

On Utilitarianism in University Education

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Abstract: Utilitarianism is rapidly growing and spreading in higher education today, and its ideas of “pursuing utility” and “entertainment first” are deeply influencing the minds of today’s college students. As a result of the connotation, manifestation, and evaluation of utilitarianism in contemporary university education, it provides value for university education to properly understand utilitarianism and mold students’ three perspectives.

Keywords: Higher education; Utilitarianism; New media

1. The current situation of utilitarianism in contemporary universities

1.1 The causes

China has been in the fast lane of rapid economic development since the 1980s, which has divided the original social structure. Higher education in the planned economy era is primarily concerned with national planning services. Since the 1950s, in order to meet the country's high demand for industrial talent at the time, the Ministry of Education has imposed special requirements for the establishment of professional departments and institutes, thereby providing human resources support for China's modernization. At the time, the main group of people accepted into higher education made up a very small proportion of the total educated population, and the majority of them were elites from all sides. In the midst of the tidal wave of national industrialization, these students who received higher education demonstrated a strong sense of idealism and historical responsibility. They threw themselves without hesitation into the tide of national industrialization, regardless of personal gains and losses, and actively responded to national distribution.

Higher education in China has changed dramatically since the 1990s, with college students' employment shifting from directional distribution to self-employment. The demand for college students in society has increased significantly as a result of the market's rapid expansion. Higher education in China has been rapidly developing since the 1990s. According to Ministry of Education statistics, the number of colleges and universities in China was adjusted to 1,022 in 1998. There are 590 universities and colleges, 13 fewer than the previous year; 432 colleges and vocational and technical colleges, a 15-percentage-point increase. China has 736 graduate student training units, including 408 universities and 328 scientific research institutions. There are 2,234,600 undergraduate students, a 248,400 increase; and 1,174,100 college students, a 14,100 decrease. There are 829,800 college graduates in the country. As of 2021, China has 3,012 higher education schools, including 1,238 ordinary undergraduate schools (including 164 independent colleges) and 32 undergraduate vocational schools; 1,486 higher vocational (junior) schools, an increase of 18 over the previous year, with 4,446,000 undergraduate students enrolled and 717,700 undergraduate students enrolled at the junior college starting point; 18.931 million students and 4.281 million graduates. The average annual growth rate of colleges and universities was 139.1% from 1998 to 2021, and the average annual growth rate of undergraduate students was 138.07%. (Source: Ministry of Education)

Rapid growth in the number of colleges and universities, as well as the number of students, results in rapid market saturation. Higher education has evolved from an elite education to a popular education. According to this premise, on the one hand, a large number of students in school are affected by the wave of consumerism and their families' expectations, while on the other hand, they face fierce competition in the market. As a result, utilitarianism is becoming increasingly popular among today's college students. Students no longer view learning as their own job, but rather consider how to pursue self-satisfaction and interests as the primary focus of their studies and lives.

1.2 Main features

1.2.1 Utilitarianism is combined with new media

College students, the object and subject of higher education, have been profoundly influenced by new media, as represented by short videos and fragment reading. Teachers' dissemination and reading are traditional methods of knowledge dissemination, but with the influence of new media, college students are no longer limited to learning knowledge in the classroom. As a result, short videos and fragmented reading have emerged as important channels for knowledge acquisition. In the new media era, media communicators will consciously disseminate eye-catching news or content for the sake of traffic, and gain attention for profit by catering to the needs of college students, whereas intelligent push is based on the Internet's algorithm, with clicks as the calculation data. As a result, the algorithm will selectively recommend utilitarianism content to college students, with the core values being hedonism, money worship, and consumerism. The new media algorithm's core is not limited to this. College students are at the stage of being inquisitive and curious about the world. When college students realize that utilitarianism philosophy contradicts the traditional moral philosophy advocated by higher education, they may try to think critically in order to obtain more information to help individuals understand it thoroughly. In the new media era, however, the core of the algorithm will push point-to-point based on value preference. As a result, when college students partially approve of utilitarianism philosophy, the algorithm will constantly push the content including "hedonism," flooding their critical thinking with massive push, causing some college students to constantly repeat utilitarianism philosophy in their brains, eventually rejecting higher education's moral education, and becoming a new propagator of utilitarianism philosophy. In some ways, utilitarianism in the new media era broadens and influences the source of utilitarianism philosophy in colleges and universities through interest-driven dissemination.

1.2.2 Benefit first, result oriented.

Pursuing one's interests is a natural part of human socialization. Smith once observed: "The food we need every day is produced not out of kindness by butchers, brewers, and bakers, but out of self-interest. We are not requesting mercy, but rather their self-interest." To some extent, reasonable pursuit of interests drives the development of social progress from the standpoint of social progress. However, if pursuing legitimate interests becomes the ultimate goal, it will lead to the opposite extreme. However, in an era of extreme expansion of material desires, today's college students are prone to value pursuit based on results.

Some college students, for example, choose subjects that will result in higher grades when dealing with academic issues.

