

On Mencius' Thoughts on Moral Education

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ABSTRACT

Mencius posits that the inherent nature of humans is inherently capable of goodness, and everyone possesses the potential to become a sage or virtuous individual. Therefore, the ultimate goal of his moral education is to cultivate "sages and virtuosos" who "clarify the hierarchical relationships prescribed by feudal rites through education" and "ensure the people live abundantly while adhering to the norms of ritual propriety." The content of moral education revolves around an organic system centered on benevolence, righteousness, filial piety, fraternal duty, and ritual propriety. The methodology of moral education, characterized primarily by self-cultivation, holds significant importance in the history of Chinese education and even philosophy. Its emphasis on moral education serves as a cautionary reminder against the current trend of utilitarian education.

KEYWORDS

Mencius' moral education thought; Sages and virtuosos; Human nature tending toward goodness; Residing in benevolence and following righteousness; Cultivating the mind and nurturing virtue

1 Introduction

Mencius was the first educator in Chinese history to combine the characters for "teaching" and "education," a third-generation disciple of Confucius, and a master of Confucianism second only to Confucius himself, earning the title "Second Sage." His moral education philosophy built upon Confucius's teachings while also introducing innovations. This article provides a framework analysis of Mencius's moral education thought, offering material for academic critique and research.

2 The ultimate goal is to cultivate "sages" who understand human ethics and practice benevolent governance

Unlike Confucius who divided the cultivation goals into three levels: sages, adults, and gentlemen, Mencius' moral education goal is very clear, which is to cultivate "sages" who can "understand human relationships and implement benevolent governance". Mencius believed that "everyone can become a sage like Yao and Shun" (from "The Book of Songs"), for three reasons: firstly, human nature is inherently good, thus possessing the potential to reach the highest moral realm and become a sage; Secondly, 'Saints are of the same kind as us' (from 'The Confession of Confucius'). The difference between ordinary people and saints is only 'early enlightenment' and 'later enlightenment'. Those who have not yet awakened can achieve self awakening through education; Thirdly, the principle pursued by Yao and Shun ultimately boils down to filial piety and brotherly love. "(From" Farewell to Confucius ")", as long as ordinary people receive education on the principles of filial piety and brotherly love, and accumulate knowledge step by step, they can also develop the character of a sage. In fact, as long as the majority of people strive towards the direction of sages, even if the goal of education is achieved.

The term 'ethics' referred to here refers to the moral relationships between individuals. The reason why we need to "understand human ethics" is because Mencius believed that "the difference between humans and animals is actually very small; ordinary people discard this little difference (referring to morality), while gentlemen retain it ^[1]. Shun was able to understand the essence of all things, understand the moral relationship between people, and act according to his own nature of benevolence and righteousness, rather than passively following external moral norms." (Li Lou Xia) It is obvious that in Mencius' view, only by understanding the moral relationship between people, that is, "understanding human ethics", and getting rid of the "animalistic nature" in oneself, can one become a gentleman or even a saint like Shun. But ordinary people did not have the moral consciousness of Shun, so the sages used the "Five Relationships" to educate them. The "Five Relationships" are five specific principles of interpersonal relationships: there should be family affection between father and son, morality between ruler and minister, boundaries between husband and wife, order between elders and children, and honesty among friends. From these 'Five Relationships', the basic virtues of a gentleman can be summarized, including benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness.

To achieve complete "Five Virtues" is just the starting point. To become a sage, one must ultimately achieve a leap through "benevolent governance". Mencius' ideology of benevolent governance originated from Confucius' "study of benevolence" and later developed into a complete system with the core content of being close to the people, making

them prosperous, and educating them. To implement 'benevolent governance', the first step is to be close to and value the people, placing them in the most important position. As he said, 'The people are the most important, followed by the country, and the monarch is the lightest.' (From 'Devotion to the People'); Secondly, we must make the people prosperous and provide them with benefits: "By improving the land of the people and reducing their taxes, we can make them prosperous." (From "Xin Xin Shang") If we don't do this, If the upper rulers lack propriety and righteousness, and the lower people lack education, those who cause chaos and harm will rise up, and the country will soon perish. "(Li Lou Shang) Simply put, implementing benevolent governance means treating the people with a heart of benevolence, safeguarding their basic rights and interests, and allowing them to live and work in peace and happiness. Under such conditions, the people will listen to teachings and management, the country will become prosperous and strong, and the rulers or practitioners will be able to achieve the accomplishments of the sages.

