

## *Original Paper*

# Rereading the Classics: Cognition and Practice of Goodness

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### **Abstract**

*The issue of the good and the evil has always been the moral cultivation discussed by ancient-modern and Chinese-foreign scholars, whose works are the wisdom treasures and classics. In the 21st century with the emergence of various problems such as the environmental deterioration, global warming, regional conflicts, epidemics and other uncertainty, it is of immeasurable significance to rereading many works for the reflection and interpretation of goodness implication so that their excellent traditional culture on goodness can continue to nourish and enlighten today's moral education, and awaken a moral consciousness to have habitual memory and cognition of goodness, to stick to good will and do good deeds to commit to improving people's well-being. It's more important for global people through interpretations in cultural inheritance to set up a universal concept and standard on goodness to standardize human thoughts and behavior, which are certain to contribute to solution to the above problems and the construction of social harmony and a community with a shared future for mankind.*

### **Keywords**

*literature, goodness, morality and value, a community with a shared future for mankind*

### **1. Introduction**

“The existence of human literature and art has its profound humanistic basis, and it is committed to the overall improvement of human's true, good and beautiful dimensions” (Jiang, 2014, p. 7). The spirit of literature not only reflects people's own realistic and spiritual state, but also asks about the value ideal associated with people's ultimate concern (Chen, 2008, p. 360). The issue of the good and the evil has always been the moral cultivation focused on by Chinese and foreign scholars in ancient and modern times, most of whose works are the wisdom treasures and classics famous both at home and abroad for representing a kind of universal and normative value and significance on the good and the evil.

In the 21st century with the emergence of various problems on the good and the evil, it is of immeasurable importance to make an insight on goodness in these works since the significance of a literary works from the perspective of historical and cultural development is a always collection of multiple interpretations in cultural inheritance (Gunn, 2012, p. 75). From the perspective of the development of human civilization, seeking some common and desirable values is not only the basic needs of human society, but also the inevitable result of the evolution of civilization. Today our world is undergoing the pandemics, regional conflicts, deficit in peace and trust and other changes unseen, and it has entered a new phase of uncertainty and transformation. It is necessary for us to explore and interpret goodness' true connotations so as to internalize the knowledge of goodness, guide people to enhance their moral judgment and pass on the values of goodness and let the excellent traditional culture continue to nourish and enlighten today's moral education, encourage people to accumulate virtue and achieve lofty personality, for the ultimate purpose of promoting global goodwill consensus in globalization and achieving a peaceful and harmonious world in the new era.

## **2. Goodness' Theoretical Construction**

### *2.1 Essence*

Defining goodness is the most fundamental issue in all ethics (Moore, 2003, p. 12). Different people hold different definitions of goodness.

Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher, once said: "The root of all the good lies in the pleasure of the mouth, and even wisdom and culture must be derived from it" (Russell, 1963, p. 300). He believes that goodness is happiness. Spinoza (1983, p. 130) believes that "the so-called good refers to all the happiness, and all the things that can promote happiness, especially anything that can satisfy the desire". Goodness is the satisfaction of rational desires (Rawls, 1988, p. 93). Bacon (2018, p. 46) defines goodness as the habit to affect the weal of men. Paulsen (1988, p. 212) believes that goodness is the shaping of one's life and the realization of life value conforming to one's ideal of perfection, while promoting the happiness of others.

A Japanese scholar believes that rational satisfaction is our highest good and in a word the so-called good is the realization of personality (Jiduolang, 1965, p. 112). In China, goodness means that all things satisfy human material and spiritual desire for existence and happiness. Dai Zhen (1980, p. 309) thinks that the true good is to achieve all one desires and feels. Zhang Qiwei (1997, p. 10) shows goodness is a value that can meet people's needs. Luo Guojie (1989, p. 406) believes that goodness is a valuable behavior to others and society displayed in the interpersonal relationship. Cui Ping (2006, p. 29) points out that goodness means the overall coexistence on the base of different individual survival, which is a kind of compatible goodness. Song Yiqiang and Jiang Hua (2007, p. 23) define goodness as the sound development of personality.

