

Research on the Doctrine of the Mean and Its Enlightenment to Contemporary Education

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Abstract: The doctrine of the mean is not eclecticism, but a lofty ideology and moral cultivation, a principle of freedom to advance and retreat, and a living wisdom of harmonious coexistence. The Doctrine of the Mean advocates a kind of “Shendu”, “Loyalty and Consideration” and “Sincerity”, a kind of “Shi Zhong” way of life, a kind of symbiosis of “all things grow together without harming each other.” And it is committed to achieving the harmony and unity of man, society and nature. Although the times are constantly changing, The Doctrine of the Mean still has a certain enlightenment and referential significance for contemporary education. It is conducive to promoting the perfection and healthy development of personality, realizing the unity of tool value and intrinsic value, and increasing the importance of ecological moral education.

1. Introduction

According to legend, *The Doctrine of the Mean* was made by Confucius' grandson Zisi, aiming to spread Confucius' studies and the goodness of human nature, and understand the doctrine of the mean. At first, *The Doctrine of the Mean* was not a single volume. During the Western Han Dynasty (201BC-AD8), it was included in the *Book of Rites* by Dai Sheng (戴圣). Later, it attracted the attention of Han Yu (韩愈 768-824) in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Zhang Zai (张载 1020-1077), Cheng Hao (程颢 1032-1085), Cheng Yi (程颐 1033-1107) in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) and others. Among them, Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200) took it out separately from the *Book of Rites*, together with *The Analects*, *The Great Learning* and *Mencius*, called the *Four Books*. Since modern times, Western natural and social sciences has caused a huge impact on Chinese traditional culture. Kang Youwei (康有为 1858-1927) tried to find a theoretical basis for the reform and published *Commentary on The Doctrine of the Mean* in 1901, which aimed to explain its trivial words and great meaning. However, Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881-1936), in the New Culture Movement, completely denied *The Doctrine of the Mean* and thought of it as an expression of fearing the strong and showing the weak. After 1949, the academic circles presented a phenomenon of “leaning to one side” criticizing the doctrine of the mean. *Annotation of The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean* published by Zhonghua Book Company in 1976 even defined the doctrine of the mean as a reactionary philosophy, opposing social change and advancement, and advocating restoration and retrogression.[1] Due to political reasons, people did not look at this issue rationally at the time, but with the development of globalization, contemporary scholars must re-examine the doctrine of the mean with a pluralistic and open vision.

2. The Connotation of the Doctrine of the Mean

Cheng Yi once praised *The Doctrine of the Mean*: Its content is profound, memorable, and very useful.[2] People who are good at reading can appreciate the essence of this ancient book, and the knowledge they learn from it will also benefit for life. It can be seen that he has made extremely high evaluations of *The Doctrine of the Mean*. So what is the doctrine of the mean? Confucius said: “Perfect is the doctrine of the mean as a great virtue! But it hasn’t been found in the people for a long time.” (2015: 35) [3] Confucius regarded it as a kind of supreme virtue and inner quality that many people have been missing for a long time. Literally, *The Doctrine of the Mean* can be divided into

“Zhong” and “Yong” in Chinese. “Zhong” is mostly interpreted as being between the two. “Yong” is mostly translated literally into Yong (the synonym of Yong). *The Doctrine of the Mean* has been mentioned in *The Analects* as early as Confucius once took the “impetuous man” and the “upright man” as examples. He believed that the “impetuous man” was too aggressive and the “upright man” was too conservative, so he advocated to be a moderate man. Besides, he also once commented on “Guanju” (The first poem in the *Book of Songs*) as “the joyous but not indecent, mournful but not distressing, without resentment and slander” and praised its proper control of emotions. After that Zisi and his descendants raised this idea to the height of philosophy. Zisi pointed out in the first chapter of *The Doctrine of the Mean*: If there is happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy in the heart, one is not expressed, called “Zhong”. If one’s expression is appropriate, it is called “He” (means harmony). The former is human nature, and the latter is the common principle for everyone in the world. Only when reach “Zhong” and “He”, all things in the world can perform their duties and breed and grow according to laws. In short, *The Doctrine of the Mean* embodies a way of being a person, a way of being in the world, and a way of symbiosis, and ultimately commits to realizing the harmony and unity of human, society and nature.

3. The Doctrine of the Mean

Reinterpret *The Doctrine of the Mean* from the three dimensions of human and human, human and society, and human and nature.

3.1 The Way to Behave: “Shendu”, “Loyalty and Consideration” and “Sincerity”

What is “Shendu”? Although *The Doctrine of the Mean* does not describe much of “Shendu”, it really focus on the inner essence of cultivating the mind. A person can show his true nature when he is alone. The more tiny and subtle things can often reflect a person's moral character and inner cultivation. Therefore, a gentleman must discipline himself, restrain self desires, guard against minor failures, consciously examine himself, be consistent with the outside and inside, pay attention to the cultivation of the mind, and always follow the doctrine of the mean. The core of “Shendu” is not “being alone” but “knowing alone”, that is, the cultivation of inner thoughts.