3 Mencius' positioning of the object of moral education is "if it is the sentiment, then it can be good"

Mencius' positioning of the object of moral education is that "from the perspective of human nature, one can become a good person" (From the Book of Admonitions). This definition does not necessarily mean that 'human nature is inherently good', but rather that people have the potential and tendency to be good. His disciple Gongduzi had doubts about the teacher's view of human nature, so he listed the three most influential views on human nature at that time: "Human nature is neither good nor bad", "Human nature can become good or bad", "Some people are inherently good, while others are inherently bad", and questioned Mencius' stance on human nature. Mencius explained, "From the perspective of human nature, it is possible to become a good person, which is what I call goodness. As for those who do wrong things, it is not a matter of their own qualifications... Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not instilled in me from the outside, but are already possessed by me. It is just that people have not thought about them. Therefore, it can be said that 'actively pursuing them can obtain them, giving them up will lose them.' The difference in moral character between people can be twice, five times, or even countless times, all because some people have not fully exerted their inherent good qualifications." (From "The Book of Songs") This paragraph can be seen as the general outline of Mencius' theory of human nature. The "emotion" in "Nairuo's emotion" is generally understood as "innate endowment" or "qualification", and can actually be attributed to "nature" and "essence". However, based on the context, Mencius' conclusion about human nature here should be "human nature can be good and has a tendency towards goodness", rather than "human nature is inherently good (referring to the manifestation of goodness in behavior and goodness in reality)". This is logically consistent with Confucius' assertion that "human nature is similar". In Mencius' view, the similarity of human nature lies in the fact that everyone has four "hearts of goodness", which means there is a potential for achieving the four virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. This potential already exists in the human heart. However, most people have not been able to let this inherent virtue shine with the brilliance it deserves. Since that's the case, what needs to be done is to find ways to protect these 'good hearts', let them grow, and implement them into actions, so as to form stable behavioral characteristics. This is the process of cultivating morality.

Mencius firmly rejected the view that "some people are inherently good, while others are inherently bad" regarding the three popular views on human nature at that time, because this view of human nature contradicts the basic fact that he believed "everyone has four kinds of good hearts" and also contradicts the proposition that "everyone can become a sage like Yao and Shun". He only agrees with the first half of the viewpoint that 'human nature can be good or bad'; As for the latter part, he knew there was no reason to refute it, but he remained silent. His criticism focused on the most influential disciple of the Mohist school at that time, Kuaizi. Gaozi advocates that "human nature is neither good nor bad", and "Gaozi Shang" records three debates between Mencius and Gaozi on the issue of human nature. In the first debate, I used willow trees as a metaphor for human nature and willow wine cups as a metaphor for good and evil. I believe that Mencius' views on "human nature" are like treating willow trees directly as wooden wine cups, which is very absurd. Mencius retorted that wine glasses are processed through methods such as sawing, cutting, chiseling, and grinding that harm trees. If we believe that human nature is "neither good nor bad", then in order to make people do good, we can only destroy their nature and force them to become benevolent and righteous, which is a very cruel act. It is obvious that Mencius' positioning of human nature is mainly determined by whether it helps to guide people towards goodness, and as for what human nature itself is, it is not the most important thing. In the second debate, the counselor proposed that "human nature is like water, with no fixed direction of flow to the east or west", and the key is to see where you lead it. Mencius immediately refuted that water does not have a fixed flow direction, but its nature is to flow downwards, just like human nature is to do good. In the third debate, Gao Zi put forward the famous viewpoint that "innate aptitude is human nature". Mencius used the sophistry technique of changing concepts, replacing the proposition with "white things are white", and then once again replacing the proposition with "the nature of dogs is like that of cows, and the nature of cows is like that of humans", thus winning the debate with a technique similar to the *reductio ad absurdum* in modern logic.