It is clear that people's cognition of goodness concept is basically consistent. It is good not only to follow the natural principles but also to benefit personal and public interests, either to satisfy human desires or to contribute to happiness. To be frank, goodness is to meet the social public will containing selfish desires and interests.

### *2.2 Diversification*

Bacon (2018, p. 82) thinks some people are in nature faithful and sincere, plain and direct, not crafty and involved. German philosopher Hegel's goodness is the legitimate welfare, the realized freedom, and the absolute ultimate goal of the world (1961, p. 142). Some American ethicists hold the pluralistic concept of goodness covering life, consciousness, pleasure, happiness, truth, knowledge, beauty, love, friendship, self-expression, self-realization, freedom, honor, peace and security (Thiroux & Krasemann, 2008, p. 150). William David Ross (2002, pp. 20-27), an English ethicist, believes that the meaning of goodness is diverse, which lies in seven prima facie duties of loyalty, compensation, gratitude, justice, charity, self-development, and not doing evil.

There are such goodness as manner, self-examination, persistence, praise, similarity, challenge, kindness, virtue, filial piety, diligence, uprightness in the first chapter of Shigu (Interpreting Ancient Words) in the classic dictionary Erya (Elegant Speech) in ancient China.

### *2.3 Classification*

The diversified goodness is unified in a common goodness. Any goodness is to respect and protect the rights and interests of individuals (self and others) and the public, i.e. benefiting individuals and the masses. People are sympathetic animals living in social groups. When we use goodness to describe people, things and behaviors, it is intended to show that they conform to a certain value or order. The criterion for judging goodness must be in line with the mainstream values of the community. Through the common values, the social community demonstrates the rationality and legitimacy of its own existence, shapes and condenses its members, connects the social members together, creates a sense of shared solidarity among members, and forms an affinity and cohesion (Wu, 2009, p. 25).

There are various kinds of goodness and evil in the process of adjustment personal and public interests to a harmonious state. Goodness can be great and small, perfect and imperfect, true and false as follows:

Such goodness as benefiting mankind, saving the country or people, curing countless people, and providing continuous assistance, is great while small goodness may be such as pointing a way to the lost, and retrieving the wallet for the lost, giving a seat to the old, the weak, the sick, the disabled and the pregnant.

Perfect goodness is to combine personal and social interests well to achieve public and private interests or win-win results from benefiting others and the group as well as oneself. It is good to serve the public wholeheartedly and even sacrifice oneself for others. But it is better to serve the public without

sacrificing oneself for others. Although it is good to respect and protect the interests of others and the public in the price of damaging his own personal interests even and life, and even it is extremely noble to sacrifice oneself to serve the public and save others, it reduces the overall social interests, so it is imperfect.

The true good are the situations in which one fights for others and the public subjectively and objectively, and his words and deeds are consistent, his subjective motivation and objective effect have reached a perfect unity such as the persons who do good deeds regardless of fame and wealth. And even dedicate themselves to seeking eternal happiness for the world. On the contrary, it is the false good or hypocrisy for someone to fight for oneself subjectively or objectively in the improper means to practice jobbery.

#### *2.4 Attribution*

It is an ethical issue whether human nature is good or evil, which has been variously argued in the world.

In China, Mencius put forward man's nature at birth is good. Sakya Aphorisms (Saban, 1985, p. 12) show that even in the critical moment of life and death will the sage not abandon his essential goodness of human nature. Confucius and Gaozi put forward that there is neither good nor bad originally in human nature (Yang, 2008, p. 67), that the good and the evil are completely caused by the influence of acquired environment. By nature, men are much alike, in practice, they are far apart. Wang Yangming mentions that the good and evil is a natural state of all things including people in the world, that a body is neither good nor evil and everything is in its natural state in the universe (Wang, 1992, p. 25). But there is Xun Tzu's theory of evil nature. Wang Haiming (2005, p. 159) mentions the debate about whether human nature is natural or social. Yang Zebo (2010, p. 80) points out human beings have not inherent good nature itself or the completion of good nature, but the tendency to be good with good heart.

