

# Practice Direction from the Perspective of Value Rationality

## The Methodological Significance of Mencius' Theory of Good Nature

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**Abstract**—Mencius established his own theory from the assumption of goodness of human nature. He advocated expanding kindness in the practice of social life. He affirmed the internal value of human, advocated to grasp the rational consciousness of human orientation. Mencius's theory of good nature represents metaphysics of Pre-Chin Confucianism, which has important meanings in epistemology and methodology.

**Keywords**—Mencius; theory of good nature; value rationality; methodological significance

### I. INTRODUCTION

During the Spring and Autumn period, the ritual music system collapsed. Mencius put forward the view of human nature: essential attribute of human. The good nature of human Mencius put forward is congenital natural attribute or acquired social attribute? What is the connection between the methodology of the theory of good nature and the external moral order? How Mencius construct his theory with good nature of human as premise? What is its methodological significance for us today? The paper will make a discussion on these problems.

### II. THE DUAL ATTRIBUTES OF HUMAN NATURE

The basic connotation of Mencius' theory of good human nature emphasizes that goodness is the intrinsic and inherent essential attribute of human beings. "It is a natural instinct that one can do without learning. It's natural morality that you know without thinking about" (13:15).<sup>1</sup> Natural instinct and natural morality are human's nature to survive in the world. In Mencius' opinion, goodness is the root and purpose in essence.

In ancient times, science wasn't developed. People tended to seek unknown things to produce a possible explanation of psychological comfort. In China, people put the ultimate sources of various contradictions in the hands of

the mysterious heaven. The tradition of ancient heaven thought has become a powerful weapon for Mencius to solve the problem of moral metaphysics<sup>[1]</sup>. Mencius believed that to know goodness was the beginning of honesty and honesty was the way of the Heaven.

In Mencius's view, "nature" is endowed by the Heaven, and "nature" contains natural attributes. The natural attribute in nature reflects the essence of the universal connection between man and animal. But the nature of this level cannot distinguish man from beast.

The heaven-sent nature was marked by moral brand because of its social attribute. "To be kind and faithful all the time are heavenly principles" (11: 16). Mencius believed that the pursuit of faithfulness and honesty and to be kind conforms to the moral order of the universe, and it has the source of transcendence. Society is an existence of necessity posed by material activities and spiritual activities of individual life<sup>[2]</sup>. Social attribute has special significance for the intrinsic value of human nature, and it is possibility for man to follow the heavenly principles.

The social attribute of nature are mainly embodied in the following aspects:

First of all, Mencius's theory of good nature is put forward under the background of drastic changes in social structure. Therefore, his theory is undoubtedly of class division, and "the nature" he put forward was embedded in the existing political and economic structure.

Secondly, the nature with social attributes gradually and inevitably causes the development of human society from lower level to higher level. But "nature" is just the beginning. Mencius clearly knew that the heart of ordinary people have the root of goodness. But without a good head like King Wenwang, they were still hard to be enlightened. Mr. Sun Zhongshan has put forward the theory of "division of three kinds of people": there are three kinds of people according to gift and talent; people having foresight, hindsight and people unknowing<sup>[3]</sup>. For people unknowing, Mencius had a similar expression in his theory: "man had done benevolence and righteousness, but he did not understand why he did it. He was used to it every day, but he didn't know it. He did it every day, but he didn't think about the reason. This kind of

<sup>1</sup> In this article, the quotations of the original part of *Mencius* are all from Yang Bojun's *Annotation of Mencius*, Zhonghua Book Company, at May 2012 Edition. It is quoted frequently in this article. In order to reduce length, the detail marks are omitted later and only mark its chapter and verse of the quotation at the end.

people occupied the majority (13.5)". People who know the superficialities but don't know its essence and are hard to understand the truth are ordinary people. The human nature of rational intrinsic value, as a kind of moral commitment to good political life, only become a permanent sensing and pursuit, can it deny any real and individual structural conditions. And realize the transformation from special people to ordinary man in endless transcendence<sup>[4]</sup>. The dividing line of ordinary people is limited, but their pursuit as an individual is infinite.

Thirdly, "nature" is not stable. It is open, dynamic and not static. It may be affected by the situation and gain or lose. Mencius compared good nature to water-based nature when he rebutted Gao Zi's opinion of "no good or evil in human nature" (11.2). Man who goes astray is because "he is forced ... so is the change of his nature" (the same as above). This change is not equal to the nature of movement.

The social attribute represents the development direction of human. Driven by increasingly rich practice, it transforms from the original secondary position toward the opposite side. Gradually through the accumulation and expansion, it sublimates to the dominant human nature. The natural attribute is converted to the non-dominant human nature. From then, social attributes stipulate and restrict the characteristics, nature and development trend of human beings<sup>[5]</sup>.

