

The Study on the Concept of Sincerity in Confucianism

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Abstract: As an ethical category, sincerity in Confucianism occupies a pivotal position. Zi Si elevated the ordinary concept of sincerity to a philosophical level into a philosophical concept, and believed that only the most sincere person can assist in the natural cycles of transformation and nurturance that occur in the universe. Mencius regarded sincerity as the nature endowed by heaven, and if human beings understand sincerity, they can grasp the essence of heaven. The Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties regards sincerity as an embodiment of the principle of heaven, which is regarded as the ultimate reality of the world. As a manifestation of natural principles, human society must embody the inherent sincerity that is inherent in these principles. Sincerity, in contrast to faith, represents a natural state that transcends the physical and reaches the metaphysical realm. Faith, on the other hand, involves a conscious effort to ascend from the physical world to the metaphysical one. While the two concepts differ in level, they are unified in essence.

1. Introduction

If "benevolence" is the core of Confucianism, then "sincerity" is the foundation of Confucianism. Because only through sincerity can other virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, and wisdom be truly cultivated. And only by being true to one's own heart, can one truly act on one's words and deeds and be sincere to others. However, the meaning of sincerity is not the same as it is today from the beginning. Its connotation has also evolved continuously with the development of Confucian philosophy.

2. The origin of the concept of sincerity

The concept of sincerity has existed long before it became a philosophical category. Scholars generally agree that the concept of sincerity originated from primitive religious rituals. In the religious system of the time, the heavenly gods were absolute authorities, powerful yet elusive, capable of both blessing and bringing disaster. Faced with such unpredictable heavenly mandates, people could only passively accept or offer sacrifices and prayers to the heavenly emperor. The concept of sincerity originated from people's devout attitude towards the heavenly gods at that time. *The Book of Rites*, "Express your sincerity personally, and only with sincerity can you be considered wholehearted; only with a whole heart can you be considered respectful. Only after being respectful and wholehearted can one serve the gods. This is the principle of sacrifice."^[1] Emphasis is placed on the sincere heart of the sacrificer during the sacrificial ceremony, showing reverence for the gods, and sincere respect

for the heavenly gods. However, following the establishment of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the worshipers adopted the concept of matching heaven with virtue rather than ancestry. The significance of virtue was emphasized, and the concept of "sincerity" transformed from reverence for gods to respect for morality. This was also an important turning point in the evolution of the concept of sincerity into a moral category.

3. The transformation of the concept of "sincerity" in Confucianism

The fundamental turning point of the concept of sincerity occurred after Confucius founded the Confucian school. Confucius talked more about faith and less about sincerity. The word sincerity appeared only twice in *the Analects of Confucius*, and both times it was used as an auxiliary word, meaning true or real.

Zi Si creatively proposed the philosophical concept of sincerity and elaborated on it systematically. According to Zi Si, sincerity is the essence of the laws of nature and the true nature of natural things. Just as water naturally flows downwards and fire naturally rises upwards, these are the natural instincts bestowed upon things by heaven. Therefore, anything artificial or contrived is already not sincerity itself, including artificially contrived honesty. In the language of *the Doctrine of the Mean*, "Sincerity is the principle bestowed upon mankind by heaven; practicing this sincerity is the way of man. Those who are born with sincerity do not need to force it; their behavior is naturally reasonable, and they do not need to struggle to find the right words or actions. Their conduct is balanced and unbiased, conforming to the way of the Mean."^[2] This means that only those who are truly sincere can fully embrace the nature bestowed upon them by fate, achieve self-realization, help others to do so, and participate in the nurturing of all things alongside heaven and earth.

After Zi Si, Confucian scholars such as Mencius further developed and deepened the concept of sincerity. Mencius basically inherited Zi Si's understanding of sincerity, stating, "Sincerity is the nature bestowed upon mankind by heaven; the pursuit of sincerity is the fundamental principle of being a human."^[3] Mencius viewed sincerity as a state of oneness with all things. It primarily referred to the moral principles of human relations and the natural order, including the inherent virtues of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. He believed that these moral principles were inherent in both humans and all things because they originated from heaven and were inherited from it.

Mencius did indeed discuss the effort of "pursuing sincerity," but in this context, sincerity was still not the ontological essence of moral conscience. Whether it was Mencius's teachings on "fully exercising the heart," "knowing one's nature," and "knowing the will of heaven" in the "Mencius," or the concept of "what heaven ordains is called nature" in the "Doctrine of the Mean," although they differed in their approach, they both understood and grasped heaven through a path from man to heaven.

