

## **A Study on Responsibility Ethics in the Context of Chinese Traditional Culture**

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### **Abstract**

The concept of "responsibility ethics" is put forward under the background of the increasingly prominent contradiction between freedom and responsibility in modern times. It emphasizes the value, initiative and responsibility of behavior selection, aiming at arousing the value and initiative consciousness of social members and promoting the fundamental solution of social problems. In view of the lack of "responsibility ethics" in modern society and the weakening of people's value rationality, this paper analyzes the responsibility ethics resources of Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism in the context of Chinese traditional culture, and explores the responsibility ethics of Confucianism with family as the main body, Taoism with people's livelihood as the main body, and Legalists with the state as the main body. In order to provide practical value for the moral cultivation of contemporary society. Looking for the resources of responsibility ethics in ancient China can realize the combination and complementary optimization of traditional responsibility ethics and contemporary society, promote the citizens to enhance their sense of responsibility, pay attention to their own responsibility and moral status, improve the moral atmosphere, and create a good moral environment for the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

### **Keywords**

Chinese traditional culture; Responsibility; Responsibility Ethics.

### **1. On the Rationality of the Formulation of "Responsibility Ethics" in Chinese Traditional Culture**

The concept of "responsibility ethics" was first put forward by Marx Weber based on the different nature of belief ethics and responsibility ethics, and mainly aimed at the ethical dilemma of modern western countries. Therefore, whether the "responsibility ethics" can exist in the context of Chinese traditional culture has become a question worth considering.

How to be a politician was published by Mr. Lin Yusheng in 1982? —It is pointed out in the paper that the spirit embodied in Chinese traditional culture (especially Confucian Culture) is mainly intentional ethics rather than responsibility ethics. The reason is that the Chinese people in the traditional sense do not attach importance to the facts in practice, but only take the purity of moral intention as the inevitable principle; those who adhere to the principle of responsibility ethics need to pay attention to the facts, take actions after fully considering the possibility of the consequences of their actions, and be responsible for the results after they come out. From this point of view, responsibility ethics seems to have no relationship with Chinese traditional ethics. However, if we regard responsibility as a kind of responsibility spirit internalized in ourselves, the situation may be different. The author believes that responsibility ethics includes two directions: Ideological and behavioral. Although modern responsibility ethics can regulate the behavior of the subject of responsibility under the constraint of law, and

then urge the subject to act in accordance with the rules of responsibility, it weakens the inner sense of responsibility and makes some responsible behaviors lack of correct moral motivation. It seems to put all ethical motives in a very low position to judge whether the subject's behavior is in line with the ethical concept of responsibility based on the effect of behavior. We should affirm the rationality of taking the effect of behavior as an important basis for the judgment of responsibility ethics. However, if we only pay attention to the responsibility performance of the behavior subject and do not care about the ideological conversion behind the responsible behavior, the responsibility ethics will become a kind of rule ethics. If responsibility ethics is only a kind of compulsory and binding ethical creed of doing things according to rules, then what is the substantive significance of its proposal? Here we need to re mention the background of responsibility ethics, in order to clarify people's prejudice against responsibility ethics. In the process of pursuing utility, people in modern society lose themselves and their responsibility requirements. Therefore, in order to make people's lack of sense of responsibility return to thinking, responsibility ethics is put forward. It can be seen that responsibility ethics attaches importance to responsibility in thought and abides by responsibility in behavior, both of them are indispensable elements of responsibility ethics.

Throughout the history of ancient Chinese ethical thought, we can see the ethical quality of paying attention to internal pursuit. In ancient China, responsibility is not an external mandatory rule, but people's self-demand, which means that responsibility must come from the heart to have moral power. This is also the reason why many scholars Misunderstand Ancient Chinese ethics. In fact, Chinese ethics is a kind of knowledge which pays attention to practice. Finding moral basis in thought is to promote the development of practice better. We can say that ancient Chinese ethics is a kind of intentional ethics, because it is indeed seeking the moral basis of the heart, but this does not conflict with the ethics of responsibility, because it not only keeps the moral responsibility in the ideological level, but also generates the moral responsibility in the heart and embodies its value in the behavior.