Purpose, rather than the subjects you want to learn from the bottom of your heart, because a higher grade point may be useful for further study and employment, but you don't focus on the study of knowledge itself. The initial goal of curriculum grade point setting was to establish a value judgment for curriculum learning. However, under the influence of utilitarianism, grade point and curriculum learning frequently form a distorted value structure. On the one hand, courses that are truly rich in knowledge must be difficult, and obtaining a grade point is relatively difficult. Courses that are easy to obtain a grade point are, on the other hand, relatively basic. As a result, students frequently select courses with higher grade points and easier results, which are extremely valuable.

This is especially true in other areas. For example, participating in volunteer activities is motivated by a desire to enrich one's resume through volunteer activities; participating in student organizations is motivated by a desire to connect with teachers and leaders through student organizations in order to obtain more resources, but rarely by a desire to serve students. In a Peking University report, Professor Qian Liqun proposed the concept of "exquisite self-interest." He mentioned: "Some of our universities are cultivating a diverse set of self-interests. Once in power, these individuals are more dangerous than ordinary corrupt officials." Professor Qian Liqun's use of "refinement" to modify the expression of "egoism" actually points out that egoism has had a profound influence on the contemporary higher education ecology, and the egoism philosophy has an unnoticed impact on college students' value judgment.

1.2.3 Entertainment to death, with happiness as the ultimate pursuit.

People's spiritual pursuit has become "entertainment" with the rapid development of human society. "Entertainment" has different forms of expression at different times, and different social classes and entertainment methods will have different manifestations. In modern times, new media entertainment has become the primary mode of entertainment for contemporary college students, owing to the rapid development of the social economy. The forms of entertainment in the new media field of vision are concentrated in a high reliance on social media, whereas the youth groups themselves are full of curiosity, explora-

tion ability, but lack willpower. The spread of new media increases the availability of entertainment for young people, and the "excessive entertainment" of utilitarianism enters people's minds grandly. Young people are more eager for happiness and sensory stimulation under the influence of utilitarianism, while ignoring the stage of higher education.

2. The evaluation of university utilitarianism

Actually, utilitarianism is a type of consequentialist evaluation mechanism that seeks to maximize the consequences of human happiness in order to achieve the prosperity and strength of the country as a whole. Utilitarianism was a progressive social change thought trend in the 18th century. On the one hand, utilitarianism sharply criticized feudal autocracy, religious hegemony, and ignorant feudal order, challenged the theory of natural rights, attacked the so-called political thought of divine right of monarch, and clearly stated that the emergence of political power was the result of social progress and the pursuit of happiness, which increased people's power consciousness. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, believes that if the proper methods and means are used, social science can achieve the same rapid advancement as natural science. This scientific spirit initiative has greatly aided the advancement of social science. From Beccaria to Bentham, they introduced forensic medicine and psychology into the evaluation mechanism of social science, and obtained results through experimental measurement, which marked a significant advancement over the medieval theological system.

However, utilitarianism has had a significant impact on higher education since its inception. Higher education in European and American countries has been dominated by utilitarianism since the nineteenth century. Yale University issued a comprehensive report criticizing utilitarianism's influence on higher education. They believe that the rapid expansion of utilitarianism education has made education highly dependent on the social economy and the market, and that higher education is losing its independence, which contradicts the significance of higher education and its inherent logic. The excessive pursuit of money in utilitarianism causes the establishment of university disciplines to be oriented by market demand. However, human society's progress requires some non-market disciplines as support and "useless learning," and excessive setting of disciplines by market trend violates higher education's original intention to pursue truth. The utilitarianism thought trend has spread more widely in the new media era. The new media era embodies anti-tradition and decentralization, while some college students have accepted utilitarianism's ideas of "entertainment first" and "interests above" under the guise of new media. The Internet has become an important way to spread ideas in the current era of new media, and information changes at a rapid pace. However, the intensive modernization work leaves people with little time to focus on their studies, and the fragmented dissemination form of new media emerges naturally. The fragmented form of communication fragments the time of young students, and in the fragmented knowledge contact, elements of utilitarianism with their distinct characteristics are easily spread among young people. In a wave of fragmented information, the youth will only pay attention to what they want to pay attention to, treat knowledge superficially, lose their independent thinking and critical thinking, stop delving into the origin and source of knowledge, and pursue practicality blindly, thus forming a result-oriented utilitarianism trend of thought, from which utilitarian behavior emerges, and utilitarian behavior will react on utilitarian thinking, making it more prevalent.

Indeed, utilitarianism's scientific way of thinking and common denominator of pursuing the maximization of human happiness have been absorbed by various schools of political thought, making significant contributions to modern political evolution. However, utilitarianism's flaws are extremely visible. Because measuring the greatest happiness is always subjective, utilitarian countries will soon lose their stable order if there is no stable political culture and ideology. However, if today's young people want to reject utilitarianism philosophy, the most important thing is to improve their social practice ability, as practice is the only criterion for testing truth. Only through discernment and judgment in social practice education can college and university students truly recognize the harm of utilitarianism and thus produce critical thinking.

Higher education is a critical link in the promotion of human progress and development. Higher education bears the important responsibility of cultivating three perspectives in youth and shaping new people for the times. The spread of utilitarianism philosophy in higher education, on the other hand, can only be a tributary, not the mainstream. Higher education should guide today's young people in shaping the values and norms of dedication and courage in social practice, so that they can truly pursue success.

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