

On the Ancient Educational Thought under the Opposite View of Human Nature of the Pre-Qin Scholars— On its Value to Contemporary Higher Education

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Abstract: The pre-qin Scholars' views on human nature could be divided into two types: malleable human nature and immalleable human nature. Based on the theory of the malleability of human nature, Confucianism formed an educational concept aiming at shaping the ideal personality of Confucianism. The theory of immutability of human nature has become the root of the two distinct educational concepts of Taoism, which advocates letting nature take its course, and Taoism, which aims at reforming human behavior. Either idea has its reasonableness. All of these have a very important impact on our higher education today.

Keywords: The Pre-Qin scholars; Human nature; Contemporary value

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1 Introduction

Education is a kind of shaping of people themselves, so the implementation of education work is inseparable from the cognition of human nature. The thoughts of scholars in the pre-qin period were an important part of the Chinese traditional culture system, which had original significance and had a profound influence on later generations. The differences in the views of different schools lie in the differences in the view of human nature and the differences in the pursuit of ideal personality derived from it.

2 Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism and Dharma's view of human nature

Confucius believed that “nature is similar, but practice is far away” (*The Analects of Confucius, Yanghuo*), pointing out that human nature is similar, while differences are acquired, which constitutes the theoretical basis for human education. Mencius said, “the goodness of human nature is like water. No man is not good, no water is not down.” (*Mencius, the first part of Gaozi*) Corresponding to xunzi's “human nature evil, its good false also” (*Xunzi, Evil nature*). According to xunzi, human nature refers to the original nature of human beings, that is, “Nature is what life is”, which tends to be the natural attribute of human beings, and “goodness” is the acquired social attribute. Mencius believed that human nature is no different from animals, and human nature should be a social attribute that distinguishes human beings from animals. Despite the conflict between mencius and xunzi on the nature of good and evil, the Confucian pursuit of good is consistent, which leads people into the realm of “benevolence”.

The book of *Mozi* does not explicitly put forward Mozi's views on human nature, but his utilitarian tendency and the elaboration on “benefit” in the book of *Mozi* indicate that Mozi recognized the view of humanity seeking benefit. However, Mozi did not recognize people's self-interested behavior. He believed that it was everyone's self-interested behavior that led to social chaos, and on this basis proposed the altruism

concept of “fraternity”, namely “benefiting the world” (*Mozi, Fraternity*). The transformation from “selfish” to “altruistic” obviously requires the shaping of people, so Mozi believed that “human nature is like a plain silk, dyed in black is black, dyed in yellow is yellow” (*Mozi, Dyeable*), emphasizing the guidance after birth.

Daoism is represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Taoism advocates inaction and nature, and believes that human nature is an ideal state as long as it returns to nature and does not cover up deliberately. Any external institutional, legal, social constraints will only backfire. Taoism believes that there is no good or evil in human nature, but the behavior of forcibly changing human nature will lead to social chaos.

The legalist school is a highly realistic school. All the works with the characteristics of legalist school hold the view that human nature pursues interests. The book of *Shang Jun, calculating land* points out: “The nature of the people: hunger for food, labor for loss, pain for happiness, shame for honor, this is human nature.” Guanzi, *Keep prohibition in mind* claims: “It is human nature: seeing the benefit it is impossible not to pursue, seeing the harm it is impossible not to avoid.” Han feizi, as a master of legalism, put forward clearly that “The doctor is good at sucking the patient’s wound and holding the patient’s dirty blood in his mouth, not because of the close relative, but because of the interest. So the wheelwright built a good car, hope others wealth; When a coffin-maker makes a coffin, he wants someone else to die. It is not the wheelwright who is kind and the coffin-maker who is vicious; If others are not rich, the car can not be sold; If no one else dies, no one buys the coffin” (*Han Feizi, Internal defense*). Legalists are not critical of human nature, nor do they want to reverse human nature. Legalists focus on how to guide people to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages, so as to achieve an idealized society of legalists.

3 The educational thought reflected by the opposition between human nature

Although Confucianism and Mohism are opposite in ideology, their views on human nature are not exactly the same, but their internal logic is the same: no matter what the natural attributes of people, people should use various means to make their personality more perfect. The perfection of the personality of each individual can constitute the perfection of a society. Mencius of Confucianism advocated the theory of “goodness of nature”, which is that he logically avoided taking

natural attributes as human congenital, but regarded part of social attributes as human congenital, namely the four beginnings of human: “Compassion is the beginning of benevolence; Shame is the beginning of righteousness; Surrender is the beginning of the ceremony; Mind is the beginning of wisdom” (*Mencius, Gongsun Chou Volume 1*). However Mencius still pays attention to the change after birth, because the four ends are just the bud of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom. To develop into a perfect personality of benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, we still need to work hard. Xunzi’s theory of nature evil, in fact, means that human nature pursues benefits, that is, emphasizes the natural attribute of human, but Xunzi does not recognize this attribute. Instead, he said, “the evil nature of man so far must depend on the teachings of teachers and testimonies, and then can be rectified, and can only be adjusted under the guidance of rites and righteousness.” (*Xunzi, Nature Evil*) That is to say, it is not terrible for human nature to be evil. External systems and laws can civilize and transform human nature, reaching the ideal realm. Although Mohism emphasizes the opposition with Confucianism everywhere, but their views on human nature can be dyed, in fact, is the same with the Confucian thought of acquired enlightenment. In a word, both Confucianism and Mohism believe that human nature can be changed through artificial efforts, and this transformation can be carried out in an ideal direction. The educational behavior itself depends on the acquired plasticity of human nature. We can call the view of human nature of Confucianism and Mohism the theory of malleability of human nature.