In western countries, Bacon believes that people naturally live out of goodness, by goodness and for goodness. People are born with self-requirements and self-discipline in thoughts and behaviors according to their own internal goodness nature. Bacon (2018, p. 46) calls goodness the habit of the affecting of the weal of men and goodness of nature the inclination, which is the greatest of all virtues and dignities of mind. And he (2018, p. 37) points out that the inclination to goodness is imprinted deeply in the nature of man, insomuch that if it issue not towards men, it will take onto other living creatures. There is in man's nature, a secret inclination and motion, towards love of others, which if it be not spent upon some one or a few, does naturally spread itself towards many, and makes men become humane and charitable.

Above all, it is difficult to use the expression that human nature is inherently good or evil to summarize the state of human being at birth. But it is certain that human nature of goodness is acquired since

everyone is born with the tendency and ability to be good and it is the essence of human nature to try to improve the world and oneself. Everyone is born equally and entitled to life, survival for freedom and happiness. Man is born as a blank sheet on which various cultures can write their text with diversity of customs, values, feelings and thoughts. The survival depends on his own efforts. Specifically speaking, his body need maintenance in pursuit of material goodness guaranteed by him and his soul must be full of content in pursuit of spiritual goodness created by him. For life, there ought to be not only the initial signs of life, but also the initial conditions to ensure the blooming of life and the subsequent living environment. Just as Bacon (2018, p. 157) says, the great multiplication of virtues upon human nature rests upon societies well ordained and disciplined. Obviously human nature lies in inborn nature, heaven-endowed nature and acquired nature. Goodness is not a purely acquired cultivation and accomplishment, nor a purely natural solidification, but a harmonious unity of human nature and social nature.

### **3. Goodness' Cultivation and Practice**

Confucius put forward the idea that by nature, men are much alike; in practice, they are far apart (Wang, 2017, p. 1). Lao Tzu tells people if you know what is good, you will know what is bad in chapter 2 of Tao Te Ching (The Scripture of Ethics). How can we practice goodness in reality?

#### *3.1 Goodwill*

Our subjective will should take the good as the goal and make it all realized. That is to say, the good can only enter the reality with the subjective will of inclination to goodness as the intermediary. "The good is the truth of the special will" (Hegel, 1961, p. 133). Individual consciousness can not be separated from social consciousness. Everyone's personal consciousness is nurtured in the social consciousness phenomena such as language, custom, system, religion and literature. One must obey the laws of the real world and recognize the objective law to care for not only your own welfare, but also the general welfare of others and community. "To some extent, the good is to do one's duty" (Hegel, 1961, p. 137). Marx once said that the basis of morality is the self-discipline of human will.

Confucius said: "If you are really committed to humaneness, you will have no evil in you". That is to say, the key to drive "evil" to "good" is the willpower of the good seeker. Mencius believes First of all one must have a subjective desire to be good and do good, then one must do self-reflection to gain enlarged goodness. The true good is to know the true self. Meditation contributes to internalization of goodness. To cultivate the inner goodness, we must look down on the external fame and benefits, gains and losses, make room for thinking, and let the heart gradually understand the sublation in thinking, remove some fetters, and get some calm.

Good will needs to be reflected in good deeds, but also needs to be tested by action to be corrected and strengthened at any time. External words and deeds can be perceived, taught, standardized and

corrected. Therefore, in daily interpersonal relationship, we should say more good words, do more good deeds, and examine our hearts to purify our hearts and sublimate our souls. The goodness in our hearts does not need to be persisted deliberately, but becomes natural.

All are in the same universe of good and evil with the dependable relationship of mutual achievement and common growth. Rationality is the ability of human beings to discover the essence of the world. On the basis of respecting natural facts and following natural laws, a person must make rational judgments before actions in improving man's life maintenance and survival renewal as much as possible according to rational principles. Let's uphold the view to be the first to worry about the affairs of the community and the last to enjoy ourselves in the world.

