

## Historical Continuation of Liberal Education Thought Based on the “Three Milestones in the West”

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**Abstract:** The historical track of Western liberal education is an indelible valuable clue to explore the true meaning of education in the history of Western education. The Republic by Plato, Emile by Rousseau and Democracy and Education by Dewey, known as the three milestones in the Western history of education thought, portray this historical context incisively and vividly. From the germination in the ancient Greek period to the return in modern times, after entering the modern times, the continuation of Western liberal education has been further developed in the diversified understanding.

### 1. Introduction

From ancient times to the present, there are many classic and heatedly discussed topics in human education and cultural heritage, among which liberty is an eternal theme. The yearning for liberal education is also one of the hot topics people pursue. To correctly understand liberal education, it is important grasp the development context of liberal education in general. The idea of liberal education originated in the ancient Greek period. After the edification and tempering of history, what changes have happened to liberal education in such a long history? In the following parts, such changes will be explored based on the three milestones, i.e. *The Republic*, *Emile* and *Democracy and Education*.

### 2. Rational Education in the Republic--Cradle of Ancient Liberal Education Thought

If the origins of liberal education are traced back to the educational tradition of ancient Greece, then this tradition began with the philosophical reflections of philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Their vision of liberal education is based primarily on the questioning of the nature of human beings. In their view, the essence of mankind lies in the rationality of mankind, and education is to protect and develop human rationality.

The rationalist tradition that has developed since Plato and Aristotle is the philosophical basis of the liberal education thought. According to Plato, there are two worlds, the “real world” and the “world of ideas”. To understand and grasp the true “world of ideas”, we must rely on sense rather than sensibility. Education is supposed to help people transcend the illusory “real world” and enter the true “world of ideas”. In Plato’s view, the objects understood by human beings are the ideas in the world of ideas, and the ideas are inborn, but once the perfect idea enters the body, it becomes indistinct. Therefore, the learning process is actually a process of “recalling”, recalling the innate rationality.

The purpose of liberal education is to cultivate harmoniously developed human beings. Plato used the famous “Allegory of the Cave” to explain the purpose of education: there is a group of prisoners in a cave, the prisoners here are actually ourselves, the world inside the cave is the visible world, the world outside the cave is the known world, and the sun outside the cave is the concept of the supreme “good”. [1] In the final analysis, education should return to people in essence, so that people can develop in a comprehensive and harmonious way. In Plato’s view, any education that cannot awaken the soul is only an external coercion rather than true education. This external

coercion is temporary, non-sustainable and variable. Therefore, the purpose of education is to make people's mind and body develop harmoniously, so that the mind can get rid of the constraint of the body to achieve freedom. Hence, Plato proposed that the highest purpose of education is to cultivate a philosophical king so as to better serve the country.

Regarding the training of liberal education, Plato believes that education is to train the body with gymnastics and cultivate the soul with music, so as to achieve physical and mental harmony, and such harmonious education is immersed in the depths of children's hearts, so that their souls can grow. Thus, he discussed different stages of education. Plato gave full attention to children's education. In *The Republic*, he described that "the best man must be combined with the best woman", and "children should be born when their parents are young and strong".<sup>[1]</sup> Once the children are born, the parents should begin to educate them, "the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the desired impression is more readily taken."<sup>[1]</sup> For children between the ages of 3 and 6, the games should be used to arouse children's interest in work and study, and to cultivate their character. After the age of 6, children should be educated in music and sports. According to Plato, the purpose of music and sports is to make a person achieve the beauty of inner mental state and external posture. "The passionate disposition when it has too much gymnastic is hardened and brutalized, the gentle or philosophic temper which has too much music becomes enervated." [1] Therefore, he believes that literary education is very important for children. At twenty years of age, a selection must be made of the more promising disciples, with whom a new epoch of education will begin. The sciences which they have hitherto learned in fragments will now be brought into relation with each other and with true being. At thirty, and then for fifteen years let the student go down into the den, and command armies, and gain experience of life. At fifty let him return to the end of all things, and have his eyes uplifted to the idea of good, and order his life after that pattern; if necessary, taking his turn at the helm of State, and training up others to be his successors. This is the staged cultivation processes of the philosophers proposed by Plato. It can be seen that for each stage, he proposed educational tasks containing different procedures, and the difficulty of learning content is directly proportional to the age and ability of the learners.

Regarding the way of liberal education, Plato argues that education cannot instill the knowledge that is not in the soul into the soul. Education cannot be indoctrinated. Featuring mechanical memory and lacking the spirit and motivation to pursue truth, this model imprisons mankind's intelligence and rationality. Instead, heuristic education should be adopted to enhance the understanding ability inherent in the soul through self-experience and perception.

