

The Logical Evolution of Confucian Theory of Humanity

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Abstract: Confucian political and economic theories of humanity are not the same as the Western tradition of practice philosophy. Although the above two Confucian theories are divorced from the moral centralism of orthodox Confucianism, they still aim to achieve the goodness of human nature. The moral theory of humanity deems that human nature is inherently good, and through moral practice only human can reach the original goodness of nature, while the political and economic theories of human nature believe that only moral practice cannot avail to reach the target of turning into goodness. The political theory of human nature mainly insists that political indoctrination be necessary, while the economic theory of human nature believes that hard work such as material production is a must to meet people's needs for security and material resources. the theory of political humanity is stripped away from politics. Such practice also affects the Confucian understanding of human nature, which has a strong sense of reality.

Keywords: Philosophy; Confucianism; Theory of humanity

1. The difference of the logical order of morality, economy, and politics in different philosophical systems

Aristotle's approach to morality-economy-politics corresponds to the progressive advancement of the individual-family-state. Based on this, some researchers have compared Aristotle's theory with the Confucian structure of practicing self-cultivation, maintaining family harmony, conducting good governance, and guaranteeing peace, and found that there are similarities between the two. However, in Confucianism, the economy refers to the behavior of a state, and rarely refers to the income of a family. In Aristotle's view, economy mainly focuses on the economic income of the family, so it is also known as "family economics".

In Hegel's practice philosophy which we focus on analyzing, the order of the three is different, too. Hegel believed that the three were an evolutionary process from morality to economics and to politics (a state), and that the ultimate basis for this evolutionary process was the ego movement of absolute spirit. Hegel placed the family in the realm of morality, while Aristotle singled out the concept of "family economics," which referred to the economic income of a family. Aristotle's classification was regarded by Hegel as a form of morality. Family members are based on a moral relationship of love, and family wealth is not for an individual's selfish desire, but rather serves the interests of the whole family, and therefore it is of ethical connotations.

In Hegel's system, the economy emerges in "civil society", a stage in which the universal ethical relationships in the family have dissolved, and every member pursues the satisfaction of his or her own desires and interests. At this stage, the pre-universality of the family has collapsed, and a higher universality of the state has not yet come into being. In the economic human nature theory we have analyzed, the affirmation of human desires is always based on the state^[1]. Both Li Gou and Ye Shi discussed economic practices under the state ideology. Although they regarded productive labor as the most basic form of practice, such practice aimed to achieve goodness as the ultimate goal.

2. Differences between Confucian political and economic theories of humanity and the Western tradition of practice philosophy

In Hegel's system, the path of spiritual development is a continuous "upward" movement towards universality and freedom, from

morality to economics and then to politics, while in Confucianism, politics and economics are a continuous inward drive towards the achievement of the highest goodness. The logical evolution of the three theories of human nature is a process from morality to politics and to economics, corresponding to human nature, emotions, and desires, respectively. Humanity, emotion, and desire are not actually distinct from each other, but each has its own emphasis in the three theories of human nature. For example, in his theory of humanity, Mencius discussed the goodness of human nature from the perspective of the four senses of sympathy, shame, modesty, and conscience, but his main focus was on human nature. For ordinary people, he who has no constant possessions has no perseverance, which means ordinary people need to achieve their morality on the basis of satisfying their basic material needs; but the gentlemen are different, the gentlemen can get rid of the bondage of material needs, achieve ideal moral personality through sheer moral practice, and reach a higher moral realm, so the gentlemen without fixed property can have perseverance^[2-3]. Mencius did not pay much attention to how to ensure that the people have fixed assets, because in his view, achieving material satisfaction is easy, and achieving ideal good governance is also very simple, as long as one can practice a policy of mercy towards the people with a heart of mercy. Therefore, later on, Ye Shi sharply criticized Mencius for viewing politics and economics too simplistically. Mencius' focus is on how to practice morality, such as cultivating one's moral character and doing good, through which one can return to the goodness of human nature.

The ideal of Confucianism insists that the king should be a person of virtue, which can be seen from the sense of destiny aroused by morality in Confucius. Confucius left Wei for Chen (both Wei and Chen were two states at that time). When he passed through the state of Song, Huan Tui wanted to kill him. Confucius said, "Heaven has endowed me with virtue, so how can Huan Tui harm me?"

