

Enlightenment of Western Virtue Ethics on School Moral Education of China

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Abstract

The low effectiveness of the school moral education has been the problem of China's school moral education in recent years. Although it is being discussed widely in academic circles, an effective solution has not been drawn. On the one hand, western virtue ethics advocates subjectivity of morality in cognition of moral essence; on the other hand, in the course of cultivating immorality and personality, it pays attention to the integrity and unity of moral personality which just hits the inner reason of low effectiveness of school moral education in china. Based on this, the western character education originated from virtue ethics has brought a lot of reference experience and enlightenment for the formulation of core value goal of the school moral education in our country.

Key words : virtue ethics in the west, school moral education, enlightenment

Introduction

Moral education plays an important role in the social development process. China has thousands of years of traditional moral education by which considerable wealth of moral education experience has been accumulated. However, with the changes and development of times and the society, all social fields are undergoing profound changes letting the social basis of original moral norms be undergoing profound changes. Thus, the traditional model of the moral education has been unable to meet the needs of current social development and low effectiveness of moral education has become an indisputable fact. The domestic

academic circles has explored and discussed the reasons of the low efficiency of moral education from many aspects, including moral education concept, goal, content, mode and evaluation system etc. During the discussion in a long time, the causes of low effectiveness of school moral education in China have been gradually reached a consensus in several aspects: seeing from moral education philosophy, there is an one-sided understanding of the moral essence and moral education function; seeing from the target, the goal of moral education is too abstract from life reality; seeing from the content, the content of moral education is too conservative and there is a lack of the times; seeing the methods: the methods of moral education are one-way, ignoring subjectivity of educational object; and from the evaluation system, evaluation of moral education has become a mere formality and lacks for effectiveness.

The concept of moral education determines the subsequent entire process of moral education. Thus, this study is firstly based on the understanding of the nature of moral virtue ethics in the west that ethics should be regarded as subjectivity; Then, it analyzes and emphasizes that the moral subjectivity is to promote the development of people which needs to shape the perfect moral personality. And the western character education whose realization of the integrity and unity of the moral behavior process embodies a grasp of the integrity of moral personality formation and cares about moral practice. Understanding these points, it has significant implications for solving the problems of school moral education in our country such as only insisting the standardization of the moral, neglecting the cultivation of moral personality and creating disconnection of moral cognition and behavior in the process of moral and behavior.

1. The essence of moral: advocating the human subjectivity

Generally speaking, the main channel of moral education in the school education of our country is still accomplished with the help of classroom teaching by means of teaching materials. There are a series of comparatively complete curriculum and teaching materials about moral education currently in our country where political content is emphasized in the school moral education from the founding of our country to now and it is unanimously recognized fact that put moral pursuit and political enthusiasm in practice together. The so-called “political”, in essence, is also the normative ethics. Thus, traditional moral education has not given enough attention to value and position of people. That is to say, its value orientation is mainly based on the perspective of social needs, emphasizing that moral education should cultivate the individuals who inherit the established social order and moral norms and when there is a conflict between the social values and individual value, the fact is that at the sacrifice of personal value to cater to the needs of the society. It is easy to understand that the traditional education concept lets the subjects of education lose inherent enthusiasm and initiative of constructing their own moral quality by killing their own personality to adapt to the strict regulations.

While the western modern ethics fully inherited the understanding of ancient virtue ethics for “Virtue”, thinking virtue itself is due to the need of human. Although human reason makes people have the purpose toward the happiness, virtue is the only road to happiness which makes people have the virtue of demand. At the same time, modern virtue ethics is also known as “communitarian” or “Communitarianism” because of its persistent understanding similar to Aristotle style for associative meaning of social background towards goodness and virtue. Aristotle firmly believed that “man is a political animal by nature” and the city-state is the background of human activities, so a person is just like a citizen of a city-state. In addition, “a city-state

is the only political forms where virtue of human life can be fully shown”^[1]. The premise of establishing city-state community is the universal agreement towards goodness and virtue in this community which makes the connection between citizens become possible. They think that the individuals’ pursuing goodness and practice of virtue not as pure and abstract individual and in the established social structure, they assume certain roles who inherit many things from the past of their families, tribe and nation as the traditional successor. The social identity and historical identity that the individual possesses is consistent.

It is believed that virtue and community are inseparable in virtue ethics. However, that the community pursues common interests (good) is the premise which makes the people form a community of such a relationship with the common pursuit and also provide social conditions for the practice of virtue. Therefore, fundamentally speaking, morality in virtue ethics, is taken as a special way of the human beings’ self realization, self affirmation and self development, a special way for people to understand and grasp of the world and subjectivity is taken as its essence. This view of subject theory reveals that morality is originated from human need, the people’s need breeds it and promotes its development and progress.