Mencius' view of human nature, whether it is "human nature is inherently good" or "human nature tends towards

goodness", reminds us to pay attention to the kind part of human nature, which is the foundation of moral education. With this foundation, moral goodness is no longer something external to human beings, but a part of human body and mind. Therefore, moral education is no longer a tight spell and external pressure imposed on people's heads, but a help to awaken and expand their own potential^[2]. This kind of human nature setting can not only increase people's acceptance of moral education, but also open up a new path of moral education.

4 Benevolence, righteousness, filial piety, and etiquette are the core contents of Mencius' moral education

The content of Mencius' moral education is based on the principles of "benevolence and righteousness", "filial piety and brotherly love" as emotional foundations, and "etiquette" as behavioral norms, forming a rich and relatively complete system.

Mencius inherited and developed Confucius' concept of "benevolence", focusing on the external manifestation of "righteousness", especially the analysis of the relationship between "benevolence" and "righteousness", which had a profound impact on the development of Confucianism. The combination of "ren" and "yi" is a significant difference between Mencius and Confucius. There is no such thing as the combination of "ren" and "yi" in the Analects of Confucius, while the combination of "ren" and "yi" appears 25 times in the seven chapters of Mencius. 'Benevolence and righteousness' is the core of Mencius' philosophical system and also the guiding principle of his moral education thought. Regarding the relationship between "benevolence" and "righteousness", Mencius believed that "benevolence" is a kind thought that exists in the heart of a person, and is also the fundamental goal of life. It is the entrance to becoming a saint and a good place for people's spirit to settle down; 'Righteousness' is a behavioral norm that lies outside of one's inner self, a path to becoming a wise person, and a smooth and broad path. So he said, "Benevolence is the true heart of a person; righteousness is the right path for a person." (From the Book of Lamentations) He also said, "Benevolence is the place where a person can rest; righteousness is the right path for a person. It is so sad to have no place to rest, to give up the right path and not walk!" (From the Book of Rites)

In addition, Mencius also interpreted Confucius' moral subjectivity concept of "moral cultivation depends on oneself" as "doing things according to one's own nature of benevolence and righteousness, rather than passively following the norms of benevolence and righteousness", and further constructed a moral cultivation path of "adhering to benevolence in the heart, following righteousness in actions, and the cultivation of a wise person is complete" ("wholeheartedly"). Specifically, it is to settle one's spirit and achieve inner peace and sufficient strength by pursuing "benevolence", which is the achievement of "inner sage"; To achieve social harmony by following "righteousness" is to realize the "external king". To achieve "inner benevolence and righteous action", one's personal cultivation is complete, and this is the career of a "wise person". To achieve the career of a "wise person", the internal spiritual construction and external behavioral norms cannot be neglected. Only by cooperating and complementing each other can they promote each other and achieve better results.

If 'benevolence and righteousness' is the guiding principle of Mencius' moral education, then 'filial piety and brotherly love' and 'etiquette' are important steps and basic conditions for practicing this principle. Ren "has rich connotations, but its most essential meaning is" love ", so the important content of" guarding benevolence in the heart "is to cultivate love. Love requires reasons. It is difficult to love people who have nothing to do with themselves without emotional foundation, but it is natural to love your parents and brothers and sisters. So, the cultivation of love starts with "filial piety and brotherly love" (filial piety to parents, friendly brothers), which is both practical and feasible. In this way, starting from "filial piety and brotherly love", constantly expanding love, when the accumulation of love reaches a certain level, a qualitative leap will occur, and the goal of "inner benevolence" will be achieved. To reach the realm of "inner benevolence", one can maintain their own benevolence and virtue, and at a minimum, cultivate oneself and be self-disciplined; On a larger scale, it can help others and benefit the world. But this is only a potential possibility. To achieve the great deeds of a sage, one must externalize the spiritual "inner sage" as the behavioral "outer king". To ensure the coordination and consistency between the "outer king" and the "inner saint", that is, to achieve "action following righteousness", it is necessary to regulate behavior through "ritual". Therefore, the external behavioral norms of "etiquette" have also become another important aspect of Mencius' moral education.