It is thus clear that since ancient Greece, rationality has always played its unique value in human education. Education is based on the rationality deep in heart, that is, the pursuit of the truth, the good and the beautiful, so as to return to people's original nature. This is the spiritual essence of education. Instead of developing professional skills and abilities, liberal education cultivates the ordinary ability of the unique rational use.<sup>[2]</sup>

### **3. Natural Education in *Emile*--Return of Liberal Education Thought in Modern Times**

In the Middle Ages, under the rule of theology, the liberal education thought with theology as the final destination was established. The characteristic of liberal education thought represented by Rousseau in this period is that education no longer aims at developing people's rationality, but aims to get rid of the worldly desire and finally convert to the divine nature of Christ. During the Renaissance, the tradition of liberal education was revived. People regarded "liberty" as the spontaneous realization of nature. The humanists demanded to break through the shackles of the church, advocated the liberation of humanity, and regarded the pursuit of individual freedom as an important task of education. Liberal education here refers to the kind of education that follows the nature, especially the natural laws of children, which is the "nature education". In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Rousseau, a French enlightenment thinker and educator, described this thought incisively and vividly in *Emile*, forming the liberal education concept of modern naturalism. "Nature wants children to be like children before adults... children have their own unique opinions, thoughts and

feelings; if we use our opinions, thoughts and feelings to replace their opinions, thoughts and feelings, then it is simply the most stupid thing. “[3] As far as Rousseau was concerned, liberty is the most important natural right of human beings and the principle of natural education is that education should conform to nature, that is, adapting to children’s nature and promote the natural development of children’s mind and body. To this end, Rousseau proposed nature education. He demanded that education should respect children’s freedom, make it possible for children to enjoy the full range of free activities, and adopt natural and free teaching methods to adapt to children’s level of physical and mental development and individual differences. [4]

The purpose of liberal education is to cultivate a “natural person” who is free, independent and self-sufficient. This is a newcomer with developed body and mind, and not bound by tradition. They are generation of independent newcomers who grow up in accordance with their own nature, develop harmoniously in body and mind without being constrained by tradition, able to adapt to social life and take social responsibility. [3] To achieve the harmonious development of human body and mind and the freedom of human nature, and require education to follow nature, children are required to take an active position in their own education and growth. Therefore, Rousseau believes that the goal of nature and liberal education is to cultivate “natural people”.

The training of liberal education must take into account the age characteristics of children. In *Emile*, Rousseau divided the education of children into four periods in the name of Emile. The first phase is infancy, i.e. at the age of 0-2, during which physical fitness is mainly cultivated. Rousseau believes that the main goal of education is to exercise and strengthen the physical strength of children and promote the healthy development of children. The second phase, childhood, i.e. at the age of 2-12, during which the primary purpose is to develop external feelings. According to Rousseau, children between the ages of 2 and 12 are in “the sleep of reason”, when children cannot think properly. Therefore, besides continuing to strengthen the health of children and their physical development, priority should be given to sensory education, which is a prerequisite for intellectual education. The third phase is the juvenile period, i.e. from 12 to 15 years old, and the main task during this period is to carry out intellectual education and labor education. Rousseau believes that the task of intellectual education is not to impart systematic scientific knowledge, but to develop children’s ability to acquire knowledge and stimulate their interest and enthusiasm in what they are learning. The fourth phase refers to youth, i.e. from 15 years old to adulthood, when moral education is primarily carried out. According to Rousseau, governed by “excitement and enthusiasm”, young people in this period should be adjusted and guided with the power of moral standards so as to better deal with the relationship between people and society and between people. In Rousseau’s viewpoint, these periods are closely related, and the educational process in each period should focus on the natural development of children. Hence, the focus of education for children is different at different times.

Regarding the way of liberal education, Rousseau called for education to respect children’s personality based on the theory of original goodness of human nature. He said that every child has his own special temperament, which determines their ability and character. This temperament should be changed and limited, or should be developed and improved. [4] Therefore, Rousseau emphasized that in the process of education, it is necessary to fully understand the individual characteristics of each child and adopt appropriate methods to teach the children. He resolutely opposed the uniform approach to education. As far as he was concerned, teachers should teach differently according to the age characteristics and personality features of children. Rousseau also stressed the need to distinguish gender differences between boys and girls and thereby implement different education.