Fan Chunren (范纯仁 1027-1101) said that the “loyalty and Consideration” is used for life. “Loyalty and Consideration” has been mentioned in *The Analects*, then Zisi used Confucius' words to carry forward and promote this idea in *The Doctrine of the Mean*. If people can be loyal and lenient, they are not far from the Tao. What is “loyalty and Consideration”? Zhu Xi put forward it in the *Commentaries on the Four Books*. “Loyalty” means that a person must do his best to treat others, follow the rules of etiquette and ethics, do not change his original position and original intentions due to foreign affairs, foreign objects, and outsiders, and be able to adhere to the truth and be loyal to himself. “Consideration” means that a person must learn to be considerate, and never push others to do what he does not want to do or force others to do.

“Sincerity” is an important principle for practicing the doctrine of the mean, and Zisi has a richer discussion on it. “Sincerity” is one of the prerequisites for an individual to have a complete personality. From a micro perspective, “Sincerity” refers to the perfection of a person's morals. From a macro perspective, “Sincerity” refers to the law of development of things. Two perspectives are indispensable. Then how to perfect the self and the thing? Zisi proposed to rely on “humanity” and “wisdom”, which is not only a way to perfect one's morals, but also a criterion for integrating self and things.

3.2 The Way of Life: “Shi Zhong”

The “Zhong” in *The Doctrine of the Mean* is not the immutable “Zhong”. Confucius emphasized that the superior men should understand the doctrine of the mean because he can judge the situation, know how to advance and retreat, and know appropriate limits for speaking or doing. The inferior men are just the opposite. It can be seen from this that the “Zhong” here refers to a kind of “Zhong” that changes due to events. So what is “Shi”? Zhu Xi interpreted it as “at any time”, and Kang Youwei interpreted it as “timely”. Compared with Confucius, “timely” is more in line with what he said.[4] At

the same time, this idea also deeply affected people in later generations. Take Zeng Guofan (曾国藩 1811-1872) as an example. In the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912), Zeng Guofan led the Hunan Army to attack the Taiping Army. After winning the battle, he took the initiative to ask for disarmament in order to relieve the worries of the imperial court. He is self-aware, understands the current situation, and knows how to advance and retreat, which makes Zeng Guofan be respected by the imperial court even in his old age. In short, “Shi Zhong” advocates to look at things in a developmental perspective, learn to analyze specific issues in detail, learn to change with time, events and conditions, and follow the principles of humanity and righteousness, instead of sticking to conventions and rigidity. Under the principle of sincerity and goodness, it is emphasized that words and actions should be just right, and just enough.

3.3 The Way of Symbiosis: All Things Grow Together without Harming Each Other

General Secretary Xi Jinping mentioned in his speech at the 60th Anniversary Meeting of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: “All things get nourished without impairing one another; all ways function without going against each other.” (2015: 63)[3] Quoted from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, it shows that the relationship between heaven and earth is not a kind of competition, but a harmonious symbiosis and all-encompassing state. Conversely, in modern society, human beings are the subject of endless development and excavation of nature. Nature has become the human’s object of gradual conquest for satisfying their selfish desires. Materialism is supreme. Value orientation is shifted. Interpersonal relationship is alienated. Racial discrimination is serious. And conflicts of countries continue. When human beings unscrupulously grab the benefits of nature, it seems that they have forgotten the basis of the survival of everything, which is precisely against the doctrine of the mean. *The Doctrine of the Mean* advocates the harmonious coexistence of human and nature, emphasizing that a person should obey the law and adhere to the law in nature, through individual cultivation, and finally realize the juxtaposition with heaven and earth.

The ancients have said: Things cannot exist if they lose their foundation. Human is not the ruler of nature, nor the commander. On the contrary, nature is the basis of human existence. If the two put the cart before the horse, gains will outweigh the losses. Therefore, people should have awe and gratitude for nature to promote inclusive understanding and harmonious co-existence.

4. The Enlightenment of the Doctrine of the Mean to Contemporary Education

Wang Yuechuan once said: “*The Doctrine of the Mean* in today's spiritual ecological crisis in the world also has the universal value of adjusting people's hearts and seeking the right way.” [5] Among them, one of the important means of “adjusting the people's heart and seeking the right way” is education. Although the times are constantly changing, *The Doctrine of the Mean* still has a certain enlightenment and referential significance for contemporary education.

