

A Probe into the Humanity and Contemporary Value of Wang Yangming's Educational Thought

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Abstract. The theory of "Extension of Intuitive Knowledge", "Mind is Principle" and "Unity of Knowledge and Action" in Wang Yangming's thought integrates philosophy, literature, education, morality, etc., which can not only be traced back to the philosophical level, but can also be embodied in educational thought. Based on Wang Yangming's philosophical thought, the educational thought has internalized the "heavenly principle" of external authority into the human heart, and turned it into the "conscience" of people's inner self-consciousness. It embodies the humanistic awareness and humanistic care that is different from "Keeping the Justice, Eliminating the Desire", and has a unique era value for the shaping of the Chinese ideological and cultural system and the creative transformation of traditional educational ideas.

Keywords: Wang Yangming; Educational Thought; Humanity.

1. Introduction

Wang Yangming is a famous writer, thinker, and philosopher in the Ming Dynasty in China, and he is the representative of the Lu and Wang's theory of heart. Wang's theory of heart has become the most mainstream philosophical thought in the middle and late Ming Dynasty and carries great implications. His thought of "Establishing morality, action and words in one" is a development and extension of traditional Neo-Confucianism. The theory of "Extension of Intuitive Knowledge", "Mind is Principle" and "Unity of Knowledge and Action" in Wang Yangming's thought integrates philosophy, literature, education, morality, etc., which can not only be traced back to the philosophical level, but can also be embodied in educational thought. Based on Wang Yangming's philosophical thought, the educational thought has internalized the "heavenly principle" of external authority into the human heart, and turned it into the "conscience" of people's inner self-consciousness. It embodies the humanistic awareness and humanistic care that is different from "Keeping the Justice, Eliminating the Desire", and has a unique era value for the shaping of the Chinese ideological and cultural system and the creative transformation of traditional educational ideas.

2. The educational thought based on Wang Yangming's Hsin Hsueh

2.1 The rise of Wang Yangming's educational thought

The rise of Wang Yangming's theory has its unique background. First of all, the commodity economy developed in the mid-Ming Dynasty, and the utilitarian-oriented extravagance attacked the traditional morality and values. Secondly, coercion led to the intensification of social contradictions, and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, as the official ruling ideology, was increasingly losing its role in stabilizing people's hearts and edifying social ethos. Besides, in the field of culture and education, Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism dominated the academic world. The Four Books and Five Classics were viewed the golden rule, and nobody dared disobey it. This made education a tool that restricted the independent thinking of scholars, suffocating human nature. At the same time, it also disconnected practice and education, made knowledge become empty talk and culture lose its inner vitality.

When the development of this thought was sluggish, Wang Yangming inherited and carried forward Lu Jiuyuan's "Mind is Principle" through his years of study and lecture experience, and summed up the core philosophical system of "Extension of Intuitive Knowledge". "It can be said that when ancient Chinese philosophy developed to the stage of Yangming's theory of heart in the Neo-

Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties, the inner spirit and basic principles that Chinese philosophy could reveal and accommodate in the context of ancient Chinese philosophy and culture have been expressed in the richest and most concentrated form.” (Chen Qi, 2014) From the philosophical perspective of psychology, Wang Yangming has condensed the education essence theory based on “Mind is Principle” and the educational methodology based on “the unity of knowledge and action”.

Inherited from Lu Jiuyuan’s philosophy of heart-mind theory, Wang Yangming internalized the philosophy of “Extension of Intuitive Knowledge” as the guiding ideology of his educational thought. His specific educational thought is the concrete and practical application of his philosophy. His educational thought broke through the increasingly rigid Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and objectively brought the ideological liberation of independent thinking and reshaping of personality at that time.

2.2 The theory of the essence of education based on “Mind is Principle”

Wang Yangming’s educational thought believes that education is a process of dedication or conscience. That is to say, the essence of education is to help people explore their own hearts to enforce their conscience. (Qiu Chun, 1957) “Have a peaceful mind, be clear about everything in the world, and have all the truth in nature, you can solve all the different things. Nothing exists beyond the mind” is the core interpretation of his subjective idealism. He objected to the “heavenly principle” advocated by Cheng Zhu’s philosophy, and believed that the real “principle” was in one’s own heart. “Heart” is the foundation of understanding all things in the universe, and it is necessary to seek inward rather than outwardly investigate things.