This paper thinks that the basic characteristics of moral should be the unity of the outer normative and inherent subjectivity and in the process of the moral education, normative moral should be emphasized and also can not ignore the people’s own development needs. Moral subjectivity and moral normative should be its nature and both of the two are mutually restricted and internal unified. In the process of China’s moral education, not only the role of moral normative and binding should be attached importance to, but also should fully understand the correctness and rationality about moral subjectivity cognition in western virtue and ethics. Only by developing the students’ subjectivity, pay attention to student’s development needs, can make the moral play its proper role and enhance the effectiveness of moral education.

2. Rebuilding the moral personality: unity of moral, knowledge, emotion, will, sincerity and behavior

“Personality is a person’s thought of self formed and shown by his behavior and a stable, permanent and the overall state of mind formed and shown by his long-term behavior”^[2] Based on this, if we separate this formation process, we can define moral personality as “people are aware of his moral responsibility, moral duty and the value and significance of their life through the moral life, thus consciously choose their own paradigm of a man, cultivate their moral quality, enrich and perfect their inner world, reflecting the internal rules of the difference between the human and animal.”^[3] Seen from this, the moral personality is a collection of moral cognition, moral emotion, moral will, moral beliefs, moral habits and its process.

In the process of forming moral personality, moral cognition is its foundation and it is in the process of the moral practice and understanding, people gradually form their own moral character. Once moral emotion is formed, it has more stability than the moral cognition and in turn influences or controls people’s moral cognition and behavior. First of all, as the formation of moral character, moral will plays a very key position in the formation of moral personality which is the joint point transforming from the knowledge, the sentiment to behaviour and also the joint point of the actual formation of moral personality. The second, moral belief is in the core position like the human soul. Furthermore, moral habits are shown in many aspects, not only in the performance of speech, behavior, attitude, appearances and hobbies etc., but also in thinking. The specific moral habits are the fusion of specific moral cognition, moral emotion, moral will, moral belief and specific human flesh which comes very naturally. Therefore, we can say, moral habits are

the final completion of moral personality. In addition, moral personality is always in moral habits and a person's moral personality can be confirmed according to his moral behavior habit. Seen from its formation, these five are in order; seen from its position and role, moral cognition and emotion is the basis, moral will is the key, moral belief is the core, and moral habits are the whole of its final completion.

Generally speaking, China's school moral education is a kind of cognitive education to a great extent which can provide the cognitive schema about morals and conducts in future for educatee. Whether a person can make a reasonable moral judgment and behavior choice have to take certain moral knowledge as the foundation, so moral education starts firstly from the moral cognition. In contrast to this cognitive style education mode, our country's moral education in the moral evaluation system takes the moral behavior as a standard to evaluate whether a person is a moral one. Obviously, our school moral education ignores the cultivation of moral emotions, moral consciousness, moral belief as the intermediate link, gives too much emphasis on instilling moral cognition and regards moral behavior as a single way to evaluate character which causes a condition to appear inconsistent knowing and doing in students and at last has become one of the reasons of low efficiency in moral education. Aristotle, the founder of western virtue ethics thought that moral cognition is a kind of "habit", that is what he said: virtue practice, which could not be gotten through the "teaching". Practice in his eyes represents a process rather than a simple moral behavior. In the process of moral practice, Aristotle attached great importance to selection and intention, he believed that "for a kind of behavior, only when a person knows what he must do and choose to do it by intention, because of its own reason and for a certain quality, it is the virtue."^[4] The concept of "choice" Aristotle mentioned means "that correct ability on skills in the pursuit of various abilities"^[5]. He thought that choice is more able to judge the a person's quality than behavior, "behavior maybe come from desire, anger, hope and opinions of waiting, yet choice shows a greater quality than a personal desire, anger, hope and opinions."^[6] Virtue ethics pays more attention to people's moral emotion, moral will and moral beliefs in the process of practice and in this process from producing moral cognition to moral behavior. They believe that it is the existence of virtue, which lets people be able to have the correct moral motivation, make correct moral judgment and do correct moral behavior confirming to virtue regulations in the process of practice.

Thus, virtue ethics has just made up for the links that lacks in the process of cultivating moral personality in our school moral education which stresses the moral emotion, motivation caused by moral behavior, moral will and so on, and also emphasizes the integrity of moral cognition and moral behavior, and unity of moral process in the process of education. Moreover, only after the five aspects have been cultivated in moral education, can we truly create a complete moral personality, and enhance the effectiveness of moral education.

