “juejie” includes cognitive reconstruction and emotional experience, similar to “cognitive adjustment” in cognitive-behavioral therapy and “self-awareness” in humanistic therapy^[7]. Chen Xiaoping’s (2025) analysis of the duality of the “self” is highly consistent with the self-personality theory in psychology^[3]. However, these studies have not placed the realm theory under the framework of psychology or psychotherapy, nor have they solved the ambiguity in Feng Youlan’s explanation of “juejie” and realm classification. “Juejie” and “realm” belong to the research category of cognition and self-personality in psychology. This paper aims to reinterpret them through psychological language, improve Feng Youlan’s theory of life realm, and better export China’s local psychotherapy programs to the world.

2. Cognitive psychological interpretation of “juejie”

Juejie is the “spiritual root” for the elevation of life realm^[8]. Feng Youlan explains “juejie” as “understanding” and “self-awareness”: “jie” (understanding) is rational cognitive ability, the grasp of things and the principles of the universe and life; “jue” (awareness) is a state of perceptual cognitive awareness, the exertion of the mind’s “perceptual clarity”^[9]. Cheng Lin (2012) points out that Feng Youlan defines the essence of philosophy as “systematic reflective thinking on life”, and “juejie” is the core ability to reflect and reveal the meaning of

life. The presence or absence and the degree of “juejie” determine which realm a person is in ^[1]. Regarding the classification criteria for the degree of juejie, Chai Wenhua et al. (2025) believe that Mr. Feng Youlan mainly divides them based on thoughts such as “distinction between man and beast” in Confucian theory of mind-nature ^[2]. He Ganggang (2025) attempts to realize the understanding of axiology from an epistemological perspective, believing that four levels of cognition determine the level of realm: “no understanding” corresponds to the Natural Realm, “shallow understanding” to the Utilitarian Realm, “categorical understanding” to the Moral Realm, and “complete understanding” to the Heavenly Realm. These four levels of cognition are also vague, inevitably leading to ambiguous definition and loose logic of the four realms. He Ganggang (2025) points out that the fundamental reason why Feng’s Heavenly Realm is ultimately defined as “inconceivable” and “unspeakable” lies in its methodological issues ^[7]. Liu Jinpeng (2010), Liang Fuchao, and Lu Yongzhao (2025) believe that Feng Youlan’s definition of “juejie” does not consider the practical dimension, making juejie feel disconnected from real life. The root cause of this is the unclear definition of juejie. From a philosophical perspective, juejie is a concept that is difficult to clarify. Interpreting it from a psychological perspective should provide a clearer explanation.

Human cognitive activities mainly involve the processing of perceived objects and the awareness of cognition itself. This self-observation of the spiritual subject is called “juexing” in Chinese culture. Juexing is a reflection from the awareness of one’s own perception to the process and functions of psychological activities themselves ^[10]. Juejie mainly covers the psychological cognitive activities of processing cognitive objects and being aware of the spirit itself.

The development of the “self” progresses from the physical and psychological to the social and cosmic-natural, showing a hierarchical nature, and this process is based on “juejie”. At the beginning of life, we often regard the body and psychology as the “self”. When we gradually realize the spatial-temporal limitations of the body and mind, we need self-transcendence to seek higher-level life meaning, thus transitioning from the physical self and psychological self to the social self and cosmic self. “Establishing meritorious deeds, cultivating virtue, and leaving behind words” is to find a more eternal form than the physical and psychological self in the social self. However, human society also has spatial-temporal limitations, so we move towards a higher level, establishing a “Tao self” in the cosmic-nature, an absolutely eternal “self”, thereby finding the ultimate sense of meaning. The core of the development and transcendence of the self lies in the cognition of things in various time and space and the understanding of the relationship between the self and various time and space.

When we are in the “Natural Realm”, our ability of “jie” is insufficient, and we can only follow instinct, thus unable to understand the meaning of life; in the “Utilitarian Realm”, we understand our own needs and the value of things, so we will maximize gains; in the “Moral Realm”, we not only understand our own needs but also the needs of others and social laws, realizing that we are individual and social beings, with a sense of role and responsibility, and recognizing that the self and others are one, which is close to the Confucian realm of “ren” ; finally, the “Heavenly Realm”, which corresponds to the “Tao” ^[11]. In this realm, we realize that we come from the Tao, live in the Tao, and will eventually return to the Tao. We are part of the universe, which is the realm of “identifying with heaven”. We realize that we are the universe itself, and we become ultimately eternal.

