



COMMENT ON “EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE IN CONFUCIANISM”

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The question of human nature has perennially stood as the central focus of pre-Qin Confucianism, as well as the origin and the nexus for the educational philosophy inherent in this philosophical tradition. In delving into the philosophical core of Confucian educational thought, Xu and Chen (2024) underscore the intricate discourse surrounding the humanity’s nature.

As early as the Western Zhou dynasty, there were some records related to “human nature” (“人性” in Chinese), but the exploration at that time remained superficial, without delving into the essence of “nature” (“性” in Chinese). Confucius, therefore, stands as the earliest philosopher in Chinese history to put forth views on human nature. In the course of inheriting and developing his predecessors’ thoughts, Confucius proposed the crucial proposition, “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart”. (Kong, 2009, p. 23). Confucius meant that the people’s inherent nature is fundamentally similar. However, the significant differences among individuals arise from the diverse environments, education and societal activities in their postnatal lives. In other words, human nature possesses both an innate similarity and a malleability influenced by postnatal factors. Confucius approached the human nature’s topic with great caution, so a thorough exploration of his views requires an analysis that integrates his philosophical systems of “benevolence” (“仁” in Chinese) and “ritual” (“禮” in Chinese) to understand the essence of his statement.

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During the Spring and Autumn Period, the term “benevolence” emerged and gained popularity, but without precise connotations. Confucius, for the first time, elucidated the theoretical implications of “benevolence” and abstracted its essence as “loving others” (“爱人” in Chinese), considering it the highest moral virtue. This marked the inception of the ethical teachings of Confucianism on “benevolence”, manifested in the Confucian classic *The Analects*, where Confucius views it as the core element of personal moral cultivation and a fundamental characteristic of an ideal personality. It permeates the entire process of moral and ethical education. Since the establishment of the “doctrine of benevolence” (“仁学” in Chinese), the meaning of “benevolence” has been broadly and narrowly interpreted. In a broader sense, “benevolence” encompasses all ethical norms, serving as the source of moral principles and reflecting the humanity’s highest spiritual state. In a narrower sense, it refers to specific social moral norms. Whether in a broader or narrower sense, the fundamental essence is the love for others, establishing the cornerstone of Confucian educational philosophy.

The Chapter *Yan Yuan* of *Analects* records: “Fan Chi asked about the meaning of *ren*. Confucius said ‘love others’.” (Kong, 2009, p. 68). This notion of “loving others” differs from the Mohist advocacy of universal, undifferentiated love. It originates from an individual standpoint, progressing from close to distant relationships, and embodies a dynamic process of extending one’s concern from oneself to others. It is a form of love rooted in familial affection, expanding to encompass care, understanding and sympathy for others. Confucius first emphasizes filial piety and respect for elder siblings as fundamental conditions for “benevolence” and, then, extends these sentiments to encompass others. This expansion of familial love into a sense of “benevolence” towards others ultimately extends to the governance of the state, contributing to the society’s well-being. This serves as the theoretical foundation for the later development of Mencius’s “benevolent governance” ideology. In essence, the foundation of “benevolence” lies in practices, such as filial piety towards elders and respect for elder siblings, which are fundamental rituals. From this perspective, Confucius’s concept of “benevolence” essentially embodies the idea of “goodness.” He perceives individuals as independent entities, emphasizing filial piety towards one’s parents, love for one’s family and the cultivation of a sincere heart in interactions with others. This indicates that Confucius’s assertion that “By nature, men are nearly alike” can be derived from his benevolent teachings, suggesting an inherent belief in the human nature’s innate goodness.

Mencius inherited the perspective of the “goodness of human nature.” Upon this premise, his educational philosophy advocates starting from the individuals’ inherent nature and fully unleashing their innate goodness. Mencius encourages people to adopt a positive attitude towards their inherent virtuous nature, considering it a fundamental guideline for their life. The educational approach he advocates, focusing on nurturing one’s heart and cultivating one’s nature, places a significant emphasis on the active expression of individual

subjectivity. Starting from the individuals’ innate goodness and inherent disposition, Mencius emphasizes respecting personal will and, ultimately, reaching the realm of ultimate goodness.

Examining Confucius’s ritualistic philosophy amid a period marked by the breakdown of propriety and the decay of music, he strongly advocated for “self-discipline and the restoration of rituals.” With “ritual” serving as an external norm, Confucius aimed to regulate people’s actions through it, thereby stabilizing the country and fostering social harmony. Thus, Confucius’s concept of “ritual” manifests in both individual and societal dimensions. On the individual level, Confucius emphasized the importance of adhering to ritual norms. He once advised Yan Hui, “Do not look at what is contrary to propriety, do not listen to what is contrary to propriety, do not speak what is contrary to propriety, do not move in a way that is contrary to propriety”. (Kong, 2009, p. 39). Confucius himself exemplified this principle, integrating “ritual” into his daily life. His emphasis on ritual stems from the observation that people often engage in actions detrimental to others or even society for their gain. Thus, he advocated for restraining personal desires through the institution of rituals, directing individuals toward the path of “goodness.” On an individual level, adherence to ritual norms is seen as a means of upholding social order. Meanwhile, when applied on a societal level, the role of “ritual” transforms into maintaining social order and fostering harmonious relationships among individuals. Confucius conveyed this idea by telling Ji Kangzi,

In carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend when the wind blows across it. (Kong, 2009, p. 112).

In other words, rulers do not need to resort to violence. By embodying goodness, the people will follow suit. The elite’s moral conduct is like the wind, influencing the common people’s moral conduct, depicted as grass. Confucius believed that morality at the top can positively influence morality at the bottom. When dealing with the common people, he advocated for moral guidance rather than the use of laws and punishment. Through ethical education and ritual teachings, people would develop a sense of shame, inner compliance and, ultimately, contribute to the state and society’s stability. However, this idealistic vision was not always realized, as individuals’ instances disregarding ritual norms were prevalent. This frustration, expressed by Confucius, also suggests that, due to the people’s inherent inclination towards “evil,” such transgressions occurred. To ensure personal development and national stability, Confucius emphasized the need to establish specific norms to constrain human behavior. Therefore, on this level, one can deduce that Confucius’s theory of human nature contains elements of the belief in the innate propensity for evil. This perspective was

later developed by Xunzi, who expanded it into the doctrine of the humans' inherently evil nature.

Therefore, Xunzi, starting from the humans' inherent nature, directly confronts the evil within human nature and rejects Mencius's moral intuitionism. This represents the progressive nature of his educational philosophy. Xunzi posits that desire is fundamental to human nature. When individuals desire something they cannot obtain, it leads to the emergence of a pursuit. If this pursuit is carried out without any moral boundaries, it can result in conflicts with others. These conflicts can, in turn, lead to calamities and disorder. Xunzi contends that to address these unrestrained desires, deliberate intervention is necessary. Specifically, he advocates for artificial intervention through education to curb the inherent human greed and transform evil into goodness.

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