(Shu Er, a chapter from the Analects). When Confucius was imprisoned at Kuang, an ancient place, he said, "If heaven is about to lose its culture, those who die later will not be able to share it. If heaven has not lost its culture, how can the Kuang people do to me?" (Zi Han, a chapter from the Analects). Confucius himself was quite open-minded about having virtue but no position. When his disciples asked why he didn't pursue a political career, he said, "The Book of History says, 'Honesty is the only virtue, and fraternal love is the only friendship.' When you apply honesty and fraternity to government affairs, you are a government official. Otherwise how do we define governance? (Wei Zheng, a chapter from the Analects). Confucius' reply of replacing political practice with moral practices such as filial piety, that equals the two, but this was not enough to eliminate the tension caused by the separation of morality and politics.

3. Confucian moral idealism has been squeezed by reality

Just as the death of Socrates had a tremendous impact on Plato, Confucius believed that he had the virtue of being ordained, but he failed to achieve his ideals throughout his life. This separation between virtue and position also had a great impact on Confucius' disciples. In the view of Mencius, second only to Confucius, the alienation between morality and politics is also manifested as the tension between the ideal and the reality. Mencius' moral idealism is even more pronounced, and he proposed the essence of benevolent governance. In Mencius' view, as long as one can practice benevolent governance with a heart of compassion, the world can be governed. In the view of Mencius, benevolent governance is actually the easiest to implement, and once the monarch adopts it, he will soon be able to rule his subjects as the latter are like drought-stricken plants longing for rain. But the reality was that Mencius lobbied various states, but in the end, he had to retreat and write books with his disciples. His words and thoughts were ridiculed as being too far-fetched. At that time, the topics of concern to the monarchs were how to achieve a vast territory with numerous subjects, and a rich country with powerful army. The evaluation of Mencius by the political figures at that time reflected that the political goals in the Warring States Period could not be achieved solely by relying on morality. The harsh reality also affected his thoughts, so Mencius' approach was to create a private space for morality. In the debate over the internal and external aspects of benevolence and righteousness, Gao Zi, one disciple of Mencius, proposed the idea of internal benevolence and external righteousness, while Mencius agreed with the former and criticized the latter. Benevolence is completely in the realm of morality, and the morality of an individual can be free from any external constraints. The so-called "I desire benevolence, and benevolence is achieved", that is to say, benevolence can be achieved completely by relying on each person's nature; but righteousness is different, because righteousness is

not only an individual's internal moral practice that is unrelated to others, but also a moral requirement in the process of interacting with others and facing others. Because it is generated in the face of others, righteousness is not entirely internal like benevolence. This is why there is a debate between Gao Zi and Mencius. Gao Zi held the view that righteousness was external because it did relate to others, but Mencius believed that righteousness was also internal because it was indeed born from the inside, just like benevolence. So, righteousness is a behavior that grows from inner and points to the other. If the emphasis is on the ego, then righteousness is internal; if the emphasis is on the other, then righteousness is external. For example, to respect for elders is naturally due to their seniority, but the reason for respecting them is indeed from the heart ^[4].

It can be seen that in the late Western Zhou Dynasty, politics had already begun to slowly alienate from morality. In the process of alienation, there emerged relatively "sheer" politicians such as Guan Zhong, whose understanding of politics had already escaped the trap of morality. For the state, the goal was to enrich the country and strengthen its military; for individuals, the goal was to meet people's needs for security and material resources. The separation of politics from humanity gave rise to the theory of political humanity, which also influenced the realistic Confucian understanding of human nature. Unlike Mencius, who only cared about moral emotions and moral nature, the political theory of human nature paid more attention to human temperament and material. Although Confucian human nature theory had always emphasized the importance of morality and regarded the achievement of perfect human nature as the highest goal, they all recognized the importance of politics itself and the irreplaceable role of politics in morality. The theory of political humanity generally emphasizes the importance of "political superstructure" such as etiquette norms, political indoctrination, and penal systems in shaping goodness ^[5].