### *3.2 Good Deeds*

It is known that goodness has no size, no amount, no end, no waiting, no seeking retribution in practice. We must do good rather than evil, on however humble a scale.

Lao Tzu tells people how to achieve the goodness in chapter 49 of Tao Te Ching (The Scripture of Ethics)—To those who are good, one can be good; to those who are not good, he can also be good; then he can gain goodness and make everyone else good. He warns people in chapter 81 that a good man are not good at debate while the debater is not necessarily good. Mencius said in Mencius Gao Tzu: If you examine and reflect yourself, you will get goodness, and the reverse, which shows that he calls for self-examination and self-reflection as the important method to recognize our conscience and to practice the theory of good nature.

As Hegel (1996, p. 98) said in the Phenomenology of Spirit, "The obligation and mission of a person is to make himself a useful and usable member for the public welfare. As much as he care for himself, he must care for others; and how much he takes care of others, the same to himself". We can know how to do out of goodness as Bacon (2018, p. 48) enumerated many parts and signs of goodness: A person is gracious and courteous to strangers. A person is compassionate towards the afflictions of others. A person easily pardons and remits offence. A man is thankful for small benefits.

Certainly philanthropic actions are the most straightforward presentation of doing good. We stick to philanthropic thoughts to help others to increases happiness by charitable deeds. Charity laws (bills) have been promulgated and implemented in many countries, and there are many philanthropists in the world. Bible tells in Galatians 6:9 us not to grow weary in doing good, for in due season, we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Bacon (2018, p. 110) advocates that riches are for spending and spending is for honour and good actions, use of wealth is consumption, and the purpose of consumption is for glory or good deeds. Bacon (2018, p. 136) said frankly that "of great riches there is no real use, except it be in the distribution. It is obvious that the purpose of making money urgently is not to satisfy greed, but to seek a kind of capital to do good. Similarly, Sakya Aphorisms show that "the enemy will come for your charity, and your relatives will leave if you have nothing to give" (Saban, 1985, p. 23). "No matter how

much you give, your wealth will continue to return like spring rain” (Saban, 1985, p. 28). “If you want to accumulate wealth constantly, charity is its best guarantee” (Saban, 1985, p. 55). “Only those who give generously can have inexhaustible wealth” (Saban, 1985, p. 87). “Charity is the greatest treasure, and goodness is the greatest happiness” (Saban, 1985, p. 54). As the saying goes, if you want to get something, you should first learn to give. Goodness is seen in giving and acceptance.

Of course, it is necessary to practice goodness with wisdom. Everyone should be responsible for the prosperity of his family, country and the world. Just as Kant (2005, p. 10) said, the moral value of human behavior does not depend on whether the behavior conforms to responsibility, but whether it stems from responsibility.

Bacon says: “the desire of power in excess causes the angels to fall (2018, p. 46); there is no man to do a wrong for the wrong’s sake, but thereby to purchase himself profit or pleasure or honour or the like” (2018, p. 15). He aims to persuade people to control desires in excess. Bacon (2018, p. 47) points out that errors indeed in this virtue of goodness or charity may be committed. We ought to follow in good deeds Confucius’ advice that we should not do onto others what we would not have them do onto us.

Just as Bacon (2018, p. 47) says some people are so good that they are good for nothing. And he warns people not to sell what they have and give it to the poor except they have a vocation wherein they may do as much good with little means as with great, for otherwise in feeding the streams they dry the fountain. He asks people to seek the good of other men, but not to be in bondage to their faces or fancies, for that is but facility or softness, which takes an honest mind prisoner. For example, if your relative or friend who is fond of gambling and often refuses to repay the money, asks you for money. The best way to treat him well is to refuse politely and intelligently. Otherwise, your lending money to him is likely to connive his unscrupulousness, indolence and effortless gains so that it will not help him, may even do harm to each other. And Bacon warns people never to give them Aesop’s cock a gem, who would be better pleased and happier if he had had a barley-corn (2018, p. 47). He hints us to supply a timely desideratum to the needy, and to do good deeds as peculiar benefits with choice.