4.1 Promote the Perfection and Healthy Development of Personality

Wang Kaidong once said in “Education, How Easy is It”, “Once indifference becomes a habit, once selfishness takes over the soul, once respect for others becomes a burden, numbness and coldness will follow.” (2011: 237) [6] Wu Xieyu’s mother-killing behavior, Tongzhuo’s cheating on the college entrance examination...These incidents made us have to reflect: What is the disease of the current education? Behind the seemingly complicated incidents, one of the problems in current education has been exposed---the lack of complete personality education. The learning of cultural knowledge seems to be frantically “squeezing” many students. Excessive pressure makes them almost breathless. Problems such as excessive selfish desires, emotional numbness, lack of “sincerity”, and the shortage and formalism of personality education have caused some students to go to extremes after experiencing pressured. Therefore, paying attention to the growth of students, teaching the way of being a person, and promoting the perfection and healthy development of students' personality have become one of the focuses of current education.

The purpose of education is to cultivate personality. Affected by the doctrine of the mean, education should pay attention to the following three points in the cultivation of personality: First,

“there is nothing that is too secret to make presentation, or too minute to manifest itself.” (2015: 33) [3] A person's moral quality and inner cultivation are often reflected in the subtleties. As people often say: character determines fate, details determine success or failure. Therefore, students are always reminded to abide by the moral principles, do not relax the restraint on themselves especially when others cannot see, and always exercise strict self-discipline, self-inspection and integrity. Second, do not do to others what you don't want. If you don't want to do something, you don't need to shirk it to others. Tell students not only to learn to love themselves, but also to learn to love others, empathize with others, and convey kindness. Third, “A man of sincerity is self-fulfilled. And the path he takes is what he chooses for himself.” (2015: 56) [3] Teaching students “sincerity” is the perfection of personal morality, and they must be done in a real manner. Don't deceive others and themselves. Treat friends and studies sincerely, and only in this way can one finally achieve oneself.

4.2 Realize the Unity of Educational Tool Value and Intrinsic Value

Someone once said: when water enters a cup, it is a cup; when water is poured into a bottle, it is a bottle. It is true that water has very good plasticity, but it often scatters around because it exceeds the carrying capacity of the container. This is like the current education. Parents and teachers are eager to hope that their children will become elites. Under the banner of “all for the children”, parents are arbitrarily shaped them into “cups” or “bottles” they want, but they have never asked children's true preferences. In the end, some students chose to end their lives due to excessive academic pressure. Not only does education fail to give students the joy of learning knowledge, but it also becomes a “cage” that suppresses their individualized development. Therefore, current education should strive to achieve the unity of tool value and intrinsic value.

The Doctrine of the Mean lies in “Zhong” and “Shi”. “Zhong” means impartiality and appropriateness; “Shi” means to have a broad vision and a comprehensive view of the overall situation.[7] In the same way, education should also be unbiased and look at the overall situation in the value orientations of tool value and intrinsic value. The tool value-oriented education connects knowledge with students' future lives and reveals the importance of knowledge imparting. This is its rationality. However, education should not only be regarded as an activity driven by pure interests, which ignores its intrinsic value---promote students to explore the meaning of personal life, make them develop and teach them to “be humans”.[8] Therefore, education can neither completely abandon the value of tools nor place too much emphasis on intrinsic value, otherwise it will move from one extreme to another. Education should achieve the unity of the two and create a healthy and caring learning environment for students. At this time, the roles of parents and teachers are no longer “potters” but “gardeners”.

4.3 Increase the Importance of Ecological Moral Education

In recent years, problems such as environmental degradation, resource shortages, overfishing, and illegal hunting have emerged one after another. A series of social hazards brought about by the ecological crisis have caused people to re-examine their relationship with nature. The relationship between human and nature is not a subordinate relationship, but an equal relationship of harmonious coexistence and coordination. Schweitz said in *Philosophy of Culture*, “not only are people equal, but all things are equal”. (2010: 70) [9] Therefore, everyone should consciously assume the responsibility and obligation to protect the natural environment when enjoying the gifts given by nature, which is especially significant for the young people who are the future builders of the country.

With the improvement of social civilization, ecological moral education has become an important part of current education. Compared with the traditional moral education system, it pays more attention to the symbiotic relationship between human and human, human and society, and human and nature. It makes education surpass the previous anthropocentrism in the cultivation of students' moral education, and it highlights the idea of “all things being cultivated together without harming each other”. As Einstein said, knowledge and skills alone cannot bring happiness and dignity to human life. [9] Education should not only cultivate people with knowledge and skills, but also cultivate high-quality people who know how to respect life and respect nature.

All in all, educators have to absorb the essence of *The Doctrine of the Mean*, earnestly think and study the doctrine of the mean, so as to make due contributions to China's construction of a socialist harmonious society and the development of human society.

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