4. Confucian ideals of rule of virtue further separating the economy from politics

In Dong Zhongshu's view, the independent status of economy had not yet emerged, and politics was still unified with indoctrination, with the aim of achieving the goodness of human nature. In the records of the Grand Scribe, the title by which Sima Qian refers to himself in the Records of the Historian, the importance of economy had begun to emerge, and he devoted a separate chapter to discussing economic behaviors in the Biographies of Merchants. In fact, politics cannot be separated from economics, and traditional politics is closer to morality, while modern politics is closer to economics. To achieve the righteousness of humanity in politics, it is necessary to meet people's realistic needs, which must be satisfied through economic activities such as the production of material goods. In the Discourses on Salt and Iron, we can see the process of the economy of the early Han Dynasty slowly separating from morality and politics. And in the Discourses on Salt and Iron, the senior officials believed that the Confucian doctrine was insufficient, or that the doctrine of benevolence and righteousness was not enough for governance. An important reason was that benevolent policies or rule by virtue could not bring prosperity and strength to a country. In the Han Dynasty, the unified country needed sufficient financial support to ensure its stability and unity, so the importance of the economy in politics was highlighted at that time. Sang Hongyang stepped out of agricultural production consistent with patriarchal ethics and attached great importance to commercial and other economic activities. At the same time, Sang Hongyang also regarded the pursuit of benefits and avoidance of harm as human nature. As we have previously discussed, Sang Hongyang placed benefits and rewards above preferences, emotions, life, and morality, viewing them as the most decisive reasons for human action. Sang Hongyang further dispelled the moral nature of human beings, arguing that the advocates of benevolence and love by Confucian and Mohist scholars were merely taking advantage of the rhetoric of benevolence to seek wealth and power.

In the debate with Sang Hongyang, Confucian scholars still adhered to the moral position, but later they also took "abstinence to adapt to situations" as their goal, believing that people's desires should be reasonably satisfied.

After the Tang and Song Dynasties, great changes had taken place in China's society and economy. We have also quoted the conclusion of economists that "social and economic changes that had a significant impact on Chinese history occurred during the Tang and Song Dynasties, and this has become a consensus in the academic community. On the one hand, the Song Dynasty saw the "revival" of Confucianism, with both Neo-Confucian Rationalistic School and Neo-Confucian Idealistic School adhering to and

promoting the Confucian tradition. On the other, more different voices began to emerge within Confucianism, which, in terms of human nature theory, it was the further development of economic human nature theory. We will discuss Wang Anshi in the context of political humanism, and even in Wang Anshi's case, his economic reform was also the key to his political reform. Even earlier than Wang Anshi, Li Gou vigorously criticized the Confucian tradition of valuing righteousness rather than material gains, explicitly proposing that "wealth" was the foundation of social existence and development, opposing the idea of making moral practice the center of human activity. Li Gou believed that everything from the people's basic necessities to the military and political supplies of a country, as well as specific ritual procedures, should be based on financial resources. It is never possible to achieve great governance of the world without financial resources. Similarly, it is impossible to seek benevolence, righteousness, and morality without financial resources. This is undoubtedly a very important breakthrough in Li Gou's thought, which also influenced his new understanding of human nature vice versa. Li Gou was known for his courtesy in his early years, but in his mature years he saw people as realistic beings with material desires, so he considered what measures to take to fully mobilize people's material production capabilities by leveraging various means of production to maximize their material needs. Li Gou replaced the orthodox Confucian "temperament" with "desire", and replaced the moral practice with the material production. In this way, his concern was no longer the contradiction between "natural law" and "human desire", "temperament" and "born nature", but the contradiction between the satisfaction of desire and the ability to satisfy desire. After Li Gou, Ye Shi further emphasized the importance of labor in the cultivation of human nature. In Ye Shi's thought, "labor" became a central term, whether it was moral practice, political practice, or production practice, all of which were a process of "being cautious and vigilant", "working hard and diligently", and "working hard in difficulties". Among the three, the production practice was the most important. The way of combining the internal and the external requires joint efforts of moral, political, and productive practices. Although the content of humanitarianism achieved by the three is different, in Ye Shi's view, they are all the process of hard work. In this regard, Ye Shi's thought goes beyond the orthodox Confucian moral centralism, especially his view that the formation of humanity depends on human labor, which is a major breakthrough.

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