In response to Mr. Lin's argument, Mr. Jiang Qing published a paper entitled "the resources of responsibility ethics in political Confucianism", in which he emphasized that responsibility ethics is the general meaning of human politics, and opposed to limiting it to the modern West. He said: according to Weber's speech, Weber did not explain the ethics of responsibility from the perspective of modernity, but only believed that responsibility ethics is a necessary condition for politicians who take politics as their ambition. In my opinion, responsibility ethics is not the product of modernity. It exists in politics of any era, but it is only obvious and implicit. Without responsibility ethics, it is impossible for human beings to have a stable and good politics. In this way, Mr. Jiang Qing extended the scope of application of "responsibility ethics" from the west to China, from modern times to various times. It is true that the concept of responsibility ethics is put forward in modern times can not be proved that the scope of application of responsibility ethics is limited to this. In fact, we can find the basis for the existence of responsibility ethics in ancient Chinese Confucianism, Taoism and Legalists. Confucianism emphasizes that political behavior should conform to the responsibilities and obligations stipulated by the subject's name, and Taoism permeates with the sense of responsibility for human survival and good social governance. From the perspective of the state, Legalists put forward a series of responsibility rules that behaviorism should follow.

## **2. The Resources of Responsibility Ethics in Confucianism**

Confucianism can be divided into Life Confucianism and political Confucianism. Life Confucianism pays more attention to the philosophical thinking of the interpretation of mind and nature, less of which contains the factor of responsibility ethics; while the political Confucianism emphasizes the basic principle of the unity of the inner cultivation and the

external behavior of the actor, so as to achieve the sage king's way of both internal and external cultivation for politicians, which has profound and rich resources of responsibility ethics.

In the spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the vassal states despite their responsibilities to the great powers, the behavior of seeking small benefits and small interests seriously damaged the interests of the country. Confucius put forward the basic philosophy of "benevolence", warning people not to be too involved in the struggle for interests, to remove the self-interest and to replace it with the heart of love. According to this, the word "benevolence" expresses the different meanings of loving relatives, friends, society, country and the world. With the expansion of the scope of beloved groups, the responsibility of the behavior subject is also increasing correspondingly. Mencius's thought of "being close to one's relatives and benevolent to the people and loving things to the people" shows the order of responsibility and obligation in Confucianism from near to far. That is, our responsibility has its source, first to our family, then to others, and finally to society and state.

The Confucian thought pays attention to the way of "internal saints and external kings", which shows that the Confucian responsibility ethics emphasizes practice and emphasizes the unity of knowledge and practice. "Inner sage" is the inevitable requirement of personal self-cultivation, and the way for a gentleman to become benevolent. Mencius's "noble spirit" is a specific interpretation of the content of personal cultivation. Self cultivation is for the individual spiritual temperament and the basic moral quality of life, which lays a solid foundation for the behavior subject to establish the sense of responsibility. "Foreign king" is usually a requirement for politicians, that is, rulers should not only stay at the level of understanding responsibility, but also put the responsibility in the process of practical application, so that the people can feel the responsibility of the rulers, which is conducive to consolidating the feudal rule. Different from the Western responsibility ethics, the ancient Chinese responsibility ethics, represented by Confucianism, requires to find the basis of responsibility within the actors, which is also the advantage of Confucian responsibility ethics.