#### **4. Life Education in Democracy and Education--Continuation of Modern Liberal Education Thought**

The development of the Western liberal education concept is closely related to the Western world’s understanding of human beings. With the development of the times, the understanding of people in various historical eras has constantly changed, and the concept of liberal education has

changed as well. And people's changes are closely related to changes in life. Therefore, the Western concept of liberal education is an educational concept derived from life. Later, the famous American educator Dewey gained a lot of academic nourishment from it, which can be confirmed by his famous book *Democracy and Education*. In this book, Dewey pointed out, "we use the word 'Life' to denote the whole range of experience, individual and racial..... 'Life' covers customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations."<sup>[5]</sup> Dewey described education as the life process of a democratic society. Education is the basic method of social progress and social reform, with which a democratic society can be built. Education should have a close relationship with social life, that is, "the school becomes itself a form of social life."<sup>[5]</sup> Dewey pointed out that "education should put specific work and people at work in the central position, for in this way will not people become isolated and selfish." [5] Because of education, the life at the school truly becomes a social life, getting rid of the bounds of books and gaining true liberation.

The purpose of liberal education is to cultivate social people. Dewey always believed that traditional education has three major flaws: separation between education and society; separation between education and children; separation between theory and practice. Opposing the fixed and ultimate educational purpose of the outside, he believes that the external educational purpose cannot estimate the children's interests and needs, the fixed purpose is rigid and inflexible, and cannot adapt to the changed specific situation, and the ultimate goal is a theoretical fiction because the world is constantly changing.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, he proposed that "education is without purpose", which means that education is a process with no purpose outside of itself, and it is its own purpose. However, it does not mean that education truly has no purpose at all. Dewey also pointed out the social purpose of education and growth. Since democracy is Dewey's social ideal, one important goal of education is to cultivate the new social people for the democratic society. Such new people are equipped with good citizenship, democratic ideals and the ability to participate in the democratic political life.

Dewey emphasized that educational training should be carried out according to the law of children's physical and mental development. In his book *Democracy and Education*, Dewey divided the study of children and adolescents into three levels. Teaching is a continuous job about reconstruction, and teachers should guide the children in pursuing organized truth based on the experience they have already accumulated. According to Dewey, the first stage is from four to eight years old, when children learn through activities and work. In this stage, children mainly learn how to learn, children gain the methods by learning and doing certain things on their own, and they must apply rather than reserve the acquired knowledge themselves. The second stage is from eight to twelve years old. It is a free attention learning stage when children's ability is getting stronger and they can learn indirect knowledge. For example, they are able to learn spatial knowledge through geography, learn knowledge about time through history. Besides, indirect and direct knowledge should be linked and then applied to life, or their learning will be meaningless. The third stage is after the age of twelve, which is a stage of reflection and attention learning. At this time, students begin to master systematic and theoretical knowledge and laws, and learn to think in a scientific way.

In terms of educational methods, Dewey emphasized "learning by doing", which is a teaching method that focuses on practice. In traditional teaching, the teacher speaks while the students listen, which implies that the teaching relationship is a simple relationship where the teacher imparts the knowledge, while the students lack activities and practices, and accept only indirect rather than direct experience. Dewey believes that "learning by doing" fully embodies the combination of experience and rationality, that is, the unity of knowing and doing, which is consistent with his viewpoint that any real education is based on experience. "Learning by doing" can also be regarded as "learning from experience". This method is in line with the law of children's physical and mental development. Only by letting children learn in natural activities can they truly gain knowledge. This method also accords with children's nature and interest, and children constantly accumulate experience "by doing". Dewey believes that children's nature is to be active, and children are also interested in activities. Dewey said, "In order to continue life, this kind of activities must be

continuous and adaptable to the environment, and such adaptive adjustment is not completely passive, it is not just the environment's shaping of the organism..... To preserving life, some factors in the surrounding environment will change. The higher the form of life, the more important it is to positively transform the environment.”<sup>[7]</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In the Western history of education thought, *The Republic* by Plato, *Emile* by Rousseau and *Democracy and Education* by Dewey reflect a historical context of liberal education as well as different comprehensions of liberal education. By expounding the above three monographs, we can see that liberal education has experienced a tortuous and long process, during which liberal education has been understood in different ways and has played different roles in different eras. Although the connotation, purpose, cultivation process and methods of liberal education are constantly changing, liberal education in each period has its own limitations, and sometimes it will move away from normal track of the society, yet for the theory itself, liberal education has never gone to extremes, and its main purpose is always to promote the full and liberal development of students. The liberty here does not refer to the blind liberty free from the constraint of any discipline. Instead, it is supposed to lead students to develop in a healthy direction through disciplines, rules and codes set by the school. The idea of liberal education not only affects people's understandings of education in different periods, but also will continue to move forward, multiply and continue in the long river of history.

Since China is still in the primary stage of socialism, the development of liberal education in China is relatively backward as compared with that in developed countries. Nevertheless, with the success of various reforms and the progress of socialist construction, abundant favorable conditions have been provided for the development of new liberal education, and liberal education has broad prospects. In the future, the idea of liberal education will develop in a wider field. Therefore, we should deeply study and thoroughly understand the true meaning of liberal education and avoid bias, so that China's educational cause can strive for further development.

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