

An Analysis of the Value of Lao-tzu's "Non-action" Thought in Moral Education in Universities

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Abstract

Lao-tzu's thought of "non-action" is not only the essence of his political philosophy system, but also provides a unique and rich philosophy for moral education. The views of "not to do anything in vain," "vacuity" and "not to contend" in his thought contain profound dialectical wisdom and humanistic spirit, which have practical enlightenment significance for the educational purpose, educational method, and the practice of educators and students. At present, there are some problems in practice, such as simple inculcation of moral knowledge, single orientation of moral education content, passive catering of moral education activities and utilitarian orientation of evaluation system. In view of the problem, this paper puts forward some feasible suggestions such as constructing recessive education model, respecting personality to enhance moral experience, strengthening teacher ethics construction and exploring the law of moral education. Integrating Lao-tzu's concept of "non-interference" into college education for cultivating moral character is not only the due course of action for inheriting and promoting China's excellent traditional culture, but also has significant implications for innovative development of college education for cultivating moral character.

Keywords

Lao-tzu "non-action"; colleges and universities; moral education.

1. Introduction

The concept of "non-action" is a significant category in Laozi's philosophy, emphasizing the practice of not overreaching, following nature, and respecting individuality. In the context of the new era, integrating it into the practice of moral education and talent cultivation in colleges and universities can not only inherit traditional culture but also innovate and expand educational concepts, answering the fundamental question of "what kind of people to cultivate and how to cultivate them," and providing beneficial support for the construction of an educational power.

2. An Inquiry into the Connotation of Lao-tzu's "Non-action" Thought

2.1. The Theoretical Foundation of "Non-action"

The theoretical foundation of Lao-tzu's "non-action" thought is established upon a profound exposition of the "Dao." The "Dao" is the origin of all things. For Lao-tzu, the "Dao" is the core concept, "naturalness" (ziran) is its essential attribute, and "non-action" is the path and state of acting in accordance with the "Dao" and aligning with naturalness. Lao-tzu's thought on "non-action" emphasizes that all things must develop fully and freely according to their objective laws, so as to achieve a state of natural harmony and the realm of "governing by non-action." This non-coercive, natural process manifests the inherent power of the "Dao." Therefore, within

his thought of “natural non-action,” Lao-tzu strives to construct a social order based on the principle of the “Dao following naturalness”, one that is grounded in the natural harmony of all things, society, and the self. From the human perspective, when individuals embody the “Dao” in their words and actions, they accumulate “virtue” (de) through the process of comprehending the “Dao.” What Lao-tzu advocates is precisely the establishment of a society endowed with “moral character.”

2.2. The Meaning and Essential Substance of “Non-action”

“Non-action” is one of the fundamental categories of Lao-tzu's philosophical system. It does not signify passive inaction, but rather implies non-interference and refraining from reckless action. [1] “Non-action” means following the inherent nature and natural developmental laws of things, allowing them to develop freely, while avoiding the constraints of external coercion. It entails respecting the spontaneity and autonomy of others to fulfill the responsibility of one's authentic self. “Non-action” is a clustered concept [2]; its core connotations can be summarized in several aspects: “not acting recklessly,” “embracing vacuity and stillness,” and “not contending.”

“Non-action” implies “not acting recklessly.” “Man follows the law of Earth; Earth follows the law of Heaven; Heaven follows the law of Dao; the law of Dao is natural.” (Chapter 25, Daodejing). “Non-action” must proceed in accordance with nature, following the objective laws of existence and development for all things, and must not forcibly intervene. In political construction, “non-action” means that rulers should respect the will and choices of the people, granting them sufficient autonomy and space for development.

“Non-action” implies “embracing vacuity and stillness.” “Attain mental void to the extreme, keep stillness to the utmost. All things flourish, from which I observe their returns.” (Chapter 16). The essence of the Way and the highest state of Virtue are to achieve the ultimate of “vacuity” and to abide in “stillness.” Lao-tzu believed that true strength comes from inner softness and tranquility, which can be attained through self-cultivation and continuous practice. However, desires and reckless actions within the mind often cause one to lose this vacuity and stillness. Therefore, Lao-tzu's concept of “vacuity and stillness” aims to encourage people to be indifferent to fame and fortune and to purify their minds.