Mencius advocated having few desires. But having few desires doesn't mean suppressing desires. Normal and reasonable human desires are heavenly principles. "To follow heavenly principle" means to be kind, and "to eliminate desires of human" means to destroy evil<sup>[6]</sup>. In Mencius' concept, people practicing Buddhism or Taoism can have normal desires. "The natural instincts of human" also conform to human nature. But they should be expressed through the form of "rites". He believed that the natural attributes are shared by human beings and animals, and we cannot confirm human nature only by its natural attributes<sup>[7]</sup>. After a careful study of the complete works of *Mencius*, you may find that Mencius has never denied this natural attribute in human nature.

Mencius attaches great importance to the integration of natural attributes and social attributes in human nature. He thought that "one shall do righteous things, but do not expect the desired effect" in self-cultivation (3.2). It means to experience and toughen state of mind in face of complicated things in secular society and not exceed the proper limits. Don't think to practice Taoism and Buddhism is to abandon desires. It can be seen that the natural attributes and social attributes in Mencius' "nature" are consistent. They are two-in-one in human nature.

### III. TO BUILD THE THEORETICAL MEANING AND PRACTICAL PATH FROM THE THEORY OF GOOD NATURE

All theoretical ideas of Mencius are based on the theory of good nature, and the theory of good nature is the guidance of practice, and always carries out the methodology of original goodness of human nature. Through Mencius's thought and the expression in *Mencius* we can see that:

#### A. *The Fundamental Difference between Man and Beast Lies in the Existence of Benevolence and Righteousness in Man's Heart*

"There are very few places where human beings are different from animals. The ordinary people abandon these distinctions. Only the noble gentleman can keep it. Shun can understand the truth of all kinds of things, and observe the mood of all kinds of characters, because he did things according to benevolence and righteousness, not using righteousness as a tool" (8.19). Mencius directly pointed out there is only a little bit difference between man and beast. That is the benevolence and righteousness in nature. According to thoughts of Marx, "conscious activities directly distinguish man's activities from animals"<sup>[8]</sup>. This conscious life activities means practical activities based on "the scale of man".

The idiom "worse than beast" originates from *Book of Jin - Biography of Ruan Ji*. It records: "one killing his father is like a beast. One killing his mother is worse than a beast". "Worse than a beast" means some beasts can't bear to part their parents. It can be seen that some people who have broken the intrinsic value scale cannot even compare with some animals. Although they are human, their action deviates from the nature of human being - goodness<sup>[9]</sup>.

#### B. *Goodness Was Endowed by Nature; It Is Non-Worldly Possessions; We Should Seek from Our Inner Heart*

In Mencius's theory of good nature, there is a distinct feature that goodness originates from inner heart of human. It is the natural essence in nature. "Benevolence is the most revered god thing, so it is the fundamental thing for man to set up a home and a country" (3.7). In this sentence, Mencius has summed up two points. First, benevolence is bestowed by the Heaven. In Mencius' view, there are heavenly principles and man's principles. Benevolence and righteousness and taking pleasure in doing good are heavenly principles. They are spiritual title and inner title. Second, benevolence is thing in nature. It is whereabouts one's life has and the entrustment one's spirit has. It is spirit house any one cannot destroy it with force.

#### C. *To Do Good Deeds Should Follow the Objective Law and Give Full Play to Subjective Initiative*

To Mencius' insights, to foster moral character and do good deeds by no means rely on pure thinking. The theory of good nature emphasizes to respect the objective laws and play subjective initiative in production and practice in many areas.

Mencius had proposed to follow the laws of nature and focus on the view of sustainable development: "if the army does not interfere with the agricultural production season, there will be surplus grains. If we don't use fine and closely woven nets to go fishing in deep ponds, there will be plenty of fish and turtles. If we cut down trees according to its certain season, there will be endless timbers" (1.3); If we follow these rules, we can make our people live in peace no matter in harvest year or bad year.

Mencius thought man should not only be particular about correct method but also positively display the subjective initiative in order to cultivate virtues. As we know that “everyone has his destiny, but gentleman don’t bow to his destiny” (14.24). Man has our fate, but we should play our initiative and not resign to our fate or abandon ourselves.

*D. Cultivate Our Temperament and Focus on Accumulation and Grasp the Dialectical Relationship between Quantitative Change and Qualitative Change in the Unity of Knowledge and Practice*

Mencius paid great attention to the cultivation of habits. He repeatedly demonstrated to cultivate temperament in an accumulated manner. It reflects that Mencius attached importance to quantitative accumulation and grasp of the law of quantitative change and qualitative change.

First of all, Mencius affirmed that qualitative change is the inevitable result of quantitative change. Water will not flow forward if it doesn’t fill hollows. A gentleman with high aspiration cannot be smooth if he doesn’t reach to certain realm”(13.24). “Reach to certain realm” has double meanings. First, it means not to interpret out of context. Second, it means weather it can apply to our daily life. Here it includes the practice is the sole criterion for testing truth of understanding.