The Confucian ethics of responsibility has the characteristics of one dimension, That is to say, more emphasis should be placed on the moral obligations of the lower level to the superior and the younger generation to the elder. In the moral principles of filial piety and brotherhood, father and son, brother and brother seem to have the same responsibility and obligation, but in fact they are quite different. In the "three cardinal principles", the son has absolute obligation to the father. If the son is not filial to the father, it is disrespectful; but the father's responsibility to the son is not so strict, even if the father is not kind, he does not violate the moral obligation. Confucian responsibility ethics emphasizes the role difference of individual responsibility, and advocates to determine the specific responsibility of actors according to different positions and identity. The main representative viewpoint is Confucius' thought of name rectification. Confucius believed that the key to solve the problem of lack of responsibility in political ethics is to match the name with the reality, that is, to advocate in their position, to seek their own political affairs, and to take their responsibilities. This is conducive to clarifying the responsibility line between individuals, so that the actors will not offside to take the responsibility they should not bear, nor shirk their own responsibility.

### 3. Ethical Resources of Responsibility in Taoism

The difference between Taoism and Confucianism lies in that it does not distinguish the responsibilities of different classes through the norms of the people's specific life, but puts forward more requirements for the ruling class's way of governing the country. Because Taoist thinkers saw the limitations of social development under the rule of Confucianism at that time, they put forward social governance principles which were quite different from Confucianism. Taoist thinkers advocated that everything should be done according to the natural of all things.

Therefore, some people criticized Taoism for its lack of social responsibility and negative hermit mentality, but in fact, Taoism was a way to solve the problems faced by the society at that time. The Taoist school jumped out of that era and concerned about the reasonable way of governing the country with a longer-term perspective, which reflects a kind of concern for the development of the real society and a strong sense of responsibility for the people's living conditions.

Laozi's thought can be divided into two parts: the chapter of governing the country and the chapter of dealing with affairs. The chapter of governing the country is mainly put forward for the rulers at that time, which contains rich resources of responsibility ethics, while the chapter of dealing with affairs puts forward some thoughts on how the people can live a happy and peaceful life, which contains less responsibility ethics resources. Laozi not only put forward the basic concept of refuting Confucian orthodoxy, but also responded to the topic of the times. He said: "Heaven and earth are not benevolent, and treat all things in the world equally; in the world of man, it is the right way." Thus, he criticized the theoretical basis of Confucianism to maintain its internal hierarchical structure: "benevolence". In Lao Tzu's opinion, heaven and earth treat all things equally, because there is no distinction between being close to or close to each other, so that all things can grow naturally and stay where they should be. Rulers should follow the operating rules of heaven and earth, not impose interference on people's normal life because of their own selfish desires, and should not artificially formulate some rules and regulations to maintain the rule. The "benevolence" advocated by Confucianism is not benevolence in modern society, but an ethical rule based on hierarchical political system. It can not be popularized among the public, and its essence is to maintain feudal rule. Lao Tzu took benevolence as a harmful quality and thought that benevolence was only the continuation of the hierarchy in terms of ethics and morality. The rulers' ruling under the guidance of the concept of benevolence would aggravate social inequality and cause social disorder.

On the basis of breaking away from the Confucian idea of "benevolence", Lao Tzu established the "natural inaction" way of governing the country. Here we need to get rid of the common people's misunderstanding of Laozi's concept of "natural inaction". Laozi's "Inaction" is not inaction in the general sense. He does not mean that the rulers and officials at all levels do not deal with state affairs, nor encourage the rulers to be laissez faire and irresponsible in governing the country, but hopes that "those who are above will not act in vain". "Nature" is to develop according to the original law of things without imposing external binding force. Lao Tzu saw that the political rule at that time contained too much interference in the free development of the people, and profoundly reflected on the Confucian governance system. He found that in order to achieve stable and long-term development of the country, it was necessary to follow the social laws, let the people grow naturally, and not put pressure on the people for the interests of the ruling class, that is, to assist the normal operation of the society without destroying the law of the free development of the people. External coercive force may make the society get twice the result with half the effort in a short period of time, but it is harmful in the long run.

The theory of governing the country reflects Lao Tzu's deep reflection on the social development mode, which contains many ethical thoughts on responsibility. The rulers' tyranny or excessive interference in people's life is actually to force the people to obey the ethical norms formulated by the state with the help of external forces. What's more, it sets up a kind of rule consciousness in the hearts of the people, thus imprisoning the development of the sense of responsibility that the people construct in their hearts as converts. Following the trend, the governance mode based on the free development of the people leaves more space for the people to establish the psychological basis of the responsibility ethics model, which is favorable to the development of the responsibility ethics in the society.