“Non-action” implies “not contending”. “Not contending” means “acting but not contending,” emphasizing humility, self-strengthening, and reducing selfish desires. First, Lao-tzu's “not contending” teaches people to be proactive and enterprising, but not to act for the sake of fame or gain, embodying an attitude of humility without self-conceit. “The soft and weak overcomes the hard and strong.” Second, “not contending” does not signify weakness or impotence; rather, it encourages people to abandon an excessive preoccupation with quick success and immediate gain, focusing instead on self-improvement and inner peace. Finally, “not contending” also requires people to transcend worldly distractions and the temptations of desire, paying attention to the reasonableness and moderation of satisfying individual needs. When people reduce their selfish desires to attain the state of “non-action,” we can maintain inner balance while achieving harmony between the individual and society.

3. The Characteristics and Value of “Non-action” in Moral Education

Lao-tzu advocates that “sages manage affairs without contrived actions, teach without speech.” This promotes guidance through natural non-action rather than direct verbal inculcation, enabling individuals to comprehend the “Dao” independently and cultivate good moral character. “Teaching without words” respects the subjective consciousness and free development of the educated, requiring educators to emphasize “exemplary teaching” (shen jiao). This steers moral education toward a more implicit and indirect direction, endowing it with greater effectiveness and humanistic care [3].

3.1. Implicitness: “Non-action” in the Aims of Moral Education

Under the guidance of Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought, the establishment of moral education aims should adopt an implicit and permeating approach. That is, students’ values and behavioral norms are subtly influenced through their interactions and participation in school and social contexts, rather than through direct inculcation or the deliberate emphasis of class rules, school regulations, or theoretical values. As Sukhomlinsky stated, “The more hidden the educator’s educational intention, the more easily it is accepted by the educational subject.”

It must be made clear that “non-action” does not mean passive inaction, and setting implicit moral education goals does not mean neglecting moral education. Rather, it avoids making the educated feel the direct pressure of moral instruction. Educators should create a positive educational atmosphere, enabling students to internalize moral norms, thereby achieving the “action” goal. At the same time, special attention should be paid to teacher-student relationships and individual student differences, allowing students to internalize moral norms along their own developmental trajectories.

3.2. Indirectness: “Non-action” in Moral Education Methods

The methods commonly employed by educators in moral education include lectures, discussions, criticism, praise, and conversation [4]. Such explicit moral education methods have clear objectives and a certain degree of coerciveness. However, contemporary college students generally possess a strong sense of self-awareness and a pronounced pursuit of individuality. Traditional didactic teaching or simple reward and punishment systems can easily lead to their passive acceptance or even psychological reactance.

Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought requires educators to adopt more indirect and circuitous approaches to moral education. Through heuristic and inquiry-based methods, such as fostering emotional experiences, the affinity of moral education can be continuously enhanced, achieving the effect of “moving them with emotion and enlightening them with reason.” This approach enables students to achieve self-discipline and self-improvement in a free and autonomous atmosphere, while also helping to cultivate their innovative and practical abilities.

3.3. Exemplification: “Non-action” of the Educator

Educators assume multiple roles in the educational process, including those of leader and designer. They are responsible not only for transmitting knowledge but also for cultivating students’ character and values. Traditional indoctrination-based education overemphasizes the leading role of the teacher while neglecting students’ subjectivity. Lao-tzu’s concept of “teaching by non-action” advocates that educators transform into guides and facilitators, paying greater attention to students’ subjective status and creativity.

As morality is an internalized norm, it can only be formed through the subject’s inner reflection. The words and actions of educators have a stronger demonstrative effect. Moral education workers must lead by example, integrating moral education into all kinds of practical activities in which students participate, thereby building a democratic educational environment, cultivating students’ democratic awareness and civic literacy, and realizing the practical significance of moral education.

Furthermore, concepts within Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought, such as “compassion”, “frugality”, and “daring not to be ahead of the world”, offer important insights for contemporary teachers in strengthening their love for students and addressing utilitarian competition in moral education [5]. “Compassion” is embodied in educators establishing deep teacher-student emotional bonds and exercising wisdom in guidance; “frugality” encourages educators to transcend fame and material gain, accommodating students’ inherent nature; “daring not to be ahead of the world” guides teachers to abandon a utilitarian mindset and adopt an inclusive posture, giving students ample freedom and space for development.

3.4. Experience: “Non-action” of the Educated

“Teaching by non-action” is essentially a form of self-education in which the educated themselves act as the main subjects. Contemporary college students have enhanced self-awareness and cognitive abilities; they are not satisfied with passively accepting ready-made theoretical viewpoints but instead seek to understand political ideologies and moral norms through their own analysis and experience. The effectiveness of moral education hinges on the active participation and acceptance of the educated. Through appropriate guidance, educators can cultivate their motivation for personal experience and self-reflection, thereby enhancing their capacity for self-education.

Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought emphasizes respect for the natural laws of development and the intrinsic motivation of individuals. For the educated, this means tapping into their own potential and interests, not blindly pursuing external validation, but growing at their own pace. At the same time, it reminds educators to reduce intervention and expectations, allowing students more freedom to explore and practice.

4. Problems in Moral Education in Colleges and Universities from the Perspective of “Non-action”

Lao-tzu’s “non-action” does not mean doing nothing at all; rather, it means refraining from excessive intervention, not violating objective laws, and fully unleashing people’s creativity to achieve self-realization. However, in the practice of moral education in colleges and universities, problems often arise such as the inability to connect theory with practice, an overemphasis on moral preaching while neglecting moral practice, and other “reckless actions.” These issues cause education not only to lose its relevance to daily life and practical application but also to restrict students’ moral development and innovation. Therefore, guided by Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought, it is necessary to adjust the methods and concepts of moral education in universities to make them more consistent with the natural laws of students’ moral development, thereby achieving the true goal of fostering virtue through education.

4.1. The Unidirectional Orientation of Moral Education Content

Current moral education in colleges and universities suffers from problems of unidimensional and theoretical content, neglecting the comprehensive cultivation of students’ psychological resilience and practical abilities [6]. The content is often limited to the theoretical transmission of moral codes, ideals, and beliefs. Students tend to accept this mechanically, making it difficult to generate interest or lasting impact. Some universities also show deficiencies in mental health education, neglecting the shaping of inner emotions and values, which can easily lead to students’ psychological stress and identity crises.

In terms of applicability, moral education content often lacks connection with real life and students’ individual experiences, making it difficult to translate into behavioral guidelines for practical situations. Furthermore, there is often a significant “distance” between educators and students in higher education, making it hard for moral education content to account for individual differences. The core of moral education lies in teaching students how to conduct themselves as moral beings. Unidirectional content orientation makes it difficult to achieve equal interaction and cultivate critical thinking. Therefore, moral education in higher education urgently needs to be reformed toward greater diversity, openness, and practicality.

4.2. The Passive Catering of Moral Education Activities

Currently, moral education activities in colleges and universities are often based on educators’ capabilities and directives from higher authorities, while neglecting students’ interests and internalized attitudes. The formats are mainly theoretical indoctrination and moral lectures.

Student participation is often passive catering, lacking emotional resonance and inner experience. In some universities, the forms of moral education are monotonous, still relying on traditional methods such as lectures and speeches, which fail to stimulate student interest and may even trigger resistance.

Some moral education activities in higher education exhibit a tendency to “emphasize documentation while downplaying process.” Activities are conducted merely to meet inspection requirements or for publicity purposes, lacking genuine educational substance. Additionally, inefficient and one-sided evaluation and feedback systems make it difficult for universities to grasp students’ real needs in a timely manner, which is detrimental to the optimization and sustainable development of moral education content, causing moral education activities to drift further away from students’ actual lives.

4.3. The Utilitarian Orientation of the Evaluation System

The evaluation system for moral education in colleges and universities exhibits a clear utilitarian tendency, overemphasizing quantitative indicators such as grades and comprehensive assessment scores, which makes it difficult to genuinely reflect students’ moral character and sense of social responsibility. This orientation fosters a test-taking mentality and utilitarianism among students. For example, students may participate in volunteer activities only to earn extra points, leading to perfunctory behavior and frequent late arrivals or early departures. Teacher evaluations also become one-sided as a result, reducing the targeting and effectiveness of moral education efforts.

At the level of teacher evaluation, some universities overly pursue short-term outcomes such as employment rates and honorary titles, neglecting students’ holistic development and personality cultivation. This “outcomes-only” approach leads to rigid and standardized moral education work, intensifies teacher anxiety and an excessive focus on quick success, which in turn may result in perfunctory performance or burnout, thereby weakening the profound impact of moral education.

5. Practical Implications of “Non-action” Thought for Moral Education in Colleges and Universities

The current lack of effectiveness in moral education in colleges and universities stems primarily from the excessive indoctrination of moral knowledge, passive educational practices, and the utilitarian orientation of the evaluation system. Lao-tzu’s “non-action” thought encompasses key tenets such as “valuing softness and non-action,” “non-action leading to natural transformation,” “the supreme good is like water,” and “the law of Dao is natural.” These provide profound insights for addressing the above issues.