If the core content of "benevolence" is "love", then the core of "righteousness" is "respect", the core of "ritual" is "respect", and "etiquette" is various rituals used to express "respect". The three are at different levels, with the deepest being 'benevolence'; The middle level is 'righteousness'; The outermost layer is 'ritual', which is the procedural or ritualistic manifestation of 'ritual'. So, "etiquette" is a tool for moral education, which is the most operable and guides people towards the path of inner goodness from external behavior. Its basic idea is to regulate people's "behavior" through "etiquette", influence people's "thinking" through "behavior", and then influence people's "choice" of value standards

through "thinking" activities ^[3]. Long term adherence to the same "choice" will gradually form a "recognition" and adherence to "benevolence", thus achieving the goal of moral education. The essence of "etiquette" is to reflect the "respect" for "people who deserve respect". There are two ways to test and improve etiquette cultivation: the first is in interpersonal communication, "if you treat others with etiquette but do not receive a corresponding response, you need to reflect on whether you are respectful enough" (Li Lou Shang), that is, self reflection; The second type is to learn from good examples, that is, to "emulate Yao and Shun", compare the words and deeds of the sages, and see if one's own actions meet the standards of the sages, whether it reflects respect for things and care for the people. Both of these methods are highly operable and can be used as content for daily education.

The content of Mencius' moral education is based on the principles of "benevolence and righteousness", with "filial piety and brotherly love" and "etiquette" as specific means. Filial piety and brotherly love start from emotions and help people achieve inner benevolence; Etiquette starts with external behavior, forming the habit of "following righteousness in actions". By upholding benevolence in one's heart and following righteousness in one's actions, the ultimate goal is to achieve the state of 'inner sage and outer king'.

5 Mencius' moral education method is mainly characterized by self-cultivation

As the inheritor of the Confucian tradition, Meng Zizhong implemented the educational principles advocated by Confucius, such as teaching students according to their aptitude and combining learning with thinking, and deepened and developed on these foundations. For example, in long-term educational practice, Mencius discovered that the cultivation of moral education has its own laws, and moral education must be carried out "step by step", without violating the laws of development and forcibly accelerating the growth process, otherwise one will have to bear the consequences of "pulling out seedlings and promoting growth". Of course, Mencius' greatest contribution to moral education is his advocacy of "being benevolent for oneself", and on the basis of promoting moral subjectivity, he constructed a self-cultivation methodology system of "cultivating one's mind and nature".

Mencius believed that the process of educational transformation should be the voluntary behavior of the subject. If he was unwilling to do so, it would be as difficult as "carrying Mount Taishan Mountain to the North Sea"; If willing, it will become as simple as "cutting branches for the elderly". So, the main channel of moral education should be the self-cultivation and cultivation of the subject, 'cultivating' the inherent 'heart', and 'nurturing' the 'nature' that can lead to goodness. The "four hearts" of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are all based on the principle of "goodness", and the main task of "cultivation" is to "preserve" this principle of "goodness". Therefore, it is more appropriate to summarize it with the four words "preserving the heart and nurturing the nature".

Mencius' theory of cultivation can be summarized as "one path and three methods", namely "seeking", "thinking", "nurturing", and "sincerity".

One path is 'seeking'. Since 'human nature is good' and there are already 'four good hearts' in the human heart, there is no need to search outside, just keep it well. But most people have lost their original kindness to varying degrees, which requires finding it back. Mencius referred to the process of searching as 'seeking peace of mind'. He said, "Benevolence is the essence of the human heart; righteousness is the path of the human being. Abandoning one's path and letting go of it, letting go of one's heart without seeking it, is a pity! If one has chickens and dogs to let go, they know how to seek it; if they have peace of mind, they do not know how to seek it. There is no other way of learning, only seeking peace of mind!" (From the Book of Admonitions) Obviously, his focus is different from ordinary moral education methods, and even completely opposite.