#### 4. The Resources of Responsibility Ethics in Legalists' Thoughts

The aim of Legalist responsibility ethics is to pursue national public interests, which is quite different from the family based responsibility ethics advocated by Confucianism. In order to make the country rich and strong, Legalists have formulated a series of moral norms, which is closely related to the philosophy view of Legalists. Legalists changed the Confucian tradition of attaching importance to benevolence and criticizes benevolence, righteousness and morality from two aspects. First of all, Legalists believe that it is the inherent nature of human beings from ancient times to modern times to be fond of benefits and evil and avoid disadvantages. This can be illustrated by the views of several representatives of Legalists. Shang Yang pointed out in "the book of Shang Jun · Suan Chi" that "People's common sense: when measuring things with a ruler, they will take advantage of their strengths and discard their weaknesses; when weighing things with scales, they will take the heavy and discard the light. When measuring personal gains and losses, you will choose what is good for you." It can be seen that Shang Yang's basic view is that all human behavior is subject to the nature of good interests. Han Feizi inherits Shang Yang's view that human nature is good for profit. In Han Feizi Liufan, he said: "Parents treat their children, If they give birth to men, they will celebrate each other, and if they give birth to women, they will kill them. However, if a man is congratulated, if a woman kills him, he will think about it and make a profit." In this way, Han Feizi raised the role of good nature to human behavior to an absolute height. Even the benevolence of parents to their children no longer exists. Only because of the number of interests to distinguish the status of children. Secondly, Legalists believe that even if everyone has benevolence, righteousness and morality, it is not conducive to the country's prosperity. There is a story in Han Feizi Wudu: "the people of Lu went out to fight with the monarch, three wars and three escapes. Zhongni asked the reason and the man replied, "I have an old father. If I die, I can't raise him." Zhongni thought filial piety, and raised him. In view of this, the filial son of the father is also the king's betrayal of his ministers." It can be seen that in the concept of Legalists, national interests are supreme, and people's moral need to focus on national public affairs can be said to be beneficial.

In view of the fact that benevolence, righteousness and morality have less reference significance for the Legalists' state-based responsibility ethics, the thinkers represented by Han Feizi have found a new way to construct their own responsibility ethics by means of "punishment and reward". Because human nature is to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages, the implementation of reward and punishment system according to the likes and dislikes of the people provides the possibility for the centralization of state power. "Han Feizi Erbing" said: "Monarchs lead their people in two ways: punishment and virtue. "Here, Han Feizi put forward "punishment and reward" as the governance idea of Legalists. On the definition of criminal morality, Han Feizi explained: "killing is punishment, and celebrating and rewarding is virtue." In other words, Legalists advocate that the rulers use killing and reward to restrain the behavior of the people, so that they do not violate the national public welfare. In terms of the psychological basis of the implementation of punishment and reward, Han Feizi made the following explanation: "he who is a minister is afraid of punishment but enjoys rewards." It is this point that provides theoretical support for the Legalists' theory of punishment and reward.

#### 5. Conclusion

In a word, responsibility ethics can not be simply attributed to the western ethical system, and its theoretical resources can also be found in ancient Chinese ethics. We can see that the Conformists put the practice of family responsibility linked by blood relationship in the first place, which is based on the heart nature. Taoism tries to break through the hierarchy system and establish the responsibility ethics conforming to the growth law of the common people. The Legalism abandon the usefulness of benevolence and righteousness and establish the

responsibility ethics with the national interests as the core. The resources of responsibility ethics contained in these schools have important reference value for the research of responsibility ethics in the present era. In the face of the dilemma of the practical application of responsibility ethics, we can find the experience through learn from ancient China and seriously summarize the shortcomings, so as to provide reference for solving the problems of the lack of responsibility ethics in reality.

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