### *3.3 Teachable Goodness*

Education nourishes goodness. Human nature can be changeable since the society is a big vat, which drives people to be good, and also lure persons to be evil. The good or the evil of human nature is decided to more extent by the acquired cultivation and social responsibility in the growth environment. The good is knowledge (Plato, 2011, p. 268). Wisdom (knowledge and reason) is the highest virtue, and people rely on wisdom to achieve goodness and happiness (Li & Lin, 2009, p. 40). Confucius said: “Loving learning, you approach wisdom; loving energetic practice, you approach Ren (Good) (Zi, 2016, p. 39). What Heaven has conferred is called The Nature; an accordance with this nature is call The Path of duty; cultivating the regulation of this path is called instruction (education) (Zi, 2016, p. 1). What the

Great Learning teaches, is to illustrate illustrious virtue, to renovate the people, and to rest in the highest excellence” (Zi, 2016, p. 85).

Mencius comments that people who are to eat and clothe without being educated are like birds and beasts. In Mencius’ view, the fundamental purpose of learning is to guide people to self-cultivation and maintain and restore their original goodness. Likewise, Richard Rorty (2003, p. 143) said that ignorant and superstitious people are like children: as long as they are properly educated, they will have true human nature. Although we do everything with instinctive feelings, we can rarely or never explain human behaviors with it. In human life, what makes behavior concrete is not a motive at all, but the instinct of behavior manifestation determined by education and social environment (Cooley, 1989, p. 17).

Bacon confirms that studies perfect nature and are perfected by experience, for natural abilities are like natural plants that need pruning by study (2018, p. 194), since a man’s nature runs either to herbs or weeds, therefore let him seasonably water the one, and destroy the other (2018, p. 153). Men’s discourse and speeches are much according to their learning and infused opinion; but their deeds are after as they have been accustomed. Therefore there is no trusting to the force of nature nor to the bravery of words, except it be corroborate by custom we call education (2018, p. 155). Cultivated carefully by the wise, fools will become noble (Saban, 1985, p. 67). In word, it is clear that being educated exerts people a subtle influence on temperament, character and intelligence. Certainly the great multiplication of virtues upon human nature rests upon societies well ordained and disciplined (Bacon, 2018, p. 156).

#### **4. Conclusion**

There are various opinions on the issue of the good and evil at all times and in all countries. Any society has its own value system and a set of the good and evil standards governing human behaviors. The good and the evil have the characteristics of times, class and nationality, that is to say, there are different cognition of the good and the evil in different times, different classes and different nations. It is not easy to form a universal understanding of this issue. The world is home to us all, upholding its peace and development is the shared goal of countries. People are sympathetic and there are so many world classics, which represent a kind of universal and normative value and significance within a certain time and space (Jauss, 2006, p. 140). This value and significance is formed by interpretation and realized by application. It is possible to form the common views on the good and the evil.

Let’s reread the world classics to form habitual memory and cognition of goodness, maintain introspective reflection on goodness, return to the real good in life, move towards the spiritual good on the foundation of the material good, and experience and practice goodness in life. Mencius tells us that as long as one sticks to goodness in thoughts and actions, one can live a more valuable and dignified



life (Bao, 2012, p. 89). Abandoning the evil and promoting the good is the realization condition of harmonious society and also the only way to achieve sustainable human development. All under heaven are one family. It is high time to abide by the rules of the world and respect morality and order in the era with the environmental deterioration, catastrophic global warming, regional conflicts and epidemics and other uncertainty. We are supposed to set up a universal concept and standard of the good and evil to standardize social behavior, to effectively promotes social harmony, to create and enrich the people's spiritual life, and to promote the formation and improvement of ethics, spirit and character. One should be good to the nature for normal ecosystems, and to the society and human individuals with humanistic feelings and good hearts for a harmonious atmosphere of mutual love and assistance instead of regional war and pure selfishness. Let's obey the heavenly principles, stick to goodness concept and do good deeds to commit to improving people's well-being and strive for an ultimately-built community with a shared future for mankind.

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