The educational essence theory based on “Mind is Principle” has impacted the educational concept of “studying phenomena to acquire knowledge” put forward by Cheng Zhu, trying to correct the deficiencies of “studying phenomena to acquire knowledge” educational theory. Seeking in the heart is to emphasize the need to seek, reflect and grasp the original heart, dig out the true state of the heart, and finally integrate the human nature and the heavenly way in the true state to achieve the unity of all things. It is because that conscience does not distinguish between inside and outside, movement and stillness, human and nature.

2.3 Educational methodology based on “the unity of knowledge and action”

Wang Yangming’s educational thought believes that education must make theory and practice infiltrate each other. That is to say, “the unity of knowledge and action” is a methodology that must be followed in the educational process. Although Wang Yangming’s theory of heart is essentially a subjective and idealistic philosophy, the “unity of knowledge and action” in his educational thought is practical. “Knowing is the idea of acting, and acting is the practice of knowing. Knowing is the beginning of acting, and acting is the accomplishment of knowing.” That is, knowing is the beginning and plan of action, while action is the result and practice. These two complement each other and are indispensable.

Specifically, the educational methodology of “unity of knowledge and action” is further refined into four principles of scholarship and teaching. The first is the principle of “get it from your heart”. This principle embodies Wang Yangming’s awareness of the “unity of knowledge and action” in his educational thought, which is different from Cheng and Zhu’s Neo-Confucianism. Because everything is in one’s own heart, in the process of education, more attention should be paid to experience, understanding and independent thinking. Academic opinions should appeal to their own hearts and come from their own practical experience. The second is the principle of “Hone in practice”. “Learning, asking, thinking, distinguishing, and acting are all for learning, and there is no one who only learns without action” emphasizes that reading, asking for advice, thinking, distinguishing, analyzing and even practice is all for learning, there is no way to truly learn by reading without implementing it. The third is the principle of “step by step”. It is advocated that education must refer to students’ cognitive level and then gradually expand their knowledge. The last is the principle of

“individualized teaching”. This principle emphasizes that different teaching methods should be set according to the personality of students, which reflects its further emphasis on people’s hearts, and finally achieves “conscience” and “supreme goodness”.

Wang Yangming’s teaching methodology based on “unity of knowledge and action” attempts to change the status quo of the separation of knowledge and action in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. It starts with practice and encourages students to achieve “conscience” in practice, improve their level of awareness and moral cultivation.

3. The humanity of Wang Yangming’s educational thought

Compared with the educational thought under Cheng Zhu’s philosophical system of Neo-Confucianism, Wang Yangming’s educational thought has richer humanistic consciousness and humanistic spirit.

The word “humanity” actually first appeared in *The Book of Change*. The discussion is “Observe the laws of natural operation to recognize the changes of seasons; pay attention to humanities, so that people’s behaviors could conform to civilized etiquette.” The “humanity” here can be roughly understood as social order and spiritual and cultural phenomena. (Cai Jigang, 2017) The definition of “humanity” in this paper is close to the concept of “liberal education” in the West, that is, “the exploration of the value and meaning of life”. (Yu Dangxu, 2003) After experiencing the Renaissance, the West formed the ideological system of “humanism”, and began to pay attention to people’s personality and mind, emphasize the importance of “human”, and resist tradition and authority. Although Wang Yangming’s philosophical system is not the same as the humanistic spirit of Western humanism, Yangming’s theory of heart does start from the human being itself in the era of repression and rigidity, denying the philosophy of Cheng and Zhu, which has always been regarded as the standard. It has a humanistic nature of ideological liberation. “In the feudal era of the Ming Dynasty, he dared to doubt the traditional conclusion and dared to oppose the imperial nonsense. It is a shocking act. His courage, personality and depth caused a hurricane in the ideological circle in the middle of the Ming Dynasty.” From the field of educational thought, we can see its humanism from the following angles:

3.1 Challenging rigid Neo-Confucianism and opposing restraint

The most humanistic feature of Wang Yangming’s educational thought is its challenge to the authority of Cheng-Zhu’s Neo-Confucianism. Wang Yangming’s theory of heart fundamentally denied the objective existence of “heavenly principles” in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, and reformed the rigid dogmatism of Neo-Confucianism. Traditional Neo-Confucianism, through the imperial examinations, made scholars to recite Zhu Zi’s teachings over and over again, but it also restricted the scholars’ thinking methods within the scope of Cheng-Zhu’s teachings. The unreasonable imperial examination system instilled learning of great classics-expositors into the way of thinking of scholars. It could not really achieve the function of talent selection, and it could not allow students to truly achieve “reasonableness” through reading. The extreme of Neo-Confucianism in the mid-Ming Dynasty brought serious consequences. The scholars’ thinking was limited, and they could only recite and imitate. The whole academic and social atmosphere became more rigid and repressed. Wang Yangming’s educational thought fundamentally opposed this way of education. His questioning of the authority of Neo-Confucianism liberated humanistic consciousness in the imperial examination system and the value of reading.