One of the cultivation methods is "thinking". Mencius believed that the "heart" has the ability to "think as the official of the heart" and is "what heaven has to do with me", which should be well utilized. He said, "The officials of the ears and eyes do not think, but are enclosed in things. When things are exchanged, they are only attracted. The officials of the heart think, think, and obtain, but not think, and cannot be taken away. This is why the heavens are with me. If they first stand before the greater, then the smaller cannot be taken away. This is just an adult. He believes that valuing important parts of the body such as the "heart" is the "intention", which helps to cultivate adult character; Valuing the ordinary parts of the body and being tempted by senses such as ears and eyes can lead to losing one's "original heart". If one first focuses on the "original heart", maintains the "goodness", and forms a correct moral cognition, they will no longer be deceived by the senses.

The second method of cultivation: "nurturing". After forming moral cognition through "thinking", the next step is "cultivation". The condition for "cultivation" is "abstinence", because "cultivating the heart is not good at abstinence". The purpose of "abstinence" is still to avoid sensory harassment. Specifically, it is to cultivate a 'noble spirit' and continuously expand the good end, in order to achieve the goals of 'wholehearted', 'intellectual', and 'knowledge of heaven'. The so-called 'mighty qi' has the following characteristics: 'To be great and strong, to be directly nurtured and harmless, it is stuffed between heaven and earth. As qi, it is matched with righteousness and Tao; to be without is to be discouraged. It

is born from the collection of righteousness, not inherited by righteousness. If one does not feel ashamed of their heart, they will be discouraged.'; Secondly, nourishing the "noble spirit" is a moral behavior, and if the behavior is deficient, it will lose its power. The fundamental content of 'nurturing' is still 'cultivating one's mind and nature', preventing the loss of 'original intention'.

The third cultivation method: "sincerity". After cultivating the "noble spirit" of "matching righteousness and Tao", the next step is to "reverse oneself and be sincere" and "preserve sincerity to the fullest". Sincerity "means" truth without falsehood ", which means" truth is the foundation of the existence of all things in the universe; falsehood has nothing ". So, sincerity is the 'way of heaven'. Sincerity is the way of heaven. Sincerity is the way of man. "(Li Lou Shang) It is natural for people to follow the way of heaven and pursue" sincerity ". It is possible for a person to achieve "sincerity" and reach the realm of "sincerity", because: "All things are prepared for me. To be sincere in the face of others is a great joy. To seek benevolence through strong forgiveness is not close." (From "Xin Xin Shang") This means: "I possess the fundamental principles of all things. The greatest joy is to reflect on oneself and discover that one is true and without falsehood. Persistently applying the principle of empathy towards oneself and others is the closest path to pursuing benevolence and virtue. The ultimate goal of sincerity is to pursue benevolence, to seek benevolence and obtain benevolence, and to discover that human nature is inherently benevolent. With such understanding, one has reached the realm of "sincerity".

'Thinking', 'nurturing', and 'sincerity' are three independent methods of cultivation, and can also be seen as three steps under the same cultivation path. Their common goal is to obtain and maintain the 'original heart' of 'goodness' or 'striving for goodness'. However, there are still differences between the three: "thinking" emphasizes thinking, mobilizing the power of the spirit, and achieving cognition; The emphasis of "nurturing" is on prevention, by suppressing "desires" to avoid behavioral errors; 'Sincerity' focuses on an attitude of honesty, and aims to achieve true personality through the virtue of honesty.

6 Conclusion

Mencius attached great importance to moral education, and his educational goals and philosophy of combining morality and ability, with moral education as the priority, have always been followed by educators throughout Chinese history. This can provide a warning for the current trend towards utilitarian education. At the same time, the comprehensive educational concept emphasized by Mencius, including family education, social education, school education, self-education, and environmental education, is also a consensus among current moral education workers and has formed a relatively mature educational model. In addition, Mencius' moral thought has had a profound impact on Chinese philosophy. For example, his theory of cultivating the mind and nature is in line with the ideological trends and social psychology of the Tang and Song dynasties, becoming a powerful ideological weapon for people to resist Buddhism and the elderly; His theory of moral cultivation was referenced and cited by Neo Confucian scholars during the Song and Ming dynasties, which promoted the evolution and development of Confucianism. Its limitations are mainly caused by the era it is in, and there is no need to elaborate here.

About the Author

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