5.1. “Valuing Softness and Non-action”: Constructing a Recessive Education Model

Recessive education refers to the process in which educators, following predetermined educational content and objectives, establish certain activity environments and cultural atmospheres around the educated, guiding them to feel and experience, thereby influencing them subtly and imperceptibly. The recessive education model is characterized by the concealment of objectives and the indirectness of methods. Lao-tzu advocated “valuing softness and non-action,” believing that “non-action” is also a manifestation of “softness”—that is, not imposing one’s will forcefully, but following natural laws and treating others with gentleness and tolerance. Educators should actively create equal and harmonious teacher-student interactive relationships, building affinity and trust, so that students consciously practice moral norms.

In terms of educational methods, approaches such as “situational teaching” and “practical teaching” embody the wisdom of “valuing softness and non-action.” Educators should guide students step by step, helping them identify with morality cognitively and emotionally. In addition, universities should streamline campus cultural activities and provide a favorable school ethos, teaching atmosphere, and style of study to support students’ self-education.

5.2. “Non-action Leading to Natural Transformation”: Respecting Individuality and Enhancing Moral Experience

In the realm of state governance, “non-action leading to natural transformation” emphasizes that rulers should follow social laws, allowing the people to be naturally transformed through education. In personal philosophy, it advocates that people should not excessively pursue material gains but achieve self-improvement. This concept profoundly articulates the importance of individual autonomous development and the internalization of morality, offering insights for moral education in colleges and universities to respect individuality and enhance moral experience.

First, it emphasizes respecting students’ individuality and uniqueness. Educators should, on the basis of macro-level guidance, encourage students to express their individuality and tap their potential. Second, it advocates achieving moral consciousness through self-experience. Educators should explain principles thoroughly and vividly, enabling the internalization of correct values. Third, it suggests that educators focus on cultivating students’ autonomy and creativity, providing opportunities for self-understanding, self-directed learning, and practice, so that students can comprehend morality and enhance their abilities through action. Finally, it advocates facing moral cultivation with a calm and natural attitude, not overemphasizing utilitarian outcomes. Both educators and the educated should set aside external material desires and turn inward for self-reflection.

5.3. “The supreme good is like water”: Strengthening the Construction of Teacher Ethics

“The supreme good is like water” means that the highest level of goodness resembles water. Water is soft yet overcomes the hard, selflessly nourishing all things. Similarly, a person’s noble moral character can often overcome worldly forces. These qualities of water profoundly illustrate the gentle, tolerant, and uncontentious qualities that teachers should uphold, as well as their love for and dedication to the educational cause.

Therefore, in terms of teacher-student relationships, teachers should treat all students equally, be good at listening to, understanding, and caring for them, and guide their growth with a gentle attitude. Teachers should continuously improve their teaching abilities, skillfully use wisdom to resolve conflicts and problems in education, and constantly adapt to changes in social development and student needs.

In the construction of teacher ethics, teachers should learn from water’s spirit of “benefiting all things without contending,” putting students first and maintaining a humble attitude. At the same time, teachers should develop a long-term educational perspective, strengthen their professional ethical awareness, and self-correct any work styles characterized by an excessive focus on quick success and immediate gain. Universities should strengthen their care and support for teachers, regularly provide psychological counseling for teachers, and seriously address any violations of teacher ethics regulations.

5.4. “The law of Dao is natural”: Exploring the Laws of Moral Education for Fostering Virtue Through Education

The thought of “the law of Dao is natural” helps educators better explore and grasp the laws of education in terms of conforming to nature, being close to life, and focusing on individual

development, thereby continuously advancing the cause of fostering virtue through education to higher levels.

It advocates conformity with nature; such laws are not subject to human subjective will. Moral education in colleges and universities should also conform to the natural laws of student development. If teachers forcibly intervene, it can easily trigger student resistance. Guided by the core values of socialism, educators should design personalized teaching activities progressively according to students' age, interests, abilities, and the characteristics of different developmental stages. This allows students to grow in a natural, comfortable environment, guides them to recognize moral norms and transform them into voluntary actions, and truly realizes the fundamental goal of fostering virtue through education in higher education.

6. Conclusion

Fostering virtue through education is the fundamental task and value orientation of education, as well as an important guarantee for realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Lao-tzu's "non-action" thought is rich in dialectical thinking and humanistic care. It aligns with the emphasis on moral education as the priority in fostering virtue through education and also makes moral education workers realize that the true value of educational work lies in laying a solid foundation for students' futures. We should continue to promote the creative transformation and development of China's excellent traditional culture, explore its significant implications for improving the effectiveness of moral education in higher education, and continuously open up new prospects for the mission of fostering virtue through education in universities in the new era.

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