Secondly, Mencius knew the necessary preparation of quantitative change to qualitative change, and qualitative change depends on quantitative change. He believed that to cultivate virtues or other practical activities need perseverance. “The value of benevolence and righteousness is determined by its maturity”(11.19). Benevolence and righteousness like growth of grain are beneficial when they are ripe.

Thirdly, Mencius also said that the implementation of benevolence should start from small things and adhere to the principle of moderation. “The way is near, but we seek it far away. Thing is easy, but we start it from difficulty. If we are all close to our parents and respect elders, the country will be better”(7.11). The truth is simple and easy, so is to practice Taoism and Buddhism. It is not good to reach for what is beyond one’s grasp. But start from the basic law, rites and moralities.

#### IV. THE METHODOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THEORY OF GOOD NATURE

Mencius's theory of good nature is not an intellectual theory but an infinite direction of thinking. Therefore, we cannot evaluate it as a result of cognition. In Mencius’ theory of good nature, it takes man as being with goodness in nature<sup>[10]</sup>. It affirms that the intrinsic value scale of human is the unity of the natural attributes and social attributes. It takes goodness as the pursuit of supremacy and transcendence of man from animal. If takes the theory of good nature as a system providing standard, nature of standardized sense is not object of knowledge but a practice direction<sup>[11]</sup>. It has not only viewed the rational consciousness of human beings

not relying on foreign bodies, meanwhile it has explored the ultimate ideal of ethical order of the scale.

Mencius's contingency thinking of preferring the larger to the smaller provides a solution to moral problems and ethical dilemmas into human nature. His view has profound insight. When there is a value conflict, Mencius always grasped the essence from surface and made a choice of “preferring honor to life” (11.10). All difficulties can be smoothly done or easily solved.

The practical value of the methodology of the theory of good nature covers a wide range, and only a discussion is made on the value orientation and the governance of the country.

First, in the value orientation, Mencius's theory of good nature plays a leading role in the construction of contemporary socialist core values. From the national level, the theory of good nature emphasizes economic harmony and moral harmony, and to practice benevolence and avoid unjust war. It pays attention to people's livelihood and endowment, takes a prosperous and contented life of people as foundation, attaches importance to public education and takes prosperous country and peaceful people as standards to determine a kingly way. From the perspective of the society, the theory of good nature advocates "righteousness" and "rite". It contains thoughts of constructing a just and fair society. Man can enjoy bottom-line freedom in a ritual society. Mencius said: "people cannot be shameless; man can free from shame from not knowing to knowing” (13.6). From the citizen level, the methodology of theory of good nature contains value rationality and moral judgment which is spirit gene rooted in blood of Chinese. It has played an important ideological base for patriotism, dedication, integrity and kindness. “Respecting morality and love benevolence and righteousness, then people can be peaceful and satisfied. So, man shall not lose the righteousness when becoming poor, and not deviate from morality when becoming rich”(13.9). For individual, man shall not do unrighteous things and keep a pure and innocent nature. It is wisdom to culture a filial and righteous heart and learn to distinguish right from wrong. Everyone can do matter within their duties well, respect each other and treat each other with solidarity and friendship. After that the society will not deviate from track.

Second, in the aspects of governing the country, Mencius’ benevolent thought has methodological significance in both theory and practice. It is a theoretical resource for the construction of good political order. First of all, benevolent government with goodness as foundation shall cherish a compassionate heart and carry out merciful management. It should appoint people on their merits, lighten punishment and stress education. Mencius stressed: "only virtue is not enough to handle state affairs, and only laws cannot make it work” (7.1). We shall rely on righteousness in making laws and combine both of them. Righteousness is the foundation. Second, people-oriented thought of Mencius advocates serving the community and putting the interests of people first. “People’s interests are more important than king’s. People’s interests are the most important, then are countries and third are king’s” (14.14).

Pay attention to the well-being of people, improve people's living standards, attach importance to farming and reasonable tax system, and create a prosperous commercial market environment. Mencius repeatedly proposed to alleviate tax appropriately. "There is a basic situation: people with certain property and income have certain moral concepts and codes of conduct. Without certain property and income, people will not lose their moral concepts and the codes of conduct"(5.3). With good tax law, there will be good human relations. Then construct schools and carry out education and teach people the basic ethics of loyalty and filial piety. Mencius believed that if implement kingly way like this, people will gladly follow the government like water and support the power of state. Then the country will be matchless.

## V. CONCLUSION

Mencius's theory of good nature contains abundant philosophical principles, and its world outlook and methodology still shine with goodness and wisdom. Seen from the methodological significance of Mencius' theory, theory of good nature has clarified the distinction between human and animal and constructed the way for human rational consciousness. It takes kind and rational human nature as foundation for order of an ideal society. Goodness is not only essence of human, but also an infinite practice guide. It leads the development direction of individual man and collective human society. It is also the eternal development trend of human society.

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