This led to a question: Is it reasonable to use sincerity, as a moral consciousness or emotional psychology, to define the way of heaven? This issue arose because the concept of sincerity as a moral attribute of humans was being applied to an understanding of the natural order and the divine will, which are often considered transcendent and objective. There was a concern about whether such a subjective, emotional, or psychological concept could appropriately describe or define the objective realm of heaven and its laws.

This tension between the subjective and objective, between the human and the divine, was a recurring theme in Confucian philosophy. Scholars like Mencius were attempting to bridge this gap by emphasizing the inherent goodness and connection between humans and the universe. However, the question of whether such a bridge could be fully and logically established remained a topic of debate and exploration within Confucian thought.

It was not until the Northern Song Dynasty that Cheng Yi solved this problem. Cheng Yi said, "The essence of sincerity is heavenly principles. How can concentration fully express it?"^[4] Sincerity is the truth, and concentration is not enough to express it.

This is actually an interpretation of "heavenly principles" in terms of "sincerity", or the essence and characteristics of heavenly principles are sincerity, that is, the way of heaven and all things it produces follow the truth and are not deceptive. Therefore, Cheng Yi regarded sincerity as a category of noumenon, and he opposed Li Qing's so-called "not deceiving is sincerity". Yi Chuan said: "Without falsehood is sincerity, and secondly is not deceiving."^[5] Sincerity means not deceiving, and not deceiving is second. Because "Without falsehood" represents a state of non-objectification, while "not to deceive" denotes a state of objectification. The latter can be viewed as an internal recognition of the noumenon, but it is never the noumenon itself. This explanation further underscores Cheng Yi's emphasis on sincerity as the essence of heavenly principles and the ultimate goal of moral cultivation.

This expression essentially defines the noumenal sincerity of the way of heaven through utmost sincerity and absence of deceit. As the way of heaven is conceived as a noumenon of utmost sincerity and absence of deceit, when humans consciously follow this way of heaven in their actions, they are essentially extending the principles of heaven to human affairs. As the culmination of Neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, Zhu Xi said, "Sincerity is the natural state of heavenly principles, free from any falseness or pretense. To achieve sincerity is to strive towards this state of authenticity, even if one has not yet fully attained it. It is what one should aspire to in daily life."^[6] This process of extrapolating the way of heaven to illuminate human affairs establishes an inherent foundation for human endeavors.

Overall, the evolution of the Confucian concept of sincerity from the pre-Qin period to the Song Dynasty represents a gradually metaphysical process. From the most authentic nature of things to the shared nature of heaven and humanity, Confucian scholars of the pre-Qin period progressed from the specific to the abstract. The Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming Dynasties regarded this abstract concept as a characteristic of the noumenon. Then, through the unity of noumenon and phenomenon, "sincerity" became the most authentic nature of all things, completing a step from the abstract to the specific. However, this raises another issue. The subjective initiative of individuals is greatly weakened. It seems that humans only need to express the "sincerity" derived from the natural order, and fraud and lies will naturally not arise. The effort of human beings in moral cultivation thus loses its necessity. The resolution of this issue involves the different distinctions between sincerity and faith in Neo-Confucianism.

4. The difference between "sincerity" and "faith" in Confucianism

As a moral category, sincerity and faith are commonly used together in Chinese, which usually refers to the subject's sincerity and faithworthiness in social communication. However, in the eyes of Confucianism, sincerity and faith have inherent differences. To be specific, sincerity is mainly about the subject itself, and related to the internal moral quality of the subject. Faith is more about the social norms of external interrelations.

From the origin of the concept of faith, its initial meaning was the psychological constraint and self-conscious state that signifies the contractual relationship between individuals, representing a moral concept of truthfulness and non-deception. Lao Tzu said, "If you don't stand faith by your words, how faith can the people be?"^[7]

It was Confucius who truly established faith as an independent moral category and integrated it into the system of benevolence. Confucius said, "Let the elderly be at ease, let friends faith each other, and let the young be cared for."^[8] Actually regards faith as the basic moral principle in handling relationships between friends, which to some extent weakens the original contractual faith in social

relationships. However, Mencius directly included faith as the way of friends in the five ethical relationships. Mencius said, "The enlightened people do not necessarily keep their promises in every word they speak, and they do not necessarily have to achieve results in everything they do. As long as it is in line with morality and justice."^[3] From this point of view, faith does not have the same high status as sincerity in Mencius. This is actually restricting faith with "morality", greatly reducing the status of faith, that is, suppressing and replacing the contractual faith with the Confucian ritual norms. This transforms the original meaning of faith as abiding by contracts into loyalty and integrity of maintaining the authenticity of one's own emotions.

The Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties continued the transformation of Confucius and Mencius' understanding of the meaning of faith and further elaborated on its transcendental nature. The interpretation of the concept of faith by Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao was to integrate the relationship between faith, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. They emphasized benevolence, which encompassed the meanings of righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith. When benevolence is spoken alone, it refers to nature, and when benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith are considered together, they also refer to nature.^[4] The nature referred to by the Two Chengs is actually the heavenly principles inherent in humans, with benevolence as the essence of nature and faith as its substance. This effectively elevated the status of the concept of faith. As a reality in the prevailing heavenly principles, faith rose from the ethical norms of the pre-Qin Confucianists to the transcendental level of human nature and the universe itself. Of course, this also further deviated from the original meaning of faith as a contractual obligation.

The Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties elevated the concept of faith to the heights of the ontological universe and the essence of the mind and nature. They integrate faith with nature and heavenly principles, forming a concept that is firmly rooted in belief.^[9] To a certain extent, this achieved a connection between the concepts of faith and sincerity.

As mentioned earlier, sincerity refers to the heavenly principles and the truth and sincerity that underlie all beings created by them, while faith represents the genuine reality inherent in human nature as part of the heavenly principles. The two can be said to be one and the same, yet distinct in their expressions. Chen Chun, a disciple of Zhu Xi, wrote *The Meaning of the Characters of Beixi* in which he provided a very meticulous interpretation of the core concepts of Confucianism. Chen Chun said, "Compared to each other, sincerity is natural, while faith requires effort; sincerity is the principle, while faith is the heart; sincerity is the way of heaven, while faith is the way of man. Sincerity is expressed through destiny, while faith is expressed through nature. Sincerity is spoken in terms of the path, while faith is spoken in terms of virtue."^[10]

In summary, the roots of sincerity and faith lie in the heavenly principles. Sincerity primarily refers to the heavenly principles, while faith represents the manifestation of these principles in human beings, primarily in terms of human morality. Against the backdrop of the Song dynasty's thought of the unity of heaven and man, when sincerity and faith are spoken together, it means that the heavenly principles are truthful and sincere, and humans should also be truthful and sincere in following these principles. This is the basic understanding of sincerity and faith in Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties.

It should be noted that the Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism's key understanding of sincerity elevates the concept to a level that encompasses the vastness of the universe and the essence of the mind. Sincerity is the characteristic of the noumenon, while faith is the practice of the noumenon. The two are the relationship between the body and the use. They have both differences and connections. We cannot separate the noumenon and the branches as two separate things, nor can we confuse them.

Therefore, the question regarding human subjectivity has been answered. Sincerity is the most fundamental trait of human beings, which manifests the laws of nature. This is the fundamental basis

for humans to become saints and sages. It is not meant that humans can become saints and sages without any effort. Faith is the practical path for humans to become saints and sages. Through the effort of "faith," humans can achieve sainthood and sagacity. Fundamentally, sincerity and faith are unified. In reality, sincerity points to the laws of nature, while faith directs towards humanity.

5. Conclusion

The concept of sincerity in Confucianism highlights the ideological characteristics and value orientation of the Confucian school, while also adapting to the foundations of traditional Chinese social life. Therefore, it is worth considering whether the concept of sincerity in Confucianism, which is applicable to traditional Chinese society in the past, can be adapted to modern society. Because whether it is a requirement of moral norms or a constraint of laws and regulations, from the perspective of traditional Confucianism, it only focuses on use and ignores the fundamental existence. As Cheng Yi opposed, "not to deceive is sincerity", "not to deceive" is not sincerity itself, but only the result of the subject's compliance with sincerity. However, the laws and rules in modern society only strive for "not to deceive", and do not establish the foundation for sincerity. Confucianism regards sincerity as the principle that all things created by heaven and earth follow the truth. The subject's compliance with ethics, morality, politics, and laws is no longer an external coercion, but rather a subject's adherence to and manifestation of its own nature.

Of course, the so-called "heavenly principle" ontology of Cheng Zhu Neo-Confucianism is fundamentally based on the ethical and moral norms of Confucianism. In terms of its specific role, it is no longer applicable to today's society in the new era. However, its logical deduction of the concept of sincerity and its transcendental and ontological framework still have philosophical significance for the discussion of sincerity today. If we regard sincerity as a fundamental and transcendent value concept, that is, as an ontological category in social activities, then observing laws and regulations and implementing scientific spirit in daily activities including politics, academia, and scientific research becomes a natural thing. Because this is a conscious adherence to and presentation of the ontological basis, rather than treating sincerity as an external moral requirement and norm. Therefore, every realistic person in social life has a mission of moral cultivation, that is, to preserve and carry forward their own supreme goodness in accordance with the sincerity nature, while excluding selfish desires brought about by individual perceptual life existence. Therefore, sincerity as an internal consciousness is the internal guarantee for the subject to resist various external temptations.

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