3. Tracing back to the traditional virtues to find the core of value target.

Character education is the practice mode of western virtue ethics and making the core value goal is its core content and views. In western traditional society, teaching students moral norms such as temperance, sincerity, justice, moderation, silence humility, chastity, firmness, hardworking not only depends on reasoning, but also seeking help from cultivating the habit using the means like rewards, punishments, praise and criticizing and instilling modes of different forms like persuasion, example and question-answer teaching. There are various strategies about character education in modern USA schools. Nonetheless, the

core values and virtues (implementing a value and a virtue monthly/weekly) are generally chosen putting all character education resources together to form moral education environment for character education by which the students get “environmental education”. Aiming at the social needs solving problems and the actual situation of community, the core values and virtues of their own are determined in the primary and secondary schools. And character education in these schools has covered both inside and outside the classroom and campus. In short, the whole living space of students has been incorporated into the horizon of character education.

In fact, the character education is not a stranger for our country. China is a country with a fine tradition of the virtues. Early in Zhou, taking “ceremony” as the dominant ethics has been the direct ideological origin of Confucian founder. Confucius put forward “benevolence”, Mencius stressed “righteousness” and defined “four virtues” including “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom” as the main social ethics orientation at his times. In Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu put forward the “five constant virtues” including benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, faith and since then the five moralities have gradually became far-reaching moral standards really getting official approval and social acceptance and; From Han Dynasty to Tang Dynasty, the system ruling the country by “Filial piety” and implementing “official system” of recommending people noted for their filial piety and moral records have been proposed successively; Eight virtues in Song Dynasty including “filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, faith, courtesy, righteousness, incorruption, shame” have been put forward and have also had great influence on Ming and Qing Dynasties, even on North Korea, South Korea and other East Asian countries; from the late Qing Dynasty and early Ming Dynasty, in the face of shock from the strong western culture to the weak oriental culture, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Zhongshan thought that morality is Chinese strong suit and new morality can be constructed as long as we bring forth the new through the old. Liang Qichao and other reformers tried to construct a new Chinese morality taking “four virtues” including “filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, faith as the basis and absorbing the essence of modern western ethics. Sun Zhongshan and Cai Yuanpei put forward a new “eight virtues” including “loyalty, filial piety, benevolence, love, faith, justice, peace and harmony” which is the fusion of Chinese and Western moral essence. Then, the Kuomintang added four virtues “courtesy, righteousness, incorruption, shame” to it and all these are collectively known as the “Four Principles and Eight Virtues” and it is still in use now.

Our country and the party has also done a lot of work in moral education. In “Several Major Decisions of CPC Central Committee on Building a Socialist Harmonious Society” issued by Chinese Sixteenth CPC Central Committee Sixth Plenary Meeting, the basic contents of the socialist core value system are stated like the following: adhering to the guidance of the Marx doctrine, adhering to the common ideal of socialism of Chinese characteristics, adhering to the national spirit taking patriotism as the core and spirit of the times taking reform and innovation as the core, and adhering to the socialist concept of honor and disgrace. From the earlier proposed concept of socialist concept of honor and disgrace, “Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces”, we can also see Chinese traditional ethics idea which is produced in the name of the country and the Party for defining our socialist core value system. It needs to be further verified in practice that whether it can effectively solve the problems appearing in the course of national moral educational practice.

Notes:

[1] A.McIntyre. *Searching for Virtue* [M]. Translated by Song Jijie. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2003.p197.

[2] Hai-ming wang. *Ethics Principle* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001.p353.

[3] Wu Minying . *Ethics Tutorial* [M]. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press , 2002.p163.

[4]&[5]Aristotle.*Ethika Nikomachea*[M].Translated by Liao Shenbai . Beijing: Commercial Press. 2003. xxvii.

[6] Aristotle. *Ethika Nikomachea* [M].Translated by Liao Shenbai . Beijing: the commercial press, 2003.xxviii.

Reference:

[1] Aristotle . *Ethika Nikomachea* [M].Translated by Liao Shenbai . Beijing: Commercial Press, 2003.

[2]A. McIntyre. *Searching for Virtue* [M]. Translated by Song Jijie. Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2003.

[3] Ding Jinhong . *The Theory of Character Education* [M]. Beijing: People's Education Press, 20005.

[4] Li Erping . Reanalysis Moral Education Problems: Reviewing the University' Moral Education 20 Years.

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