On the surface, Taoism and Legalism, one advocates purity and inaction, the other advocates severe punishment and strict law, but the two have a certain ideological origin. From the attitude to human nature, we can see that both Taoism and Legalism emphasize the natural nature of man. They acknowledge the rationality of nature. Taoism believes that human nature is valuable. It opposes to destroy human nature with excessive education. The ideal state of education should be people-oriented and conform to the natural law of physical and mental development^[1]. In the eyes of Legalists, people’s nature of seeking advantage and avoiding harm cannot be changed and need not be changed.”What I call benefit, the origin of righteousness” (*Shangjunshu, Kaise*). This is in sharp contrast to the above two schools of Confucianism

and Mohism. But this brings with it a simple logical wound: since human nature is immutable, is education necessary? Taoism believes that the whole society has been bound by a variety of unreasonable rules, in which the human body should constantly get rid of the shackles of the secular world and return to human nature, which is a process of acquired learning and education. Legalists advocated that the social system should be designed according to people's nature of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages, and people should be guided to abide by social rules through interests. Therefore, people's acquired education is mainly to learn the rules of the society. In this process, people have not changed their nature of seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages, nor have they improved their personality. Taoism and Legalism have different education modes, but the logical foundation of both is the unalterable theory of human nature. We can call the Taoist and Legalist view of human nature as the unmalleable human nature theory.

The difference between malleable and unmalleable human nature is not only the difference between Confucianism & Mohism and Taoism & Legalism, but also an antagonistic clue running through the history of ancient Chinese thoughts. The superiority of Confucianism in education is an important factor for it to become the dominant ideology in ancient China. On the basis of the malleable human nature, Confucianism attaches great importance to changing people through acquired education and shaping people into individuals with Confucian ideal personality. In this process, people should constantly improve themselves and surpass themselves. "Everyone is the unity of the real me and the possible me. The human being always contains a possibility that transcends the reality of the present person^[2]." In contrast, Taoism and Legalism went to two extremes. Taoists emphasize people's self-cultivation, opposes external interference, include cultural learning. The education thought of legalism never aims at reforming people. They wish only to transform man's actions and oppose all efforts of individual human beings to achieve their own personal perfection. Therefore, in general, the Taoist view of education is to indulge the individual, the Legalists' view of education is to wipe out the individual, the Confucian view of education is to transform the individual.

4 The value of understanding each school's view of human nature to contemporary higher education work

In the pursuit of ideals, contemporary higher education in China is close to the spontaneous self of Taoism. In terms of teaching thinking, China's contemporary higher education adheres to the Confucian concept of "teaching tirelessly", while in practical work, China's contemporary higher education adopts the legalist method of formulating laws and decrees, and strictly prescribing rewards and punishments. The former is a series of ideas often advocated by the higher education administrators, such as respecting the independent personality of the educated, and the educated use their academic interest to drive their enthusiasm for research. In the middle are the working ideas of the majority of front-line teachers, who hope to make the students have the desire to acquire knowledge from their hearts with the education and guidance of Confucianism. The latter is the most practical way of teaching management in colleges and universities, force students to study with strict school rules and disciplines, which are all in the implementation of legalists' judgment of "seeking advantages and avoiding disadvantages" in human nature. That is to say, our teaching philosophy is Taoist, teaching method is Confucian, teaching management is legalist. These three are both contradictory and an organic whole, which is a feature of China's higher education.

Legalist teaching management does not focus on whether the educates are really willing to learn, but only on whether the educates have made the behavior of willing to learn. This way has a strong executive force. It is beneficial for educates to acquire knowledge quickly, but it lacks motivation for further development. Especially for graduate education, the requirement of knowledge innovation exceeds the requirement of knowledge acquisition, which is difficult to achieve under the framework of legalist management. Constitution and rules are important, but ultimately education should return to people themselves, to the formation and improvement of personality. Many institutions of higher education have numerous and detailed rules and regulations on teaching management. It is difficult for students to master all the rules during their study, and teachers cannot understand all the

rules after years of teaching. Although it is the need of meticulous management, it is also unconsciously caught in the contradictory situation of “The law is clear, but there are many thieves” (Lao zi, Chapter 57). Higher education workers should pay attention to absorb the Taoist thought of “doing nothing is doing something” and give teachers and students more autonomy in teaching management.

So, as we know, the educational ideas of the pre-Qin scholars have been influencing our educational work in

a special way in China.

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