In lower realms, “juejie” often shows cognitive characteristics such as “seeing only parts but not the whole, black-and-white thinking, and egocentrism”. In higher realms, juejie shows cognitive characteristics such as “dialectical thinking, metacognitive ability, systematic thinking, and decentration”. Among them, people in the Natural Realm and the Heavenly Realm seem to be dominated by natural and instinctive forces, but people in the Natural Realm do not understand this force, cannot control their own state, and are completely passive; while

people in the Heavenly Realm not only understand this force but also actively adjust themselves to be unified with it, experiencing higher-level meaning, which is an active state.

3. “Self” expansion in realm transformation

People have different degrees of juejie in the universe and life, so the universe and life will show different meanings to people, which constitutes a person’s certain realm. The realm is different for everyone, but people either know or do not know, see or do not see ^[12].

In Shuowen Jiezi Zhu, “jing” is the same as “jing”, referring to the end of a piece of music, the completion in time; “jie” refers to the division of spatial boundaries. In ancient Chinese classics, realm refers to the termination or end in time or the boundary, limit, or territory in space, originally representing a material spatial concept that characterizes specific facts, and later extended to the spiritual space, the world of the mind, and even the ultimate state of the spirit. Fang Dongmei regarded realm as the life level and spiritual state achieved when individual life merges into cosmic life (Dao). Tang Junyi regarded realm as the domain or scope where the transcendent mind carries out perceptual communication activities. Zhang Shiyong believed that realm is a dynamic temporal field and time domain in which people operate ^[13].

Our perception is based on a certain spatial-temporal object or scope, and we think and practice within a certain spatial-temporal object or scope. This spatial-temporal scope constitutes our “realm”. In different realms, our understanding of the universe and life is different, so the meaning of the universe and life is also different. Chen Xiaoping (2025) proposed the view of “transcendental-empirical duality of the self”, believing that realm elevation is the orderly expansion of the self-structure. Through juejie, people gain cognition of different time and space and understand their relationship with themselves, thereby realizing the construction of meaning, which is the process of realm elevation.

Combining Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist thoughts on people, Feng Youlan proposed the theory of life realm, taking realm elevation, i.e., human cultural generation, as the philosophical theme ^[14]. Feng Youlan’s realm classification mainly proceeds from the spatial dimension, and the contrast between the Natural Realm and the Heavenly Realm also reflects the dimension of consciousness and unconsciousness, but lacks the time dimension. The three dimensions cannot form a whole, so it cannot be clearly defined. Realm should be composed of time, space, and awakening level as a whole. From the spatial perspective, it includes physical, psychological, social, natural and other realms; from the time perspective, it includes past, present, and future realms; from the awakening level perspective, it includes the realm of knowledge and ignorance. The universe composed of time and space is only a small part perceived by humans, and only what enters consciousness can be “juejie”, which refers to the realm of knowledge or consciousness, and vice versa, the realm of ignorance or unconsciousness. Such a realm divided by time, space, and awakening level will exceed four. Such a classification of realms is more orderly and easier to connect, enabling us to grasp and understand each part of the realm as a whole and realize the transition between realms more easily. The development process of psychology, self, and personality is to a certain extent the process of realm expansion. The process of realm elevation is also the process of psychological energy flow and psychological healing.

4. Conclusion

“Human” is the core of traditional Chinese philosophy ^[15]. The elevation of life realm is a characteristic of Chinese

philosophy and a way for Chinese people to solve psychological difficulties. When facing problems, Westerners focus on the problems themselves, while Chinese people are better at finding reasons from themselves to achieve self-transcendence and thus surpass the problems. The theory of life realm can be interpreted as a systematic psychological therapy theory with unique Chinese characteristics. The essence of realm elevation is to achieve “self” expansion through juejie. The elevation of life realm is inherently isomorphic with personality growth and psychological healing. From a theoretical perspective, researching the realm theory from the perspective of psychotherapy can realize the application transformation of Chinese philosophy and provide a Chinese plan for psychotherapy. The psychological therapy theory of realm elevation has a better explanatory power for existing Western psychotherapy technologies; realm elevation also has important practical significance. From the perspective of realm elevation, “clients” are not patients, but “ordinary people” waiting for realm elevation, waiting to transition from a lower realm to a higher one. In this process, the psychotherapy relationship and psychotherapy technologies will also undergo subversive changes.

Disclosure statement

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