3.2 Return to the heart, pay attention to introspection and personal value

“Mind is principle” is the basis of Wang Yangming’s theory of the essence of education. “The master of the body is the heart, and the heart triggers the mind” emphasizes that “heart” is not only the most important part of the human body, it can dominate the human body, and “mind” is also generated from one’s own heart. This kind of educational awareness emphasizes that one’s own body

and mind should be paid more attention to, which is fundamentally different from Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. “Reading” in the traditional sense is for the pursuit of fame and fortune, while the real education should be “extension of intuitive knowledge”. This point of view is different from Cheng Zhu’s philosophy, emphasizing the understanding, reflection and comprehension of one’s heart, and attaching importance to the value of one’s heart.

3.3 Valuing education in cases and valuing moral education

Wang Yangming’s “Extension of Intuitive Knowledge” believes that everyone has “conscience and self-knowledge”, so that everyone has the right to education. Different from the education of the scholar-official class, Wang Yangming’s education objects comes from almost all classes. When he was lecturing in the academy, there were students from the four classes of scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants. He taught according to the individual, and decided the way and content of education according to the characteristics of the students. “Extension of intuitive knowledge” is the ultimate goal of education, that is, to awaken the inner conscience and establish morality through the means of education. His idea of “Extension of Intuitive Knowledge” played an important role in educating the social atmosphere and influencing moral fashion at that time. Under his educational ideal, everyone can awaken the morality and conscience in their hearts through education, which reflects the humanity of education.

4. The contemporary value of Wang Yangming’s educational thought

Up to now, Wang Yangming’s philosophy of psychology and his educational thought still have its unique guiding significance.

4.1 Attach importance to the combination of instrumental and humanistic education

In the 21st century, with the progress of human science and technology and the development of craftsmanship, the instrumental nature of education has become increasingly prominent, but the humanism of education has survived in the cracks of the times. The popularization and strengthening of exam-oriented education has made education show a model of mass production of talents, which is also the alienation of education in an industrialized society. However, it goes against the essence of education. The popular test-oriented education has turned the function of education, ignoring the independence of people. This is the imprisonment of the human soul as well as the one-sided understanding of education. Wang Yangming’s requirements for students are “determination, diligent study, reform, and kindness”, which integrate moral character and spiritual cultivation into education. The purpose of education is to cultivate talents, but that’s not all. Education is to develop people’s souls in a more noble direction.

4.2 Equal importance to science education and humanities education

Wang Yangming draws attention to the edifying role of all types of education, which coincides with the increasing emphasis on the whole person in contemporary education. Education for the whole person is the cultivation of a well-rounded one, who has a broad humanistic vision and a strong cultural identity, in addition to professional knowledge. Education is supposed to be both humanistic and scientific, focusing on the all-round development of human beings. Just as some educational philosophies of universities in the West and Hong Kong, humanities and liberal arts education should be incorporated into the education system, so that the educated can enjoy the enlightenments from humanities, history, sociology, literature and other disciplines while learning professional knowledge. This educational philosophy will cultivate students’ humanistic vision and humanistic sentiments, and deepen their understanding and appreciation of society, life, culture and life.

4.3 Family education and social education with humanistic consciousness

Under the shackles of today's test-oriented education, family education has gradually become rigid. Parents' great ambitions for children lead them to place too much emphasis on discipline and academic education, with the goal of gaining admission to prestigious schools, while neglecting their children's social adaptability, independent living skills, moral sentiments and mental health. Family education with humanistic awareness should concentrate on the nurturing role. Parents should have sufficient understanding, tolerance and respect for children in childhood and adolescence, cultivate them to develop independent thinking and capability, attach importance to children's feelings and personality, and guide them with good moral character so that children can develop a healthy personality and moral qualities, ultimately achieving the goal of humanistic education.

5. Conclusion

Wang Yangming's educational philosophy of "Extension of Intuitive Knowledge" believes that all knowledge is the study of the mind or the study of conscience. Education is also the process of devoting one's heart or the conscience, teaching people to cultivate morality or to carry out the commands of conscience. This thought also chimes with the humanistic consciousness of education today. What we should think about is how to deepen the organic combination of education and humanistic awareness, the instrumental and humanistic development of human beings and the all-round development of human beings and the promotion of social progress. We should constantly sum up the past, reflect on practice, look towards the future, and constantly endow educational culture with the significance of the times, while deepening the inner concept, spirit and value.

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